

It's really quite clear that one person significantly helped the working class and the middle class in America the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That person is Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart. And that's because he drove down prices and broadened availability of everyday, basic necessities of life. When Sam started Walmart in the early 1960s in Arkansas, established retail stores took no notice. Well, they notice now!

See, Walton and his team worked for decades to leverage the power of free markets by price-pressuring grocery stores and other retailers to work smarter to compete and pass many of the fruits of their efforts on to consumers. And, along the way, millions have been meaningfully employed by all those retailers.

In short, Sam Walton directly impacted countless people for their continuous betterment, often every time they went to their local Walmart! And in constantly moving towards efficiency and betterment for their customers, Walmart became a powerful refiner of supply chain techniques. Because of free markets and supply chain advancements, many of the goods on Walmart's shelves were from around the country and around the world. What was happening early on was that people in faraway places like Asia were using their skills to provide goods Americans were happy to buy. Those Asian workers and their companies thrived from selling their goods, and Americans thrived from buying their goods. Think of it...countless billions of highly beneficial free-will transactions between people who would never meet one another!

All this came about because of a motivated person like Sam Walton was constantly refining his use of a vastly complex supply chain. But Sam couldn't possibly do it alone—he had help from a huge host of Walmart employees. And, of course, he had a whole lot of help from the goods-producing companies. Moreover, Sam had a whole lot of help from transportation companies and their workers. Think of it...one small item on the shelf that cost just pennies in a Walmart in the middle of Kansas would wind its way from some factory in Bangladesh or Taiwan. And right there in the middle of making all that work, year in and year out, was the direct impact of a man by the name of Malcolm McLean. Even today, we might say that the ghost of Malcolm McLean hovers over billions of transactions each day around the world.

So...just who is Malcolm McLean? He was a teenager during the Great Depression in America who couldn't afford college...but he saved \$120 to buy a used truck for him to haul all kinds of stuff. Fast forward a couple of decades to the mid-1950s and we find McLean borrowing \$22 million to buy a couple of World War II-vintage ships. He wanted to use the ships to most efficiently transport goods using containers, you know, giant steel boxes, each taller than a person with more capacity than the living room in many houses.

The back story about those containers? Before McLean, containers had been used on a fairly limited basis. But McLean was focused on very widespread commercialization of the use of containers for transporting dry goods. Why? Because, at the time, the labor costs of loading goods by hand were \$5.86 per ton in 1956 dollars. But loading a container back then only cost 16 cents per ton. That means the choice was spending, say, \$10 loading a container on a ship...or spending \$360 paying workers to hand-load the ship.

Those workers were called longshoremen. You might remember the gritty role played by actor Marlon Brando in the Best-Picture-Oscar movie from the 1950s, *On the Waterfront*. So...\$10 versus \$360? Those are economics everyone easily grasps—both the workers being hired and the consumers ultimately paying the workers in the price of their retail purchases. But there's even more benefit to containerization...yes, talk about processes being streamlined! Opting for the speediness of the containerization approach meant the waiting ships and waiting trucks spent a lot less costly time waiting at the dock. So McLean started by running a successful ocean route from New York down the coast to Florida and across to Texas.

This is an unstoppable story in life...new innovations, new inventions, new technology, new ways of doing things all help the person paying the bills. But it displaces people who were doing tasks the old inefficient way. That is why the vast majority of Americans were directly involved in agriculture in 1800 and about 1% are involved directly today. Oh, for the good old days where we could all do backbreaking work on

farms with no machines and no electricity! You wanna go live that way? Didn't think so! But isn't there a family member you see every Thanksgiving who seriously likes that idea...but somehow never does it?

McLean methodically went international, creating intercontinental routes with his company SeaLand. Then the U.S. military discovered SeaLand in the late 1960s, engaging many of his ships to sail to Vietnam with many containers serving wartime needs. But, still, McLean had a much bigger vision, and he did what all self-driven innovators do: he plugged away for years, driving relentlessly towards a big goal. His particular goal was a very big idea that seemed practically impossible: vast standardization of containers such that any given container could be planned for, stored, and stacked seamlessly on ships, trains, and trucks alike across many companies and many countries. Today, this is called *intermodal transportation*.

