Except for a sharp but short-lived economic downturn early in the decade, the 1920s were quite prosperous. Productivity and real wages - that is, the amount of goods and services that a person could buy with an hour's labor - both rose. New industries such as radio and aviation became prominent and profitable. Older industries such as automobile production, the movies, and advertising enjoyed rapid growth. People spoke of "The New Era" in the nation's economic life, in which mass production was linked to mass consumption in such a way as to generate uninterrupted growth and general prosperity and ensure that depressions would become relics of the past. That optimism was proved erroneous when the stock market crash of 1929 signaled the start of the worst depression the nation had ever endured.

Still, the prosperity of the 1920s, temporary as it may have been, had permanent effects on the way Americans lived, in large part because the primary driving force behind the decade's economic growth was spending on consumer goods. The introduction and widespread use of installment-plan buying, time-purchase plans, and other forms of consumer credit permitted millions of Americans to acquire the automobiles, radios, and other glittery new gadgets that a flourishing mass-production economy was turning out for their delight.

That avalanche of new consumer goods had a dramatic impact on the American home. There were significant differences between social classes in "typical" household furnishings, and the impact of the new mass-consumption society was much greater on urban than on rural America. Still, by the end of the 1920s the majority of Americans - rural and urban, and of all social classes - lived in homes that were quite different from those of their parents or grandparents. The following essay by Ruth Schwartz Cowan focuses primarily on how the definitions and the conduct of housework changed during the 1920s, but it also provides clues as to how American life in general was transformed by industrial technology and new buying habits.

In the twentieth century, the proliferation of household technology has dramatically altered women's lives but has not in the least mitigated the assignment of housework to women. When the twentieth century opened, the vast majority of American women spent most of their waking hours feeding, clothing, cleaning, and sustaining themselves and their families; eighty years later, as the century is drawing to a close, the vast majority of American women are still spending many of their waking hours feeding,
clothing, cleaning, and sustaining themselves and their families, albeit with markedly different tools. . . .

While it is no doubt true that every family is unique, it is also true that, at any given time and place, families living within the range of a certain standard of living confront similar material conditions in their homes and similar public attitudes about what distinguishes a "good" or a "decent" home from one that is neither. Each of us may bring a unique combination of psychic and social factors to our work; but, in any given time or place, depending upon the class to which we belong, women tend to organize their kitchens in more or less the same way and to read the same magazines, newspapers, and books. If our work, at least part of the time, is housework, then no matter how different we may be from each other, our work processes will be fairly similar. Hence, although it is difficult for a historian to learn much about what individual women and men felt about the work that was (or was not) being done in their homes, it is somewhat easier to learn how that work was being done. Between 1900 and 1940, the differences in the work processes of housework between those who were rich and those who were poor, were striking - so striking, indeed, that they remained engraved, consciously and unconsciously, on the minds and in the behavior of later generations.

The second generation of twentieth-century women came to maturity during the First World War, bore their children during the Roaring Twenties, and struggled to keep their households functioning during the dreary years of the Depression. Enormous technological and social changes occurred between their mothers' time and their own; and these changes began - but only just began - to alter not only the work processes of housework but also the fundamental differences between women of the two great social classes.

