

Caps, Cuffs, and Aprons

Carol Kennis, delivered at the Lakewood Heritage Center, April 8, 1997

Introduction

- I will be speaking about Domestic Servants in 19th century Colorado. I will discuss: who employed servants; who worked as servants; what servant's lives were like; and why the custom of employing domestic servants gradually came to an end.
- I'd like to begin by asking "How many of you work now for a wage or have done so at one time?"
- Think of your occupations as I read the following quote from an 1885 Colorado Springs Gazette editorial:

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There is one item in household expenses which is still exceedingly and it would seem unreasonably high; the wages paid to female domestics. All through the East girls who do general housework rarely get more than \$3.00 a week. Here in Colorado Springs the usual wages paid are \$25.00 a month or more than double the eastern rate. While the country was new and the number of women few as compared with the number of men such high rates were inevitable. But now that society has attained its normal condition in such places as Denver and Colorado Springs it would seem high time for the rates paid to female domestics to undergo a reduction.... We are glad to learn that in Denver at least the wages of domestics are diminishing. It is understood that \$20.00 a month is now paid in many families and that good servants are in some cases obtainable for \$16.00 a month. This wave of progress it is hoped will before long reach Colorado Springs.

- How would you react if this were written about your occupation?

Introduction

In my opinion to truly understand the 19th century or any particular era, it is important to understand the lives of the working classes. This is the primary thrust of "social history". It is my view that the presence of domestic servants and the social conventions surrounding this occupation are distinctive of the 19th century. The existence of such a class of live-in household workers made possible the elaborate social customs of the Victorian age.

Census — This is an especially appropriate talk for a gathering of women because according to the U. S. of 1870 1/2 of all female wage earners (this includes children) were employed as domestic servants. Thus, roughly 1 million women servants made up 1/12 of the total labor force in the nation. By 1920 however, only 1/6 of employed women worked as domestics.

Who Employed Servants in the 19th Century?

In the 19th century nearly everyone who could employ a servant did so. Three quarters of the households employed modest staffs of 1 or 2 domestics. However staffs of 25-40 were not unheard of as late as 1900.

Employing servants in the home was common because they were required for many reasons in the 19th century. 1. The physical strain of housework before the invention of labor saving tools was quite heavy.

2. Tradition dictated that servants were required as status symbols. In fact, male servants such as butlers, were primary to show onus's wealth.

Many women sought employment in domestic service because for many years, until industrialization provided other jobs, it was the primary position open to female workers.

Wages were not bad as compared to other jobs when one considered the cost of room and board. For many women and girls, domestic skills were the only skills they had to market. Some young girls between the ages of 13 and 18 were sent by their families into domestic service because in this way they could earn a wage and live in the relative safety of a good home.

- Factory work was sometimes considered too unsavory an environment for young women.

Who were the people that worked as servants?

There are a few generalizations one could state about servants in America before 1920. First, there was an important distinction between the servant workers of the East and the West. In the West nationalities other than Irish dominated. In New York Irish dominated because of the large percentage of immigrants. In the mid-west Germans dominated, in Minnesota, Illinois and Wisconsin, Scandinavians. In the Southwest Mexican and Indians dominated and in the south, blacks.

Secondly, the demand for servants was highest in the West. And because of the distance from the traditional sources of domestic labor, native born white women predominated. Only in California and Washington state in the 1880's did men compete with women for jobs and these were usually the Chinese men-servant.

Most servants were women, regardless of the region. Domestic service was available to women because the tasks they performed were considered as part of the women's sphere and therefore not contrary to nature.

In fact, the 1870 census recorded that 1/2 of all female wage earners were domestics -- roughly 1 million women servants. They made up 1/12 of the total labor force. By 1920 only 1/6 of women employed worked as domestics. (T. Schlereth, Victorian America p. 71)

- Except for these generalizations, the servant class nationwide was as diverse and undefinable as the average American.

•What were the lives of servants' like? How did they perform their jobs?

For most people who employed servants the usual arrangement in a middle class home was to have one woman servant who was considered a maid of all work. This woman

acted both as cook and waitress at meal time and as maid, char woman, and laundress during the rest of the week.

If other servants could be afforded it was usually a cook and a laundress. Often laundresses were day laborers who washed for several families and maintained their own homes. For instance Emily French, one of the few domestics to leave her diary, worked as both a cook and a laundress in Elbert and Denver in 1890 while still maintaining her own home. Many of the families in Elbert were little better off than she. As common in rural areas, her employers were her friends and paid her more often with food, clothing and fodder for her horse than with money.

Wealthy households employed many more servants.

