Manly Boys and Enterprising Dreamers: Business Ideology and the Construction of the Boy Consumer, 1910–1930

LISA JACOBSON

Early twentieth-century advertising discourses on the archetypal boy consumer promoted a masculinized ideal of consumption that broke decisively from the stereotype of the emotion-driven female shopper. Boys were lauded as rational, informed buyers who prized technological innovation and influenced parents and peers. While touting boys' ample consumer appetites, promoters of the boy consumer also depicted boys' interest in advertised goods as worthy of entrepreneurial-minded self-improvers. The ideal of the boy consumer thus harmonized the potentially hedonistic ethos of consumerism with older ideals of productivity and industriousness. New ideologies of manhood that valorized enthusiasm, loyalty, and salesmanship confirmed the boy consumer's manly vitality.

In a 1927 issue of the advertising trade journal *Printers' Ink*, a New York talent agency promoted Percy Crosby's famous comic-strip character Skippy as an ideal advertising pitchman. Described as "a worthy successor to Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer, and Penrod"—the cunning boy heroes of children's literature—Skippy was not only "wise for his years," the advertisement claimed, but also determined to "argue or fight for what he wants. Skippy rarely loses an argument for he knows definitely what he and 'the folks' should have. . . . If Skippy likes your reputable merchandise, . . . so will others and you will profit by having him 'whistle the patter' for you."[1]

Enterprise & Society 2 (June 2001): 225–258.

LISA JACOBSON is lecturer in history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Contact information: History Department, UCSB, Santa Barbara, CA 93106, USA <jacobson@humanitas.ucsb.edu>

I would like to thank Margaret Finnegan, John Majewski, Regina Morantz-Sanchez, Leslie Paris, Erika Rappaport, Cecile Whiting, the participants at the 1999 Business History Conference, and the editors and anonymous referees of *Enterprise & Society* for helpful comments and suggestions.

1. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 141 (1 Dec. 1927): 183.

To prospective advertisers, Skippy's virtues as a spokesman resided as much in his dynamic boyish charms as they did in his celebrity. For the very traits that made Skippy such a compelling salesman also made him an archetypal American boy: a demanding, influential, and precocious consumer. This image of the American boy became increasingly familiar in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, thanks to the juvenile magazine publishers who promoted him and the advertisers who embraced him as the hero of the new consumer age. Sell the boy, publishers and marketing strategists promised, and you will have at your command a progressive and loyal consumer, eager and able to influence family spending. As an advertisement placed by *American Boy*, a prominent children's magazine, put it, the boy consumer was nothing short of a "human dynamo—restless, resistless, resourceful. When he wants a thing he gives no one any peace until he gets it."[2]

One might be tempted to view the much-vaunted boy consumer simply as a manifestation of the growing clout and significance of child consumers in the early twentieth century. As middle-class families became more democratic and child-centered, children acquired more autonomy and a greater voice in family decision making. Cognizant of such changes, advertisers sought to guide and exploit the family's new egalitarianism by courting middle-class children through juvenile magazines such as *American Boy, American Girl, Boy's Life, St. Nicholas, Everygirls Magazine,* and *Youth's Companion*. They saw in children's advertising an opportunity not only to cultivate the brand loyalty of future generations but also to enlist children as active selling agents within the home. Whatever children may have lacked in the power of the purse—and that power was expanding—advertisers hoped children could make up for in their power to nag and persuade.[3]

All child consumers, however, were not equal. Though advertisers targeted both boys and girls, the construct of the demanding, persuasive child consumer was not entirely gender-neutral. When ad-

2. Ibid. 76 (26 Sept. 1911): 5.

3. For more on the emergence of child consumers in the early twentieth century, see Lisa Jacobson, "Raising Consumers: Children, Childrearing, and the American Mass Market, 1890–1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997); Gary Cross, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); Ellen Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s* (New York, 1996), 51–79; William Leach, "Child-World in the Promised Land," in *The Mythmaking Frame of Mind: Social Imagination & American Culture*, ed. James Gilbert (Belmont, Calif., 1993), 209–38; Miriam Formanek-Brunnell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood*, 1830–1930 (New Haven, Conn., 1993), 161–84.

vertising writers and children's magazine publishers glorified the progressive appetites and salesmanship of the child consumer, they usually had the manly boy in mind. What made the valorization of the boy consumer so remarkable was its departure from a centuries-long tradition of associating consumption with feminine vices. From the moralists of Greco-Roman times to the republican pamphleteers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, critics of unbridled consumption—what they would have termed luxury—had decried materialistic excess as the mark of effeminate men and lustful women. Seduction by luxury meant, in historian Victoria de Grazia's words, to be overcome by an "out-of-control femininity." Even in the late nineteenth century, when Victorian gender ideology sanctioned women's cultural authority as expert shoppers and arbiters of taste, women remained subject to age-old prejudices that maligned consumer desire. As medical science would have it, the middle-class "lady" shoplifter was not a thief but a kleptomaniac—weak-willed by nature, narcissistic, ruled by emotions, and incapable of self-control.[4]

Such stereotypes of the woman consumer generated considerable ambivalence among advertising professionals toward their predominantly female audience. Recognizing women as the "purchasing agents" of the family, trade journals routinely reported that women accounted for 85 percent of consumer spending. By advertisers' own reckoning, such command over the family purse strings gave women the consumer clout to make or break a product's success with the snap of their pocketbooks. Yet, although awe for women's buying authority sometimes translated into respect for women's consumer sovereignty, it also coexisted with contempt for Mrs. Consumer's fickleness, stupidity, and irrationality. However unfounded, such attitudes helped ease uncertainties that many admen felt about their own claims to professional legitimacy and respectability. For despite their college educations and upper-middle-class backgrounds, members of this predominantly male profession encountered disapproval from peers and guardians of high culture who criticized advertising for pandering to the vulgar lowbrow tastes and irrationalities of the feminine consuming masses.[5]

4. John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought* (Baltimore, Md., 1977); Victoria de Grazia, ed., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), 1–8, 13–15; Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (New York, 1999), 10–11, 32–33; Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York, 1989).

5. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985), 66–72, 84–87; Patricia Johnston, *Real*

Why then, in light of such problematic associations of consumption and femininity, did children's magazine publishers and the advertising trade glorify boys as consumer dynamos? How did the celebrated exuberance of boys' consumer appetites escape association with the allegedly feminine vices of extravagance and frivolousness? Most important, how did the architects of mass consumption revise and restore meaning to the conventional gender polarities of work and leisure, breadwinning and consumption, discipline and impulsiveness that masculine consumption threatened to disrupt?

Curiously, although men were targets of advertising and avid consumers of sporting goods, commercialized leisure, clothing, grooming aids, and even crystal, the advertising trade press offered little comment on adult male consumer desire prior to the 1930s.[6] In fact, despite evidence to the contrary, embarrassed automobile marketers and manufacturers, unwilling to concede male interest in "superfluous" features that had little bearing on car performance, clung to traditional gender stereotypes in promoting cars to men and women, sometimes even in the same advertisement. Thus, the Lexington Minute Man Six advertisement in *Sunset* told readers it was "a man's car in power and speed—and a woman's car because of its luxury, ease of handling, and simplicity of control."[7]

Advertising discourses on the boy consumer resolved the apparent contradictions between consumption and masculine gender identity, a problem historians have yet to explain in the period before the Depression.[8] Figuring as a kind of bridge between the businessman's allegedly sober rationalism and the irrational extravagances of the archetypal woman consumer, the boy consumer seemed to occupy a liminal space that mediated the transformation

Fantasies: Edward Steichen's Advertising Photography (Berkeley, Calif., 1997), 234–35. For an important interpretation that stresses advertisers' recognition of women's consumer sovereignty, see Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore, Md., 2000). Representing about 10 percent of the advertising profession, women were mostly employed as copywriters for "women's product" accounts and were unlikely to handle boy market accounts. For more on women in the advertising profession, see Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 33–35; and Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The* Ladies' Home Journal, *Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York, 1995), 169–96.

6. Mark A. Swienicki, "Consuming Brotherhood: Men's Culture, Style and Recreation as Consumer Culture, 1880–1930," *Journal of Social History* 31 (Summer 1998): 773–808; Blaszczyk, *Imagining Consumers*, 16–18, 20, 31–32, 46–47, 49, 271.

7. Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1991), 35–66, 111–34, quotation at p. 129.