Material Conditions for Those Who Were Still Living Comfortably

During the 1920s and the 1930s, a housewife of the more prosperous classes did not regularly work for wages, despite the fact that she was better educated than her mother had been and more likely to have worked for a few years before marriage. Only one in forty of the "business class" housewives who were studied by Helen and Robert Lynd in Muncie, Indiana ("Middletown"), in 1925 had worked for wages in the previous five years. The typical comfortable housewife of this generation lived in a house that was fairly similar to the one in which she had been raised (if she were lucky enough to have been the daughter of a prosperous father); it was spacious, perhaps a bit smaller than her parents' had been, lacking a spare bedroom or an old-fashioned parlor, but not much smaller; and it was equipped with many of the same modern conveniences (telephones, hot and cold running water, indoor plumbing, gas and electricity). By the end of the 1920s, the daughter was likely to have had one or two appliances that had not been available to her mother (perhaps an electric washing machine, or a refrigerator, or an automobile); but, even more significantly, she would have acquired the conveniences and the appliances earlier in her marriage, when her children were still young and the burden of her work was heaviest, and when her household routines (which are very resistant to change) were first established. In 1926, 80 percent of all the
affluent households that were studied by market researchers in thirty-six American cities had vacuum cleaners and washing machines. More than half of all the households in the United States had an automobile by 1930, and every single one of the business-class households of Muncie had one by 1925. When the Lynds returned to study Muncie again in 1935, 40 percent of all the households whose assessed value was over two thousand dollars (a sum the Lynds regarded as the dividing line between adequate and inadequate housing) had a refrigerator.

Taken together, the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine, the refrigerator, and the automobile had profound implications for the reorganization of work in the households of the prosperous. Possession of an electric washing machine meant that a "decent" housewife could do her wash at home and by herself without undue drudgery; these early washing machines did not go through their cycles automatically and did not spin the clothing semidry (they had electrically powered wringers), but they did eliminate a good deal of the hauling and the hand wringing that had once made laundry work inconceivable for a woman of "status." The vacuum cleaners of the day were heavy instruments; but since they could be wheeled, they eliminated not only the drudgery but also the stooping that had once been associated with heavy cleaning and thus eliminated the perceived necessity for a servant to undertake it. Vacuum cleaners also cleaned more thoroughly than brooms and thus made it possible for the young housewife to dispense not only with the horrors of spring cleaning but also with the women whom her mother had hired to help with it. The young housewife's refrigerator reinforced the tendency - which had actually commenced when either her basement or her mother's had been converted from a storage room to a furnace room - to purchase foodstuffs in small, rather than large, quantities and to dispense with delivery services provided by the retailer. The automobile served only to accelerate that trend as well as to create a host of other transportation services (such as taking children to parties and to doctors) that women of an earlier generation had not provided for their families. The average comfortable housewife of the generation before the First World War had done some of her housework herself and managed the labor of other people who did the rest of it; the average comfortable housewife of the generation that came to maturity after the war managed more appliances than people.

The availability of appliances and conveniences was one - but not the only one - of the factors that stimulated this reorganization. One study of the relationship between the acquisition of household appliances and the organization of household work in this period reported that, while most of the families of students at Mount Holyoke College had acquired four or five major appliances in the decade between 1919 and 1929, and 96 percent of the families had also decreased the amount of household help that they employed, only a small fraction of these attributed the decrease solely to the acquisition of the appliances. The other families were probably responding to a new set of demographic factors (namely, a severe contraction in the available supply of servants) and to a new set of ideological factors (namely, new attitudes articulated in women's magazines and advice books during the 1920s). . . .

The supply of servants was shrinking for many reasons. The European conflict and, after that, the immigration restrictions of the mid-1920s drastically reduced the
influx of foreign-born young women, who had previously constituted the largest portion of the servant population. In addition, the expanding economy of the 1920s increased the opportunities in factories for women without skills. In Indiana, for example, the ratio of servants to households was 1 in 20 in 1920; and the business-class wives of Muncie reported that they employed approximately half as many servant-hours as their mothers had done, at roughly five times the wages (salaries for people in the middle-income ranges had roughly doubled in the same period). Only one quarter of the seven hundred urban households of college-educated women that were studied carefully by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1930 employed a domestic servant, as did only 17 percent of the three thousand middle-class families studied a year later by President Hoover's Conference on Home Building and Homeownership—percentages that would have been astounding twenty years earlier. . . .

