

ADVERTISING AND CONSUMER SOCIETY

In the following vignette Ernest Elmo Calkins, author of the 1928 bestseller, Business, the Civilizer, describes how in two generations (1880-1920) manufactured goods and labor-saving devices revolutionized and modernized American households. He credits business and particularly advertising for this revolution. Calkins's passage aptly describes what historians call the rise of consumer society which emerged in the 1920s just before the Great Depression.

When I was a boy, about fifty years ago more or less, mother used to buy a bar of Castile soap half a yard long and four inches square and saw it up into cakes an inch thick. The cake was hard as Stonehenge, the corners sharper than a serpent's tooth. It took weeks of use to wear it down so that it comfortably fitted the hand.

Today we have a cake of toilet soap—a great many of them, in fact— just the right shape to fit the hand, just as pure as Castile, scented if we like, tinted to match the bathroom decorations if we prefer, reasonable in price; and when we want another cake we go to the nearest grocery or drug store, and there it is.

And not only toilet soap. We have seen the evolution of shaving creams, safety razors, and tooth pastes, as well as soap powders, laundry chips, washing machines, vegetable shortenings, self-rising flours, electric irons, vacuum cleaners, hot-water taps, aluminum cooking utensils, refrigerators, kitchen cabinets— everything, in short, that constitutes the difference between our mothers' kitchens and our wives'.

The amount of sheer drudgery that has been taken out of housekeeping in fifty years can be realized only by comparison, by drawing the illuminating parallel. An iron, soft-coal cook-stove; a reservoir at the back the only source of hot-water supply; the green-painted iron pump in the wooden corner sink for cold drinking water from the pump outside; saleratus instead of baking powder; hog lard instead of vegetable shortening; butter and milk hung down the well by a string to keep them cold; heavy iron pots and skillets to be lifted, to say nothing of the coalhod; dishes washed by hand; no device to alleviate the frightful labor—no rubber scrapers, scouring mops, metal-ring dishrags, no wire brushes, or drying racks, or cleansing powders; baked beans an eighteen-hour job; oatmeal an overnight operation; sugar, salt, dried fruit, pickles, crackers, rice, coffee, pepper, spices, lard, bought in bulk, scooped out of open boxes or barrels...exposed until sold, dumped on a sheet of paper laid on the scales. Molasses and vinegar drawn from the wood, and between whiles the gallon measures standing around, proving the adage that molasses attracts more flies than vinegar. Food was unclean, there was no sponsor for its quality, and it came to the kitchen almost in a state of nature. The housemother became a miniature manufacturing plant before the food was ready for the family to eat. And the preparation of meals was but a small portion of the housewife's burden. There was cleaning with no other implements but a rag, a broom, and a turkey wing. Clothes were washed with a rub-rub that wore the zinc from the washboard.

Put such a kitchen beside the one pictured in most advertisements selling kitchen equipment, or those complete ones shown in the housekeeping departments of the women's magazines, "How to Furnish the Ideal Kitchen." Better still, take a modern housewife, not the delicatessen and can-opener type, but a real housekeeper, who keeps her house and takes pride in it,—there are such even to-day,—and put her in an old-fashioned kitchen like that described above. She could not do in a week what my mother did every day of her toil-bound life. To keep house with what was available half a century ago was an art handed down from generation to generation, which happily has been lost, except among the newly arrived foreign-born.

Source: Ernest Elmo Calkins, Business the Civilizer (Boston, 1928), reprinted in Robert D. Marcus and David Burner, ed. America Firsthand. vol. 2 (New York: 1989), pp. 223-224.