

"Interpreting Domestic Servants"

Presented at the Rocky Mountain Regional Conference of the  
Association of Living History Farms and Museums

Colorado Springs, Colorado

February 27, 1988

by

Carol E. Kennis

"I don't think a young woman should be advised to enter domestic service unless she could be very sure of a good home; first, without knowledge, she is not able to do the work of the home that requires skill, hence she does the hardest things, which is often beyond her strength, and is soon broken down. Besides, it is a very lonely life.... There is no place where one is more lonely than to be alone with people, and that is what working in a house means to so many, though not all."

This is a quote from a woman who worked in domestic service in 1915. But it might have been the sentiments of a servant or maid-of-all-work who worked and lived in this house between 1907 and 1909. In trying to interpret to the public what the history of this house represents, I've become convinced that it has to include the life and work of the domestic servant.

Telling the correct story of the domestic servant has been challenging. From the difficulties I experienced in trying to tell the true picture of the genteel life that these walls housed my interest and curiosity about the life of domestic servants has continually increased. Slowly the portrait of the American domestic servant has become clearer. This is rewarding since my research has concentrated on those individuals that were by the nature of their occupation and social standing supposed to remain unseen and unheard. After reading household manuals describing the mistresses' point of view on what she would like her servants to do and how to act and after reading contemporary articles on the "Servant Problem" I began to wonder how the servants felt about such things. What were their impressions of themselves and of their work and how can we interpret this to the public today?

I came to realize that domestic servants were more common in the U.S. in middle and upper class households between the 1870's and the 1920's than I thought. In fact, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries domestic service was one of the most important sources of women's gainful employment. For example, in 1910

women servants comprised 24.6% of all gainfully employed female workers ten years old and older. Yet, this class of work and the people who performed these services are neglected in the interpretation of many of our historic sites. This is an oversight because many of the sites that we deem important for interpretation are the very same homes, farms, and ranches, that employed servants in the first place. This gap of information is due not only to the lack of research but also stems from the low social status of the occupation originally.

The interpretation of the domestic servant is important because their presence made it possible for the elaborate social customs of the Victorian and Edwardian ages to manifest. Domestic servants worked in private families doing the work commonly done by the housewife or mother without compensation. How else could a lady of the time spend hours each week making and accepting social calls, planning and attending involved dinner parties and participating in the other well defined social necessities of the time. Even fashion of the period often required the assistance of a maid to properly assemble, clean, press, and to wear. Ask yourself, how different would your lifestyle be if you employed servants to do the tasks that take up so much of your time now? Would you entertain on a grander scale. Perhaps you'd have company stay for longer periods of time if you didn't have to cook and clean up after them. Would your house be more meticulously cleaned and your garden more extravagant in its designs?

My search for the "true" picture led me to realize that by interpreting the social history of the Victorian and Edwardian periods without including the work and life of domestic servants we are creating a misshapen impression of the past. Therefore I have gathered some information about domestic servants in the U.S. between 1870 and 1920 that you will hopefully find useful in the interpretation of your site.

The demand for domestic servants constantly increased during the periods of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Women and girls filled most of these positions.

While few other forms of employment were open to women they predominated in domestic work because the tasks they performed were considered as part of the women's sphere and therefore not contrary to nature. As industrialization increased and other areas opened to women they became seamstresses, factory workers, telephone operators and clerks. Native born white women turned away from domestic work because of its low social status even though the pay which included room and board was about the same. As a consequence, immigrant and black women were disproportionately represented in domestic service especially in the Northeast and South.

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.

For instance, an 1896 Scrivner's article advised those who were considering a move to Colorado Springs of the difficulty to be had with servants out west. It read,

"Servants are expensive and haughty but fairly competent, twenty-five dollars (a month) for a waitress, the same for a chambermaid and more for a good cook. But one must take out(west) his own coachman. The native talent draws the line at livery. The housewife who dared to communicate with her cook, when she wanted a change of sweet for dinner by postal card only, may easily have lived in the Springs. It is well to be gentle with all the servants and at all times for if some of the influential ones should become offended the offending employer might find herself the victim of a boycott."

Native born white women also predominated in rural areas and in small towns.

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. When other servants

were added to the staff it was usually a cook and a laundress. Most often the laundress was a day laborer who washed for several families and maintained her own home.

Only a high-class home such as Glenn Eyrie were men present as butlers, valets, chefs, and footmen. Otherwise men were hired as gardeners house maintenance men. In rural areas and in lesser affluent homes only a laundress might be hired to do what was considered the most difficult of all household labor.

For instance, Emily French, one of the few domestics to leave us 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.

Many domestics felt looked down upon by their mistresses and many complained about being told how to wash, dress, and even what type of undergarments to wear. Although some enjoyed their work and felt that it prepared them to be better homemakers when the time came, most agreed that the workload was heavy, repetitious, and eventually debilitating.

Of course the actual duties differed from region to region and depended on the personalities and means of the employer. Overall servants averaged two more hours of work daily than other working women and most worked seven days a week. When not asleep they were at the beck and call of the family. The only time a servant was fully off was when she was out of the house.

Two of the biggest controversies surrounding the "Servant Problem" were the wearing of livery and the use of the word "servant" itself. These 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."

Most live-in domestics only received Sunday afternoons and possibly one other afternoon off a week. This allowed little

time for socializing and contributed to the loneliness of the domestic. 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. His duties included minding the twenty two fireplaces, polishing the floors, recording the weather station information, and exercising the dogs, and fishing in Queen's Canyon on Wednesdays. He admitted that no one was ever worked to death there. 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.

Because of these things, and not so much of the wage women increasingly chose to do day work and only lived-in when absolutely necessary. Emily French and her fifteen year old daughter both did live-in work in 1890 in order to support their family. Emily hated being away from her home and family and her daughter complained that her mistress denied her the use of the one bathroom in the house.

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 south. In 1885 the Colorado Springs Gazette ran the following editorial.

"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

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."

Wages did go down somewhat but by 1907 when Florenze Ordelhide began at the Glen he was paid \$30.00 a month plus room and board but he only had Sunday afternoons off. Later when he worked for a family in the Broadmore as a second chauffeur, with no specific time off he received the same wage.

If a domestic was fortunate enough to work in a wealthy household life could be easier and more exciting. Although family trips were often viewed by the mistress as a good opportunity for the servants to do spring cleaning, many servants accompanied their employers. Rowena Pearce, the daughter of Dr. William Bell, founder of Manitou recalled, "My parents had taken out four English servants, two maid servants, a coachman and a gardener, who remained with us until they eventually married and settled in Manitou." Although according to her mother, in 1876 two of the servants became "insufferably" independent and had to be let go.

Another employee of Gen. Palmer's John Matthys was hired as a valet while the General was in England. When the Antlers Hotel burned in 1897 they made a rushed trip back to Colorado Springs. At first John did not like the ruggedness of the West and told the General that he wished to return home. Convinced to stay until Christmas, when they did return to England John had decided not to quit and stayed with Palmer in his private and elaborately furnished railroad car <sup>and</sup> made five trips to England.

Many other servants were not so fortunate however. 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.