"Really doing it yourself" had once been considered demeaning, but attitudes were changing. In the early decades of the century, women's magazines had repeatedly offered advice to housewives who were, for one unfortunate reason or another, coping with their homes single-handed, but the emphasis in those articles had been on the word unfortunate. The housewife was told, for example, that if help was scarce, it was easiest to serve children the same food adults were eating, although clearly it would be better for the former's digestion and your temperament if they ate with a nursemaid in the nursery; with luck, the servant shortage would soon pass. "Decent" housewives were never depicted, in those years, as doing the heavy work of their households themselves; when instructions for proper laundry work or sanitary cleaning were proffered, a tell-tale "instruct your laundress" or "see that your maid" would always slip through. In the years after the First World War, as advertisements for refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners replaced those for iceboxes, laundry tubs, and brooms, servants disappeared from the advertisements—to be replaced by housewives, neatly manicured and elegantly coiffured, but housewives nonetheless. In those same years, the language used in the nonfiction material in women's magazines also underwent a subtle change, coming to imply that housework was to be thought of no longer as a chore but, rather, as an expression of the housewife's personality and her affection for her family. Laundering had once been just a task to be finished as quickly as possible; now it was an expression of love. The new bride could speak her affection by washing tattle-tale gray out of her husband's shirts. Feeding the family had once been just part of a day's work; now it was a way to communicate deep-seated emotions:

When the careful housekeeper turns from the preparation of company dinner to the routine of family meals, she will know that prime rib roast, like peach ice cream, is a wonderful stimulant to family loyalty, but that it is not absolutely necessary for every day.

Diapering was now a time for building a baby's sense of security, and cleaning the bathroom sink became an exercise for the maternal instincts, protecting the family from disease.
Clearly, tasks of such emotional magnitude could not be relegated to servants. The servantless household may have been an economic necessity for people in the 1920s and the 1930s; but, for the first time, that necessity was widely regarded, at least in the public press, as a potential virtue. And whether or not she regarded it as a virtue, the average comfortable housewife of this generation learned to organize the work in her household without the assistance of servants or with far fewer hours of assistance than her mother had had. Where a servant had been replaced by a vacuum cleaner, the comfortable housewife was spending more time than her mother had spent getting the floors and the rugs into shape; where a laundress had been replaced by a washing machine or a deliveryman by the household automobile, a housewife was spending time and energy on chores that, in her mother’s day, had been performed by other people. No matter how a household chose to slice the cake of available resources in the interwar years, every decision to "do it myself" was a decision to increase the time that the housewife would spend at her work. In households that were prosperous, the labor saved by labor-saving devices was that not of the housewife but of her helpers. This is the most salient reason that every time-study of affluent housewives during these years (and many such studies were done, as these were the years in which home economists, like so many other Americans, were fascinated by "efficiency studies") revealed that no matter how many appliances they owned, or how many conveniences were at their command, they were still spending roughly the same number of hours per week at housework as their mothers had. The most comprehensive of those studies, covering fifteen hundred urban and rural households, in the years 1924-25 and 1930-31, found a range of hours spent in housework from a high of sixty-one (for rural farm homemakers) to a low of forty-eight (for college-educated urban women living in large cities) - figures that were not markedly different from those reported by Leeds and Woodbury twenty years earlier.

This second-generation prosperous housewife had also expanded certain aspects of her job description, which could not be mediated by technology at all - namely, those aspects having to do with the care of her children. Infant care was much more complex than it once had been, because in an effort to combat infant mortality (which had been scandalously high in the United States in the pre-war period) - mothers were watching scrupulously over their children's diets, weighing them several times a day, and repeatedly carrying them to physicians' offices for checkups. Child care no longer consisted of teaching young children to read, write, and add and in seeing to it that children were adequately clothed and regularly fed; it now also involved attending child-study meetings, becoming involved in the local schools, reading books and magazines about children, supervising them in playgrounds, and transporting them to lessons and social events.

I accommodate my entire life to my little girl. She takes three music lessons a week and I practice with her forty minutes a day. I help her with her school work and go to dancing school with her.
My mother never stepped inside the school building as far as I can remember, but now there are never ten days that go by without my either visiting the children's school or getting in touch with their teacher. I have given up church work and club work since the children came. I always like to be here when they get home from school so that I can keep in touch with their games and their friends. Any extra time goes into reading books on nutrition and character building.