8. For a fascinating analysis of *Esquire* magazine's efforts to promote a "new model of self-indulgent" masculinity in the 1930s, see Kenon Brezeale, "In Spite

from an older producer ethos to a newer consumer ethos. Wholly of neither one nor the other, the boy consumer appealed because he wedded the virtues of consumption to the virtues of business. Unlike the feminine consuming masses, in whose hands consumption threatened to spin into hedonism, the boy consumer managed to harmonize the consumer ethos with older ideals of industriousness and disciplined entrepreneurship. He purchased advertised goods to further worthy entrepreneurial ambitions and worked hard to afford them. But if his work ethic preserved traditional notions of bourgeois manhood, other traits made him the embodiment of new ideals of masculinity that accompanied the rise of managerial capitalism. In his passionate enthusiasm, loyalty, and salesmanship, the boy consumer displayed all the hallmarks of the successful corporate personality.[9] Though easily ascribed to youthful enthusiasm, consumer exuberance was made to fit within these new ideologies of manhood. Further, the boy's affinity for technological innovation—his love of cars, wireless, and all things mechanical—made his consuming passions a force of progress. Viewed in this light, early twentieth-century Americans could interpret the boy consumer's unrestrained embrace of advertised goods as evidence of manly vitality rather than of emasculation.

The boy consumer's appeal suggests that advertisers, as purveyors of the new culture of consumption, did not wrestle with their demons simply by pinning hedonistic excesses on women.[10] Rather, they sought to contain the new culture's threatening implications by softening the dichotomies between autonomous selfhood and consumer selfhood that historians have all too often exaggerated in their portraits of early twentieth-century consumer culture.[11] Herein lay

of Women: *Esquire* Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer," *Signs* 20 (Autumn 1994): 1–22. On the gendering of masculine consumer identities in the 1950s, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York, 1983), 42–51.

9. There is a vast and growing literature on redefinitions of masculinity that accompanied the rise of managerial capitalism. Among the most helpful are Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930* (Baltimore, Md., 1994); Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993); Jeffrey P. Hantover, "The Boy Scouts and the Validation of Masculinity," in *The American Man*, ed. Elizabeth Pleck and Joseph Pleck (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980), 185–201; Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, 1996).

10. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 162.

11. Warren I. Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," in Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society*

the psychic rewards of selling the boy consumer. Admen, still not fully convinced of their own legitimacy, cherished the ideal of the boy because he possessed attributes that they most admired in themselves. As one who prized technological innovation and readily adopted the new, the boy seemed to erase the cultural gap that nagged at advertisers in their courtship of Mrs. Consumer. Moreover, as the master salesman who guided family spending, the boy, much like the advertising executive, relished his role as a missionary of progress. In this way, various strands of business ideology—drawn from the worlds of advertising and the modern corporation—helped to forge a new synthesis of consumption and masculine gender identity.

American Boy's Campaign to Promote the Boy Consumer

The earliest and most aggressive promoter of the boy consumer was the boys' magazine, *The American Boy*. Read by well-to-do middle-class boys who ranged in age from nine to nineteen, the magazine aimed to cultivate character and enterprise through its wholesome fiction, articles on ways to make money and things, and features on hobbies and heroes. The magazine's reputation for clean, inspirational reading won it a welcome place in middle-class homes and YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) reading rooms, where it was embraced as an attractive alternative to the "cheap novels and wild story papers" that Progressive Era reformers believed poisoned young minds.[12] Thanks to its popularity among boys and the approval of parents and community leaders, *American Boy* boasted subscription sales of 500,000 by 1910.[13]

Central to *American Boy*'s mission as a character builder was instructing its readers in the virtues and values of advertising. To gain credibility with prospective advertisers, *American Boy* assured firms that its readers learned "a surer and finer appreciation of values—personal and commercial" and were well schooled in "the underly-

in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1984), 271–85; T. J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History*, ed. Richard Wrightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York, 1983), 1–38.

12. Advertising proof sheet, 1910, box 197, N. W. Ayer Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. [hereafter, abbreviated as Ayer]; "Let These Friends Develop Your Boy," advertising proof sheet, 1917, box 197, Ayer.

13. Advertising proof sheet, 1910, box 197, Ayer.

ing principles of advertising."[14] Much as *Good Housekeeping* and *Collier's* had previously done in 1909 and 1910, *American Boy* launched a monthly series of "Advertising Talks" that appeared in its pages from May 1917 through April 1918.[15] These editorials educated boys about the superior value and trustworthiness of advertised goods and helped the magazine cultivate its image as a chummy advisor guiding and shaping the boy market to better serve advertisers.[16]

From the 1910s through the 1920s, the central focus of *American Boy*'s ongoing trade press campaign was selling the virtues of the boy consumer himself. One prominent strategy was to connect the boy's consumer prowess to the child-centeredness of the middle-class companionate family. An ideal and an emerging reality, the companionate family, unlike its more hierarchical Victorian predecessor, granted children greater freedom from parental control and a larger role in family spending through such innovations as allowances and family buying councils.[17] In *American Boy*'s vision, boys commanded the authority of a miniature patriarch within such families. Likening the boy to a "Dictator to the Universe," *American Boy* depicted boys as the center of families in which "*boy* wants, *boy* opinions and *boy* knowledge *go*."[18] Because of the special affection that middle-class parents held for their sons, boys proved remarkably influential salesmen. "Every boy is an eighth wonder of the world to his parents," *American Boy* reminded advertisers. "They want to follow his interest; they study the magazine he reads; they see the world as he sees it; and they buy the things he wants—not merely because they want the *merchandise* but because they want to *please the boy*."[19]

14. "The Boys Are the Buyers," advertising proof sheet, 1923, box 198, Ayer; "A Course in Advertising FOR BOYS AND YOUNG MEN," advertising proof sheet, 1917, box 197, Ayer.

15. For more on the advertising education campaigns in *Collier's* and *Good Housekeeping* see Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, Md., 1998), 353–57. For more on *American Boy*'s advertising education campaign, see Jacobson, "Raising Consumers," 65–71.

16. "Gee! This train's ahead of itself," advertising proof sheet, 1925, box 200, Ayer.

17. For more on the rise of the companionate family, see Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York, 1977), 53–118; Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York, 1988), xx, 107–32; Robert Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, 1993), 88–118. For a discussion of allowances and the democratization of family spending, see Jacobson, "Raising Consumers," 104–42.

18. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 80 (5 Sept. 1912), 11.

19. Ibid. (22 Aug. 1912), 12.

As if to make sure potential advertisers understood that the boy was not milking maternal sentiment alone, the trade press campaign stressed that fathers were especially likely to bend before the boy's demands. According to one advertisement, "the approval of his boys means more to a man than the approval of anyone else in the world."[20] Other boys' publications concurred. Explaining why "Every Boy Family Is A Center of Buying Energy," *The Boys' Magazine* observed that it was "apt to be rough on father's prestige" if he failed to cater to his boy's consumer demands.[21] Here was the ultimate assurance of advertising success: who need worry about changing stodgy adult mindsets when courting the boy promised to relax buying resistance from the family breadwinner?

The boy's influence on family spending also owed much to the progressiveness and adaptability of youth. In the newly electrified, motorized, wireless age that gave birth to mass communication and mass transportation, modernist sensibilities reveled in the "here and now" and made a cult of the new—sensibilities perfectly embodied in the spirit of youth. As a result, *American Boy* boldly claimed, modernity itself had given boys' authority more weight than patriarchical authority. Thanks to the rapid pace of change in modern society, one 1912 advertisement explained, "boy knowledge" had become indispensable. "[T]he boy is the only member of the family with enough *mental agility* to keep pace with the times. He tells father what's what."[22] Manufacturers, weary of resistant adults, could turn to "youth for acceptance—knowing that fellows like Walt and Sam think and talk progress, anticipate it, rush to meet it more than halfway. Youth greases the wheels of progress . . . keeping the oldsters moving forward, well oiled with the spirit of advance."[23]

As such *American Boy* advertisements implied, boys commanded influence over family spending because of their superior consumer savvy. In one trade press advertisement, it was the boy, not the mother, who assumed the mantle of family purchasing agent. Boy wonder "Billy Byer" helped solve his mother's dilemma over what brand of cereal to buy when he recommended one regularly advertised in his favorite magazine. Billy's father, exceedingly pleased with his son's interest in learning from advertisements, promptly told his wife, "it was right to have [Billy] . . . suggest things we're going to buy."[24] To advertisers who sometimes doubted the woman

20. Ibid. (29 Aug. 1912), 9.

21. Ibid. (12 Sept. 1912), 78.

22. Ibid.

23. "Greasing the Wheels of Progress," advertising proof sheet, 1927, box 200, Ayer.

24. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 102 (7 March 1918), 13.

When Slim Watson talks carburetors his family sits up and takes notice

The young man at the left of the picture is Slim Watson, none other! He knows a pile about motor-cars and is letting Mother and Dad in on a big earful.

For some time, the head of the family (over there on the right) has been planning to trade in his old car. Like many car-owners, he's in the period of indecision as to which make to buy. Should he trade it in for the same make, an open car or a coupe, one of a different make? Pretty hard to make up his mind. Slim is convincing him that such-and-such a bus is the best buy . . . the one he really ought to have. It isn't the first time that Slim and his Dad have thrashed out the subject, either. Looks as though the youngest of the family were scoring a win at this session!