For instance, Glen Eyrie, the estate of Colorado Springs founder and railroad man, General Palmer, is a good example of the number of servants in the wealthiest households. In 1900 there were approximately 80.

A young man named Florienze Ordelhide began working there in 1907 as a dishwasher in the butler's pantry. He was responsible for shining all of the silverware and washing fancy dishes. His boss was the Italian butler, Mr. Bertalotti who was very strict; always holding up the glasses to see if he could find spots. The lady in charge of the housecleaning felt sorry for Florenze and so gave him the job of taking care of all 22 fireplaces in the house; waxing and polishing by hand the floors, walking the Generals dogs, and fishing in the nearby reservoir on Wednesdays. Florenze commented that no one was ever worked to death there.

Long hours of work and isolation.

Another element common to most domestic workers was the long hours. Of course depending on the number of servants and size of household the work day varied in length but was usually 10 to 12 hours long. This was not considered unusual in the 19th century. When the domestic was not actually involved in duties however, they remained at the beck and call of the employer.

One girl wrote, "I worked four weeks for a family in Minneapolis. I used to get up at four o'clock every morning and work until ten p.m. every day in the week. Mondays and Tuesdays, when the washing and ironing was to be done, I used to get up at two o'clock and wash or iron until breakfast time. I was paid \$3.50 per week."

Between 1870 and 1900 the average domestic enjoyed one afternoon and one evening off a week. The long days and few leisure hours as well as the fact that they lived at their work place meant that domestics were more isolated than all other workers in the 19th century. This contributed to the failure of the few domestic labor unions begun at the turn of the century.

One maid told a labor interviewer, "What I minded was the awful lonesomeness. I went for general housework because I knew all about it, and there were only three in the family. I never minded being alone evenings in my own room, or I'm always reading or something and I don't go out hardly at all, but then I always know I can, and that there is somebody

to talk to if I like. But there, except to give orders, they had nothing to do with me. It got to feel sort of crushing at last. I cried myself sick, and at last I gave it up, though, I don't mind the work at all."

Florenze Ordeldhide was seventeen when he went to work for General Palmer at Glen Eyrie. He enjoyed his job but when invited to Europe with the family a year and a half after he started at the Glen, he chose to take the three months off and visit his family in Kansas instead. He said that he had gotten very homesick.

Loneliness was so widespread, for instance, that in Colorado Springs a minister recognized the problem and set out to help. His daughter wrote: "At that time Sunday school was held in the afternoon. We found that young people who served as maids in wealthy homes in the north-end of town could have Sunday afternoon and evening free and liked to come down and attend this service. Rev. and Mrs. Haycraft had this service in their home and offered refreshments afterward to make it a real social gathering for those that had been working all week." (Missionary Frontiersman" unpublished manuscript, special collections, Tutt.)

Women working as domestics especially bridled at the low social status indicated by the wearing of uniforms and use of the word "servant" itself.

These traditions seemed to conflict with America's democratic spirit. And although most home manuals stressed the wearing of cap and apron, American servants had a general dislike of clothing that was identified as "servant attire".

One young woman wrote "I will be a servant no more. A domestic tradeswoman I am, a chambermaid, a waitress, an employee with an employer, but a servant with a mistress never. I am an American."

Employers perpetuated the low social status of servants with symbols. The message was sent that the classes could not intermingle. Servants must use crockery and ironware to eat meals and not the china and silver provided for the family. They must never eat with the family but only in the kitchen or their own dining room. They were segregated from the family and had to use their own staircase, back halls, back entry, and bathroom, when one was provided. Sleeping quarters were never on the same floor as that of the family but rather in the attic or in the basement. In many upper-class households men were dressed in livery and women in black and white uniforms with cap so that they would not be mistaken as a member of the family by a visiting guest.

Isolation from others and second class social status, combined with expanded job opportunities after during and after the First World War that caused fewer women to seek

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*employment as domestics. And more chose to do day work
and not live-in.*

Overall wages for live-in domestics were no less than those paid in other unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Rural areas offered less than cities but wages here in the West were higher than in the northeast or the south. Wages remained between \$25.00 and \$30.00 a month for live-in help.

*A wave of progressive reform from 1890s till W.W.I helped
to improve living conditions for some domestics.*

Invention of household appliances .

Creation of other job opportunities for women.

Summary

I will leave you with a short joke printed in the 1869 Pueblo Chieftain. Once again I ask you to put yourself in the place of the women it was written about

“Two servant girls were given tickets to go to a theatre. Returning in a short time, their mistress asked them why they did not stay. They answered that they sat in the place till a curtain was rolled up, and some ladies and gentlemen began talking about family matters, when supposing they had no business there, they went out of the room; and there being no keyhole convenient, they concluded to return home.”