

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: WOMEN'S HELP WANTED ADS  
IN KANSAS CITY, 1920-1936

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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2020

ABSTRACT

The question of the nature of women's paid work has been a frequent point of historical inquiry. Using a source previously only tapped quantitatively, this paper seeks to expand our understanding of how women's employment was advertised for and viewed during the 1920s and 30s in the United States of America. This new source is Help Wanted and Situation Wanted ads (employees seeking work) from the *Kansas City Star* between 1920 and 1936. Kansas City is at once a typical midwestern city and also one with unique industries due to its important position in the national transportation network. The research looks at the ads qualitatively, as reflections of sentiments and requirements for certain jobs, as well as part of an active market, subject to all the cultural elements involved in analyzing product advertising.

This paper confirms several impressions from other sources, but it also reveals the extent to which women's employment included sales jobs and raises new questions about the avenues of women's employment during the 1920s. Most of all, these new questions demonstrate the usefulness of this new source. In the

final part of the paper, I outline ways to examine the sources quantitatively.

Ultimately, newspaper Help Wanted ads are an untapped source with potential for confirming and building on other research topics that have long been understated, if not ignored entirely. Hopefully, this paper will serve as a demonstration of the value of further research into this valuable historical source.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled "Great Expectations: Women's Help Wanted Ads in Kansas City, 1920-1936," presented by Jeremiah David Laurent, candidate for Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

By the dawn of the Great Depression, the illusory whimsy and freedom of the 1920s was all but dead. While Hollywood films promised an escape, the reality of the Depression loomed large. One of the strangest and most unlikely places you could still find at least a little whimsy was... the Help Wanted Ads. In 1931, the *Kansas City Star* ran a promotion for 'Alice in Ad land.' This was a competition, with cash prizes, involving scouring the Help Wanted ads for specific ads that 'interested' the fictive Alice.<sup>1</sup> The language the paper uses was startling: "wonderful and unusual offerings" that were "entertainment for the whole family" in the "modern wonderland" of "the Want Ad columns of The Star."<sup>2</sup> As surprising as this might seem, it was actually quite typical. Newspapers had long been central to American life and culture.<sup>3</sup> In 1880, there was one newspaper printed for every two households, around twelve pages each. By 1915, there were one and a half for every household, and by 1930 many papers ran over forty pages.<sup>4</sup> The Help Wanted and Situation Wanted (covering job requests from the employee's perspective) sections of the paper were mainstays of the newspaper by the 1920s and 30s. They were part of the American culture and economy, and this included 'Alice in Ad Land.'

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<sup>1</sup> "Alice In Want Ad Land," *Kansas City Star*, 4/12/1931, 20A.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Krissoff Boehm and Steven H. Corey, *America's Urban History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 1-3, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Guareneri, *Newsprint Metropolis: City Papers and the Making of Modern Americans* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3-4.

This is not a thesis about whimsy, but instead it focuses on the analysis of the two or sometimes three pages of Help and Situation Wanted ads in the newspaper. These pages contained more than dry facts, they were advertisements targeting certain demographic groups and using a common language of sales. They included ads from both those seeking employees or employment. By 1931, it was not all that unusual that 'Alice' might be 'interested' in Help Wanted Ads. Women had their own section in the Help Wanted ads, carefully segregated but far from empty. These ads cannot reveal the actual experience of employment, nor do they represent the entire job market. They also do not reflect the entire employment market, as jobs were also acquired by word of mouth or connections. Some women also engaged in paid work that was informal, intermittent, or even illicit. However, Help Wanted ads represented a large portion of the employment market and revealed the way that employers and working women viewed women's work.

Newspaper employment sources have been underutilized by scholars, especially in qualitative analysis of how the language and content of the ad reflected cultural and economic factors. Instead, most of the few analyses of Help Wanted ads consider them quantitatively for the purpose of economic history.<sup>5</sup> These quantitative analyses have used the ads as a shorthand for determining changes in wages in

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of economic analysis of Help Wanted ads include: Jay L. Zagorsky, "Understanding the Economic Factors Affecting Help-Wanted Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 22, no. 3 (1993): pp. 75-84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1993.10673412>; Jay L. Zagorsky, "Job Vacancies in the United States: 1923 to 1994," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 80, no. 2 (1998): pp. 338-345, <https://doi.org/10.1162/003465398557438>; Curtis J. Simon, "The Supply Price Of Labor During The Great Depression," *The Journal of Economic History* 61, no. 4 (2001): pp. 877-903, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022050701042012>; John Walsh, Miriam Johnson, and Marged Sugarman, *Help Wanted: Case Studies of Classified Ads* (Salt Lake City, UT: Olympus Publ. Co., 1975); and Georgina M. Smith, *Help Wanted, Female; a Study of Demand and Supply in a Local Job Market for Women* (New Brunswick: Research Program, Institute of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers, the State University, 1964).

certain jobs, in trying to understand the economic basis of job advertising, and for uncovering details about the efficacy of a government job-placement program rather than focusing specifically on the content of the Help Wanted ads themselves. All of these uses of ads are valid, but I shall argue that scholars have missed an important source on the values, norms, and expectations contained within the ads. I seek to examine these ads as cultural and social documents.

In this paper, I will confirm several claims that have been made elsewhere and will advance other more novel claims. The cultural cachet of jobs had much to do with how they were advertised. Women, both before and during the Great Depression, wanted jobs in far greater numbers than they could acquire them. In other words, women's job seeking was limited by external pressure in addition to internal self-repression. In fact, it was the former factor, my research suggests, that was by far the more significant. Women wanted and sought jobs in numbers far greater than they were offered, despite cultural pressures among middle-class white women not to search for work. Even among those who were expected to work--the poor, minorities--society did not, either economically or culturally, value it highly. This encouraged women to devalue it as well. Next, I argue that the inspirational and aspirational language of some ads was part of the atomization, discussed further in the methodology section of this thesis, in which most women were made to understand implicitly what sorts of jobs for which they could and could not hope. In the Great Depression, women's available jobs in the Help Wanted section dropped even more dramatically than men's, even as their employment also dropped somewhat less rapidly in some sectors. Economic downturn was, however, mostly

only implied. Women's job situations were often only a worsening of already uneven opportunities pre-Depression, in which big opportunities existed mostly as grand overpromising.

However, the most fundamental claim this thesis makes is that understanding the world of these sorts of ads matter. Newspapers were a central part of people's experiences in the 1920s and 30s, and these ads were part of how they interacted with employment opportunities. While the rise of online services has reduced the importance of newspapers, those too might turn out to be important sources for the future, though this is beyond the scope of this paper. What is within this thesis's scope is an examination of the methods by which newspapers shaped and reflected the job market, its gendered expectations, and the ways that these resources could be used in the future. Newspapers reflect and shape how a society views itself. That much is uncontroversial. Help Wanted ads were a major part of it, allowing us to understand a portion of cultural, social, and economic life in the 1920s and 30s. If a reader comes away with anything, it should be an appreciation of the possibilities of the source. This thesis thus serves both to advance certain claims about work in the 1920s and to advance a series of methods, tools and sources, to be further explicated below.

EDUCATIONAL-CONT'D. We Need More Young Men and Women... NIGHT SCHOOL... SPALDING'S... LEARN ACCOUNTING... YOUNG MEN... TROY BARBER COLLEGE... MEDICAL AND DENTISTRY... SELL GREETING CARDS... LOVE OF CHILDREN... SITUATION WANTED-FEMALE... To Telephone THE STAR Call HARRISON 1200

To Telephone THE STAR Call HARRISON 1200

To Telephone THE STAR Call HARRISON 1200

(Figure A. A typical Women's Help and Situation Wanted Page, *Kansas City Star*, July 19, 1925)

## **Literature Review**

Women's employment has been an often discussed topic, usually of the lived experience and perception of the job. Several remarkable works of scholarship outline women's involvement in work. Some articles and monographs examine women's employment at large, but most consider specific professions and women's place in them. A majority of these do not analyze the recruitment process. All are vital to understanding these processes.

The first category of scholarship on women's employment is the monographs and articles that cover individual jobs traditionally performed by women in the years between the Civil War and WWII. Dorothy Sue Cobble's work, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century*, focuses on unions and unionization through an examination of waitress jobs. Susan Benson's excellent monograph, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*, expands the investigative lens by examining the whole cultural picture in which both employers, employees, and customers struggle to help define the spaces of work and leisure. The retail stores, Benson makes it clear, were sites of cultural conflict and mixing. Sharon Strom's *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work 1900-1930* benefits from a focus on women's work in the office beyond secretarial work, including typists, accountants, and various mid-level management jobs thought

suitable for some women. In doing so, her work highlights just what drew women into these fields, and how this changed with the Great Depression. *Female Corporate Culture And The New South: Women In Business Between The World Wars* by Maureen Gilligan is particularly helpful in putting into perspective the expansion of women's clerical work beyond the obvious position of secretary down into the depths of women's office work. Secretaries were not always the best paid positions, and in either case most women worked in rather less culturally exalted positions. Additionally, I have benefited from the cultural perspective on women's office opportunities and struggles presented by Julie Berebitsky in *Sex and the Office: A History of Gender, Power, and Desire*. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis's *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* is a heartfelt and carefully researched--through interviews, primarily--look at what it meant to be a domestic worker in this time. While it covered Washington D.C., it is reflective of experiences that can be extended to African Americans throughout the Great Migration period. Articles such as "Suited for Service: Racialized Rationalizations for the Ideal Domestic Servant from the Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century" by Enobong Hannah Branch and Melissa E. Wooten helped reveal the role that racial stereotyping played in changing perceptions of what the ideal 'help' looked and acted like. This connects with the question of who was hired for what roles in domestic labor.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, I have consulted *City of Eros: New*

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<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Sharon Hartman Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Maureen Carroll Gilligan, *Female Corporate Culture and the New South: Women in Business between the World Wars* (London: Routledge, 1999); Julie Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office: a History of Gender,*

*York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* by Timothy J. Gilfoyle. His work emphasizes the extent to which prostitution, as a reaction to difficult economic situations, could be part-time or informal work in addition to, and not just instead of, other low-paying labor, such as domestic service.<sup>7</sup> While invisible in Help Wanted ads, such ‘second jobs’ were often central to the survival of some women.

These works are joined by several that have explored the overall job situation for women, or specific aspects of it that reach beyond a single profession, focusing on the 20th century.<sup>8</sup> *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in The United States, 1900-1995* by Julia Blackwelder was constantly referenced, especially for its insights on how quantitative and qualitative evaluations of women’s work could be combined. It also served to create a sense of continuity, since each chapter handled a decade or pair of decades. Both *Now Hiring* by Blackwelder and *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920* by Lara Vapnek look beyond middle-class assumptions about women’s labor to grasp the reality of women’s labor, and foreground it in the 19th and 20th centuries together. In the words of

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*Power, and Desire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living in, Living out: African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C., 1910-1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010); E. H. Branch and M. E. Wooten, “Suited for Service: Racialized Rationalizations for the Ideal Domestic Servant from the Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Century,” *Social Science History* 36, no. 2 (15, 2012): 169-189, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01455532-1537320>.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of the Sex, 1790-1920* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992), 60-61, 65-6.

<sup>8</sup> Works that have helped emphasize the continuity of women’s employment difficulties, as well as the middle-class trends that tried and partially succeeded in stifling women’s labor, include Seth Rockman, *Scraping by: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), which addresses the marginal economic position of women in early 19th century Baltimore in its fourth chapter, “A Job For A Working Women;” and Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City ; 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).



historian Alice Kessler-Harris, women have always worked. The early 20th century was a transformative time, and some women understandably felt that the 1920s brought opportunities not previously open. They were right. History shows that many eras were transformative, and that opportunities opened and closed constantly. The challenge when reviewing the literature was to keep a sense of proportion as to what was and was not changing, and the historiographic presentation of this change or its lack.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, I have consulted several works dealing with the time period in general, and the Depression in particular, in order to understand the dynamics that defined the cultural background of the ads. *Newsprint Metropolis: City Papers and the Making of Modern Americans* by Julia Guarneri is vital to shaping my understanding of the importance of newspapers and their changing role in American society. In the working life of American men, the Work Progress Administration (WPA), among other bodies, looms large both in their lives and in the American cultural imagination on the era. When it began in 1935, the gendered assumption that only one member of a family should work--the concept of the family wage--made it so that many women were excluded, though not in all cases.<sup>10</sup> However, even for men, WPA jobs were far from panaceas, and the WPA shared the general belief--reflected in some but not all Help Wanted ads--that women were simply worth less. Women were victimized by the Great Depression no less, and in many ways more,

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<sup>9</sup> Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997); Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010);

<sup>10</sup> Donald S. Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1943, 1973 reprint). Please confirm that this is correct. Or were you indicating Howard's birthdate at 1943? If so, delete that date as it is not necessary for Chicago style.

than men. But relief for them was bound up in patriarchal notions of what families were, and thus what women's work was.<sup>11</sup>

### **Theoretical Methodology**

I will be using a few different theoretical lenses in this paper. The first is how both 'sides' presented themselves, curating how they showcased themselves and the jobs. Some jobs were part of a landscape of promised equality and opportunity for women, and this itself was a theoretical element. When ads promised a "man's income" or opportunities for ambitious women comparable with men's, they seemingly defied a norm.<sup>12</sup> We can and should doubt their sincerity. Despite the cachet of secretarial and teaching careers, most women who worked outside the home did so as housekeepers, waitresses, or other lower-status and low-paying jobs.<sup>13</sup> However, at every level there was negotiation going on around both credentials and characteristics.