Slim is just one of the 500,000 up-and-coming near-men who read THE AMERICAN BOY and talk motor-car to their parents. These 500,000 enthusiasts are great boosters for the automobile that has won their respect and confidence. They're your equal in everything but years. Their man-sized opinions are heeded and usually followed by the *man* who pays the bills. Their wants are man-sized and they usually get what they want.

Enlist the powerful influence of this big army of rooters on your side. Tell them about your motor-car through the advertising columns of THE AMERICAN BOY. It's their favorite publication, and its say-so determines their buying habits. Copy received by January 10th will appear in March.

The American Boy

Detroit Michigan

Likening the family to a consumer democracy, *American Boy* highlighted the pivotal role of boy consumers in family spending decisions. Reproduced from the N. W. Ayer Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

consumer's savvy, *American Boy* offered a tempting vision of an exuberant boy, schooled in advertising, inspiring Mrs. Consumer on her way to the market.

Promoters of the boy market routinely asserted that deference to the boy consumer was a matter of course within modern, democratic families. "Nowadays," *American Boy* reminded prospective advertisers, "boys are considered more."[25] A series of advertising vignettes featuring 16-year-old "Master Billy Byer" underscored the esteem and deference accorded the fact-finding boy consumer. In one such advertisement, Billy's younger sister, recently endowed with a generous handout from Dad, requests her brother's assistance in purchasing a new camera, noting that Mother and Dad had anointed him "the official wise-party on what to buy." The accompanying photograph shows Billy confidently explaining camera features to his awed and grateful sister inside a camera shop. Shot from behind the sales counter, the photo allows us to see only the back of the store salesman, who presumably has been rendered mute—perhaps he, too, is awed—by Billy's disquisition on the virtues of a particular camera brand.[26] Much as this particular advertisement likened the boy's consumer authority to that of an adult male—in this case a seasoned camera store salesman—other *American Boy* advertisements suggested that the boy's consumer authority was equal, perhaps even superior, to that of his father, especially in the realm of new technologies like cars, radios, or phonographs. Advertising photographs of a family conference at the dinner table conveyed the boy's consumer influence in simple, iconographic terms. In one advertisement, captioned "When Slim Watson talks carburetors his family sits up and takes notice," we see Mother and Dad listening intently and respectfully as young "Slim" offers pointers on what car make to buy.[27]

American Boy no doubt overstated the democratic boundaries of the middle-class companionate family. Indeed, in touting the boy's powers of persuasion, the magazine's trade press campaign sometimes championed boy salesmanship that others might have construed as ill-mannered, spoiled behavior. "When the family sets out for an evening at the movies, son not only tells father and mother *where* to go, but he insists as well that they shall take his choice. They do—or you don't know the tenacity of a boy's reasoning."[28]

25. Advertising proof sheet, 1920, box 198, Ayer.
26. "Suppose you were going to buy a camera," advertising proof sheet, 1918, box 198, Ayer.
27. Advertising proof sheet, 1926, box 200, Ayer.
28. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 133 (8 Oct. 1925): 7.

Of course, exaggerating the realities of family democracy and deference to boy opinion served a larger purpose. Subscription sales alone would not pay for the fine stories and illustrations that the *American Boy* editors commissioned. But a steady supply of advertisers, convinced that the boy was a target worthy of their marketing dollars, would. To gain advertisers' confidence, *American Boy* had to persuade them that the purchasing power of its mostly high school–age subscribers was not limited to their spending allowance or meager earnings. Further, the publishers needed to counter common perceptions that juvenile advertising was of value only as a long-term investment in building brand recognition and at best a sales booster of exclusively juvenile products. *American Boy* thus represented itself as an upscale class medium. To gain access to the boy was to gain access to prosperous, free-spending families. "'Where there's a boy there's a family'—and in this case a family that pays $1.50 a year" for an *American Boy* subscription enjoyed by all members of the family.[29] By guaranteeing access to families of means, *American Boy* hoped prospective advertisers would come to regard boys as "a direct sales factor"—"When you advertise to them . . . you sell them for today and for tomorrow"—who influenced purchases of family goods as well as boys' goods.[30] But even if advertisers were not convinced that boy persuasion was sufficient to close the sale, they could be reassured that their message would be read by other family members who also perused the magazine. The proposition that advertisers could reach multiple consumer constituencies by targeting the boy—not just children, but mothers and fathers as well—meant that the magazine could attract advertising from a wide array of mass marketers. How better to generate revenues than by maintaining a diverse advertising portfolio of toys, cereal, soap, toothpaste, shoes, clothing, sporting goods, automobiles, radios, bicycles, and bicycle tires?[31]

American Boy also enhanced perceptions of the boy's purchasing power by highlighting his role within the "family firm." The concept of the family firm was originally the brainchild of progressive home

29. "Choosing the car," advertising proof sheet, box 197, Ayer; *American Boy* ad, *The Thompson Blue Book on Advertising* (New York, 1909), 122, in the J. Walter Thompson Company Archives, Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, Sales & Marketing History, Duke University, Durham, N.C. [hereafter, abbreviated as JWT Archives].

30. "When father was a boy—," advertising proof sheet, 1920, box 198, Ayer.

31. In *Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and* The Saturday Evening Post (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1989), 65–71, Jan Cohn notes that *The Saturday Evening Post* became much easier to finance when it welcomed a female readership and added household goods to its narrow range of male-oriented advertised goods.

economists and child experts, who popularized the idea in *Parents' Magazine* and other women's magazines during the 1920s and 1930s. Conceiving the family firm as a sort of roundtable conference on family finances, child experts promoted it as a vehicle for teaching children the value of money and moderating their consumer demands.[32] But, whereas child experts envisioned a parent-directed family firm that would teach children an appreciation of limits, *American Boy* imagined boys assuming a far more participatory and influential role. As one trade press advertisement had it, when it came time to review the architects' plan for a new home, the boy "was very much 'in' on the conference—plugging for a certain fire-proof roofing, for floors the gang could dance on, for an oil-burning furnace (he's been toting ashes in the old house!)—and a dozen other modern knick knacks and angles."[33] Above all, *American Boy*'s family firm strategy made it clear that the boy was the advertiser's route to deeper family pockets. *American Boy* readers, one advertisement claimed, were "man-sized, man-minded fellows" who "are pressing, day after day, in their family buying councils, for the acceptance of progressive merchandise of every description."[34] Boys need not let a drained allowance stand in the way of their expansive consumer desires, another advertisement contended, when they could marshal "the facts for selling-the-family campaigns on things their allowances can't buy."[35]

The Material and Psychic Rewards of Selling the Boy

Judging by the rapid expansion of space devoted to advertising in *American Boy, Boy's Life,* and *Youth's Companion* during the 1910s and especially the 1920s, children's magazine publishers had succeeded in awakening advertisers to the lucrative potential of the boy market. In a 1920 study of seventy-two magazines, *Youth's Companion* and *American Boy* ranked thirty-eighth and forty-third, respectively, in advertising volume, each drawing approximately half a million dollars in annual advertising revenues—millions shy of the leading women's magazines but more than respected monthly standards like *Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, Physical Culture, Sunset,* and *Scientific American.*[36]

32. Jacobson, "Raising Consumers," 120–25.

33. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 149 (17 Oct. 1929): 5.

34. Ibid. (3 Oct. 1929), 7.

35. Ibid. 141 (1 Dec. 1927): 7.

36. *Special Curtis Edition of News Bulletin* 78 (14 May 1921): 6, J. Walter Thompson Company Newsletter Collection (Main Series), JWT Archives.

Advertisers were guided in their courtship of the boy consumer by the supposition that the middle-class boy exercised consumer authority not just over family members but over other children as well, especially girls and less affluent boys. If the middle-class boy's privileged status as a dictator of trends made him a miniature patriarch within his own family, it made him an aristocrat among child consumers. Kodak, for example, ran special advertising contests in *Boy's Life*, the staunchly middle-class scouting magazine, on grounds that Boy Scouts were "the best and liveliest boys in town" and as such sure to set enviable examples for others.[37] Likewise, *American Boy* touted its well-to-do subscribers as "leaders in their neighborhood—the presidents and treasurers of the little social clubs—the captains of the teams—the most popular men at school—the fellows who stand out as leaders from their boyhood up, and whose opinions carry most weight."[38] More pronounced was the assumption among advertisers that boys commanded authority over the consumption patterns of girls. Even as advertisers sought the allegiance of both boys and girls, they routinely privileged boy culture. For example, when the Streckfus Steamers steamboat company devised an advertising campaign to revive interest in steamboat excursions, they keyed it entirely to masculine nostalgia—even though the company distributed its advertising booklets to Girl Scouts and Camp Fire Girls as well as Boy Scouts and YMCAs. Boy culture was the focus when the Streckfus "Mississippi River Steamboat Manual" related dramatic stories of "glamorous deeds," famous steamboat captains, and legendary battles between "daring men" and Indian chiefs along the great river—tales that advertisers thought would excite the interest of "any red-blooded youth." Like so many advertising efforts, theirs was a campaign to "win back the boy."[39] All too often, catching the girl was but an afterthought in an advertising culture that exalted boy opinion and boy persuasion.

