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WMST 298: Cultural and Social Methods
Mini Project 4: Historical Connections

The Evolvement of Domestic Servitude: Women Controlling Women
-Demonstrated through short scenes-

1870. Granville, Ohio. Ellen Jones is a domestic servant in the Bancroft Household.

Henry Bancroft: Where is Ellen, Dinner was supposed to be ready minutes ago.

Almena Bancroft: She was busy helping me finish up the laundry. How was work today?

Henry Bancroft: Banks are fine.

Almena Bancroft: Still the richest man in all of Granville?

Henry Bancroft: You better believe it!

According to an 1870 Census-His value of real estate was \$10,000 and his personal value was \$28,000.¹ What does that mean for today? He would have a real estate value of \$165,571.70 and a personal value of \$463,600.77 dollars.²

Almena Bancroft: I think we should look into getting another servant; we can afford it you know.

Henry Bancroft: Yes, yes. It would certainly ensure dinner be made on time. I assume that Amelia helped out with chores today?

Almena Bancroft: Yes, well sort of. She has always been on her own, reading books, going for long walks.

Henry Bancroft: Perhaps if she did her share of the work we would not be wasting time discussing the possibility of an additional servant.

In the 1870s, one's wealth was reflected in the family's ability to have servants (more servants= more wealthy= higher in the social stratum). In Chicago at this time, domestic servitude comprised 60% of women's work.³

Ellen Jones: Sorry for my lateness, ironing took much longer than I anticipated. I will finish preparing dinner now.

¹ www.ancestry.com

² Historical Currency Conversions, <http://futureboy.homeip.net/fsp/dollar.fsp>.

³ Daniel A. Graff, "Domestic Work and Workers," The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago (2005).
<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/386.html>

Almena: I'll fetch Amelia to help you (beat) AMELIA!

Amelia: Coming.

According to an 1870 Census, Almena was listed as "keeping the house" while Amelia was listed as "helping her mother." Even with the addition of a domestic servant, women of the family were still expected to contribute to housework/daily chores.⁴ This relationship however caused conflict between the women of the house and the domestic servant(s), the housewife would often feel like her authority was being undermined or her work as a woman devalued by her domestic servant.

Ellen Jones: I was wondering if we could possibly invest in some sharper knives for the family, they are inexpensive and they would help me...

Almena: What?

Ellen Jones: I just thought-

Almena: How dare you, this family has obviously gone without for years and somehow we have managed. You can manage.

Ellen Jones: (small inner monologue that only the audience can hear) I often feel lost. I am thirty nine years old and this is what I spend my time doing, not because I enjoy it, but because I have no other choice. There are no other options. I do not own property, I do not have much money saved, I need a place to live and food to eat. This is not my country. I am not unintelligent, I can read. I can write. But this is the work available.

I do have trouble sleeping because my room is so cold, just like the dinner that I eat. Would it be so difficult to serve me dinner with the rest of the family, so that I may too enjoy a warm meal? Servants have no protection. No rights. It is dissimilar from an industrial job, I do not work 7am-5pm, I am always working, always being supervised. I am given too much to do in one day and when it does not get completed I am not paid. Sometimes Almena says that she paid me when she actually has not. Washing takes hours and I am expected to prepare all meals on these days as well. I get frantically nervous, so much that last week I splashed hot grease on my arms and now have very painful burns. It makes my other work difficult.

Domestic work was indeed difficult- Servants were expected to clean, cook, do laundry, work long hours. Domestic servants were usually poor, unmarried women born outside of the United States (Ellen was from Wales). Many non-U.S. born women were refused from other jobs; therefore they had no choice but to become domestic servants, forced to work longer hours for less pay. It was said that this job attracted immigrant women because it was a very "low status" job, though it provided room and board (advantageous to women who did not have family in the area).⁵ From "The Experiences Of A Hired Girl," [author unknown], in The Outlook published in 1912, the author (the hired girl) claims that "If the mistress of the house would only write out the work of the week, day by day, would put down on paper the work required, certain work for

⁴ www.ancestry.com

⁵ Daniel A. Graff, "Domestic Work and Workers."

certain days, would treat housework like a business, and treat their maids like the employees of a business, many of the problems of domestic service would be solved.”⁶ Much of Ellen’s passage is drawn from this account, the fact that she had no protection and felt obligated to stay because of the room and board provided. Ellen would not have been paid more than \$2.75 a week (based on a Chicago study of Domestic workers who would work 15 hours a day for \$2.75 a week).⁷ The equivalent to \$2.75 is only \$45.53 today.⁸

1910. Granville, Ohio. Amelia Bancroft lives alone, The Pond Household+ Elizabeth Spellman are her neighbors.

Amelia Bancroft: (dramatization, fiction...) You may ask why I chose not to get married. I am seventy years old and I am not widowed, but single. I said it, single. Never felt the need to get married, to share my life with someone else. You might not understand this, but I did not want to rely on another’s income or security in order to live my life. I did not want to feel like I lost everything if my husband died. My father was wealthy enough and left me enough money that I did not need to get a job, it would have been unnecessary; it would have been silly for me to have attempted to find work. I do have trouble with completing some household tasks, such as ironing, my neighbors joke that I am not really a woman (laughs to herself).

In the Pond Household

Elizabeth Spellman: Anna can you help me?

