

(thing) by [izubachi](#) (1.7 hr) ([print](#))

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S&H Green Stamps was a popular [consumer](#) incentive program, the first of its kind, managed by the Sperry & Hutchinson Company. At its peak in the 1950s and 60s, the program was a widely recognized American [cultural](#) icon. S&H distributed three times as many stamps as the [U.S. Post Office](#) and enough catalogs to circle the globe one and a half times. Hundreds of thousands of families gathered their Green Stamps to paste into small booklets in the hopes of redeeming them for various goods from S&H centers across the country. They embodied the [zeitgeist](#) of the post-War boom: a genuine faith in the benefits of [consumerism](#).

The program worked by means of an efficient distribution and reclamation system. Merchants, especially [grocers](#) and gas stations, would buy Green Stamps from the S&H company. With each purchase, the merchants would then distribute Green Stamps to their customers, along with a booklet for keeping them. The hope was that people would seek out merchants distributing Green Stamps and stay loyal to them. Customers would duly paste their green stamps into the booklets, upgrading to various sizes as they gained more stamps. Meanwhile, S&H distributed [catalogs](#) filled with merchandise such as [toaster ovens](#), [silverware](#), [toys](#), small furniture items; the stuff [yard sales](#) are made of. When one had collected enough stamps, one visited a redemption center in the local area and traded in the booklet for goodies. Green Stamps could also be exchanged for cash rewards, if none of the catalog's items caught one's fancy.

The stamps themselves changed in appearance over the decades, but stuck to certain themes. They were colored a light, [pastel](#) green and had a red S&H logo. There was also text declaring the stamp's value. Certain stamps with values greater than the standard were distributed for special occasions and promotions. The stamp books came in different sizes, from small starter booklets to huge albums for the super-shopper. The smaller books were dark green with the S&H logo tastefully centered. Larger books framed a picture of the typical [nuclear family](#), with dutiful mother showing a full page of the book to her smiling children while father the [benevolent patriarch](#) watched over their shoulders. The catalogs were filled to the brim with shiny items, trinkets of [the American Dream](#), absolutely free (with the right number of stamps, of course).

Sperry & Hutchinson Company first began their Green Stamps program in 1896. They were set to wider distribution in 1899, and gradually infiltrated the consumer market. Like most other commercial ventures, S&H Green Stamps suffered serious setbacks during the [Great Depression](#), but the economic collapse proved to be a blessing in disguise. People who had grown up in those troubled times now had an ingrained need for saving money any way they could. S&H Green Stamps were in a prime position after [World War II](#) to be attractive to both [spendthrift](#) consumers and pressured merchants looking for ways to [up the ante](#) on the growing competition. They skyrocketed in popularity. One could simply not own a gas station or grocery without distributing S&H Green Stamps. It was the sure path to [bankruptcy](#). By 1964, Sperry & Hutchinson Company was the single largest publisher in the United States and the largest purchaser of consumer goods in the world. It was estimated that 80% of U.S. households collected the stamps.

So if they were so popular, where are they now? The [stagnation](#) in the 1970s contributed to a slow deterioration of S&H Green Stamps' customer base. Merchants found that the stamps were no longer an effective tool of maintaining customer loyalty (since everyone gave out stamps) and ceased buying them. It looked like the company would putter out [with a whimper](#). Then in 1999, the great-grandson of one of the original founders, Walter Beinecke, purchased the company. He transformed it into an online [retailer](#). Functioning under the same principles, S&H Green Stamps became [S&H greenpoints](#). Customers are now given a magnetic swipe card to which points are added with every purchase. They redeem these points online through <http://www.greenpoints.com> where a catalog of goods is available. The program has nowhere near the penetration that S&H Green Stamps once did, isolated mainly to the [East Coast](#). It does, however, show promise. The last store to offer physical Green Stamps was a [Piggly Wiggly](#) in Tennessee, which ceased their distribution on February 14, 2003. They are now officially collector's items.

The S&H Green Stamps program was a marketing [coup d'?tat](#) for the time. It allowed merchants to compete on terms of more than just price or service, giving them valuable flexibility. At the same time, the program perpetuated itself by its very existence; if the rival grocery store across the street started using them, one had no choice but to start purchasing them as well or risk [haemorrhaging](#) customers. The notion of receiving free products for little effort was an attractive one to customers. The novelty of the stamp books also helped promote the program. In an arbitrary decision between several merchants, the presence of S&H Green Stamps could thus serve as an important tipping factor. Once they had found a chain which gave the stamps away, customers were unlikely to leave it for another. Unique to the history of the U.S. consumer market, the program's success was abstracted to several other loyalty initiatives. [Frequent flyer miles](#), [magazine](#) sale campaigns, [credit card](#) cash-back bonuses, [junk food](#) point programs, and all their ubiquitous counterparts can trace their roots directly to S&H Green Stamps. If you happen to find an old S&H Stamp Book while rooting around in your attic and don't feel like keeping them around for [nostalgia's](#) sake, you can get something worthwhile for them. They are plenty of seekers for these vintage stamps on [eBay](#). If your stamps are from before the 1950s, you have a better chance of getting a fair price

for them. Otherwise, you can still redeem your stamps with Sperry & Hutchinson Company. Send a letter to
S&H Customer Care Center
P.O. Box 407060
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33340

with your stamps, name, address, and daytime phone number. You can either be credited for greenpoints, or simply take a cash exchange. And if you're looking for Green Stamps? The best place to check is eBay, which has a wide range of auctions offering Green Stamps from different eras. If you'd prefer not to do your dealing over [the Wired](#), more kitschy [antique](#) shops in your local area might have a few booklets tucked in the back. I was able to find one after some searching, but your mileage may vary.

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 - Bugging my poor parents.
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