I put on roller skates with the boys and pass a football with them. In the evenings we play cards and on Sundays we go to ball games. My mother back East thinks it's scandalous.

Experts repeatedly suggested that a mother was the single most important person in a child's life, and that the child raised by nursemaids was a child to be pitied. The young boy raised by servants would never learn the upright, go-getting resourcefulness of the truly American child, would never become a useful member of the egalitarian republic, and would probably fail in the business world; his sister, deprived of the example of her mother, would not know how to manage the myriad appliances of the modern kitchen, would never learn how to decorate a pineapple salad or wash silk underwear in an electric machine, and might thus never be able to capture a husband. Even more worrisome was the thought that children raised by nursemaids might never reach adulthood because they would be tended by persons who were unfamiliar with the latest medical and nutritional information. Mothers were being asked to take more of a hand in the rearing of their children, and many mothers were responding to the challenge.

Thus, the comfortably situated housewife of the interwar years expended most of her time and energy, just as her mother had, in the interests of her family. Even during the worst years of the Depression, she continued to run her household "decently"; her husband was still employed, the family was not on relief; they still owned their own home, and they still kept it up; the interior was orderly, the meals arrived regularly, the children stayed in school, the family went to church, their health - whatever strain they were under - remained reasonably stable.

But something subtle had changed. Emily Post summed it up better than anyone else when she added a new chapter to the fifth edition (1937) of the famous etiquette book that had first appeared in 1915. This chapter dealt with the problems faced by "Mrs. Three-in-One" - the woman who had to be guest, waitress, and cook at her own dinner parties. Like her mother she understood the rituals of gracious entertaining, knew how to make guests comfortable in her home, knew precisely which foods should be served on which occasions, knew how to reflect the status of her household in her own behavior. But unlike her mother, either because of inclination or circumstance, she was also a manual laborer: she had to chop the onions, roll the pastries, manipulate the cooking times, arrange the platters, carry them to the table, carve the roast, remove the dirty plates, pour the coffee-all the while appearing as if she were not doing any of these tasks. As part of the process of reallocating the time she spent in household work,
she had ceased managing the labor of others and had substituted her own. This transformation, which might properly be called the "proletarianization" of the work of economically comfortable housewives, did not occur overnight. Its fullest effects would not be felt until the next generation had reached maturity, but the handwriting was on the wall. In an effort to sustain the standard of living to which an earlier generation had been accustomed, the prosperous housewife of this generation started down the path of "doing it herself;" the implications of which would not become entirely clear until her daughter had completed the journey.

Material Conditions for Those Who Were Still Struggling to Make Ends Meet

Meanwhile, during these decades, many Americans - in fact, still the majority of Americans - were struggling, as their parents had, to maintain their families at something over the level of mere subsistence. The fabled "prosperity" of the 1920s was more apparent than real, more intermittent than continuous, for the families of industrial workers, small farmers, day laborers, and skilled craftsmen. Industrial productivity - particularly of consumer goods - multiplied during the 1920s and then multiplied again. Automobiles were appearing in ever more front yards, radios proliferated, the number of pages devoted to advertisements in newspapers and magazines trebled and then quadrupled. In communities across the land, however, more than half of the households were still living below - and, in some cases, far below - what was then defined as the minimum standard of "health and decency." Helen and Robert Lynd calculated, for example, that in Muncie in 1924, $1,920.87 was required to achieve this standard for a family of five (the estimate included the cost of rent, food, fuel, clothing, insurance, union dues, and other such items as well, significantly enough, as one full day per week of paid household help), and that somewhere between 70 percent and 88 percent of all the households in town, in that year did not attain it. Similarly, in 1926, in Zanesville, Ohio, 70 percent of all families had incomes below $2,000. Wages for skilled and unskilled workers and prices for agricultural goods were indeed better in the 1920s than they had been in any previous decade; but the problem, for the families of men so employed, was that good wages and prices could not be depended upon to be continuous: factory workers were likely to be laid off at a day's notice when business was slow; farmers had good seasons but also bad ones; day laborers were paid only during certain seasons of the year; illness and accident could strike at any moment and, in the absence of guaranteed sick leaves and adequate workmen's compensation, could cripple a family for substantial periods. A nationwide study conducted by economists at the Brookings Institution in 1929 - when the boom had presumably been booming for close to a decade - revealed that 59 percent of the nation's families appeared to be living below a minimally decent standard; needless to say, that figure went up, rather than down, during the next decade.