Advertisers, with some justification, judged boys to be a more responsive audience. According to *Printed Salesmanship*, boys comprised 60 percent of the children who filled in coupons for premiums offered through advertisements.[40] But advertisers concentrated on reaching the boy primarily because they perceived girls to be far more flexible and boys far more rigid in their gender identification.

37. "Boy Scout Contest Lasts Another Month," *The Kodak Salesman* 10 (Sept. 1924): 6, in the Wayne P. Ellis Collection of Kodakiana, Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History, Duke University, Durham, N.C.

38. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 100 (13 Sept. 1917), 13.

39. "Merchandising Mississippi Steamboats to Boys," *Printers' Ink* 136 (2 Sept. 1926): 95–96.

40. "What the Coupon Brings," *Printed Salesmanship* 48 (Feb. 1927): 515–23.

As advertising authority Evalyn Grumbine observed, "Girls admire and enjoy boys' books and many boys' activities. Boys, however, do not reciprocate in their feelings about girls' activities."[41] A contributor to *Printers' Ink Monthly* recognized the same lack of reciprocity in girls' and boys' radio preferences, noting that, although girls listened to the same radio programs as boys, boys did not pay attention to programs that "hold a feminine audience."[42] Put another way, creators of popular culture expected girls to embrace male heroes as their own, and many girls, having grown accustomed to the denial of female subjectivity, so obliged. As film theorist Laura Mulvey has explained, "for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second Nature*."[43] Such adaptable subjectivity, however, was rarely demanded of boys by a patriarchal culture fearful of overfeminization. By relegating girls to the periphery, or in some cases excluding them altogether, advertisers, historian Ruth Oldenziel has observed, may well have helped "to shore up male identity boundaries in the new world of expanding consumerism precariously coded as female."[44]

Such privileging of boy culture thus served multiple purposes. On the one hand, selling the boy consumer offered numerous material rewards to advertisers, not the least of which was the opportunity to reach multiple consumer constituencies among children and within families. But it was the psychic rewards of selling the boy consumer that made him such a significant cultural phenomenon. To the largely male advertising profession, the boy consumer was an ideal spokesman for the progressive virtues of consumption. As a promoter of the new and improved, the boy consumer mirrored advertisers' own self-image as the engineers of the nation's rising standard of living. Steadfast in his allegiance to modernity, the boy seemed to grasp intuitively the alignment of advertising's mission with progress itself. As *American Boy* noted in its trade press campaign, "The boy today is usually the first to take up the new things, to demand the improvements that have made the American family's standard of living so high."[45] Indeed, the boy consumer's modernity made him

41. E. Evalyn Grumbine, *Reaching Juvenile Markets: How to Advertise, Sell and Merchandise Through Boys and Girls* (New York, 1938), 79.

42. Bernard Grimes, "Radio's Most Critical Audience," *Printers' Ink Monthly* 28 (June 1934): 49.

43. Quoted in Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1993), 188.

44. Ruth Oldenziel, "Boys and Their Toys: The Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild, 1930–1968, and the Making of a Male Technical Domain," *Technology and Culture* 38 (1997): 63.

45. Advertisement, *American Boy* 113 (28 Oct. 1920): 7.

the guiding force behind "THE UP-TO-THE-MINUTE FAMILY": "It's almost an obsession with him—to be alert for news of new things, better ways—to see that modern goods and services come up for discussion in the family buying council."[46]

Advertising advocates could point to the boy consumer's modernizing zeal as justification for the trade's claims to professional legitimacy. Since the turn of the twentieth century, advertising partisans had argued that advertising played an essential role in the nation's economy and cultural life. Making the case first in trade journals and then in mass magazines, boosters credited advertising with having made significant contributions to material and cultural progress. Advertising had solved problems of overproduction by stimulating demand and rationalizing distribution, the argument went; it had "elevated" public taste for better things and ways of living by bringing the public "news" of progressive manufacturers; and it had improved the quality and prices of goods by securing outlets for mass-produced, branded goods.[47] "Advertising is *revolutionary*," the J. Walter Thompson agency rhapsodized. "Its tendency is to overturn preconceived notions, to set new ideas spinning through the reader's brain to induce people to do something that they never did before. It is a form of progress, and it *interests only progressive people*."[48]

Despite the advertising trade's confident discourse, lingering doubts about advertising's merits remained. Even as advertising professionals distanced themselves from advertising's unsavory past of patent medicine peddlers and snake oil salesmen, caricatures in popular fiction and on the stage continued to stereotype them in unflattering ways. The J. Walter Thompson agency complained in its *News Bulletin* that playwrights and novelists lampooned the advertising executive as "a breezy, cocksure, snap judgment, phrase making individual who is altogether ridiculous from the conservative business viewpoint." Theatergoers recognized him as the fool "who interrupts discussion with snappy inspiration along jazz lines," the *News Bulletin* grumbled. Such slights to advertisers' expertise magnified their professional insecurities and revived suspicions at J. Walter Thompson that business executives failed to "accept the advertising man as an individual having the same professional or business standards as himself." Desperate to be taken seriously, the advertising industry managed to exhibit both defensiveness and an inflated sense of purpose in reasserting its professional legitimacy. Admen, after all, were college graduates, drawn from top universities, far too serious, J. Walter Thompson maintained, to devote "time to thinking up zippy catch phrases or snappy slogans." Rather, they approached "the problem of merchandising and advertising with the same careful and analytical method that a problem of national farming, food distribution, [or] coal distribution . . . would be approached."[49]

46. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 155 (21 May 1933): 5.
47. For a full elaboration of the advertising profession's assessment of its contributions to progress, see Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 329–61.
48. *The J.W.T. Book: A Series of Talks on Advertising* (New York, 1909), JWT Archives.

Such faith in advertising's value to the nation, however, did not ease all concerns. Though the boy seemed less prone to the vices of Mrs. Consumer, the concept of a masculine consumer identity nevertheless required defense. For all the praise heaped on the boy consumer, his progressive buying habits at times threatened to recall less flattering associations with feminine malleability, extravagance, and vanity—traits advertisers usually reserved for Mrs. Consumer. Consider, for example, an *American Boy* trade press advertisement that applauded the boy consumer for knowing "more about styles for young men . . . than *Vanity Fair*" or one that commended his responsiveness to progressive obsolescence: "He buys a new hat every season and a straw hat every summer. . . . He goes out in search of the newest thing in neck-ties and shirts. And he gets what he wants."[50] As fashion-conscious trendsetters, boys even seemed to dictate a rapid pace of progressive obsolescence. "When they crack the whip you jump," *American Boy* cautioned the trade. "Ask Sam and Andy Stevens what the well-dressed near-man will wear. They'll tell you. They have the latest dope on shawl collars, bat-wing ties, patent leathers and pompadours. If they don't like a thing—it's out."[51]

Advertising boosters unraveled traditional associations of consumption and femininity by valorizing the masculinity of boy consumers. Wrote one authority on the boy market, advertisements were addressed not to the "Little Lord Fauntleroy type" but to the manly aspirations of "real honest-to-goodness back-lot boys who go to school, play and dream dreams, to say nothing of working at odd jobs once in a while when the chance offers to pick up a 'couple of bits.'"[52] The reference to Frances Hodgson Burnett's widely read 1886 novel contrasted the manly boy consumer with the title character, an overprotected prissy who dressed in lace-collared velvet suits and wore long curls. Exhibiting neither the sartorial excesses nor the aristocratic demeanor that typified Little Lord Fauntleroys, middle-

49. *News Bulletin* 98 (May 1923): 1–3, JWT Archives.
50. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 133 (19 Nov. 1925): 7; ibid. (5 Nov. 1925), 7.
51. Ibid. 137 (18 Nov. 1926): 7.
52. S. C. Lambert, "Building a Business on Children's Good Will," *Printers' Ink* 112 (29 July 1920): 89.

class boy consumers—those who earned a "couple of bits" now and then—could not be stigmatized as sissies. A stock figure in early twentieth-century popular culture, the sissy was a recurring foil—a counterpoint to real manly boys—in the Norman Rockwell illustrations that adorned the covers and advertisements of *The Saturday Evening Post*. In contrasting the sissy's "overtly narcissistic investment" in appearance with the manly boy's casual fashion aplomb, Rockwell's advertising illustrations, art historian Eric Segal has argued, suggested that masculine consumerism and interest in style need not "degenerat[e] into effeminacy."[53]