But the obstacles to that standardization were enormous! The Federal government forced McLean to sell his trucking business to be in the ocean-going-ship business. The port authorities in every port had to be persuaded to build infrastructure for handling containers. And imagine those three separate industries—trains, trucks, and ships—each needing to change and re-build around standard sizing of containers. And how about different transport rules in each state and each country? What a series of nightmares! It took a long time, but McLean's persevering leadership radicalized and bettered the shipping of cargo forever!

What all that has come to mean is that a standardized, 20- or 40-foot-long container is filled, specifically ID'd, and then sealed for safekeeping and protection of its content at a manufacturing plant somewhere, say, in Asia. Then, the container would be loaded on a truck to be taken to an Asian port, then loaded on the ship for America, then unloaded at an American port, then pivoted by a crane and stacked onto a train, later moved onto an 18-wheeler truck at a regional location, then driven and unloaded at, say, a Walmart distribution center or Walmart store. Results? Extensively lowered labor costs. Little to no theft. Every container full of goods with very low shipping costs. Hey, a modern ship can handle 24,000 20-foot containers at a time—the equivalent of a freight train over 40 miles long! And those savings are largely passed on to consumers. That's because competitors in a free-market work to keep prices competitive. That's trickle-down betterment...in fact, that's betterment that has permeated the world's supply chain system for decades now, playing a big part in creating prosperity worldwide for workers and consumers!

Indeed, one of the reasons why Walmart is so successful is because it and many of its hundreds of millions of customers glean benefits every shopping day from the pervasive use of standardized containers as envisioned by Malcolm McLean. Did you know that McLean filed for and received a patent for his innovation of standardized containers? Then, amazingly—for the betterment of all—McLean arranged that his patent be made available royalty-free to all who wanted to use his patent around the world!

The really cool thing is, this is just one story of how supply chains are in constant-improvement mode. Entrepreneurs and savvy competitors work every day to innovate in order to win their customers' business and loyalty. This kaleidoscope of activity is why free markets and competition are so powerful over time.

But, like most everything else, intermodal transportation has experienced some serious problems in the COVID era. That's because successful supply-chain transportation is inherently very tightly scheduled and orchestrated. And a supply chain is only as strong as its weakest link. COVID-induced isolation of workers, production hiccups, and labor shortages plagued the world. So many a ship languished off the coast of America, waiting for days or weeks to be unloaded onto trains or trucks. Yeah, even if many like to think so, humanity does not control everything just yet—vastly disruptive events do intrude on the best of plans.

Here's the deal. When you spot a long train with railroad car after railroad car carrying stacked containers, you see the handiwork of McLean. Same with low-priced clothing. Bicycles. Shoes. And you know that all of this thinking is of intense relevancy to the Christian, because superb stewardship of all that's entrusted to us gets to the very core of God's purposes for us in our relationships and witness. We aren't all cut out to be an utterly remarkable Malcolm McLean! *But God has cut you out to be an utterly remarkable you!*

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Do you really believe that every role you have in life—including believer, neighbor, co-worker and perhaps parent, spouse, or sibling—is designated by God to be an ongoing stewardship-witness opportunity for you? Discuss the key specifics of how this works in your life.
  
2. Have you paused lately to stop and thank God that we get to live in the current era? After doing that, list how several of your particular God-appointed stewardship roles have been made more effective in ways not possible a century ago. Be specific.
  
3. This episode made these two closing statements: “We aren’t all cut out to be an utterly remarkable Malcolm McLean! *But God has cut you out to be an utterly remarkable you!*” Now, go reflect on your answers to the previous two questions. Do those answers reflect that your works are working to reveal the fullness of “*an utterly remarkable you*” for Christ’s glory...? Explain.