Though some companies took a seemingly feminist line in their Help Wanted ads, the most notable expression of this dialogue was the ongoing process of divisions between female workers. Marxist scholars have proposed the idea of false consciousness to talk about the ways that working class people were supposedly

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<sup>11</sup> Julia Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis: City Papers and the Making of Modern Americans* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> "Earn A Man's Income," *Kansas City Star*, 11/5/22, 7B.

<sup>13</sup> Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 65.

blinded to their class interests.<sup>14</sup> However, a similar claim could be made about other categories. Help Wanted ads divided out prospective employees by dozens of immutable categories. Advertisements not only had education or experience requirements, or their explicit lack in some cases, but also racial, ethnic, gender, marital and other requirements.<sup>15</sup> This process might be called “atomization.” People hardly needed help in dividing themselves out from each other. Ads could and did reinforce these divides, however. This atomization was most consistently evident in housekeeping jobs, where an ad might request a maid who was a widow, age 40+, unencumbered, or of a specific ethnicity.<sup>16</sup> It was present everywhere, however, reflecting how class, race, gender, and age differences were reinforced. Sometimes this was subtle. Secretarial ads hardly had to directly indicate that they were primarily for certain types of white women. Instead they could ask for features such as a good personality, neat appearance, and so on. These factors have to be considered together to understand how companies and individuals indicated preferences that divided women workers into a large variety of jobs. Women’s Situation Wanted ads enhanced this trend as well. The market was a competition, and sisterhood could turn out to be little more than a phrase. Help Wanted ads certainly influenced the way women’s jobs were viewed. The pressures against atomization of the job market were ultimately weaker than the pressures for it, and thus atomization defined this era’s market.

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<sup>14</sup> Fredrich Engels, “Letter to F. Mehring”. *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Selected Works in Two Volumes, Volume II*, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1949), 451

<sup>15</sup> “Housekeeper Wanted--Refined, Motherly Christian Woman,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/15/25, 6B.

<sup>16</sup> “Woman--unencumbered widow over 40”, *Kansas City Star*, 10/2/1972, 8B.

Beyond that, each specific set of job categories had its own set of terms and formats that helped frame how the opportunities were presented. These tended to be simplest when the job itself was low-status, and more complex as it began to grow in status and also perceived skills needed. There were exceptions, which will be considered, but these trends were clearly visible. It is important to note both general trends and specific instances.

My research focus is on the *Kansas City Star's* Help and Situation Wanted ads from 1920 to 1936, and on the information contained within. I used two Sunday editions of the *Kansas City Star* per each month, using at least six months a year for a broadly representative sample. Sunday was when the ads were most numerous. A few caveats: first, I will only look at wage labor. Women acting as housewives were in fact working, and had massive economic value, but society quite literally valued wage labor higher, as these ads cost money to print and submit. These ads allow a historian an avenue into specific types of cultural discourse. The promises that employers and prospective employees made reflected their priorities and expectations. The accuracy of these expectations are in some portions of the thesis, immaterial, and in others central. Second, while there are factors that could make Kansas City representative of the Midwest, newspapers varied. News was nationalizing, but Help Wanted sections, while omnipresent, had different costs and standards. The conversation was mediated by, and in the control of, the newspapers. As an example, *The Star* specifically divided out Sales jobs from the others, for reasons that no doubt also included how many of those jobs were, to put it nicely, optimistic. Women were promised they could make a good income selling

Christmas Cards on their own, year after year. This division between 'sales' jobs and non-sales jobs existed in Men's Help Wanted as well. In many ways these divisions defined the Help Wanted ads, though as will be outlined they could be very arbitrary. Some ads clearly belonged in another category, and Sales and Agent Wanted ads each mixed the male and female somewhat clumsily. In the face of these confusions and struggles to find a good income, left unsaid in this forum was the possibility of prostitution, and just how many jobs involved sexual harassment, rape, or inducements towards prostitution. Societal fears of women's work leading to prostitution were, of course, entirely backwards: it was the lack of wages and power that set up the situation that led women to consider paid sex work as a viable alternative.<sup>17</sup>

The question inevitably arises: why Kansas City? Kansas City was a city that in many ways was typical for the Midwest, but it also had characteristics that made it stand out in that era. In some ways the 1920s and 30s was the height of Kansas City's national cultural relevance, what with having spawned its own version of jazz, among other things. Kansas City's cultural centrality was, in many ways, the result of its geographic centrality. It was the heart of the Midwest, a cow town with powerful railroad connections and its own political machine, a sure sign of both corruption and importance. It also was a center of the most impactful innovations in racially restrictive real estate covenants, driven in large part by African American migration to the city in the 1920s and 30s. Since 1910 Kansas City has been the headquarters of what, part of the way through the 1920s, would be named Hallmark

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<sup>17</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 290-291.

Cards.<sup>18</sup> There were thus several avenues of unique job opportunities and restrictions existing alongside other features of midwestern cities that were more typical. Unions were weaker in the Midwest for garment workers than they were in the Northeast, once the bastion of the garment industry. This meant that for some women in Kansas City, the garment factories were available avenues of work, during the 1920s and 30s. This race to the bottom, towards parts of America with less extensive workers' rights, would hardly end at Kansas City: as always, the city at the center of the nation was a waypoint, in time and space alike. In time unions for garment workers would gain too much ground in ensuring basic workers' rights, and move on to other centers of manufacture, and eventually out of the country. These different industries--cards, printing, garments, meatpacking, sales work connected by railroads--combined with more universal job categories common in most cities, makes Kansas City an ideal first example of what can be learned through research into Help Wanted ads. Later scholars could, if they were inclined, examine other cities to highlight the particularities of those cities' Help and Situation Wanted advertising markets compared to Kansas City.

This paper will begin by examining the historical context of women's work in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will cover, job by job, some of the important professions advertised in the 1920s to establish a baseline and standard for Help and Situation Wanted ads. Chapter 4 will examine the Great Depression, in order to outline what did and did not change. I will examine, holistically, how the job market reacted to the Depression. Chapter 5 will look at possibilities for quantitative analysis of the same

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<sup>18</sup> Robert L Puschendorf, "[The Halls of Hallmark: The Nebraska Years](#)", *Nebraska History*, 2008, Nebraska State Historical Society: 6–10. Retrieved April 12, 2018.

data I have been looking at qualitatively, as well as a consideration of Help Wanted and Situation Wanted ads as a source in general. Finally, Chapter 7 is the conclusion, in which I will restate my arguments on the importance of these sources. This thesis reveals the changing priorities of the market, and the propagandistic presentation of women's work, all of which deserve greater scholarly attention.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE 1920s and 1930s

The Roaring Twenties were something of a myth: beginning in recession, ending in Depression, and along the way including guest appearances by the Ku Klux Klan. Our distorted vision of the era, and people within it of themselves, is caused in large part because of the media. Newspapers were central to the narratives that emphasized the fast times, chaos, activity, and bustle of 1920s cities. Cities, after all, had finally taken their place as the center of American population in 1920. They had always been cultural centers since before there was a United States.<sup>1</sup> Like the American population, newspapers consolidated and increased their readership, size, and scope. As outlined earlier, newspapers increased from one per two households at around twelve pages in 1880 to one and a half per household by 1920. By 1930, many papers ran over forty pages.<sup>2</sup> Historian Julia Guarneri contends “cities made newspapers... and newspapers made cities.”<sup>3</sup> Both men and women read newspapers, and some middle-class families bought two copies, one to stay home, and one to go with the man to work. Newspapers were far from their decline, and part of this was due to the continued rise in female literacy and readership. The world seemed larger than ever, even with recessions and disappointments. The 1920s thus had every reason to feel like a watershed decade. The Great War, the war to end all wars, had been successfully ended, suffrage was

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<sup>1</sup> Boehm and Corey, *America's Urban History*, 1-3, 7-8. Make sure that you have full citation above before going to shortened ones.

<sup>2</sup> Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis*, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis*, 4.



finally achieved for many women--though African-American women of course struggled to exercise the franchise in the South--and after a brief hiccup the American economy began to rapidly expand. The following section will ask the question of how these changes impacted women politically, socially, and economically. In all three areas there were significant limitations on changes. The comparative failure of women's post-suffrage political goals heightened the importance of social and economic analysis, both of which can be addressed by historians through newspaper sources, including Help Wanted ads.

Women's labor had been an ongoing topic for discussion in the 1800s, as women tried to survive and find work. They struggled against racial, class, and gender biases, as well as perceptions of immorality if they worked outside the home, and sometimes even if they did not.<sup>4</sup> Employees and employers had every reason to downplay these concerns, since if a job ruined marriage prospects, it would not be worth it for many middle-class women. A language of justification of women's paid work thus began to form that was in full-flower and acceptance by the 1920s. In the meantime, poverty drove women into second jobs, including illicit ones sometimes. Thus, jobs occupied by working-class women—maids, cooks, waitresses, street vendors and, increasingly, factory workers--gained a reputation for illicit sexuality, both in prostitution and non-marital sex. This compromised perception of purity was increasingly made central to social norms for women. Middle-class women were encouraged to keep far away from appearances of impropriety by avoiding (wage) labor and instead focusing on consumption of products. This was the famous

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<sup>4</sup> Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 60-61.

separate spheres ideology, in which women should, some argued, stay in a 'private' sphere that focused on care of husbands and children and somehow included making all the market consumer decisions for a household.<sup>5</sup>

Working-class women were not entirely immune to the pressures of domesticity, both from above, where middle-class moralizers were overly concerned with the behavior of working women, and from men of a similar economic class. The former is a tale often told, of middle-class morality imposed from above. The latter is more complicated. Working-class men's demands for a "family wage" were often gendered attempts by working men to gain "manly independence" and keep women in the home, for various reasons.<sup>6</sup> White working-class men could not stop the shift in labor from seeking "women" instead of "girls", that is to say labor as lifelong rather than a short period in a women's life. Economic necessity trumped cultural norms and increasingly some women worked outside the home throughout their life span, but this was against all of the pressures briefly outlined above.<sup>7</sup>

Amidst these contradictions and confusions, the women's movement formed. In this movement, the most popular and successful set of arguments espoused by advocates portrayed women's suffrage as a natural extension of women's housekeeping duties, using a broom to sweep out corruption in politics, and which eventually aligned itself by the turn of the 20th century with Progressivism.<sup>8</sup> In this it

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, *Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 3-7.

<sup>6</sup> Rockman, *Scraping By*, 98.

<sup>7</sup> Rockman, *Scraping By*, 113-117.

<sup>8</sup> Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930* (Chicago, IL: I.R. Dee, 2003), 140-145.

seemed an extension of the strong connection between the early organized women's movement and abolitionism, owing to their basis in northern women's activism.<sup>9</sup> This time, however, suffrage activists were prepared for victory: the vote would be close, but in national and state houses they triumphed through hard work and a powerful network of allies.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the 1910s found the nation in a time of rising suffrage, temperance, and progressive activism. Starting from the second half of the 19th century, secretarial work had become increasingly feminized, and factory work was divided into women's jobs and men's jobs. Shifts in perception of women's work continued, in part because education for both men and women was increasing, slowly but steadily, across the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Young women working was increasingly accepted in limited ways. Movies and books of the 1920s on women's work were often expansions upon, or even adaptations of, fiction written in early decades, especially the 1900s and 1910s. Women's employment in war factory work had opened up new vistas, and many women at the time fought a losing battle post-war to keep jobs that paid better and offered more than pre-war employment.<sup>11</sup> This fight was not helped by the fact that many of the jobs—jobs involving war industries that switched back to civilian production—disappeared in general. While the totality of women's post-WWII exclusion from the workplace has been challenged, with a

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<sup>9</sup> Ellen Carol Dubois, *Suffrage: Women's Long Battle for the Vote* (S.I.: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 6-20.

<sup>10</sup> Dubois, *Suffrage*, 243-277.

<sup>11</sup> Carrie Brown, *Rosie's Mom: Forgotten Women Workers of the First World War* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2013), 159-189.

notable reversal beginning several years after WWII, it was seemingly more complete post-WWI.<sup>12</sup>

What did post-WWI exclusion look like for the women? For many, it meant marrying, as most always had planned on doing, and quitting their jobs.<sup>13</sup> WWI was thus a brief interlude, an incident in a life that followed traditions of marrying and leaving the employment market that would continue into the 1920s. A larger percentage of women worked, but the number of women who worked for wages throughout their lives increased far more slowly. For middle-class women, paid work was a stage in life, rather than a permanent condition. Some of these women returned to paid employment, during WWII, as middle-aged women workers, however.

Society changed from the paradigm of the 1910s only slowly. As with Wilson's dream of a League of Nations, suffragists found that their victory did not create a new world as they had hoped. Instead of throwing open doors and initiating rapidly growing equality in economic and political life, suffrage led to modest legislative and workplace gains, despite the well-known changing cultural norms that have defined the 1920s. They did not gain any significant political power, however.

Women, facing strong institutional pressure, hesitated in their drive to seek political office.<sup>14</sup> According to Marueen Flanagan's study of Chicago women's

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<sup>12</sup> Joanne J. Meyerowitz, "Introduction: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-60," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne J. Meyerowitz (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 1-16, 4-6.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *Rosie's Mom*, 187-9.

<sup>14</sup> David Joseph Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 51-54.

electoral activism, the true culprit was both parties' bipartisan refusal to pander to (which is to say represent) the issues that motivated women's social clubs and activist organizations.<sup>15</sup> Women nationally made hard-fought minor electoral gains at most, such as a bill targeting infant mortality.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the causes of their electoral lockout, the result was that any progress made by women in the 1920s would be economic and social, areas that can be addressed by my sources. But is there any other evidence of such progress for women?

