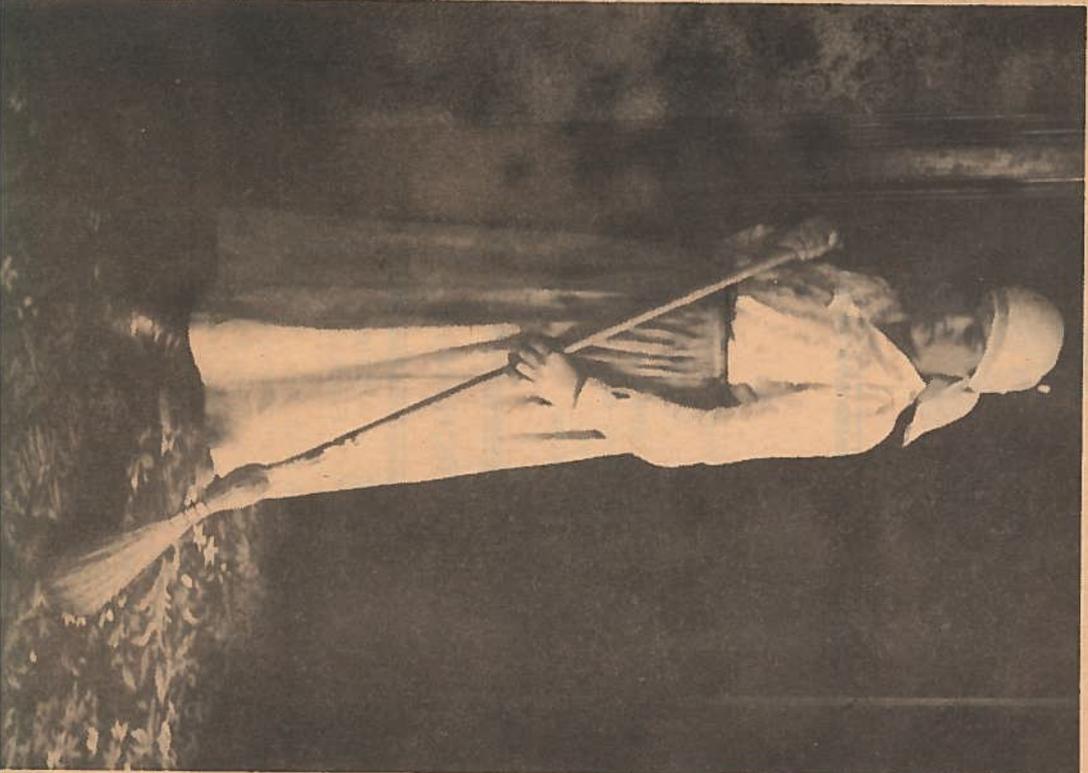


Rethinking of Old Orleans

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Vol. IX The Hired Girl No. 4



Having a hired girl or domestic was a way of life for the middle and upper classes years ago. In fact, it was a way of life most of us know very little about in the late 20th Century. However, in the 19th Century and early part of this century, hired girls were commonly employed in average farm and village households. I suppose high class people would have referred to them as maids or servants, but to the average housewife of eighty years ago, this servant would simply have been "the hired girl."

I especially wish to draw your attention to the photo included with this article. What a beautiful, artistic study of an unidentified girl, some unknown photographer captured here around eighty-five years ago. We can only assume her duties were that of a domestic with broom and dust scarf tied around her hair. The photo is from a glass plate negative found with other plates with scenes which can be identified in the Towns of Galnes and Carlton circa 1903.

We know that many domestics were young women in their teens and early twenties. Frequently they would have fallen into the age category between finishing eighth grade in district school and marriage, as many people did not go to high school in the 19th Century or early part of this century. In fact, some hired girls would certainly have come from poorer families who as we shall say "farmed out" their daughters to earn their way. Wages would have been a pittance but the hired girl got her "board and keep". The architecture of many larger 19th Century homes is evidence enough that quarters, usually in the upper rear wing with back stairs, were designed for hired girls and hired men.

Duties of hired girls included washing, sewing, cleaning, baking, cooking, baby sitting and any other household chores thought only to be a woman's work at the time this photo was taken.

By the time of World War I and later the Depression, the hired girl had become pretty much a thing of the past. It was then that only the wealthy could afford such a luxury. Not only hard times caused the demise of hired help, but also advan-

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ces in electricity with numerous electrical appliances made the average housewife's chores much easier. In fact, home architecture, decorating and furnishings became more streamlined and easier to maintain. Refrigeration came into being and cooking three meals a day became a lot easier because of advanced technology in both kitchen equipment and food processing. Automatic washers, permanent press shirts and day care centers eliminated many domestic duties.

Indeed, as we know daily life today, employing a live-in hired girl is unheard of. It was, however, a way of life which is almost forgotten, having faded into oblivion.