

Marc Levinson. *The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2011. Pp. 358. Paper. \$24.95.

Marc Levinson, a former economist for J.P. Morgan Chase and University of New York trained historian, introduces an in-depth company history of the once-behemoth grocery store chain, The Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company (A&P), from its founding in the 1850s until its decline in the 1960s. Levinson not only offers detailed insights on A&P's underpinnings, but also a chronological summation of the social, political, and economic trends of the United States during the company's heydays. By using a plethora of sources from state and federal governments, banks, Hartford family archives, and newspapers, Levinson argues that A&P's legacy is still pertinent to today's economic questions about the relationship between big business and smaller, independent enterprises.

The first half of the book introduces the humble beginnings of the company. George Gilman was the founder of the Great American Tea Company in the early nineteenth century. As the name suggests, A&P sold tea and coffee products. After the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the enterprise was rebranded as "The Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company." Gilman's success was due to low prices as a result of being both a wholeseller and retailer, and the development of a nationwide mail-order system. Gilman's right hand-man, George Hartford Sr., took over the business after Gilman's passing and started the A&P grocery store revolution.

The second half of the book examines the start of the Hartford Brothers era after their father's passing. The grocery chain became one of the biggest retailers in the United States in the early twentieth century. George and John Hartford strategized efforts to eliminate competition by utilizing innovative techniques such as private labeling, maximizing profits by buying bulk and selling cheap, and installing refrigeration that allowed stores to carry dairy, meat, and produce. All these efforts resulted in making A&P the first retail chain to reach one billion dollars in sales and boasting over 16,000 stores nationwide

By using economist Joseph Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction," Levinson reiterates that it is "the painful process by which innovation and technological advances make an industry more efficient while leaving older, less adaptable by the wayside." Applying this concept to A&P's push for more innovative, efficient grocery stores, Levinson shows that it affected local communities who enjoyed access to fresher and cheaper food, but smaller businesses who could not afford to implement these strategies were left behind.

Local grocery stores were smaller enterprises in comparison to A&P. These shops sold limited quantities of products at higher prices. This meant that women, who did most of the shopping at the time, had to go to three or four different stores to get everything they needed. Still, shop owners did have their loyal, frequent customers whom they knew personally and built strong relationships with. Levinson mentions that politically and socially, A&P was constantly criticized for their business practices of selling at low prices. To the public, it seemed like an attack on the enterprises of the local, working-class men. This started anti-chain store movements, pressuring politicians and institutions to examine A&P closely for monopolistic tendencies and creating special taxes in order to slow down the destruction of mom and pop stores nationwide. Eventually, A&P's ascent started to weaken in the post-World War II era when competitors began building bigger and better supermarkets in regions where A&P had not expanded to, such as the West Coast. Moreover, the death of George Hartford Jr., who handled the business aspect of the company also contributed to A&P's decline.

While Levinson's description is very detailed regarding A&P's early history until the end of its heydays, he glosses over the post-Hartford era. There have been new managing owners, associated business chains (Super Fresh, Food Basics), and attempts to revamp A&P with new store designs, adding pharmacies, and plans for overseas ventures. It would be helpful to explore comparative questions and connections to competitors such as Kroger, Safeway, and Sears. Historians and non-historians alike who share an interest in early twentieth century U.S. economic, business, and retail history will find this book easy to read and informative.

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