This is no easy question to answer. It can be tempting to simply jump between two extremes with regards to the 1920s. First, that it was a time of no real and meaningful change, and second that it had the hallmarks of a revolution. The first was closer to reality; however, there was change in some women's social lives. Still, the most recognized symbol of the Roaring Twenties for women was the flapper. The cultural representation of the flapper was a young woman who listened to jazz, bobbed her hair, wore short skirts, danced, drank, smoked cigarettes, and otherwise enjoyed life--and sex--more than was considered proper. This image was, largely, limited by race and class to white upper- and middle-class women, a "performance" that challenged sex and gender norms to some extent, even as it baffled older feminists.<sup>17</sup> Critiques of this style and self-presentation came not only from male misogynists, but also from female suffragists and reformers who believed

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<sup>15</sup> Flanagan, *Seeing With Their Hearts*, 141-144

<sup>16</sup> Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2007), 102-107.

<sup>17</sup> Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 18-22.

that women should be focused on seemingly loftier achievements such as social improvement or a further permutation of feminist political goals, rather than fashion or a new lifestyle.<sup>18</sup> These generational divides were made worse by the flappers' association with the defiance of prohibition, which in many ways was a victory of women's political influence. Among white women, it was young women--those most likely to be drawn to the flapper aesthetic--who were most likely to work, but the flapper was a figure of leisure, not labor. Media portrayed the flapper in a variety of ways, and women's fashion was as much a target of critique, criticism and disdain from all sides.

Women were a vital part of this new "consumer culture."<sup>19</sup> People joined Book of The Month Clubs, bought "Brand name" products in increasing numbers, continued their patronage of chain stores, and took part in an increasingly nationalized culture.<sup>20</sup> In reaction, there was continued criticism by social elites of women's (especially working women's) consumerism and 'overinvestment' in fashion as impractical or an attempt to hide their lowly economic circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Angela Latham contends that fashion trends primarily followed women's desires, however, and that their (limited) ability to choose and create their own fashion represented a degree of economic independence.<sup>22</sup> Fashion was a cultural, moral and economic

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<sup>18</sup> Latham, *Posing a Threat*, 22-34.

<sup>19</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 144.

<sup>20</sup> David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1939 Decades of Promise and Pain* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), |160-170.

<sup>21</sup> Latham, *Posing A Threat*, 37-48.

<sup>22</sup> Latham, *Posing A Threat*, 48.

statement by women, a way to demonstrate their independence. This is most seen, of course, in the guise of the flapper. There was a tension between the assertion of individuality through clothing and the chasing of expensive trends, one picked up by critics and comics both then and now.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, movies represented a mass-produced form of individual consumption.

Consumers, whatever their gender, were defined and self-defined in ways that allowed ad-makers to sell their products. This was one of the defining factors of advertising modernity. Advertisements sought to “mirror popular fantasies rather than social realities” and thus are a good way to contextualize this era.<sup>24</sup> Advertising agencies perhaps included more women employees than average in high levels, thanks to the idea that women might have expertise on “the ‘woman’s viewpoint’” in advertising.<sup>25</sup> Kansas City and other smaller cities had women members in their advertising clubs--organizations designed to organize advertisers in particular cities--but the larger cities segregated advertising clubs by gender, which is to say that there was a club for women, and a club for men.<sup>26</sup> Even this limited foothold for women was greater than that of other racial or ethnic groups, and so often advertisers sold products to people they struggled to understand.<sup>27</sup> Women made up 85% of consumer spending by advertisers estimates in the 1920s, and advertisers

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<sup>23</sup> Latham, *Posing A Threat*, 37-48.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), xvii.

<sup>25</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 35-9.

were torn between several conceptions of female consumers.<sup>28</sup> Some advertisements made sure to keep simple, while others portrayed women as the “businessmen” of the household, making smart purchasing decisions... and thus of course buying their product.<sup>29</sup> Advertisements for women’s menstrual products got around the scandalous nature of their topic by making the ads about women on the go, who did not need to stop for anything.<sup>30</sup> Ads were thus profoundly important to understanding society at the time, but this paper will seek to explore another important sort of ad.

Other factors for women’s self-assertion in the 1920s were the divisions along racial, ethnic, and class lines. Faced with the racism of many white feminists, Black feminists pivoted towards focusing on achieving “equality of the races” with sex equality in a “subordinate position” as one Black feminist noted.<sup>31</sup> The most significant event in this particular era for African-American women was the Great Migration, in which hundreds of thousands of Black Migrants streamed, during WWI and continuing afterwards, into the northern half of America. They brought with them their cuisine, their political ideologies, their culture, and social bonds that would reshape northern cities and, eventually, the northern economy. These changing economic demographics allowed Madame C.J. Walker to thrive in the world of work. Her company’s runaway success as a cosmetics empire stood out, and she was a rich woman indeed. This was, however, a blip in an era in which Black women, and

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<sup>28</sup> Marchand, *Advertising The American Dream*, 66-7.

<sup>29</sup> Marchand, *Advertising The American Dream*, 66-7, 168-171

<sup>30</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 20-22

<sup>31</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 103.



in fact all women of color, were locked out of even the modest opportunities white women had found in the previous two decades.<sup>32</sup> These divisions were political as well, as outlined earlier: women voted with racial, class, and other interests as their husbands did, rather than existing as a discrete block at this time.

Advocates of workers' rights did not have a good decade in the 1920s. Whatever the supposed newness and modernity of the 1920s was, it did not involve improved labor practices.<sup>33</sup> In this era of contradictions, historians' traditional interpretation was that the 1920s were "Lean Years" for American workers, and that after 1923 there was a "remarkable hiatus" in activism.<sup>34</sup> Historian Jon R. Huibregtse argues that the 1920s led to the formation of a modern language of political engagement that set up the New Deal.<sup>35</sup> Women would have to wait for any changes. The period was one of unabated exploitation of working women. Reformers achieved very limited child labor laws, but no real restrictions on large-scale exploitation, whether of men, women, or children.<sup>36</sup> Uneven prosperity continued even as high school and college graduation rates for men and women increased throughout the 1920s, and did not--surprisingly--reverse in the 1930s.<sup>37</sup> The growing GDP, almost one-third larger by the end of the decade, was broadly

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<sup>32</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 177-123.

<sup>33</sup> Charles J. Shindo, *1927 and the Rise of Modern America* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 7-9.

<sup>34</sup> Jon R. Huibregtse, *American Railroad Labor and the Genesis of the New Deal: 1919-1935* (Gainesville, FL: Univ. of Florida Press, 2012), xiii, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Huibregtse, *American Railroad Labor*, 5-8.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph M. Hawes, *Children between the Wars: American Childhood, 1920-1940* (New York, NY: Twayne, 1997), 22.

<sup>37</sup> Hawes, *Children Between the Wars*, 33-5.

concentrated among the rich.<sup>38</sup> The Help Wanted ad market was thus very much a field heavily in favor of the employer.

How did most people in this most mixed of decades view women's work, both economically and culturally? Women were sometimes portrayed in fiction and newspapers as workers, but only as temporary workers. Fictional stories set at women's workplaces often ended in marriage and the heroine's exit from the world of business, such as in the book and then film *The Office Wife* (1930), the short story "Not The Marrying Kind" (1934), or, about department store work, Edna Ferber's *Buttered Side Down* (1912).<sup>39</sup> In many cases this supposed exit from the economy was wishful thinking on the part of both men and women, compared to the economic realities that meant that the percentage of working women who were married increased from 15% in 1900 to 29% in 1930.<sup>40</sup> While the percentage of women who worked increased only 1%--from 23% to 24%--in the 1920s, women grew more visible on the silver screen.<sup>41</sup> But not, tellingly, working married women. The marriage bar--the tendency, by either open policy or discrete action, for married women workers to be fired or drive out--did not by and large dissolve during the 1920s or the 1930s. We can tell from Help Wanted ads, outlined further on in this paper, that women wanted safe and clean working conditions and at least decent pay. However, decent work was defined by the media and a woman's peers, and

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<sup>38</sup> Susan B. Carter, ed., *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), series Ca9.

<sup>39</sup> Berebitsky, *Sex in the Office*, 132-136; Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 214-215.

<sup>40</sup> Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 112.

<sup>41</sup> Michael E. Parrish, *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1994), 141.

generally was given a highly gendered definition. If men wanted to keep women in place, and rich women poor women in place, limitations had to exist. It was necessary because by the 1920s nearly half of the nation's female population over 20 had worked at some point in their lives, usually between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five when rates dropped off somewhat, likely because of marriage.<sup>42</sup> The average woman, whether popular culture accepted it or not, likely worked outside the home for wages at some point in her life. It would be more surprising if culture had not changed in response. But as the data in John Rury's work on female education and employment shows, clerical and manufacturing work both had huge drop-offs in a woman's life cycle compared to domestic service, which was engaged in by women of all ages.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the most culturally invisible profession for women, as domestic servants, most consistently worked across their life. For most other professions, working for wages was just one stage of their life. Women were thus taught to seek jobs that were year round but temporary, rather than life-long careers.

During all this time, Kansas City was rocked by all the same events. When African Americans migrated North, they came to Kansas City too. When corporations grew in power and unions floundered, there was Kansas City to provide a 'friendly' business environment. Kansas City was neither immune to, nor separated from, all of these trends, for women and men alike.

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<sup>42</sup> John L. Rury, *Education and Women's Work: Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870-1930* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 93-98.

<sup>43</sup> Rury, *Education and Women's Work*, 107-8.

In 1929, the bottom fell out of the world, or so it felt to many. Suddenly everyone struggled to find work, or if they could find it, work that paid enough to keep a body alive. Many cultural products--novels, movies, and more--ignored this reality, as the popularity of Shirley Temple attested. But even in an era of cheap amusements, upbeat lies of prosperity and the delusion of plenty gave way to occasional heartfelt portrayals of at least a little of the reality of the Depression, such as *The Plow That Broke the Prairies* (1936), *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), or *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933).<sup>44</sup> Suffering was widespread, though scholars have found that for a variety of hotly debated reasons, mortality did not increase overall.<sup>45</sup> While unemployment drastically increased, men's positions decayed faster than women's, in part because sex-typing of jobs kept women in menial, low-paying jobs that hung on somewhat better. In 1930 7.1% of men and 4.7% of women in the labor force were without a job, and in 1940 women's unemployment was still a percentage point lower than men's.<sup>46</sup> This did not mean that women had it easier: in one sense the less dramatic rise in unemployment reflected the already weak position of women. Besides this, married working women were still a minority, and working women who were married undoubtedly relied on a dual income if at all feasible, considering women's lower pay almost across the board. Children, especially teenagers, found cause to try to find any work they could in the face of the misery of

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<sup>44</sup> Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: a Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 8-11, 60-62.

<sup>45</sup> Jose A. Tapia Granados and Ana V. Diez Roux, "Life and Death in the Great Depression," ed. Alejandro Portes, *Proceedings Of The National Academy of Sciences Of The USA*, August 18, 2009, <https://www.pnas.org/content/106/41/17290>)

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Milkman, "Womens Work and Economic Crisis: Some Lessons of the Great Depression," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 8, no. 1 (1976): doi:10.1177/048661347600800107)

the Great Depression, and it was often hard to track or regulate such work, for all that reformers tried.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps in part because they had less to lose, and in part because of rampant misogyny--"If more wives were slapped", a contemporary Chicago domestic court judge said, "there would be fewer divorces"--men targeted women for hostile attention in the Depression.<sup>48</sup> Not only was there a shift in practice, but also in policy. The New Deal codified and reflected cultural trends. Novels ignored the realities of "female survival" to instead focus on the potentials of women's partnerships with men rather than their wage earning: even the most progressive or leftist authors seemed to view women workers as "woman first, worker second."<sup>49</sup> Frances Perkins, soon to become the labor secretary, emphasized women's work as secondary, when as the numbers showed, there were only five industries where "white woman" made more than \$18 a week when a "winter coat cost \$40."<sup>50</sup> Black women were even worse off. Even professional women found themselves reaching a nadir: while women's overall unemployment did not increase outrageously compared to men's work, the jobs women lost were the ones they most valued.<sup>51</sup> Women needed a New Deal. What women got instead was far, far more limited. Women's wages for

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<sup>47</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 50-69

<sup>48</sup> Holly Allen, *Forgotten Men and Fallen Women: The Cultural Politics of New Deal Narratives* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2015), 95-97.

<sup>49</sup> Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1997), 141-2.

<sup>50</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 6-7.

<sup>51</sup> Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 7-9.

government supported jobs were intentionally discriminatory, and industrial codes often actively worked to exclude women from minimum wage requirements.<sup>52</sup> These of course often only codified existing rules and excluded women working as domestics entirely.<sup>53</sup> They did, however, open the door to the right to strike for some professions, including among women. Programs such as the Civil Works Administration hired as many as 7% of their jobs from among unemployed women, and the Works Progress Administration did provide limited--but greater than previous--relief to both working-class and white collar women.<sup>54</sup> It was enough to satisfy critics, but across the space of generations, it stands as deeply inadequate. Even this improvement took years to come, a result of a good deal of pressure and activism. Women made themselves a part of the New Deal in the face of constant criticism and skepticism. These limited benefits were, of course, racially defined. Women were left to struggle through early on in the Depression and even later on, women faced a tough job market and aid that added up to very little. The 1930s were no more the time for women workers than the 1920s had been, often for very similar reasons. Yet the job market still existed, and the Women's Help Wanted ads continued.

Women, as they say, have always worked.

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<sup>52</sup> Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1985), 110-114.

<sup>53</sup> Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 114-117.