There were, to put it simply, still more "uncomfortable" people than "comfortable" ones during the supposedly gay 1920s, and there were considerably more during the depressing 1930s. During the 1920s, sheer subsistence may not have been as
much of a problem as it had been for an earlier generation; but families still found that, periodically, they needed two incomes in order to get by. Fifty-five out of 124 "working class" wives studied by the Lynds in Muncie had worked for wages between 1920 and 1924: "the mister was sick and I had to"; "it takes the work of two to keep a family nowadays"; "we are always needing extra money."

Admittedly, some of that extra money was being spent on goods and services that would have been totally out of reach twenty years earlier. The hard-pressed housewife of the 1920s was not investing in luxuries (although some contemporary critics accused her of doing so); but when times were good, she and her husband were trying to create for themselves the standard of living to which more prosperous families had become accustomed before the First World War. With the help of building-and-loan associations, these families were buying their own houses; in Zanesville, for example, where 70 percent of the households earned less than two thousand dollars, 79.9 percent of them were owners rather than renters of their dwellings. The houses in which the second generation of hard-pressed housewives lived were neither spacious nor elegant (a typical one would have been a four-room, one-story bungalow), but they were likely to be wired for electricity (73.7 percent of the houses in Zanesville), outfitted with running water (90 percent), perhaps a bathroom with indoor toilet and a tub (60 percent), piped gas (96 percent), a gas range (89.6 percent), and a telephone (69 percent); and if things had gone particularly well for the family, or if there was more than one continuous breadwinner, there might even be a car (48 percent of the families in Zanesville had one at a time when only 30 percent of the families were living above the poverty level). Those social critics who disparaged these expenditures because "money was being wasted on luxuries," or because "the pressure to conform and to consume is everywhere more intense," or because "people are today so willing to put themselves into debt to satisfy expanded wants") were uniformly members of the more comfortable classes. From the point of view of those who had known the discomforts of poverty in their youth, these amenities were not so much amenities as basic decencies too long withheld. To own one's home meant to be out from under the thumb of a landlord who could evict a family at a moment's notice; to have electric lights meant an end to eyestrain, kerosene explosions, and the need to clean lamps; to have running water, an end to exhausting labor; to have a toilet, and end to the discomfort of a privy on a snowy night and to typhoid fever in the summer; to have a telephone, the possibility of easy communication with members of one's family; to have a gas range, the end to coal dust all over the kitchen; to have an automobile, the possibility of a Sunday in the country (is that luxury?) and also, of finding a job on the other side of town in case the plant close to home shut down (is that a luxury?).

In the period after the First World War, the diffusion of these amenities, combined with public health measures that were becoming more prevalent (purification and inspection of milk, water treatment plants, sewers for poor neighborhoods, diphtheria inoculations, regular refuse collection, fortification of certain foods with vitamins, certification of meat and poultry supplies) meant that the standard of living for this generation was considerably higher (or rather the standard of death and illness considerably lower) than it had been for their parents. Nationwide, the infant mortality
rate continued to fall - in part, at least, because milk and water ceased to be contaminated; and physicians learned how to control diarrhea, tuberculosis, congenital syphilis, and diphtheria (which had all been major killers of infants). Some of the dreadful epidemic diseases that had either killed or debilitated adults and older children in an earlier generation (cholera, typhoid fever, smallpox) were virtually eradicated by the 1920s; and other diseases (such as tuberculosis, rickets, syphilis, and dysentery) were vastly diminished in their destructive power: in Chicago the death rate from typhoid fever had gone as high as 174 per 100,000 per population in the latter years of the nineteenth century, but was down to 2 per 100,000 in the 1920s; tuberculosis, which had been the second most prevalent cause of death in the United States in 1900, had declined to tenth by 1930, and the death rate from tuberculosis dropped by an incredible one third (from 150 to 98) just in the four years between 1918 and 1922; Salversan was being widely used to control syphilis, and cod liver oil (however awful it may have tasted) and fortified flour and margarine (whatever natural food buffs today may think of them) were just as widely used to control rickets. All of this, needless to say, went a long way toward easing a poor housewife's concern about the health of her family and toward relieving her, as her mother could not have been relieved, of the difficult work of caring for those who were ill.