American Boy's trade press campaign thus drew upon a familiar discourse in popular culture in seeking to de-sissify the boy consumer. Accordingly, *American Boy* readers were "two-fisted young men whose buying impulse knows no vacation." Instead of deriding boys for their self-indulgence, the magazine celebrated their expansive consumer desire as the mark of "near-men" who "buy with a man-sized capacity." Even the decisive manner in which boys shopped testified to their manliness, another *American Boy* advertisement suggested: "Family marketing is all in the day's work for Reg. When given a grocery order, he isn't backward in asking if he can add on some of his favorite eats. Very often he just brings 'em home anyway, with a 'Gee, but we oughta had some of these long ago!' to back him up." Captioned "Reg Jackson 'brings home the bacon,'" the advertisement cleverly conflated shopping with breadwinning, as if to root consumption in the more traditional masculine realms of labor and initiative taking.[54]

Perhaps most significantly, *American Boy* presented boy consumers as a familiar audience with whom advertisers could readily identify. When they addressed the boy, advertisers erased the social and cultural distance they maintained from the feminine consuming masses: "They're your equal in height, weight, buying preferences, intelligence. They're your equal in everything but years."[55] Characterizing boys as decisive, discriminating, and "well-informed buyers," boys' magazines like *American Boy* and *Boys' Life* implicitly contrasted the virtues of the boy consumer with the alleged foolishness and fickleness of the woman consumer.[56] "Snap judgments, with this young army," one advertisement confided, "are giving way to weighing results. Insatiable in their demands . . . they nevertheless

53. Eric J. Segal, "Norman Rockwell and the Fashioning of American Masculinity," *Art Bulletin* 78 (Dec. 1996): 633–46.

54. Advertisement, *Printers' Ink* 137 (16 Dec. 1926): 7.

55. Ibid. 133 (19 Nov. 1925): 7.

56. Ibid. 145 (8 Nov. 1929): 89.

look for values before charging it to Dad or hypothecating next month's allowance."[57]

Advertisers could thus measure the manliness of the boy consumer in part by his difference from the fickle irrationalities of the archetypal woman consumer. The cultural resonance of the manly boy consumer ran even deeper, however, for the very traits that made the boy a model consumer—his loyalty, enthusiasm, and decisiveness—also mirrored other contemporary cultural expressions of boyish virtue and manliness. Indeed, gendered discourses of consumption acquired salience and persuasive power precisely because they drew upon ideals of masculinity that reverberated elsewhere in American culture.

During the Progressive Era, a host of social and economic developments led middle-class men to formulate new ideals of manhood that clashed with older Victorian codes of manly self-restraint. For Victorians, a man's character—his ability to control powerful passions, to work hard, and to live honestly and abstemiously—defined the essence of manliness. Guidebooks presented self-mastery and restraint as both a moral duty and the route to economic independence and material success. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, such ideologies of middle-class manliness, first forged in an era of small-scale, entrepreneurial capitalism, began to lose persuasiveness as managerial capitalism narrowed opportunities for men to achieve dreams of economic independence and ownership. By the 1920s, the autonomous self-made man who achieved upward mobility through hard work and ingenuity had been replaced by the corporate team player who subordinated personal autonomy and individuality to company needs. Within the vast corporate bureaucracies that were coming to dominate the economic landscape, only the distant hope of promotion to a coveted position in upper management eased the prospect of lifelong salaried dependence.[58]

Alongside lowered career expectations, middle-class men perceived additional threats to Victorian codes of manliness from the debilitating influences of sedentary work and soft living, the frivolous pleasures of commercial leisure, and the closing of the Western frontier—once an important outlet for manly adventure and self-assertion. For YMCA and Boy Scout leaders, women's dominant influence over boys as teachers in the schools and mothers in the home

57. Ibid. 141 (15 Dec. 1927): 7.

58. Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 10–13; Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 248–50; Peter Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities in Modern America*, 3d ed., rev. (1974; Baltimore, Md., 1998), 77–79.

only amplified the need to reinvigorate middle-class manhood.[59] Edgar M. Robinson, who headed YMCA boys' work, sounded the alarm when he assailed the boy who has been "kept so carefully wrapped in the 'pink cotton wool' of an overindulgent home [that] he is more effeminate than his sister, and his flabby muscles are less flabby than his character."[60]

In their quest for new sources of male power and authority, middle-class men began to embrace new ideologies of "passionate manhood" that valorized decisiveness, bodily fortitude, physical aggression, and a fighting spirit—all "inversions of 'feminized' Victorian civilization."[61] Some men, heeding Teddy Roosevelt's call, took up the "strenuous life," displaying and discovering bold manly vigor in muscular sports like prizefighting, college football, and bodybuilding, in the rugged outdoors, and in the military adventurism sanctioned by U.S. imperialism. Team sports, YMCA gymnasiums, and scouting provided antidotes to the excessive coddling and passive spectatorship that male character builders believed threatened "robust, manly, self-reliant boyhood."[62] New epithets—"sissy," "pussyfoot," "cold feet," and "stuffed shirt"—scorned "behavior which had once appeared self-possessed and manly but now seemed overcivilized and effeminate."[63] In particular, the phrases "pussy-foot" and "cold feet" glorified decisive action as a hallmark of vigorous manhood while deriding hesitancy and paralyzing doubt as signs of weakness.[64]

The single-mindedness and certainty that exemplified ideals of manhood were also evident in the boy consumer's unwavering allegiance to branded goods. A contributor to *Printers' Ink*, lauding the boy consumer's "passionate loyalty," underscored the martial fervor of the boy's brand devotion: "His heroes are found not only in fiction and the sporting pages, but in *things*—motor cars, electric refrigerators, radios. And what he admires he is ready to fight for."[65] Not just

59. Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 13; Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 251–53; David Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870–1920* (Madison, Wisc., 1983), 44–49.

60. Quoted in Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy*, 48.

61. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 253.

62. Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 16–17; Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 182–83; the phrase "robust, manly, self-reliant boyhood," used by Boy Scout leader Ernest Thompson Seton, appears in Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy*, 49.

63. Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*, 17.

64. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 224–25.

65. Stephen W. Meader, "Selling the Tom Sawyers: No Kid Stuff—Your Fifteen-Year Old Won't Tolerate It," *Printers' Ink* 159 (16 June 1932): 51–52.

ordinary consumers, boys were "fans," another *Printers' Ink* writer enthused.[66] Such praise for the boy consumer's loyalty and exuberance might have encouraged some advertisers to regard him as an easy mark. However, progressive discourses on boyish virtue also allowed advertisers to interpret these traits as manifestations of manly vitality rather than as signs of feminine gullibility and materialistic excess. Where Victorians had sought to restrain boyish energy and unruliness, progressives glorified boyhood as a repository of manly virtues that civilization and feminine influence too often stifled. For many middle-class men, the path to revitalization lay in recovering the exuberance, spontaneity, and playfulness that reigned freely in boyhood.[67]

Notions of boyish vitality and exuberance, however, were too slippery to anchor consumption firmly in the masculine realm. What more certainly transformed consumption into a manly pursuit was the boy consumer's rationality and affinity for technology. As one trade press contributor would have it, boys were no-nonsense consumers who, unlike women, responded to "straight selling" rather than emotional appeals or manipulation.[68] If the "reason why" copy that accompanied advertisements for cars and new technologies was too technical or lengthy for the masses, boys seemed perfectly suited to it. A restless inquirer, the boy, advertiser Frank Fehlman asserted, was "a sponge seeking facts, more facts, and still more facts.... Why, why, why, is the key to his thinking."[69] Further, advertising professionals contended, as the mechanics who fixed the family car, electric iron, radio, and washing machine, boys were naturally drawn to technical information and would "read a whole page of 10-pt. type without skipping a word."[70] The boy consumer's affinity for reason-why copy thus transformed his proclivity to consume into a pursuit of knowledge and technological expertise.[71]

By constructing boys as technologically conversant consumers, promoters of the boy market safely contained boys' prolific consumer appetites within the masculine realm. Rather than a mark of materialistic excess, the modern boy's desire to possess the latest gear and

66. Ernest Rowe, "Two Specialties, to Round Out Season's Sales," *Printers' Ink* 120 (24 Aug. 1922): 143.

67. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 255–57; Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy*, 52–54.