<sup>54</sup> Scharf, *To Work And To Wed*, 122-127.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE ROARING TWENTIES

Let us return to the wonderland that ‘Alice’ promised in 1931. What were these promises? How did Help Wanted ads work, or in some cases, not work? One of the most obvious things an advertisement could promise, on the employer’s end, was a “permanent” or “steady” position, work that could help create a consistent income.<sup>1</sup> These sorts of promises are evident both in 1920 in the advertisement just described and in 1933 with “full or spare time” employment for a “lady” in “sales work” and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Many of the promises employers made were not particularly gendered. Men surely wanted steady employment, good wages, and the opportunity to advance in their jobs. Indeed, men’s Help Wanted ads promised many of the same things.

Ads promised and demanded qualities from women, some of which were almost intentionally vague, and others of which were very specific. Some of them were pretty straightforward, such as ads that wanted experienced workers, while others stated “previous experience not necessary” indicating a willingness to train them.<sup>3</sup> Office jobs demanded qualities such as “dependable” and “neat”, while a request for “show girls” could include an exact height requirement.<sup>4</sup> Both of these differed from the ways that housekeepers were chosen. Whereas words like “neat”

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<sup>1</sup> “Girls and Women,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/1920, 11.

<sup>2</sup> “Women Can Get Their Hosiery,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/1/33 HW, 11B.

<sup>3</sup> “Clerk in Office,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/16/20, 4B

<sup>4</sup> “Stenographer--One of Kansas City’s Foremost Business Institutions”, *Kansas City Star*, 5/16/20, 4B. “Show Girls”, *Kansas City Star*, 5/10/20, 9.

and “experienced” could and did serve to steer some poor job-seekers away from these professions, housekeeping was, at the time, still the most common profession for African-American women, and one which underpinned the migration of many such women to northern cities.<sup>5</sup> So housekeeping ads clarified throughout the decade whether they wanted a “colored” woman with hotel experience to do pantry work, or a “white” woman to be “companion to two children and do light housework.”<sup>6</sup> The world of Help Wanted ads could be very small once you filtered yourself away from jobs that clearly were not aimed at you. Women’s Help Wanted sections were consistently smaller than men’s, throughout the 1920s. The amount of difference varied, but the existence of the difference did not. This will be discussed in depth later, but for the moment what needs to be understood is the literal cost of words. Long ads reflected larger budgets, or employers searching for large batches of employees at once. While there was a discount for multiple days of ads, placing ads was expensive all the same.

The jobs I will be outlining are, in order, maid work, office work, teaching, sales work, factory and laundry work, and odds and ends. These jobs had a racial and class component. Very few middle-class white women did maid work, and very few African-American women of any class had any secretarial advertisements targeted at them. Class determined not only the length of an ad, but also its presentation. These jobs were ‘raced’ and ‘classed’ and so we can address them as specific jobs to cut through to the racial and class implications of each. Each section of this chapter advances the argument that the way the jobs were framed and

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<sup>5</sup> Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*, 97-100; Blackwelder, *Now Hiring*, 65.

<sup>6</sup> “Pantry Woman,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/20/27, 7B; “Woman--White,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/20/27, 7B.



advertised said something not only about what the jobs were, but also about what employers wanted prospective employees to think the jobs were. Women in Situation Wanted ads responded within the frameworks employers set out, seeking pay and rights commiserate to the job as it had been presented. There were in fact many small markets in each Help Wanted section. By this it is meant that each reader would read the same Help Wanted ad differently, and sort and group themselves within categories of jobs for which they felt qualified. Meanwhile employers were aiming only at those women, and not all women. In the 1920s, there were an increasingly larger number of job opportunities for women, but even so, one of the largest sections of women's employment was domestic work, and ads for these positions filled the Help and Situation wanted section.

### **A Maid, A Maid!**

We should begin by looking at paid housework in the 1920s. While it was close to the gendered and often sexist ideals of womanhood propagated in the 19th century, it was still paid work. Maid work was the backbone of many poor women's livelihoods, and was poorly compensated. This was reflected in the ads in two ways. First, the wages offered--stated more often than secretarial wages--were low. Second, both the Help and Situation Wanted ads for this job were short. These jobs more often than not faced the greatest obvious atomization, with age ranges, ethnicity, and marital status all closely dictated in many ads. These often create absurdities to the modern eye, such as why they searched for widows. Upon reflection, it is likely the employer was seeking the experience of a housewife without

an inconvenient husband in the way. Such a woman would also often be in dire need of money, in a vulnerable position, and thus perhaps more willing to work bottom dollar. Similarly, while skills were important, one of the primary qualifications seemed to be the ability to fit into certain stereotypes and assumptions about domestic labor. These stereotypes included age stereotypes, such as “between 30 and 45”, but in some cases even included specifics such as weight.<sup>7</sup> Even so, there was variety among the tasks asked for... at least on the side of Help Wanted. An employer might ask for a “Lady--Elderly” to care for two children, or a “middle aged” woman to care for children and do “light housework”, or a housekeeper who is a “good cook,” or in another example one who is, preferably, a “Christian scientist.”<sup>8</sup> African-American women were a category all their own, excluded in some ads (“Housework--Afternoons, white woman”) and required by the racism of employers to label themselves by race (“Girl--Colored” again and again, week after week).<sup>9</sup>

An examination of some Help and Situation Wanted ads does reveal some patterns as to how both employers and employees treated the work, however sparse the evidence. Several ads from April 15, 1921 show some of these patterns. First, these jobs were not necessarily segregated by marital status, and in fact being married could qualify a woman and her husband to work together. One ad wanted a couple to do “light housework.”<sup>10</sup> Another ad asked for a “middle aged” black woman

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<sup>7</sup> “Girl or woman, white,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/17/25, 7B.

<sup>8</sup> “Lady--Elderly; Care for two children,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/18/25, 8B; “Lady--Middle aged,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/18/25 8B; “Housekeeper for Widower,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/18/25 8B; “Housekeeper--Family Adult”, *Kansas City Star*, 10/18/25 8B.

<sup>9</sup> “Housework--Afternoons, white woman,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/18/25, 8B; “Girl--Colored” *Kansas City Star*, 10/18/25 9B.

<sup>10</sup> “Girl-White for light housework,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/15/21, 14.

who can make “any kind of salad” for pantry work.<sup>11</sup> Other ads called for “elderly” women to do light housekeeping.<sup>12</sup> Most ads started with demographic requirements, before then segueing into job requirements, before ending in wages. Surprisingly, while some promised “good” wages, many others did not.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the focus was often less on the wages and more on defining the limitations of the service, in order to appeal to more women. From the emphasis on its lack in some ads, one can see the time-consuming nature of laundry work.<sup>14</sup> Women of all sorts of ages were desired, for reasons that could not easily be reduced to a single stereotype. Instead, employers made many different conflicting assumptions about women’s lives and employment based on often arbitrary or non-indicative categories. Employers occasionally asked specifically for “German” or “Swedish” women for their households, on other occasions they specified the woman’s religion, or they wanted married and unmarried women.<sup>15</sup> The homeowners had a lot of expectations about the kinds of people who would respond. The job itself was widespread despite these standards. In 1920, 15% of all employed women worked in private households, almost as large a segment of the job market for women as all clerical jobs combined.<sup>16</sup> These statistics get more unbalanced in favor of private

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<sup>11</sup> “Pantry Woman--Colored, Middle-Aged,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/15/21, 14.

<sup>12</sup> “Woman--Elderly for light housekeeping,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/15/21, 14.

<sup>13</sup> “Girl--White; general housework,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/15/21, 14

<sup>14</sup> “Housekeeper--White, to care for home and 20 month old baby,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/15/21, 14.

<sup>15</sup> “Girl (white)--Light housework,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/7/23, 7B.

<sup>16</sup> Blackwelder, *Now Hiring*, 113.

housework when one looks at foreign-born women and African Americans, where domestic workers made up 35% and 50%, respectively, of the total female labor force.<sup>17</sup> The women who participated at the highest level in the workforce were the ones most often excluded from Help Wanted ads by demographic requirements.

Owing to how rarely prospective maids got a voice either in the media or--with a few notable exceptions--their own word, it is important to consider the ads they placed carefully. The women took cues from what employers were demanding of them, but sometimes responded with their own requests. These requirements often had to do with the work environment they required or felt they could stand. Just a few examples of these demands from a single day illustrates the point: one woman asked for "no sunday", another for "day work", a third wanted "cooking and general housework", a fourth hoped "to take care of children and assist with housework" and yet another wished for an employer who would be okay with her being married with a working husband.<sup>18</sup> In these examples women had very little bargaining power, but what power they had was almost always aimed at controlling the circumstances and nature of their work. Wages were less often mentioned. Placing an ad outlining hoped for job requirements was not available to everyone, and most negotiations took place on or between jobs. Consider the case of African-American maids chronicled by historian Elizabeth Clark-Lewis. The women saved money when they wished to transition from ceaseless and unending live-in service to less secure but

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<sup>17</sup> Blackwelder, *Now Hiring*, 65.

<sup>18</sup> "Girl; Colored; Neat," *Kansas City Star*, 11/7/26 12B; "Girl; colored; day work; laundry or cleaning," *Kansas City Star* 11/7/26 12B; "Girl; colored; experienced," *Kansas City Star* 11/7/26 12B; "Girl--Colored; to take care of children and will assist with housework," *Kansas City Star* 11/7/26 12B; "Girl, colored, neat, capable and reliable," *Kansas City Star* 11/7/26 12B.

more freeing daywork. They lined up another job carefully before quitting their current position, started Penny Savings Clubs, and consulted successful laundresses to determine how to get into less constricting daywork. No doubt this left some of their former employers surprised by their sudden moves.<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, whose primary source was the Washington D.C women themselves, missed a part of the market. This was not surprising, since the servant economy ran partially on personal recommendations invisible to the newspapers. In Kansas City, one can actually find Laundresses in the Situation Wanted ads, including some who followed the living-out strategy. “Laundress--bundle washing” read one, or “family washing called for and delivered”, which among both white and African American laundresses seemed to be a common phrase for day-work.<sup>20</sup> Thus, even in fields such as maid work, where word of mouth and friends mattered in placement, studies of Situation and Help Wanted ads can add texture and depth to our understanding of the economic nature of these relationships.

The relationship between employer and help, especially but not limited to African-American maids, cooks, and others workers, was no more founded on mutual trust than white mistress-enslaved woman relationships pre-Civil War. They even featured a similar degree of delusion on the part of the employer as to the fundamental nature of the relationship. These economic relationships appeared to be interpersonal, however, because of the cultural division of ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces. Since maids’ work was usually performed in private homes, white employers

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<sup>19</sup> Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*, 138-149.

<sup>20</sup> “Laundress--Bundle washing,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/6/27 8B; “Laundress--family washing,” *Kansas City Star* 2/6/27 8B; “Laundress--White,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/6/27, 8B.

understood the position of a maid as being private rather than public work. More than a few of the women who worked in this position would have disputed the “domestic” or personal understandings favored by their employers, instead viewing them as a work relationship. The flawed and even delusional understanding of the nature of the work--and the relationship--led employers to seek out exacting racial, ethnic and age characteristics in hiring. They sought those that fit their broad stereotypical images of who was most suited for the position.

Thus, the Help Wanted ads were somewhat peripheral to the struggles that defined maid service. Situation Wanted ads were similarly one important avenue for employment, but told a relatively brief story. Instead, they largely confirm the reported experiences of the women themselves, while revealing a new and more formal avenue where these job-sorting and defining practices happened, and could be performed out in public, as they were when maids requested certain sorts of households. If nothing else, children were a hassle, large houses a nightmare, and if they could not be paid well, they could at least have an achievable task. These judgements were always subjective, and families with children could and did look for caretakers for those children--sometimes called nurses, though some nurse jobs advertised fit the modern definition better--or maids willing to clean up after a large family.

Ultimately, so much of the power was with the employer, especially at this early stage of the employment process, when it came to ads. This is a fact that was in many ways true with every profession in which women, and many men for that matter, worked. But in maid work this power was of a different nature, and a different

form. While all jobs advertised had similarities of power dynamics, maid work is one of the jobs of which the least can be understood from only the Help Wanted ads. But we can understand something from how little needed to be said to be understood.

## Teaching and Teachers

Teaching seemed to open doors for many women, especially the growing number of high-school and college educated women, a total which increased even during the Great Depression. These doors, however, often ultimately led away from teaching. It was and would remain one of the larger avenues of women's employment in this era, but office and department sales work both had notable numbers of former teachers entering their field. Teachers and former teachers gravitated to traveling sales work. Each year, toward the end of the school year, there was an explosion of ads targeting teachers for part-time work, and ex-teachers for steadier jobs. On April 10th, 1921, there were five different help-wanted ads, one of which declared that the sales work would be "along school lines."<sup>21</sup> There is some evidence that these sales jobs might have involved selling books, perhaps even textbooks, to various parties. But this evidence is only negative evidence: on April 1, 1934, an ad ran that promised a "new specialty for schools and teachers" to women with a car and a willingness to travel.<sup>22</sup> But this opportunity was, despite being aimed at book women, "not books."<sup>23</sup> The implication that teachers were often hired to sell

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<sup>21</sup> "Women Teachers Wanted To Travel During Summer Break," *Kansas City Star*, 4/10/21, 7B HW.

<sup>22</sup> "Book Women--Teachers," *Kansas City Star*, 4/1/34, 6B.

<sup>23</sup> "Book Women--Teachers," *Kansas City Star*, 4/1/34, 6B.

books of some kind was clear, but the details are difficult to confirm through ads alone.