The trouble was that neither the amenities nor the public health measures did much to lighten the burden of her other chores. While the hard-pressed housewife may have entered the twentieth century in terms of electricity, running water, and pasteurized milk, she had not entered it in terms of birth control. In 1924, for example, the Lynds found that in Muncie all of the business-class housewives approved of the use of contraceptives, but that only half of the working-class housewives did. Thus, not surprisingly, only one business-class home among those the Lynds studied had six or more children, but there were seven such working-class homes. In the 1920s, although the birth rate was dropping nationwide, the poor continued to have markedly more children than the "comfortable." In the 1930s, although the birth rate in urban areas dropped off markedly for all classes of the population, that in rural areas - where many such housewives lived - was as high as it had ever been. Nothing is, of course, better calculated to increase the burden of housework than the presence of children, especially small ones. When there are eight or nine mouths to feed (or even five or six), cooking is a difficult enterprise, even if it can be done at a gas range; and the drudgery of laundry (especially if there are diapers) is not greatly eased by having the hot water come out of a tap instead of a pot. The electric appliances that would have made some aspects of housework markedly easier simply remained too expensive for those who were still struggling to make ends meet. Even when electric service was available, an electric washing machine cost between sixty and two hundred dollars (a month's wage for a workingman), and only the more expensive models would have been truly labor saving, since the less expensive ones had small tubs, which had to be emptied and filled manually, and hand-cranked wringers. Small wonder, then, that in 1926 only 28 percent of the homes in Zanesville had electric washers, and that the vast majority of them were in affluent homes. What was true for the washer was true also for the vacuum cleaner
(only 52.6 percent of homes, of whom slightly more than half were affluent homes) and mechanical refrigeration (.4 percent).

In any event, in both the 1920s and the 1930s, a substantial number of poor housewives were either rural or black or both and thus lacked access to amenities, public health measures, and appliances. Among the tenant farmers that Martha Hagood studied in 1934 in Tennessee, only eight out of two hundred households could afford electric service (although the area in which they lived was considered progressive in rural electrification), and not a single one had running water - at a time when 83 percent of all urban and rural non-farm residences were electrified. In "Plainville," a rural town studied by James West in 1940, only three homes had bathrooms, and they belonged, respectively, to the funeral director, the veterinarian, and the mayor. The Farm Housing Survey, undertaken by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1934, revealed that, for example, only 20 percent of the farmhouses in Missouri had a kitchen sink with a drain, that only 7 percent of those in Kentucky had a bathroom, that only 25 percent of those in the state of Washington (which was considered a particularly prosperous agricultural state) had flush toilets, and that only 17 percent of those in Ohio (which was also fairly prosperous) had electricity. On farms across the land, the birthrate was still high, the average length of life still low, the "old-fashioned" diseases still appallingly prevalent, and various discomforts, both of body and of mind, were part and parcel of daily experience.