68. K. B. White, "Booklets That Teach Boys How to Play," *Printers' Ink Monthly* 5 (Nov. 1922): 33.

69. Frank E. Fehlman, "Copywriting Needs a Rebirth," *Advertising & Selling* 16 (10 Dec. 1930): 25.

70. Meader, "Selling the Tom Sawyers," 52.

71. For more on "reason-why" approaches and consumer rationality, see Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 296–97.

mechanical equipment—whether for sports, home entertainment, or electrical tinkering—was a testament to the boy's quest for mastery over new technology and his love of progress.[72] Not surprisingly, advertisers' infatuation with the boy consumer coincided with the popularization of wireless experimentation as a boyhood hobby. For middle-class boys, learning to be "handy with tools"—a skill mandated by the Boy Scout manual—and playing with technology were important facets of growing up in the early twentieth century. As radio historian Susan Douglas has written, "If [boys] failed to recognize how the desire for adventure, combat, and the assertion of strength, on the one hand, could be reconciled with the need to prepare for life in the modern world, on the other, popular books and magazines were there to remind them. Everything could be achieved through technical mastery."[73] In the technology-centered world of boys' play, consumerism became the means to display mechanical flair, inventiveness, and mastery of technical change—all measures of masculine success.[74]

Advertisers' most flattering tribute to the boy may have been their equation of his technical mastery with his command of family spending. *American Boy* had long asserted that in the arena of cars and radios grown-ups regularly depended upon boys for guidance in their purchases.[75] By the late 1920s, advertisements appearing in boy publications began to echo this vision. Some depicted boys in the role of the brand-conscious consumer savant, instructing mom and dad on what to buy. For example, a 1928 radio battery advertisement pictured a father returning from the store with the Burgess "Super B" brand his son endorsed. Making the case for boys' superior consumer savvy bluntly, the copy applauded the father for following his son's advice: "It's a wise dad who buys the kind of batteries that his son recommends . . . for the boys of today certainly know their stuff."[76] The accompanying illustration—an etched drawing of a boy greeting and stopping his father at the front door with the question, "Did'ja get the 'SUPER B' I told you about?"—underscored the boy's authority by seeming to diminish the father's. Looking every bit the loyal organization man in suit and hat, the package-bearing father ap-

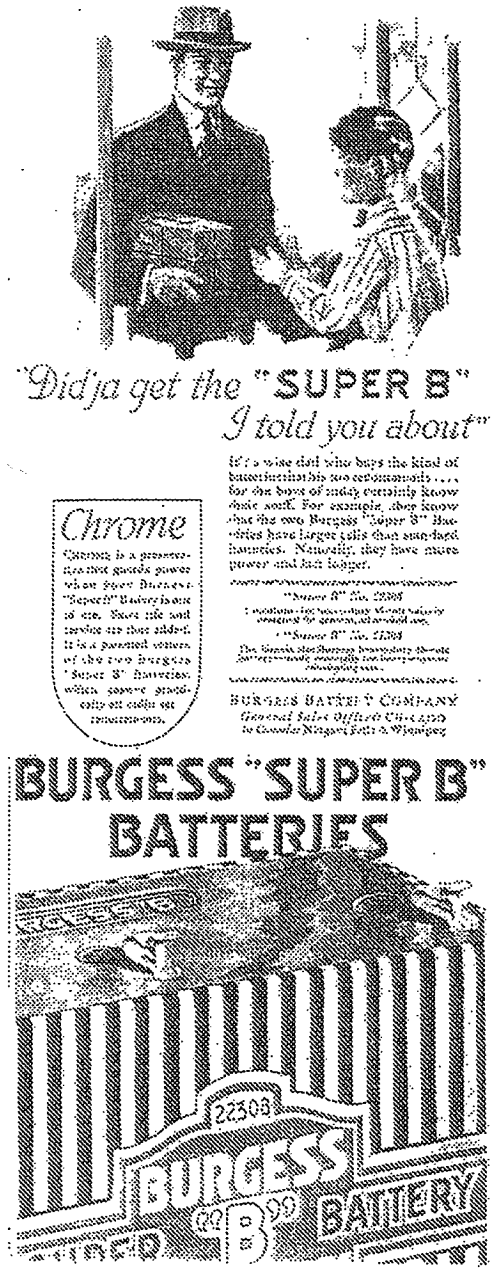
72. "When father was a boy—," advertising proof sheets, 1920, box 198, Ayer.

73. Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922* (Baltimore, Md., 1987), 191.

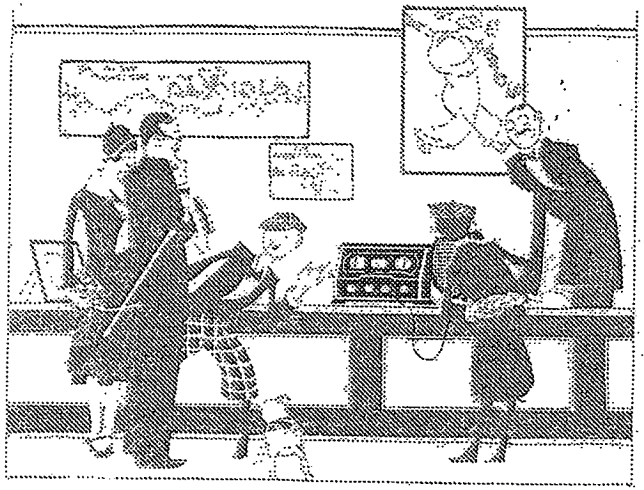
74. A similar point is made in Oldenziel, "Boys and Their Toys," 77–78.

75. See the following *American Boy* advertising proof sheets housed in the Ayer Collection: "That's right, Mike—talk back at him," c. 1925, box 200; "Choosing the Car," box 197; "Give the Boys the Credit," 1923, box 198; "But gosh, mother, she won't run on just looks," box 198.

76. Advertisement, *American Boy* 29 (Sept. 1928): 47.



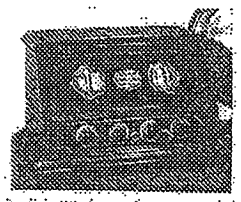
Advertisers depicted boys as consumer savants who tutored fathers in brand-consciousness and consumption. Reproduced from *American Boy*, Sept. 1928.



See that Dad gets the dope on Radiola 20

—the best buy in radio today

RADIO is no fun whatever unless you can tune in just the stations you want and cut out the ones you don't want. It takes how but to watch his step on this or he may get stung with a set that can't stand the pace of a lot of stations going at once. But Radiola 20 was made to be specially selective. It's many times as good in this way as the average receiving set. Twenty stations at twenty minutes to six pick as all for Radiola 20 when you have the dial numbers handy. It's the little chart of who when it comes to tuning them in sharp as a razor. There are five rules. And the last one is an extra fine power tube. When the words and music come in you'll think the singers or musicians are in the next room. You'll get bands, orchestras, shows, songs, stories, everything, clear as can be—better than on many sets costing twice as much. Just as it is you and your Dad can hear Radiola 20. The rest will be easy. There's an RCA Authorized Dealer near you. Look him up right away. You'll see this sign



Radiola 20, less equipment . . . $78

RCA-Radiola

Advertisers imagined that boys' superior knowledge of new technologies translated into masterful salesmanship. Reproduced from *American Boy*, June 1927, with the permission of Thomson Consumer Electronics.

peared to be at his son's beck and call, an errand boy to the boy boss. In a similar vein, a 1927 RCA advertisement, instructing boys to "See that Dad gets the dope on Radiola 20," depicted a boy inside a radio shop pitching the Radiola's virtues to beguiled parents.[77] For boys who read these advertisements as allegories of boy empowerment—and how could they not?—consumer culture became a realm where they could stage imaginary Oedipal coups, triumphing over fathers as tutors in consumption and master persuaders.

As such advertisements further suggest, the boy's likeness to the go-getter salesman—indeed, to advertising executives themselves—was in no small measure responsible for the high esteem in which advertisers held him. In the popular literature of the 1920s, the salesman emerged as a model of the manly modern businessman. Advertising executive Bruce Barton's 1924 best-seller *The Man Nobody Knows* offered the most ennobling tribute in its portrayal of Jesus Christ as a "magnetic" leader who used his organizational skills, charismatic salesmanship, and business acumen to build "the greatest organization of all." In sharp contrast to the nineteenth-century image of the salesman as a morally suspect "confidence man," twentieth-century discourses cast selling as a productive activity—even a public service—that helped to satisfy wants and stimulate the economy. If masculine virtues seemed missing from the sedentary lives of supervised office workers, they abounded in the salesman's persistence, eagerness to do battle for clients, and enthusiasm. To possess "enthusiasm"—what historian Angel Kwolek-Folland has described as "one of the most frequently used words in the business vocabulary of the early twentieth century"—was to possess a multitude of related and mutually constituting traits: "optimism, persistence, initiative, cheerfulness, and company loyalty."[78] The figure of the salesman, then, affirmed the presence of masculine virtues even as managerial capitalism eclipsed older ideals of the self-made man.