Teaching jobs for female teachers were often thankless tasks, and very poorly remunerated. In Chicago in 1899, a second year teacher made only \$500 a year, wages that were hardly adequate, considering the stringent requirements and the marriage bar imposed.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, female teachers both protested for their rights and better pay, and sought out alternate employment. In cases where women married, unless they had both the economic situation and inclination not to work, they would have to find another job, which no doubt was another reason that drove them to search the papers. Despite some degree of activism, the 1900s and 1910s were not transformative for teachers' salaries, in part because the marriage bar may have limited their ability to accrue higher wages over time. Teachers were a known target for employers, and one that those in other professions often actively sought.

The supposition that employers targeted teachers to try to convince them to switch jobs is well-attested to in our Help Wanted sources. A bank gave "preference" to someone with teaching experience who might be looking for a job with a "good salary" and "opportunity to advance" while a sales job "along school lines" promised \$200-300 a month for ex-teachers or those "interested in children."<sup>25</sup> Sealing the deal, the latter job was characterized as "dignified, pleasant and profitable", three

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<sup>24</sup> Flanagan, *Seeing With Their Hearts*, 64-5.

<sup>25</sup> "Excellent Position for Highly Educated Women Between 22 and 45," *Kansas City Star*, 1/6/24, 7B; "Unusual Position For Educated Women," *Kansas City Star*, 1/6/24, 7B.



words that did not always describe a teacher's work.<sup>26</sup> It also goes without saying that if it was sustained throughout a year, the \$200-300 a month was rather more than many female teachers would make. In addition to full-time positions for ex-teachers, there were also "vacation" positions offered for teachers to make much needed money in the summer.<sup>27</sup> Positions asking only for educated women, too, were liable to draw teachers, and one particular ad simultaneously sought women over 28 interested in a full-time position and, at the end, stated that summer work along the same lines was available for teachers.<sup>28</sup> Women who went to college had few options for employment, and teaching was a tried and true one. Another ad targeted both "teachers" and "religious workers" for something with "more satisfactory returns" while still, apparently, helping the world.<sup>29</sup> All but one of the preceding positions considered were sales jobs, strengthening the likelihood that whatever these teachers were being convinced to sell was something employers believed they had particular and special knowledge about. Books were just one of the many things teachers might have been tempted to sell.

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<sup>26</sup> "Unusual Position For Educated Women," *Kansas City Star*, 1/6/24, 7B.

<sup>27</sup> "Vacation Positions for Teachers," *Kansas City Star*, 5/4/24, 5B.

<sup>28</sup> "A Well Educated Refined Woman Over 28," *Kansas City Star*, 7/20/24, 3B.

<sup>29</sup> "Teacher or Religious Worker," *Kansas City Star*, 8/2/25, 6B.

**Ex-Teachers or Educated women  
Wanted at Once.**  
Sales manager, National Home and School Assn., desires correspondence from educated, refined women to fill three attractive traveling positions beginning March 15 and April 1; work is along school lines and will pay successful representatives \$1,500 to \$4,000 per year, plus railroad fare; guaranteed salary with liberal drawing account to start; applicants must be 23-45, have initiative and pleasing personality; give past experience and state fully your qualifications for this position; city applicants call any day this week for personal interview. M. C. McBride, 612-J, Ry. Exch. Bldg., Kansas City, Mo.

(Figure B. Ex Teachers or Educated Women Wanted, *Kansas City Star*, March 15, 1922)

Despite their dominance in Help Wanted ads, sales jobs were not the only lure for teachers. Women did not become teachers because of some inherent 'maternal' instincts that suited them for the work. A combination of cultural and economic factors encouraged women to enter the teaching profession. Increasingly, some of these same cultural sources, including periodicals, encouraged college-educated white women to try clerical work as an alternative to teaching, which despite its cachet, was no longer the only profitable profession a college educated woman could enter, with vistas opening up in office work and other areas. As was discussed in a section above, different jobs had different profiles for both likely and actual membership. Clerical work was one that blended options, and it was very tempting, especially to ex-teachers who were educated in normal schools instead of universities.<sup>30</sup> Only college graduate teachers made more on average than the average clerical worker. At the higher ends available to women--office management

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<sup>30</sup> Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 331-3.

and personnel departments--there was more opportunity to at least dream of comparatively high salaries. There was a glass ceiling in business, but even female principals, already rare, nationwide made outrageously high salaries (\$3000 or more a year) far less than equally rare female office managers.<sup>31</sup> Such a salary was beyond the hopes of most women, but not beyond the dreams, as the 1920s were filled with success stories, both dramatic and more modest.

Teaching jobs, by and large, generally did not have such success stories. It was in some ways steady and solid employment, but there were no stories of outrageous economic gains. Additionally, teachers faced “moral scrutiny” and less free time in a demanding environment that could, according to historian Sharon Strom, lead to “breakdowns.”<sup>32</sup> This flow sometimes went both ways, for teachers and middle-class office workers were both part of the same cultural milieu, with similar preferences and desires, despite jobs that could not, in many ways, prepare one for the other.<sup>33</sup> This does not mean that there were no financial incentives to remain a teacher, since it paid more than quite a few other female professions. By the 1920s teaching had competition, however, and the balance of its economic high-status had seemingly begun to shift, as other professions for women began to gain in status as well. This could be viewed positively, but in practice it helped few women. Women’s paid employment was still concentrated in low-income work that

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<sup>31</sup> Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 332-3.

<sup>32</sup> Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 334.

<sup>33</sup> Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 334-5.

often fit gender stereotypes. Either way, all of this was, in the 1920s, outnumbered by women's unpaid employment as housewives.

Of course, while these sorts of ads dominated, there were ads seeking women for teaching work. Most of them focused on seeking teachers for rural areas, or those willing to teach at different levels. These ads appeared only occasionally, and were especially rare in Situation Wanted ads, owing to different priorities and sources of information about employment. One element of the lack of ads has to do with the existence, by 1934 if not earlier, of a "teacher's registry" by the "Mutual Teacher's Agency."<sup>34</sup> Put simply, there were other options for teachers, both by word of mouth and agencies and organizations devoted to matching jobs to teachers. Those teachers who posted Situation Wanted ads were often looking for non-teaching positions, and Help Wanted ads looking for teachers tended to seek out cheap teacher labor. There were some exceptions, however. On July 20th, 1924, a teacher posted a Situation Wanted ad seeking a job in a "grade" or "rural" school, promising both good references and experience.<sup>35</sup> Rural schools certainly needed the labor, but they could not exactly promise fabulous wages. As an example, a 1920 ad for a principal and teacher in Sibley, Missouri, a tiny village, offered \$80 and \$65 per month respectively.<sup>36</sup> These regions lacked the money and, in some cases, the inclination to invest in education. This was a tale as old as the United States, since women teachers had originally been hired in growing numbers in states, such

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<sup>34</sup> "Teacher's Registry," *Kansas City Star*, 5/6/34, 9B.

<sup>35</sup> "Teacher--Experienced," *Kansas City Star*, 7/20/24, 4B.

<sup>36</sup> "Teachers Wanted," *Kansas City Star*, 7/10/20, 7.

as Massachusetts, starting at the end of the 18th century as a cost-saving measure.<sup>37</sup> Even this explanation ignores the racial segregation that existed in Missouri schools, which no doubt further limited economic resources for hiring of teachers.

In the *Kansas City Star* I did not find a single advertisement for African-American teachers, nor did the *Kansas City Call*, the most prominent African-American paper of the city, carry all that many Help Wanted ads. When employers searched for teachers, it was far more likely to resemble the case where a “100 year old” firm sought a teacher to instruct others in “Progressive Education.”<sup>38</sup> Another ad sought a teacher in “20th century bookkeeping” at the “Business Men’s Efficiency Institute.”<sup>39</sup> Teachers, or those who were willing to act as teachers of their particular skills, had valuable skills. The market at least acknowledged this with each such ad. Their pay, conversely, made it attractive to try to poach them, even if it was only for a summer between them returning to their teaching job. Teaching was repurposed and repackaged as a positive quality for a jobseeker, but only rarely did employers seek out teachers for teaching. The existence of a teaching registry similarly complicates efforts to understand the teaching job market.<sup>40</sup>

From the above evidence we can notice a few things, and see avenues for future research. First, teachers faced intense pressure, as well as several options to leave the profession. Second, teaching jobs were primarily advertised in non-

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<sup>37</sup> Rachel Hope Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 28-9.

<sup>38</sup> “Instructors In Progressive Education,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/15/34, 7B.

<sup>39</sup> “Teacher--To teach 20th century bookkeeping,” *Kansas City Star*, 7/1/20, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Exploration of the teachers’ registries would make a valuable follow-up project.

newspaper formats. Third, there is a need for further study on the employment of teachers in various traveling sales jobs, and the role they might play. Finally, the role of teachers' registries deserves greater consideration. These facts point towards some women finding less satisfaction in teaching careers and seeking out other avenues of employment. Despite this, teaching remained a large part of women's employment opportunities, and an equally large part of education in America. What teachers do allow us to talk about is the timing of ads. Specifically, most of the ads found were concentrated between February and June, logically enough. Teachers on holiday could only work summers, and ex-teachers were more likely to quit at the end of a school year than at the start. Seasonal advertisements represent an elusive subject, and one that says much about parts of the economy that were focused on less in mainstream cultural discourse. Far more ink was spilled on the office working woman who made it big than on the reality of office work, let alone small time and part time jobs. These jobs will be discussed in a later section, but the dynamic is important for understanding teacher's place in this newspaper hierarchy.

### **Office and Professional Work**

Clerical work for white women, as a relative portion of the total employment landscape, grew, at the same time as the number of white women in housekeeping work continued to shrink. More culturally charged than maid work, office work was the subject of movies (often adaptations of novels or periodical stories about the same subject) about steamy office romances. Women who worked as secretaries, accountants, and even office managers had both income and relative independence

unknown to many women. Additionally, there was a good deal of cultural cachet, that is to say societal interest and comparative respect, associated with office life, even as these assumptions did not always line up with reality.<sup>41</sup> Movies, novels, and news media presented women with an image of more opportunity for advancement in these jobs than existed in reality. Many of the longest and most detailed Help Wanted ads came from this industry. Corporations were able to more easily spare the extra pennies for longer ads if they believed it would gain them able workers. Ads promised a “Good salary” and “Permanent” work for a typist, or that this stenography job was an “excellent opportunity”, or that a job, while temporary, had “short hours” and “good pay.”<sup>42</sup> Relatively few women reached the heights and prestige that came from being a secretary at a large firm. Hours tended to be long, and the 1920s saw attempts to apply supposedly scientific management to typists, treating this work as a factory process. Regardless of its truth in all particulars of these and similar ads, there was enough to recommend the work that situation wanted ads in the field were never absent, even at the height of the Great Depression.

Office work had its own terms, standards, and pipelines designed to prepare women for the office environment and work. Business, secretarial, and teaching education was common in a way factory training was not. Such schools competed with each other, using different methods of shorthand, all advertised as faster, better, and more likely to get one a job than competing schools or methods. While

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<sup>41</sup> Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office*.

<sup>42</sup> “Typist--experienced, accurate,” *Kansas City Star*, 7/6/24, 4B; “Typist--preferably with radio experience,” *Kansas City Star*, 11/16/24, 6B; “Typists--three,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/10/20, 14.

these schools were marketed in a gender neutral way, it was very clear both by testimony and statistics that most of the people using their services were women. Their costs also meant that they were pretty obviously aimed primarily at middle-class or upwardly mobile white women. Their self-advertisement reveals the competitive nature of this education, each trying to capture the market from the other. There were several major Kansas City schools, including the Dickenson Secretarial School, which catered to both men and women. However, all of Dickenson's testimonials were either gender neutral or from or about women, including one headlined "Employer wants daughter to take course."<sup>43</sup> Besides brochures advertising the merits of the various schools, one could also see ads in the newspaper. McEwan's "Easy Shorthand" promised that you could reach 300 legible words a minute if you bought "this celebrated" book and followed its advice (See Figure C).<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, the more professional Kansas City Business College sought "young men and women" with promises of them making hundreds of dollars a month, complete with placement help.<sup>45</sup> They even attempted to appear to defray the costs of attending by saying students would be "furnished employment" while working.<sup>46</sup> This is pretty obviously deceptive, a sort of paid internship of the exact sort so often abused nowadays. But it was clearly tempting, and part of a landscape that also included speedwriting schools, a three year course at Huff College, and

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<sup>43</sup> Brochure, "Dickenson Secretarial School 1924 Brochure," Matron's Vocational Alliance 1931 Directory" [1924], SC8-2, "Dickenson Secretarial School," SC8-2 Local Schools Collection Collection, Missouri Valley Reading Room, Kansas City, MO.

<sup>44</sup> "Great Shorthand Revolution!", *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/20, 10B.

<sup>45</sup> "We Need Young Men And Women," *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/20, 10B.

<sup>46</sup> "We Need Young Men And Women," *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/20, 10B.



more. One of the most notable facts about both the brochure ads and these is the fact that it is carefully gender neutral. Both men and women have a chance at stenographic profits, even though stenographers were increasingly female. It was about not alienating potential clients in largely for-profit ventures.

**GREAT SHORTHAND REVOLUTION!**  
**McEWAN'S EASY**  
**SHORTHAND**

so simple that children are learning it, so brief that 300 words a minute can be written, so legible that all its writers are considered experts by employers and are paid the highest salaries. The Wonder Manual costs \$1.

**"HIGHER SHORTHAND EFFICIENCY."**

This celebrated book is to help writers of other systems. It has made tens of thousands of inefficient writers experts in a short time; price 50 cents. For these books or further particulars write McEwan Shorthand Corporation, Edison bldg., Chicago.