Anna Pond: What Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Spellman: Anna, my dear sister, I can’t carry all these by myself, please they’re heavy.

Anna Pond: Coming, coming. Sit down Elizabeth, you look exhausted.

Elizabeth Spellman: I am exhausted. I might lie down for a minute before scrubbing the kitchen.

Anna Pond: Do not forget to begin preparing dinner earlier than usual- Warner is arriving home early today.

Elizabeth: How is the insurance business these days?

Warner J Pond: It is going okay.

Anna Pond: Walter! Earlier than early!

Warner J Pond: Yes! I came home Anna because I realized...it’s our anniversary! (he takes her in his arms)

⁶ "The Experiences Of A Hired Girl," [author unknown], *The Outlook*, vol. 100, April 6, 1912, pp. 778–780.

⁷ Daniel A. Graff, "Domestic Work and Workers."

⁸ Historical Currency Conversions, <http://futureboy.homeip.net/fsp/dollar.fsp>.

Anna Pond: Well, I guess I must have forgotten. Elizabeth fetch us some fine meat for tonight, it is an occasion!

Elizabeth: I need a rest-

Warner: I don't see how it is so outrageous that you help around the house since you intend on residing under my roof-

Anna Pond: Warner, Please. Elizabeth, prepare dinner, rest after. Now Warner, tell me about you day...

According to the 1910 census, Elizabeth Spellman was living with her sister and brother in law in Granville, Ohio. She had no job listed and was widowed. Due to the nature of domestic work at that time, it only seems plausible that Elizabeth would be expected to work around the home. The relationship between heads of household (Walter, Anna) and other members (Even family like Elizabeth Spellman) possibly are comparable to the housewife-domestic servant relationship. It is possible that the Pond family was unable to afford a domestic servant as they even rented out their house to two women in 1900, Addie Clemmons (Librarian) and Carrie Saine (School Teacher).⁹

1930. Granville, Ohio. Anna E Pond serving as Amelia Bancroft's domestic servant

Anna E. Pond: I don't have to say that money does not come easy these days. My husband was 10 years older than me; I was anticipating this I suppose. I imagine I will be here for the rest of my life. There are more opportunities for women in the workplace now, but I just did not want to leave my home. I want to be doing the work I am used to doing.

Amelia Bancroft: Anna, I have never seen this place filthier. I have made a list of everything that needs to be completed by today, I have guests coming tomorrow.

Anna: (looking at the list) there is no way I can do this all in one day.

Amelia Bancroft: Well then you must work into the night.

Anna: Amelia please. We were good friends once, why all this-

Amelia: I am doing you a favor and I will not have you or my home reflecting poorly on *me*.

Anna: (to herself) Warner, I miss you. Elizabeth, I'm sorry.

Post WWI, there were more opportunities for women in the workplace (clerical/secretarial jobs). Domestic work was beginning to be taken over by African American women. Phyllis Palmer in "Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945," states that an African American servant allowed the housewife to have a more superior status

⁹ www.ancestry.com

and socially assert white woman's femininity. Conditions for the domestic servant were poor, especially during the Depression, as "servants complained of employers offering day work to the lowest bidder at the notorious "slave pens.""¹⁰ I imagine that Amelia and Anna must have had some relationship prior which led to Anna eventually becoming a servant in Amelia's home. I found it interesting, since they were once neighbors, that Anna Pond was clearly listed as a "servant" in the census rather than "keeping the home" (which would be typical if Anna were family/close friend). Amelia, due to her past relationship with Ellen Jones, is continuing a problematic housewife-domestic servant relationship. Palmer questions "Why have some women (op)ressed other women into service instead of protesting our exclusive responsibility and challenging me to work with us to reorganize how, where, and by whom housework is done?"¹¹ Domestic workers were not included in 1930s/40s "labor law and welfare state positions," so like Ellen Jones, Anna Pond's employment rights were not protected by law.¹² This woman controlling woman (in the home, the one place they have some control), is a fascinating relationship during this time period. It stems off of a lack of appreciation for the difficulty of housework, of women's contributions to society, and the lack of control women were feeling overall (that they had to assert their dominance over other women rather than questioning their own situations).

Primary Document: "Sadie's Servant Room Blues": 1920s Domestic Work in Song

*This here job don't pay me much,
They give me just what they think I'm worth.
I'm going to change my mind, Yeah, change my mind.
'Cause I keep the servant room blues all the time.
I receive my company in the rear,
Here these folks don't want to see them here.
I'm going to change my mind, Yeah, change my mind.
'Cause I keep the servant room blues all the time.
I'm going to change this little new room for a nice big flat,
Goin' to let my friends know where I'm living at.
I'm going to change my mind, Yeah, change my mind.
'Cause I keep the servant room blues all the time.
They have a party at noon, a party at night,
The midnight parties don't ever break up right.
I'm going to change my mind, Yeah, change my mind.
'Cause I keep the servant room blues all the time.¹³*

¹⁰ Daniel A. Graff, "Domestic Work and Workers."

¹¹ Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), xii.

¹² Shirely Tilloston, "Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States 1920-1945: Few Choices Women, Work and Family." *Labour/LeTravail* Fall91, Vol. 28, p381-383, Academic Search Complete (EBSCO)

¹³ "Sadie's Servant Room Blues": 1920s Domestic Work in Song. *Hard Times* anthology, Rounder Records, 1928
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/20>

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