Much as 1920s business ideology established the virility of corporate salesmen, it also helped to masculinize consumption. When promoters of the boy market celebrated the restless enthusiasm and charismatic salesmanship of the boy, they touted not only his value to prospective advertisers as a consumer but also his masculine credentials as a producer. "Get a boy on your side," one advertising authority promised, "and you have made not merely a sale, but a salesman." In advertising discourses, the boy consumer-salesman assumed the role of a loyal warrior, using advertisers' "data to argue

77. Ibid. 28 (June 1927): 27.
78. Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business*, 80–88.

down anybody . . . who dares to disparage" a favored product.[79] Not just a child defending pride of possession, the manly boy, like any worthy salesman, battled on behalf of the firm. The boy even bested the sales professional by virtue of his freedom from professional codes and his trusted position within the family. "He's got it all over your own men in many ways," *American Boy* instructed advertisers. "He's not restricted by sales ethics. He'll paint a gloomy picture of a competitive make your men wouldn't think of painting. And the way he can praise your car would be 'just sales talk' if it came from your agent."[80] Possessing the loyalty of an organization man, the enthusiasm of a sales professional, and the flexible ethics of a fast-talking street peddler, the boy consumer was a formidable amalgamation of virtuoso salesmanship, past and present.

Advertisers who hoped to enlist the boy's dynamic salesmanship pinned their hopes on winning over the "gang leader," a charismatic Tom Sawyer–like youth who could sway the consumer loyalties of the neighborhood gang. If advertisers could sell the gang leader, advertising authority S. C. Lambert reasoned, "the trick is turned, for he is pretty sure to sell the members of his gang. This may mean five or more sales instead of [just] one."[81] Advertisers' understanding of gang leaders was partly informed by conceptions of adolescence, first formulated in the Progressive Era by psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who viewed male adolescence as a pivotal moment of transition in which boys formed gangs and recapitulated the lives of barbarians. Hall stressed that the gang instinct, if properly channeled, could be put to constructive ends. Such was the hope of character-building organizations like the Boy Scouts and YMCA, which sought to shape the gang instinct by ruling through gang leaders. If they could win the "key boy," character builders surmised, the rest would fall in line.[82]

Much like Scout leaders, advertisers eagerly gambled on the "gang spirit and high-pressure enthusiasm" of the middle-class boy consumer.[83] Numerous advertisements played to boys' desire to be the gang leader by enticing them to start a club organized around a favorite branded good. One advertiser promised special rewards to leaders who got a "crowd of boys together" for an Auto-Wheel Coaster

79. Meader, "Selling the Tom Sawyers," 51–52.
80. Advertising proof sheet, July 1924, box 198, Ayer.
81. Lambert, "Building a Business," 89, 90.
82. Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy*, 101–5.
83. Lambert touted the boy's "gang spirit" in "Building a Business," 90; the phrase "gang spirit and high-pressure enthusiasm" appears in the *American Boy* ad proof sheet, "Pretty snarky, but will it write?" 1925, box 200, Ayer.

Club.[84] U.S. Giant Chain Bicycle Tires promoted its club and tires through spokesman "Joe Fastpeddler," a boy whose last name summoned dual images of athletic prowess and aggressive salesmanship. As president of the fictional Thriftville Boys Bicycle Club, Joe Fastpeddler "issued an order that every member who expects to keep up with the bunch" on the club's bike trips "use U.S. Giant Chains on his wheels."[85]

As such advertisements suggest, clubs honored boys as valiant leaders—captains and presidents—who commanded the respect and consumer loyalties of their peers. Yet, even as clubs tied achievement to consumer endeavors—bestowing prizes and honorifics upon boy leaders who purchased advertised goods and inspired peers to follow suit—advertisers subordinated boys' consumer identity to their dominant masculine identity as producers. In going after the gang leader, advertisers believed they were appealing to an entrepreneur, ever "on the lookout for new ideas which he can apply to his business."[86] Thus, the advertising campaign for Pierce-Arrow coaster wagons defined leadership of a local Coaster Club as the starting point of a successful future as a business executive or professional. From captain of the Coaster Club, the advertisement promised, it was "an easy step . . . to captain of the baseball team, manager of the football or basketball outfit," and eventual recognition as a leader among men: "It's the boy who develops his genius for leadership that rises to be the bank president, the manager of the big business house, the college professor."[87] At a time of diminishing opportunities for young men at the top of the corporate ladder, the notion that consumer leadership could launch one on the road to upward mobility must have been heartening indeed.

By linking consumer leadership to such career trajectories—all preserves of manly independence—advertisers suggested new ways in which consumer selfhood could be reconciled with autonomous selfhood. In the new corporate order, the scramble to the top favored team players who cultivated a malleable self and winning personality over solitary strivers who showed dedication through steady work habits. What such organization men often lost in the process, however, was a solid sense of their own identity. Admen were themselves familiar with this dilemma, for they were the ultimate corporate team players, beholden to clients as well as to unpredictable consumers. Perhaps feeding their own nostalgic yearnings, advertisers

84. Advertisement, *American Boy* 22 (Nov. 1920), 43.
85. Ibid. 30 (June 1929): 47.
86. Lambert, "Building a Business," 90.
87. Ad copy quoted in Lambert, "Building a Business," 90–91.

affirmed that boys could experiment with the new work personality—using their powers of persuasion to promote brand loyalty among their peers—without sacrificing their dreams of becoming a self-reliant professional or business executive. Boys who made personality their capital, admen implied, possessed the kind of dynamic leadership that guaranteed manly independence. Even so, advertisers' construction of the boy consumer was fraught with contradictions, for in likening him to a modern salesman they also likened him to the consummate organization man. A far cry from the independent entrepreneur, the modern salesman was a product of vast transformations in the economy that subordinated the sales representative's traditional reliance on initiative and improvisational skills to standardized selling strategies and rationalized sales routes.[88] Such incongruities, however, help account for the boy consumer's appeal: he was simultaneously a part of and apart from the new corporate economy, a symbol of its dynamic salesmanship and an alluring reminder of the autonomy and individualism that no longer reigned supreme.

Depictions of the boy consumer as an aspiring businessman sustained a crucial link between the work ethic and the burgeoning consumer ethos. As the 1920s progressed, however, advertisers began to acknowledge more openly the consumer aspirations that lay at the heart of the boy entrepreneur. This shift was especially notable in advertisements that addressed boys as managers and earners of their own spending money. Initially, most advertisements for earning opportunities addressed boys as entrepreneurs without appealing directly to their consumer desires. Whether it was an advertisement for fur-trapping supplies, vegetable seeds, or a bike that could speed up a newspaper delivery route, boys were first and foremost businessmen striving to earn their own way. One bicycle manufacturer, for example, told boys that with a bike they could make "twice as much money" selling newspapers "in half the time," and liberate themselves from having "to keep asking Dad for money."[89] Not merely a mode of transportation, the bike became a vehicle for instilling traditional producer values: "With a bike he can deliver newspapers and parcels . . . run errands and carry messages . . . all of which give him an early and sound training in good business habits, thrift and independence."[90]

The purchase of a bike, though itself an act of consumption, served the boy's entrepreneurial drives rather than his dreams of ac-

88. Timothy Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1995), 7, 17, 193–220.

89. Advertisement, *American Boy* 26 (Jan. 1925): 30.

90. Ibid. 104 (Feb. 1930): 39.

quiring more consumer goods through augmented earnings. *American Boy* endorsed this view in its own editorials on the virtues of advertising. The magazine's editors recommended careful study of advertisements not only because boys would learn to spend more intelligently, but also so they might "discover business opportunities" and acquire "an understanding of business" and advertising practices essential to their future success.[91] Even as the magazine's editors promoted consumption, they distanced boys from its more threatening, potentially emasculating, implications. Becoming absorbed in the advertisers' world of consumer abundance was an exercise in business preparation, not an act of self-indulgence.

By the mid-1920s, the relationship between work and consumption had begun to shift somewhat in advertisers' minds. Where previously consumption had been lauded as an investment in capital—the means to further business aspirations—now consumer aspirations became the goad to industry. Accordingly, advertisers began speaking to boys not just as entrepreneurs in the making but also as unfulfilled spenders whose consumer fantasies could awaken entrepreneurial ambitions. Picturing an enticing array of sporting goods floating in black space, Ferry's Purebred Seeds Company framed boys' quest for spending money in explicitly material terms: "The stores are full of just what you want—cameras, swimming suits, fishing tackle, baseball equipment, running shoes, tennis racquets and camping outfits. Why waste time merely wishing for them when there is a fine way to earn money to buy them?"[92] Another Ferry's advertisement, illustrated with a drawing of fields sprouting baseball bats and trees laden with baseballs, linked the cultivation of nature's abundance to the satisfaction of consumer desire.[93]

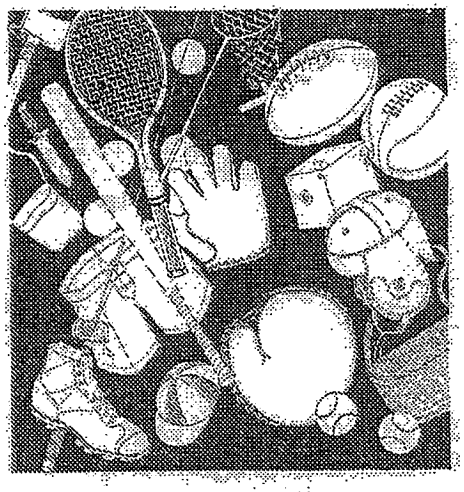
Several factors account for advertisers' willingness to appeal more overtly to boys' consumer appetites. First, advertisers could reassure themselves, as they often did in the trade press, that consumer desire stimulated the work ethic. Perhaps more important, the change in focus reflected advertisers' new assessment of boy culture in the 1920s. Through both observation and rudimentary market research, advertisers discerned a more pronounced consumer orientation in boys who grew up during the Jazz Age.[94] Indeed, as advertisers adapted their campaigns to the desires of their audience, the boy

91. "Why Read Advertisements: Advertising Talk No. 4," *American Boy* 18 (Aug. 1917): 24.