N. B.—Mr. Oliver McEwan, "the greatest living authority on shorthand," will shortly be lecturing in Missouri—St. Louis and Kansas City.

(Figure C. Shorthand Revolution! *Kansas City Star*, February 1, 1920.)

More traditional universities began to add in business courses, but they were inevitably outnumbered by schools focused on the course of study, yet these too were very important.<sup>47</sup> Money making had traditionally been regarded as antithetical to the mission of universities, but that had begun to change, as had college women's vocational options. Among graduates of the class of 1902-3, by the 1920s 70% of those employed were teachers, however among recent graduates in 1932 the number of teachers was down to 58%.<sup>48</sup> Women college graduates had to support themselves, and as the 1920s were a boomtime for business, office jobs were an

<sup>47</sup> Strom, *Beyond The Typewriter*, 71-3.

<sup>48</sup> Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 326.

obvious area of growth.<sup>49</sup> In such circumstances, corporations had resources to both expand and attempt to innovate office life. Scientific office management was in vogue, promising to do for offices what it had already done for factories. The average woman was not too hung up on such specifics. She searched for opportunities, whether as telephone operators, accountant positions, or in the typing pool. The need was great enough that some companies promised to teach the people on the job, beyond any training that business colleges or vocational programs might offer. One May 16, 1920 ad offered permanent positions with “liberal” salaries in a job that would be “instructive.”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the frequency of such in-house training represented a distrust of business education, or perhaps merely differing in-office systems.

Experience certainly helped one land jobs, and ads often enough required it, but employers needed more positions than passed through various secretarial schools. This was not surprising, considering the time and expense that business schools, or even secretarial courses, represented. Generally, most office Help Wanted ads did not include all that many specifications for age or race, with some notable exceptions. It was rare enough that the instances seem like outliers, driven by personal idiosyncrasies. A woman seeking work who labeled herself, unusually, a “nursegirl” was not representative of a trend towards that label, and is almost unique in calling herself that.<sup>51</sup> Neither did Help Wanted ads of this type have to resort to

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<sup>49</sup> Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter*, 326-8.

<sup>50</sup> “Office Position--Experience Not Necessary,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/16/20, 4B

<sup>51</sup> “Nursegirl--21,” *Kansas City Star*, 12/01/35, 8B.

these specifics if they, as they often did, demanded that prospective employees “state age, experience and salary expected.”<sup>52</sup> This allowed them to screen out women by demographic details at a level not shared by all ads.

Age was a particularly large internal barrier to promotion and employment. It was a barrier both due to the marriage bar, and malicious reasoning that encouraged companies to spurn ambitious women or treat them as sure to marry and leave. Therefore, many companies created unofficial “glass ceilings.” Just as the secretary was a gendered position by the 1920s and 30s, so too did employers often sexualize and gender the qualities they sought in female office workers. This perception persisted even though actual incidents of what contemporaries would consider immoral behavior was less widespread than media hysteria and the pop cultural figure of the sexualized secretary might indicate.<sup>53</sup> These dimensions could and were not visible in the ads themselves, which would certainly not have been answered if the full context possible was included in each case. Instead, a vision of office work sheared of even the slightest hint of disreputable behavior drew in women to a job. In fact, women’s office work was sometimes characterized as being the public version of domestic service. Secretaries were sometimes called “office wives” as in Faith Baldwin’s 1930 novel, *The Office Wife*.<sup>54</sup> People’s ability to fit office work into the common framework of women’s work likely helped spur and allow its notable growth. If office work was respectable work with standards that emphasized their professional nature, while also being relatively highly

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<sup>52</sup> “Credit Assistant,” *Kansas City Star*, 11/5/22, 7B.

<sup>53</sup> Berebitsky, *Sex And The Office*, 9-14.

<sup>54</sup> Faith Baldwin, (1930), *The Office Wife*. New York: Dodd, Mead.

compensated, then the only real question is why more women were not employed in the field? These expectations were borne out by an expansion in the 1920s of women's role in office work. Women participated in slowly increasing numbers, starting with the lowest paying, entry-level positions and only tepidly spreading to more influential and well-compensated positions. The 1920s, at least, were a continuation of that trend as it became normalized, and the Help and Situation Wanted ads were a revealing part of this image.

### **Sales Work**

Sales jobs were an entire category of the Help Wanted ads, kept carefully away from the others. Some of these jobs could be remarkably promising, in the sense that they promised great salaries. Others were more obviously confined, with women working not on commission but for a salary. The differences--such as the products sold, or the salaries promised--should not obscure what they held in common, or the sleight of hand present in most cases.

What counts as a sales job? The fact was that the newspaper's division of sales and non-sales jobs routinely made the mistake of placing jobs titled sales in non-sales-job parts of the Help Wanted section.<sup>55</sup> In the example cited, "salesmen" were requested, but not in the Sales Job section. This was clearly not a deliberate choice, but a matter of placing ads in the wrong section, the Help Wanted equivalent to typos. This problem will loom even larger in later sections. Categorization, arbitrary as it is, is necessary to some degree. When one spoke of sales jobs, what counts? Obviously, there were the traveling sales jobs, but what if anything did they

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<sup>55</sup>"Salesmen--About 25 to 30 years of age," *Kansas City Star*, 10/13/1929, 8B.

share with department store sales jobs? Both required expertise in certain things they would sell--a person was recruited for the Millinery department (hats), or underwear, and this defined at least their early work--and both jobs could be remarkably unstable. Both also depended on the satisfaction of customers to determine how any individual day went. They were service jobs, but so were most of the jobs available to women, one way or another. The prominent question was why this arbitrary category and not another? Despite being an actual category of the newspapers, as indicated above they were inconsistent about its application, or for that matter the gendered divisions they otherwise upheld, with some sales jobs targeting women being found in the Help Wanted--Agents (Male) section alongside jobs aimed exclusively at men. Thus, to remove ambiguity we will look at department store and traveling sales jobs separately.

Winter brought seasonal sales work in great numbers, and with exaggerated promises. Card-sellers offered women card sales jobs that often made insane promises that changed only a little year after year.<sup>56</sup> One could “Earn \$3 every hour: Sell[ing] Christmas Cards” though quite suddenly in 1930 it became “\$4.”<sup>57</sup> The advertisements offered “liberal compensation” and potentially, in one case, “\$75-\$100” a week on commission without needing “experience” or anything more, it

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<sup>56</sup> “Earn 3.00 Every Hour, Sell Christmas Cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/19/26, 6B; “Make Real Money,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/19/26, 6B; “Early \$3 Every Hour,” *Kansas City Star*, 12/2/28, 10B; “Christmas Card Salesladies,” *Kansas City Star*, 12/2/28, 10B; “The Easiest Card To Sell ‘Talk About’ Christmas Cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/15/29, 9B; “Fastest Money Maker In The Selling Field,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/15/29, 9B; “Christmas Card Salespeople,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/7/30, 8B; “Earn \$4 Every Hour Selling Christmas Cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/7/30, 8B.

<sup>57</sup> “Early \$3 Every Hour, Sell Christmas Cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/15/29, 9B; “Earn \$4 Every Hour, Sell Christmas Cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/7/30, 8B.

seemed, than wishful thinking.<sup>58</sup> While such figures were not impossible, the guarantee implied by such figures reminds one of the promises of multi-level marketing. Still, of all cities to make such a promise, Kansas City, home of Hallmark, certainly had a leg up. Women did not work for “pin money” but out of a combination of necessity and desire, and these jobs for all of their promises were quite serious matters. What did they promise? Sellers of “World War Pictures” emphasized the beauty of their product and that one could gain “\$50 to \$100 a week easy.”<sup>59</sup> Women would not believe in their power to sell a bad product, so the ads had to sell both product and profession. One card-seller offered “\$10 Example Book free” for just such a purpose, even while promising “A Big Opportunity” to make up to \$125 a week.<sup>60</sup> Women were almost universally offered “wonderful” or “beautiful” products and a promise of fabulous profits.<sup>61</sup> The effectiveness of these ads cannot be known, and neither could whether their offers of money were anything more than smoke and dust. But the ads reoccurred every year without fail, representing a market that seemed to have found at least some success.

In contrast to traveling sales jobs, department store jobs were unstable not because they were part time, but because of an incredibly high turnover. Studies in 1925 and 1930 found turnover ranging between 67% to 250% per year, though it is

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<sup>58</sup> “Make Real Money,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/19/26, 6B; “Earn \$75-100 Weekly Selling Personal Xmas Cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/19/26, 6B.

<sup>59</sup> “World War Pictures,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/23/21, 5B.

<sup>60</sup> “A Big Opportunity,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/21/28, 8B.

<sup>61</sup> “Christmas Greeting Cards Box Assortment,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/21/28, 8B; “Christmas Cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/21/28, 8B; “Answer Christmas Cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/21/28, 8B; “Christmas Card Salesladies,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/21/28, 8B. Make sure the newspaper name is italicized throughout the thesis.

likely that many who left one job in the field migrated to another job in the field, rather than leaving the workforce entirely.<sup>62</sup> By the 1930s there was a significant portion of department saleswomen who were married, and by 1939 there were places where half the female labor force consisted of somewhat older married women.<sup>63</sup> The marriage bar could not be enforced as strongly as some owners wanted because the high-turnover of sales positions that needed filling made it impractical to turn away married workers. There also were ways to climb the ladder in certain important managerial or buying positions.<sup>64</sup> But for the most part it was a career with a low ceiling, though one that included higher authority in places than that of the average factory job.<sup>65</sup> These unstable and uncertain jobs nonetheless were thus attractive to people, at least for short periods of time. Did they pay well? No, but few women's jobs did by modern standards. Many of the attractive elements of the sales' jobs could not be represented in the ads as they were in both media or practice. The media portrayed the job as glamorous, and like its portrayal of secretarial work a site of "sex, and social mobility... as saleswomen married men of a higher class whom they had met through store contacts."<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile in actual practice, the work culture of department sales jobs included their own newspapers, a

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<sup>62</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 164-6.

<sup>63</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 203-6.

<sup>64</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 25, 214, 288-9.

<sup>65</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, Appendix C.

<sup>66</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 215.

focus on their “white-collar prestige”, and the job’s “opportunities for initiative and creativity.”<sup>67</sup> None of this was, or could be, represented in a Help Wanted ad.

Traveling sales work challenged some gender stereotypes. While it was often not particularly well paying, despite the promises in the ad, the women doing the job had to travel long distances selling products. It is hard to imagine a career that seemed more obviously divorced from assumptions about women’s employment. Female factory workers made things, and female office workers, as outlined earlier, were often portrayed as fitting into a domestic version of the public sphere, as office wives. Teachers were educating children, and maids were cleaning up around the house. Some ads for traveling sales positions emphasized the requirements for travel and exploration. Consider the ad on March 5, 1933, which asked for women “free to travel” and promised to pay for their transportation.<sup>68</sup> This was pretty normal, and a “traveling position” to the “southern states” included an age range--25 to 35--and listed tact, initiative and a “pleasing personality” as central parts of the work.<sup>69</sup> Bluntly, this is part of a cultural framing of the work. By emphasizing the pleasing personality, good looks, enthusiasm and skill needed, ads like these try to place themselves both outside and within the expectations for women. Teaching, after all, in the past was a ‘masculine’ profession, one that women were thought unable to manage. By emphasizing the social and people-pleasing aspects of the work, advertisers made it sound entirely within the ‘rightful’ bounds of 1920s and 30s

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<sup>67</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 227-332.

<sup>68</sup> “Salesladies--Free To Travel,” *Kansas City Star*, 3/05/33, 8B.

<sup>69</sup> “Traveling Position Southern States,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/10/20, 13B.



womanhood while also appearing challenging, skillful, and well compensated. It was no coincidence that some sales ads looked for “book women” defining them by what they sold.<sup>70</sup> It was a bold profession, but not one in rebellion against social gender expectations, or so they seemed to indicate. Traveling sales was thus both thrilling and typical and acceptable, or so the ads argued.

In terms of the narrative themes of the ads, what bound them together was a promise of different and rewarding work. In some cases, women had long since trod a path into the profession--as in department stores--while in others it was truly novel, at least in the national eye. Sales work had, in certain areas, become feminized, but in an incomplete sort of way. Simply, the boundaries of gendered behavior were far more fluid than those at the time recognized. This fluidity allowed the goalposts to move, and similar to how treason never prospered because if it did it was not treason, in the long run professions can and were integrated into the ‘feminine.’ When the boundaries that seemed hard and fast shifted while pretending that they were equally solid, professions such as sales work were presented very carefully by employers and employees alike. This process both freed women to join the profession while being within propriety... but also was associated with the devaluing and deskilling of said profession. Each job, both those outlined above and those discussed below had their own reasons to present themselves as within the bounds of gender norms. Its enforcement and creation, in both the ads and the jobs--was not simply one way, but collaborative, for all that one party had considerable power over the other. Situation Wanted ads, here or elsewhere, often only differed from Help Wanted ads by small degrees. In the ads, we see a shared if troubled narrative.

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<sup>70</sup> “Book Women--Teachers,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/1/34, 6B.

## Factory Work, Dressmaking, and Laundry

The first step to understanding factory work is to define factory work and its impact on ads. I shall also seek to outline expectations of employers and employees, as well as the status and role of laundry work. Laundry work is often not viewed as being related to factory work, but could be. There was a divide between the personal and the industrial laundry work that could be seen in the language of Help Wanted Ads.