Even the hard-pressed housewife who had access to amenities, and had invested in appliances, could not be certain that they would be there when most needed. The washing machine, the car, and the living-room furniture were all likely to have been bought on installment plans, the house carried a mortgage, and the utility companies presented their bills monthly. Thus, in bad times, when her husband was out of work or disabled, and she was forced into the labor market - precisely the time when she dearly needed her washing machine to do the laundry or her car to reduce her trips to market - the family was more than likely to have fallen behind in its payments; and, as a result, the electricity might be turned off or the car repossessed. The Lynds described the technological condition of working-class homes, under the best of conditions, as a "crazy quilt":

A single home may be operated in the twentieth century when it comes to ownership of an automobile and vacuum cleaner, while its lack of a bathtub may throw it back into another era and its lack of sewer connection and custom of pumping drinking water from a well in the same backyard with the family "privy" put it on par with life in the Middle Ages.

To make matters even worse, the hard-pressed housewife of this generation had begun to read - as her mother probably had not - many of the magazines that were addressed to her more affluent contemporaries; and the daughters of both classes were taking the same home economics courses in school. Through these various sources of information, such a housewife learned about ways to feed her family, furnish her home, do her laundry, and otherwise conduct her daily life - ways that were approved of by
"experts," and that would have been totally foreign to her mother: nutritionally balanced meals, carefully structured family budgets, four-hour intervals between infant feedings, cabinets and extensive work surfaces in kitchens, completely tiled bathrooms, percale sheets, and many, many more. Unfortunately many of these products were very expensive; and if the price was not beyond the hard-pressed housewife's means at a particular moment, it may well have been beyond her ability to plan for. How do you make out a budget when you cannot predict what your income will be next month? How do you feed an infant on a four-hour schedule when you have a toddler who eats all the time, a husband who gets his breakfast at six in the morning and returns home hungry at seven at night, and a school child who eats at seven, at noon, and at five o'clock?

If inability to rearrange her life in the "recommended" fashion were not enough to make the struggling housewife feel inferior, the women's magazines were delivering yet another message deliberately calculated to make her feel even worse: to wit, that if her family were not socially accepted, if her children and her husband were not healthy, if her home were a breeding ground for germs, if she herself looked old and tired before her time, or if her babies failed to gain weight - or, worse yet, if they died - she was entirely to blame, since remedies for those conditions were easily at hand and easy to apply. If such a notion had ever crossed her mother's mind, it was at least not confirmed, over and over again, on almost every printed page. In her mother's day, when copywriters composed advertisements for soap or sheets or sealing wax, they thought in terms of the ingredients in the product, or the cleanliness of the factory where it was made, or the various ways in which a clever housewife could use it. In the years between the wars, they thought about "guilt" and did so intentionally, because psychologists were telling them that "guilt," "embarrassment," and "insecurity" would sell goods faster than any other pitch. Thus, the hard-pressed housewife was being told that if she failed to feed her babies special foods, to scrub behind the sink with special cleaners, to reduce the spread of infection by using paper tissues, to control mouth odor by urging everyone to gargle and body odor by urging everyone to bathe, to improve her children's schoolwork by sending them off with a good breakfast, or her daughter's "social rating" by sending her off to parties with polished white shoes - then any number of woeful events would ensue, and they would all be entirely her fault: not God's will, and certainly not a result of the greed of capitalists or the cupidity of public officials. This message was reiterated so frequently, and the visual material accompanying it was so blatant, that it could not have failed to make an impression on such a housewife and, at the very least, to undermine her self-confidence. Small wonder, then, that some of these housewives went out to work even when their husbands had steady jobs: with the additional cash, these wives could at least purchase the clothing, the cosmetics, the appliances, and the sundries that the magazines were suggesting would so markedly improve a family's way of life and a mother's own peace of mind.* "I began to work during the war," one housewife in Muncie reported,

when everyone else did; we had to meet payments on our house and everything else was getting so high. The mister objected at first, but now he don't mind. I'd
rather keep on working so my boys can play football and basketball and have spending money their father can't give them. I have felt better since I worked than ever before in my life. . . . We have an electric washing machine, electric iron, and vacuum sweeper. I don't even have to ask my husband anymore because I buy these things with my own money.