92. Advertisement, *American Boy* 27 (March 1926): 51.

93. Ibid. 26 (April 1925): 47.

94. Rather than relying on systematic market research surveys, in the 1920s advertisers typically gathered data about children's consumer preferences through advertising contests that solicited testimonial letters.



Vegetables will pay for them

Advertisers increasingly appealed to boys' unfulfilled consumer desires, even as they linked spending to the work ethic. Reproduced from *American Boy*, March 1926.

Peas, beans and baseballs

Reproduced from *American Boy*, April 1926.

consumer began to look more like a shallow materialist than a disciplined entrepreneur. Consider the contest held by Ferry's Purebred Seeds company in 1928 for the best letter on "Why I Plant a Garden." The contest announcement had suggested as possible answers "helping out the home-table" or "competing with . . . a neighbor" for the best produce, but their subsequent advertising campaign in 1929 and 1930 reflected an entirely different set of motives, presumably based on boys' contest responses. Boys' entrepreneurial ambitions were informed less by a sense of family duty or friendly rivalry than bold materialism.[95] "Put a rake into the soil in your own backyard and pull out Money," baited one advertisement.[96] Vegetable gardening, boys were told, could yield "plus fours for the afternoon's golf game, a tuxedo for the evening's affair; a radio set; plenty of cash in the pocket—or full equipment for baseball and hockey."[97]

The boy audience that juvenile advertisers now imagined bore a remarkable similarity to Ted Babbitt, George Babbitt's son in Sinclair Lewis's satirical 1922 novel about the spread of pecuniary values. A manly boy to be sure, Ted was "a natural mechanic" and an inveterate "tinkerer of machines." He was also a fashionable dresser—"[p]roudest of all was his [Fancy Vest] waistcoat, saved for, begged for, plotted for"—whose vast consumer desires outstripped the intensity of his work ethic. Having no use for the impractical "old junk" taught in high school, Ted collected clippings of advertisements for correspondence courses, including one that "bore the rousing headline: 'Money! Money!! Money!!!'" Intrigued that the promise of "BIG money" demanded minimal expenditure of time and study, Ted amassed a collection of "fifty or sixty" such advertisements.[98] Though he eventually headed off to college, Ted's flirtation with correspondence school underscored the shifting calculus of work: no longer an end in itself, work was not so much the measure of the man as it was the handmaiden of consumer ambition.

By the close of the 1920s, both consumer ambition and entrepreneurial drive expressed the virtues of the modern businessman. The consumer-savvy businessman, reflected in the idealized figure of the boy consumer, signaled the emergence of a new emblem of masculinity befitting the age of mass consumption. In overturning less flattering associations of consumption with feminine excess, the boy consumer both advanced and reflected the positive revaluation of consumption during the early twentieth century. In one sense, the

95. Advertisement, *American Boy* 30 (March 1929): 67.
96. Ibid. (May 1929), 32.
97. Ibid. (April 1929), 39.
98. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (1922; New York, 1996), 15, 17, 71, 73, 74.

glorification of the boy consumer is a measure of the profound anxieties that attended the growth of modern consumer society. Advertisers, never fully convinced of their own legitimacy, admired boys for the flattering reflection they projected onto their own cultural mission. Through the figure of the virile boy consumer, advertisers could refashion consumer desire to suit their own masculine self-image as producers and champions of modernity. As a progressive buyer who valued technological innovation, the boy consumer seemed perfectly synchronous with advertisers' self-proclaimed crusade to raise the American standard of living. Uniting consumer desire with entrepreneurial ambition, the boy consumer offered proof that the consumer ethic need not undercut the work ethic. In another sense, however, the glorification of the boy consumer suggests that anxieties over the growth of consumer society were beginning to fade. Consumption had become a manly virtue—not a sign of effeminacy or childlike dependency, but a legitimate, even productive, activity within the masculine domain.

Bibliography of Works Cited

Books

Abelson, Elaine. *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store.* New York, 1989.

Bederman, Gail. *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917.* Chicago, 1995.

Blaszczyk, Regina Lee. *Imagining Consumers: Design and Innovation from Wedgwood to Corning.* Baltimore, Md., 2000.

Cohn, Jan. *Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and* The Saturday Evening Post. Pittsburgh, Pa., 1989.

Cross, Gary. *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood.* Cambridge, Mass., 1997.

de Grazia, Victoria, ed. *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective.* Berkeley, Calif., 1996.

Douglas, Susan. *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922.* Baltimore, Md., 1987.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment.* New York, 1983.

Fass, Paula. *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s.* New York, 1977.

Filene, Peter. *Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities in Modern America,* 3d ed., rev. 1974; Baltimore, Md., 1998.

Finnegan, Margaret. *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women.* New York, 1999.

Formanek-Brunnell, Miriam. *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930.* New Haven, Conn., 1993.

Garvey, Ellen. *The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s.* New York, 1996.
Griswold, Robert. *Fatherhood in America: A Cultural History.* New York, 1993.
Grumbine, E. Evalyn. *Reaching Juvenile Markets: How to Advertise, Sell and Merchandise Through Boys and Girls.* New York, 1938.
Johnston, Patricia. *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen's Advertising Photography.* Berkeley, Calif., 1997.
Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History.* New York, 1996.
Kwolek-Folland, Angel. *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930.* Baltimore, Md., 1994.
Laird, Pamela Walker. *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing.* Baltimore, Md., 1998.
Lewis, Sinclair. *Babbitt.* 1922; New York, 1996.
Macleod, David. *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870–1920.* Madison, Wisc., 1983.
Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940.* Berkeley, Calif., 1985.
Mintz, Steven, and Susan Kellogg. *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life.* New York, 1988.
Rotundo, E. Anthony. *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era.* New York, 1993.
Scanlon, Jennifer. *Inarticulate Longings: The* Ladies' Home Journal, *Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture.* New York, 1995.
Scharff, Virginia. *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age.* Albuquerque, N.M., 1991.
Seiter, Ellen. *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture.* New Brunswick, N.J., 1993.
Sekora, John. *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought.* Baltimore, Md., 1977.
Spears, Timothy. *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture.* New Haven, Conn., 1995.

Articles and Essays

Brezeale, Kenon. "In Spite of Women: *Esquire* Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer." *Signs* 20 (Autumn 1994): 1–22.
Hantover, Jeffrey P. "The Boy Scouts and the Validation of Masculinity." In *The American Man,* ed. Elizabeth and Joseph Pleck. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980, pp. 185–201.
Leach, William. "Child-World in the Promised Land." In *The Mythmaking Frame of Mind: Social Imagination & American Culture,* ed. James Gilbert. Belmont, Calif., 1993, pp. 209–38.
Lears, T. J. Jackson. "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930." In *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History,* ed. Richard Wrightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears. New York, 1983, pp. 1–38.
Oldenziel, Ruth. "Boys and Their Toys: The Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild, 1930–1968, and the Making of a Male Technical Domain." *Technology and Culture* 38 (1997): 60–96.

Segal, Eric J. "Norman Rockwell and the Fashioning of American Masculinity." *Art Bulletin* 78 (Dec. 1996): 633–46.
Susman, Warren I. "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture." In Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century.* New York, 1984, pp. 271–85.
Swienicki, Mark A. "Consuming Brotherhood: Men's Culture, Style and Recreation as Consumer Culture, 1880–1930." *Journal of Social History* 31 (Summer 1998): 773–808.

Magazines

Advertising & Selling. 1930.
American Boy. 1917–30.
Printed Salesmanship. 1927.
Printers' Ink. 1912–33.
Printers' Ink Monthly. 1922–34.

Unpublished Sources

Jacobson, Lisa. "Raising Consumers: Children, Childrearing, and the American Mass Market, 1890–1940." Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997.
J. Walter Thompson Company Archives, Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, Sales & Marketing History, Duke University, Durham, N.C.
N. W. Ayer Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
Wayne P. Ellis Collection of Kodakiana, Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History, Duke University, Durham, N.C.