The Housewife in the 1920s and '30s: The Quest for Perfection

FOCUS

This section will help you understand
a. the changing role of the housewife in the two decades following World War I
b. the role of advertising in controlling a woman’s self-image.

Technology and Science

After 1918, housework and childcare continued to be the major concerns of the married woman, but the role of the housewife was slowly changing. For one thing, she was less isolated. The radio and the telephone brought the outside world to her parlour, and the automobile broadened her horizons considerably.

In addition to these advances in technology, housewives began to receive advice from different experts on the best way to run their homes. Everyone from economists to advertisers was telling the homemaker how to do her job. Ladies' magazines contributed to the information overload by publishing articles on “scientific” methods of child care and personal hygiene.

The magazine image of the up-to-date homemaker surrounded in her kitchen by a battery of modern appliances did not reflect reality for many women. Electricity and electrical appliances were more readily available, but how many women actually owned them? Check the table in Figure 9.2 to get an idea of the percentages.

![Image showing various homemaking items]

Figure 9.1 By the late 1920s housewives could choose from an assortment of time-saving devices. These ads from the 1927 Eaton's catalogue show that when it came to carpet cleaning there was a product available to fit every budget.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>StatScan</th>
<th>Appliances in Canadian Households, 1941</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>% Electric Lights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm areas</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small towns</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cities over 30 000</td>
<td>99.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9.2 Why do you think that more electrical appliances were located in cities than in small towns and farm areas?
The Ideal Mother

Women were supposed to use the time they saved from domestic chores to care better for their husbands and children. Scientific approaches were meant to replace intuition and advice from relatives and friends. Magazine articles and guidebooks said that babies should be fed by a schedule. While breastfeeding was still preferred, mothers had to wean their babies promptly at nine months. Mothers also had to toilet train their children at a precise age whether the child was ready or not.

Although the experts assured mothers and fathers that it was OK to love their children, public demonstrations of affection like hugging and kissing were discouraged. It was thought that children might become spoiled and ill tempered if their parents gave them too much attention. If older children misbehaved, their mothers were blamed for not following these scientific principles of child rearing.

The Ideal Wife

By this time, advertisers had discovered a basic psychological principle—that if you can make someone feel inadequate, you can sell that person almost anything. Newspaper and magazine advertisements began to create an ideal image of the perfect wife that was impossible for any woman to achieve. Women who read these ads were made to feel that if only they bought the advertiser’s product their husbands would love them madly and they would be happy for the rest of their lives.

In this way, advertisers created a market for face creams, beauty soaps, mouth washes, and deodorants. New fashion styles inspired by the flat-chested flapper emphasized the need to be slim and trim. Since very few women actually possessed the flapper-type body naturally, they had to try to acquire it through unnatural means. These included fad diets, strenuous exercise routines, and restrictive articles of clothing like girdles and bras. Shorter hair that required styling made beauty salons popular and added to a woman’s cosmetics bills.

Figure 9.3
Do you agree with the advertiser's statement that there is a "lifelong beauty contest in progress" for every woman? After analysing this ad carefully for its views on women, do you feel like buying a bar of Calay Soap? Why or why not?

RECONNECT

1. How did technology affect the role of housewives after World War I?
2. Briefly summarize the "ideal" image of a wife and mother in the 1920s and '30s.
3. Find an advertisement aimed at young people in a current newspaper or magazine. Tell why you find it either effective or offensive. Have you ever bought anything just because you saw it in an ad? Have you ever found an ad so offensive that you decided not to buy the product?