What counts as factory work? Where should the lines be drawn? There was much work done in factories by women, but even more work done by women that in many ways resembled factory work. Indeed, when even offices got into the game of trying to behave like a 'rational' factory, the lines between factory and non-factory could be blurred. The greatest example had to be laundry work, which had many similarities to factory work. It was lowly paid, lower-class, had a number of specific jobs at each stage of the task, and required constant repetitive work to achieve. This work was coded as domestic, and would be for decades to come, thus drawing women into long, exhausting work with often limited pay. An article in *People's World*, "Laundry Strike: Everybody Get Out" by Nell Geisner and Jenny Carson claims that by the early 20th century, laundry work was more of an industrial than a domestic task.<sup>71</sup> A "Power laundry" that had dozens or hundreds of employees had made the same jump as the garment industry: from an individual's domestic task to

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<sup>71</sup> Nell Geisner and Jenny Carson, "Laundry Strike: Everybody Goes out," (*People's World*, April 6, 2007, accessed September 16, 2020, <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/laundry-strike-everybody-goes-out/>).

a factory-style job.<sup>72</sup> We should be broad in our definition of factory work, though even then we should acknowledge that categorization of jobs is arbitrary.<sup>73</sup>

We can generalize about the nature of the Help Wanted ads across professions. The ads for factory work, especially laundry work, tended to be shorter and more functionalist than ads for office or sales work, though with certain very telling claims and assurances. But there were exceptions to this pattern of shorter, more simply informative ads. In fact, there was one major, startling exception: the Loose-Wiles Biscuit Company, founded in Kansas City. In 1932 it would acquire Cheez-Its from a competitor, but at the time of the ads it was a creator of chocolates, crackers, and other sweets. In the early 1920s, it released a very sweet set of Help Wanted ads extolling the virtues of employment there. Some ads can seem to mostly present a job, rather than sell it. The Loose-Wiles ads were not those. The advertisement--technically separate from the Help Wanted category, but serving the same function--itself was over five-hundred words long, aimed both at women seeking such jobs, and those who might know "girls" fit for the job. Employees had to be ambitious and interested in permanent, high-paying work in a "clean, pleasant, well-lighted" environment.<sup>74</sup> The ad openly discussed the salary, which was competitive or even superior to the national median, at least in theory.<sup>75</sup> The median weekly wage in 'candy' ranged from \$8.63 to \$11.75, but Loose-Wiles started at \$12,

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<sup>72</sup> Geiser and Carson, "Laundry Strike: Everybody Goes Out."

<sup>73</sup> Certainly, the purpose of the article was to outline the unionization of this industry in New York by Communists in the 1930s, and so categorizing laundry-work as industrial was thus theoretically important both then and now. However, its claims regarding the nature of the work ring true.

<sup>74</sup> "To Every Girl Who Works For A Living," *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/20, 15A.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Elizabeth Pidgeon, *Wages of Women in 13 States*. (Washington D.C, U.S, Govt 1931), 18.

with a \$1 weekly bonus for good attendance, and the promise that once fully trained, wages would “average” between \$17 and \$25.<sup>76</sup> This was a very generous offer, no doubt designed to bring the kind of ambitious women they said they sought. It was comparatively high considering that there was no degree needed, though it fell short of some promised weekly hauls. The ad also brings up amenities that many factories promised in their own ads: a cafeteria that sold food “at cost”, a restroom, and “free medical attention.”<sup>77</sup>

In exchange for all of the above, employees would be expected to work nine hours a day, at least Monday through Friday. It was not listed as to whether they were closed on Sunday, but they did operate reduced hours on Saturday, ending at 12:30 pm. It was thus a very full and demanding job that they tried to make sound like a great opportunity. This was undercut to an extent by the fact that it was aimed at over 100 different women. They clearly needed a lot of employees, and fast, though the reason was not entirely clear, and does not seem to be related to the factory being new. Perhaps they were expanding? These mass batches of job offers were not unknown among factory Help Wanted ads, and even in office work. Similar to other famous factories practicing paternal policies to puncture unionism, they offered social clubs, choirs, and bragged of having a branch of the public library on-site.<sup>78</sup> The “packing department” offered “pleasant work” that could be learned in weeks, the “Icing department” was “very interesting work” turning plain biscuits into

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<sup>76</sup> Pidgeon, *Wages of Women in 13 States*, 18.

<sup>77</sup> “To Every Girl Who Works For A Living,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/20, 15A. You could you Ibid. for repeating citations that are exactly the same.

<sup>78</sup> “To Every Girl Who Works For A Living,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/20, 15A.

treats.<sup>79</sup> Finally, the “Chocolate Department” was called a “sweet” job that they were sure caused women reading the argument to “Ah” and “Oh.”<sup>80</sup> It was not enough to offer a decent wage, relative to the wages in similar jobs, but instead to give details on the departments, instructions on how to show up at the factory to apply, and even a three paragraph history of the company. All of this should be kept in mind when considering the other advertisements. This reflected, in some ways, a gold standard of propaganda. How could one even imagine unionizing in such a job? No need for a jobseeker to ask why there are a hundred different openings, and near the start of the 1920-21 recession. Such welfare and extraneous programs were, however, one of the first things cut in the budgets even of supposedly compassionate factory owners, which no doubt contributed to unionization in the 1930s.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> “To Every Girl Who Works For A Living,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/20, 15A.

<sup>80</sup> “To Every Girl Who Works For A Living,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/20, 15A.

<sup>81</sup> Kyle Anthony, “The Bitterest Battle: The Effort To Unionize the Donnelly Garment Company,” in *Wide-Open Town: Kansas City In The Pendergast Era*, ed. Diane Mutti-Burke, Jason Roe, and John Herron (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 143-147.

# To Every Girl Who Works for a Living:

Every girl who has her living to make is concerned in good wages, interesting work, pleasant surroundings. The positions offered here may not apply to you; but please read this, since among your acquaintances there may be girls who ought to carefully consider this offer.

In three departments of our business we need more girls—BUT NOT ANY KIND OF GIRLS. They must be ambitious, interested in a permanent position; girls who will appreciate a Company that is concerned in their welfare and affords the following advantages:

1. The opening salary is \$12.00 per week, with a cash bonus of \$1.00 per week for regular attendance. In a short time, as the girls become experienced, they soon average \$17.00 to \$25.00 per week. Experience is not necessary. We teach them to become efficient.

2. Nine working hours each day, except Saturday, when we close at 12:30 P. M.

3. In this Sunshine plant, the surroundings are clean, pleasant, well-lighted—just the right kind of a place to make Food Products.

4. There is a convenient rest room; free medical attention; a cafeteria serving food at cost; there is a choral (singing) club, a social club, a branch of the Public Library.

The work is described below:

#### Packing Department

It is pleasant work to pack Sunshine Biscuits into the cartons, cans and boxes necessary to safely convey them to consumers. A few weeks of experience and the right application make the girls rapid—thereby increasing their earnings to the average previously mentioned.

We can use at least 50 girls in this Department.

#### Icing Department

Here is very interesting work! The Icing Department might be called the "dressing room" of the biscuit business. Plain biscuits are dipped in frostings, icings and coatings of various flavors; or a delicious filling is placed between two biscuits, making a tempting sandwich. The girls learn quickly and soon are brought up to the average in earnings.

We can use at least 25 girls in the Department.

#### Chocolate Department

Do we hear "Ahs" and "Ohs"? Everybody considers this a "sweet" job. We have two divisions. One is the chocolate dipping room, where the finest kinds of Vassar Chocolates are hand dipped.

Here we can use at least 25 girls. The other division is packing Vassar Chocolates into their neat, artistic

boxes, giving them a final deft finishing touch with appropriately colored ribbons.

Here we can use at least 25 girls.

#### How and Where to Apply

The Sunshine Bakery is located at 8th and Santa Fe sts., just a few feet north from the location of the old union station. From the Kansas Side take the following cars, eastbound:

Central Ave., Quindaro, 5th St., Cheesee.

From the Missouri side take the same cars, westbound. If in doubt, ask any policeman or conductor for definite directions.

When arriving at the plant, just come right through the main entrance to the second floor. The girls will be courteously received, assigned to the work which appeals to them or for which we think they are best adapted, and at which they may be able to earn the most money. Competent instructors will teach them.

Don't delay! These positions are open now. The first to come must be the first to be served. Don't telephone. Come right over to the plant at your earliest convenient time.

#### The Company

In 1902 this company started a small cracker and candy plant. Since then public approval of its products has made necessary the building of modern Sunshine Bakeries in New York, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Dallas, Omaha, with distributing branches in more than 100 principal cities. Our Sunshine Workers total several thousand. Our sales volume runs into many millions of dollars. Our well known trade name, "Sunshine Biscuits," not only typifies the products we make, but the very atmosphere of the institution and the disposition of its workers.

Truly, it is an industry of which Kansas City, its birthplace, may well feel proud.

And for this reason, if for no other, every Kansas Citizen should aid us. This is how you can do it:

If you know, directly or indirectly, the type of girls we are looking for (16 years of age and up), recommend to them that they apply promptly for the positions described in this announcement. The increasing demand for Sunshine Biscuits and Vassar Chocolates has caused our production to fall behind sales. We must produce more in order to maintain our policy of rendering the retail trade the best service that lies within our power.

If Kansas City is to continue its growth as an industrial center, the labor problem is the responsibility of every citizen. Knowing the Kansas City Spirit as we do, it is felt that you will respond to this appeal if you are able.

**Loose-Wiles Biscuit Co.**

8th and Santa Fe Sts.

(Opposite Old Union Station)

(Figure D. Loose-Wiles Baking Company Ad, February 1, 1920, underlining mine)

As seen by that ad, one of the important considerations employers faced was portraying factory work as a site of upward mobility appropriate for women. In this factory work shared characteristics with sales work, which similarly had once been seen as transgressive. Plenty of factories did not bother, but others emphasized the

light duty, and the way that the work was something women could do, according to the standards of the time, as outlined earlier. This was despite the fact that this was an issue that in some senses was settled. Women had been in factories for generations, albeit often different groups of women. The demographics of women's factory work tended to be a race to the bottom, factory owners searching for women with few other options than factory work. But it is not hard to imagine that some women feared, as some men did, being ground down and spit out by factories. Every kind of promise was given to men in the 1920s, the age of paternalistic factory structures based around perceptions of Ford's practices.<sup>82</sup> The truth of these promises, whether with Ford or other factory owners, is less important in the short term culture behind Help Wanted ads than the perceptions this created. However, for men at least, the 1920s were a time of both growing prosperity and inequality.

Women's factory work is one of the most explored elements of women's employment by historians in general, thanks to the novelty of factory work in general and women's involvement specifically in the 19th century. By the 20th century, such work was rather routine and common, as seen above. Factory jobs for women spanned across most industries, even as, within each industry, their jobs were often segregated by sex based on perceptions of their physical abilities. But these differences should not be overstated: a meaningful number of women in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s were a part of the United Electrical Workers, for example.<sup>83</sup> Women

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<sup>82</sup> Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (London: Icon, 2010), 38-40.

<sup>83</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble "Recapturing Working Class Feminism", in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-60*, ed Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), 57-83.

worked in most factories, however segregated their tasks, but it would wait until the 1930s, 40s, and 50s for women to become a significant and noticed part of certain industries and, especially, their unions. In the meantime, a majority of Help Wanted ads for factory jobs involved clothes making (including millinery), food preparation, and as discussed below, laundry work. Employers sought out “power machine” operators and “millinery makers” and fifty women who had expertise to work in the “pants and overalls” department.<sup>84</sup> Emphasizing a theme to be explored below, a March 1926 ad sought a female “payroll clerk” for a factory employing over 150 workers.<sup>85</sup> Jobs also existed in training women in dressmaking, such as a job involving meeting at “Wolfe’s Dressmaking and Tailoring College.”<sup>86</sup> The job does not specify exactly what it involves. These ambiguous relationships are one of the things that can be most fascinating when looking at women’s help wanted ads, and a further exploration of “operators”, dressmaking, and other significant areas of women’s employment that could be in one advertisement individual and custom, and in another part of a factory in which labor would be treated industrially. Women’s marginal position, and especially underrepresented women’s marginal position, could place them in complex and hard to fully study positions, as information about laundry work below will show.

In examining laundry work, a very clear distinction soon emerges. The laundresses advertised for in the Help Wanted section, and the laundresses

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<sup>84</sup> “Operators--Experienced on Power Machine,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/10/1920, 11; “Milliners, experienced makers,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/10/1920, 11; “Operators, Fifty, For Pants and Overalls,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/10/1920, 11.

<sup>85</sup> “Payroll Clerk,” *Kansas City Star*, 3/21/26, 10B.

<sup>86</sup> “Dressmaker,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/7/22, 5B.



advertising in the Situation Wanted section were not, despite the name, always the same. In just one day at the start of 1920, laundry work in the Help Wanted section was divided between “markers”, “sorters”, “feeders”, and “ironers” and had both foreladies--and “departments” such as the shirt department.<sup>87</sup> These jobs were not always marked out by race, though they sometimes were. The forelady was sometimes specified as white and another ad for the “rough dry department” wanted an “experienced white girl.”<sup>88</sup> Not all positions demanded that, and in fact most seemed more focused on experience, and getting people for specific positions.<sup>89</sup> This pattern can best be compared not to the secretarial pattern, in which ‘whites only’ was implicit, but to the pattern of maid work, in which if you wanted to exclude African Americans, you had to specifically mention for which race you were looking.