Older cultural values may have suggested that a working wife was a sign of economic distress and social disorganization in a family (which no doubt is why many "misters" didn't approve of their wives going out to work, and why many wives avoided such work), but newer cultural values suggested that it was the responsibility of both parents to improve the standard of living of their children; and some women no doubt concluded, as had the mother just quoted, that they could achieve this aim faster and more surely with cash in their pockets then with bread dough on their hands.

Thus while the comfortably situated housewives of this generation were slowly marching down the road to proletarianization, their less comfortably situated contemporaries were heading toward greater productivity. Improvements in technological systems were having the same effect on the households of people with small incomes as they have in giant factories and offices: an increase in the goods or services that can be produced for the person-hours that are being expended. Low-income housewives worked very hard in the interwar years. None of the working-class wives of Muncie reported spending less than four hours a day on cooking, cleaning, and laundering (marketing and child care were not even inquired after), and most reported seven or more hours a day, seven days a week. Yet for some of those housewives, some of that hard work was paying off, some of the time. If a hard-pressed mother of this generation had more cash than her mother had had, then her children ate better than she had as a child; since more fruits and vegetables were available, fresh and cheap, at more seasons of the year) their diet was more varied and more healthful. If she and her husband had managed to buy a house, then it was, like as not, more spacious than the one in which she had been raised, and it was better ventilated, warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer, and more likely to have running water and a toilet. With the running water and a hot-water heater and a sewing machine, she could keep her children cleaner, better dressed, more comfortable, and possibly even healthier than she had been as a child, without spending much more time than her mother had spent in the doing of it. She certainly could not afford to pay the wages of human servants; but when times were good, she was beginning to invest in electrical appliances and she knew that they, too, could increase her productivity: that a washing machine meant the ability to change the sheets every week or underwear every day, and a vacuum cleaner meant that dust could be kept from accumulating in the house.

**Conclusion**

In the years between the two world wars, there were still many differences between the two great segments of the population-not the least of which was that, for those who were poor, any gain in their standard of living in one year was likely to be lost
in the next. In some communities, at some times, the gap between the standards of living of the two classes was as great as it had ever been: the poor still begot many children and took them out of school early, still lived with filth and ate in their kitchens, still suffered ill health, lost their teeth and smelled bad, still handed down their clothes and took their shoes from the ragpile. But in other communities, at other times, the ability to live at a minimum standard of health and decency was no longer the privilege only of those who were affluent. Public health was improving, housing conditions were better than they had been, various amenities and conveniences were becoming more widely diffused; and even those who were poor in relative terms could profit from some of these changes. All of them worked together to make hard-pressed housewives more productive and less uncomfortable than their mothers had been and to make their housework bear fruit in improving the health and the prospects of their families. The gap between those who could afford to live "decently" and those who could not may have been as wide as ever; but in the years between the wars, the average housewife of less than modest means was living, at least some of the time, at a higher standard than her mother had been able to attain. Looking back, we can readily understand why she, and her daughter in the next generation, believed that gas ranges, pasteurized milk, electricity, washing machines, fortified margarine, and vacuum cleaners had played a significant role in this accomplishment. We can also understand why these women continued to believe not just that their place was in their homes but that the work that they did there had enormous value. Small wonder then that these women, and their descendants, accepted the yoke of women's work in the home and viewed the modern tools with which they did it as liberating, rather than as oppressive, agents.

* Whether women of the lower economic classes worked for "pin money" or out of real economic necessity is a question that has been endlessly debated, one commentator's pin money invariably turning out to be another commentator's "real necessity." The most recent analyses of working women in the interwar years are no exception: Winifred Wandersee sees married women's work-force participation as a result of the "pursuit of luxury"; while Alice Kessler-Harris sees it as an effort to maintain or to improve a family's standard of living. Kessler-Harris seems to me to be right; the "rising expectations" of this period were the expectations of working-class people that they had a right to the same conveniences and amenities that had long been associated with the standards of the more comfortable classes. What Wandersee seems to regard as luxuries were washing machines, automobiles, additional changes of clothing, a four-room apartment, and a chance for children to stay in school longer that their parents had.