The division between the Situation Wanted and Help Wanted ads might be another form of racial exclusion. The Help Wanted discussed departments, jobs, and sub-jobs as part of an attempt to rationalize and control the flow of work. These jobs were not all that well paid, but the women seeking them required only skill and experience. In contrast, women who advertised as laundresses did not seem to be looking for work in a ‘laundry factory.’ Instead these individuals, including a sizeable

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<sup>87</sup> “Laundry Help--Experienced Finished Markers and Sorters,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/1920, 11; “Laundry Help--Experienced Feeders,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/1920, 11; “Laundry Help--Experienced Girls to operate cuff press in shirt department,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/1920, 11; “Laundry Help--Experienced hand ironers,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/1920, 11; “Laundry Help--Experienced Girls In All Departments,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/1920, 11.

<sup>88</sup> “Laundry Help--Experienced white girl for rough dry department”, *Kansas City Star*, 10/23/21, 5B.

<sup>89</sup> “Laundry Help--Experienced Markers,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/20, 11; “Laundry Help--Experienced,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/20, 11; “Laundry Help--Experienced Feeders and Folders,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/20, 11; “Laundry Help--Experienced girls in all departments,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/02/20, 11.

African-American contingent, aimed their efforts at finding families seeking women to do their laundry without living in. This fact connects to the experiences outlined in *Living In, Living Out*, in which laundresses were independent African-American women who serviced multiple rich households, without living in any one of them.<sup>90</sup> Individuals sought an individual, family-based employment that would allow them to work their own hours, albeit generally for equally substandard pay. Meanwhile large laundries that likely catered to a wide variety of clients both personal and institutional sought specialized workers for specific shifts that could then be managed and controlled. This was already emphasized earlier, but looks very different in light of the mobile, pre-factory work being offered in the Situation Wanted ads. “Laundress-Day work or bundle” begins one ad, while another advertises “colored, first class washer and ironer” and a third states that she’s “Experienced, neat, quick.”<sup>91</sup> Some of these women were seeking factory work, but as the ‘day work’ section indicated, not all of them. The above facts would likely not surprise many living at the time, who would be far more likely to understand the job market than we do, at least in the abstract. It represents a division that we can struggle to grasp, in the same way that it can be hard to notice the factory-like elements of stenographic pools when you have been culturally trained to divide out factory work from maid work from office work. Even the ads, where this division had to be made for practical purposes, could wind up obscuring as much as they revealed. Future historians not versed in the specific language and economic relationships expressed via the Help and Situation

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<sup>90</sup> Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out*, 142-3.

<sup>91</sup> “Laundress--Day work or bundle,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/7/21, 10; “Laundress, colored, first class washer and ironer,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/7/21, 10; “Laundress--experienced, neat, quick, reliable; colored woman,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/7/21, 10.

Wanted ads might struggle. Factory work is thus an area deserving of further exploration using some of the tools and facts outlined here. The changes in this area of employment during the Great Depression are an especially rich topic, one which will be more thoroughly examined below.

### **Odds and Ends or The Ads Are Stranger Than You Think**

All of the preceding sections might get one comfortable in assuming that they, by and large, knew what would be in the content of any particular set of Help Wanted pages in the 1920s *Kansas City Star*. This was not true at all. While most days, the majority of the positions offered fell within the major categories, arbitrary as they were, plenty did not. Some of these jobs were even commonly advertised, though they slipped beyond the easy bounds. What would you classify a ladies' companion--not maid as? Some jobs were obvious and to be expected, such as seasonal picking jobs. But others included very specific jobs--specifying clothing size, height, and more--for models, cabaret workers, or women willing to be part of Kansas City's own version of Ziegfried's famous Follies.<sup>92</sup> Others defy even those categories and raise far more questions than a small entry could ever provide in the way of answers.

Any attempt to pick out especially notable cases runs into the fact that this was a mediated experience. The ad for the cabaret said little more than that it was seeking a woman to work there, and to enquire at a certain location.<sup>93</sup> This discretion

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<sup>92</sup> "Models, sizes 16 and 18," *Kansas City Star*, 1/21/34, 6B; "Show Girls", *Kansas City Star*, 5/10/20, 9.

<sup>93</sup> "Show Girls", *Kansas City Star*, 5/10/20, 9.

means that details on some of the ads were intentionally obscured. Cabarets could be any number of things, from the relatively aboveboard to a cover for prostitution. There was little enough to go on, for all that silence could seem like its own answer.

Another such ad provoked an entire world of questions that could not easily be answered, in August of 1928:

“Two Girls For Directing Home Talent Shows: Must have clever personality, nice appearance and either college or business training: dramatic exp. not necessary as we train you. Expenses, good salary. All year work and good future. If you can qualify apply at once, giving age, exp. ref and recent photo. Universal Producing Co., Fairfield Ia.”<sup>94</sup>

A similar ad ran two years later, in March 1930, asked for young women to “coach amateur shows” and added the requirement that the women should know how to “handle people.”<sup>95</sup> Whatever Universal Producing Company was, it was not anything like the famous Universal Studios, who certainly did not do ‘Home Talent Shows.’ Across the space of decades, it looks remarkably fishy. At the very least, an attractive personal appearance seemed to be a plus for this job, even if it was otherwise aboveboard, like secretarial jobs could be.<sup>96</sup> The value of uncertain or strange ads are the questions they raise.

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<sup>94</sup> “Two Girls For Directing Home Talent Shows,” *Kansas City Star*, 8/05/28, 7B.

<sup>95</sup> “Young Women To Coach Amateur Shows,” *Kansas City Star*, 3/16/30, 9B.

<sup>96</sup> The need for a photograph but also a college degree leaves one with conflicting signals. We cannot know for sure what a woman of 1928 would think of this ad. History is full of moments where information runs out.

This itself seemed at least a little related to the trend of advertising amateur contests through the paper. Contests--whether bridge tournaments or a search for models, chorus girls, and those looking for fame and fortune--were part of the Help Wanted 'genre.'<sup>97</sup> In another case a radio station advertised for a contest whose reward was paid engagements at the "electric theatre."<sup>98</sup> This did not quite explain Home Talent Shows, as opposed to regular talent shows and contents. But we can settle it at least vaguely in a larger universe of ads.

Few advertisements were quite as strange, but those that existed help reveal something about the market. Advertisements for models focused, obviously enough, on physical bodies. In this case the stereotyping was quite blatant, with skin color, hair color, looks and heights all defining a woman's potential.<sup>99</sup> But these were not the only ads out there. Often, women wished to be companions to other women. This did not seem to be a maid job, because many of the women requesting it were highly educated. Instead it was possible it involved small amounts of housework and, more importantly, company for the lonely. On top of this, women, or at least a very few women, could be recruited for bridge tournaments, see their artistic ambitions validated, or at least compensated, and more.<sup>100</sup> The key to these is that they were, by and large, individual or one-off opportunities. Quantitatively, these ads mattered very little. That said, they reveal that despite the very narrow employment limitations most women faced, there were occasionally other opportunities. It can be

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<sup>97</sup> "Amateurs--amateurs and novelty performers to appear in contest," *Kansas City Star*, 1/5/36, 7B

<sup>98</sup> "Girls--Models, chorus girls, and girls ambitious for the stage," *Kansas City Star*, 5/17/36, 7B.

<sup>99</sup> "Show Girls", *Kansas City Star*, 5/10/20, 9.

<sup>100</sup> "Bridge players Wanted," *Kansas City Star*, 2/5/33, 6B; "Artists--5 for designing greeting cards; men or women," *Kansas City Star*, 10/21/34, 9B.

easy to view the market as consisting of a small number of possible jobs. Instead, these sorts of sources remind us that women had choices, even if they were highly bounded. But these choices existed within very clear restraints. Not just anyone had a deep understanding of bridge, and female artists then and now face significant challenges. Thus, it is more indicative of individual possibility, rather than collective possibility. But individual possibility was all that American society typically offered to anyone. In reality, America often instead offered only collective stereotyping and judgement.

### **Race, Class, Gender and the Structures of Promise**

This coming section will examine the structures of promise of these ads, considering their connection to gendered promises of greater equality or at least opportunity, but also gender, class, and race stereotypes.

Public Relations, formally, was young in the 1920s, but it had always been a part of business. It mattered how a business presented itself, because it would both influence whether people would want to buy their products, and also how its employees would react to it. Help Wanted ads were thus offering both jobs and the company as a whole, in the case of the larger ads. Even those ads that dealt purely with housekeeping included certain techniques to convince others of the merits, slim though they might be, of the job. Most of these strategies are likely to be familiar to the average reader, being common sales techniques, modified specifically for recruitment. Such behaviors were no more products of the 1920s than America invented enterprise.

There is one trend that will need some explaining, especially as it has often been seen as a very modern, flash-in-the-pan trend. This is what has been referred to as “woke branding” or “woke washing.”<sup>101</sup> Summarized simply, it is the trend towards companies advertising their support for socially conscious or progressive causes, in an attempt to connect with the interests of certain types of young consumers. It can be compared to “greenwashing”, which is similarly an accusation of a company or store taking on the appearance of a desirable trait for its customers (environmentally friendly, non-racist, etc.) without the reality.<sup>102</sup> Descriptively, it involves trying to indicate a match between values, since trust is a well-known component of sales. People tend to trust those like them, which is why cons or scams often target people with similarities to the scammer, be it politically, religiously, or economically. Prescriptively, the accusation has been that merely changing one’s logo to a rainbow flag, or the color of one’s products to green does not mean that the policies and actions of the company are in the best interests of anything other than their bottom line.<sup>103</sup>

What does that have to do with anything, let alone Help Wanted ads from the 1920s and 30s? In the case of many ads, nothing or very little. However, there were certain types of ads, and certain types of phrases that reflect the era. These ads played upon the successful drive for women’s suffrage, and the newfound sense of

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<sup>101</sup>Peter Adams, "The Year of 'woke-washing': How Tone-deaf Activism Risks Eroding Brands," Marketing Dive, July 8, 2019, [PAGE], accessed September 17, 2020, <https://www.marketingdive.com/>; hbomborguy, "Woke Brands," *Youtube*, 26:43, February 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06yy88tLWlg>.

<sup>102</sup> Cahal Milmo, "'The Biggest Environmental Crime in History'," *The Independent*, December 10, 2007, accessed September 17, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/us>).

<sup>103</sup> hbomborguy, "Woke Brands," *Youtube*.

women's independence and power. This sense was in almost all ways highly premature, but culturally drove many trends relating to women. Women, including married women, were recognized as having economic power. This recognition only grew during the 1920s. This economic power was in one sense created, socially and culturally, by the recognition. Wives were viewed as the "purchasing agent" of the home, and working women drew greater attention as clientele.<sup>104</sup> Help Wanted ads that were targeted at ambitious, well-educated (white) women thus showed a great deal of respect, on paper, to women's ambitious and even desires to have equal economic opportunities with men. This feminist pose can be seen especially often in the early years of the 1920s, but persisted even into the heights of the Great Depression, albeit only occasionally. Women were repeatedly offered the prospect of a "man's income."<sup>105</sup> One business declared "Women equal to men" in their particular company with opportunities just as men had, if they were ambitious and wished for "profitable and permanent" positions.<sup>106</sup> Statistically these promises did not often come true, but having been made indicates something about the market, and something about what employers thought these women wanted. Put simply, there was a rhetorical supply and demand for such words.

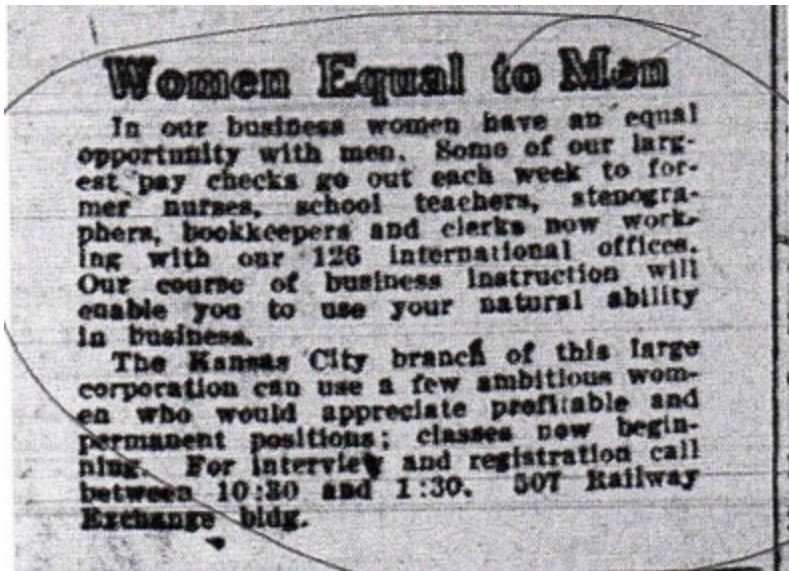
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<sup>104</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, "Advertising Women: The J. Walter Thompson Company Women's Editorial Department," in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader* ed Jennifer Scanlon, ( New York, NY, New York University Press, 2000) , 202.

<sup>105</sup> "A Traveling Position, Must Be Filled At Once," *Kansas City Star*, 11/5/22, 7B.

<sup>106</sup> "Women Equal To Men", *Kansas City Star*, 3/5/22, 4B.





(Figure E. Women Equal To Men, *Kansas City Star*, March 5, 1922)

There were race and class based gaps in such promises. The women being offered such jobs were usually required to be experienced and well-educated, two things that were linked and associated then--as now--with certain classes and races. Explicit and implicit sorting occurred in most, if not all, ads. It was in fact the nature of Help Wanted ads to try to sort through just such cases just as it was also meant as an advertisement. Products were targeted for their audience, and when that product was a job, the targeting became fierce and significant.

The examinations of various jobs and their connection to Help Wanted ads above should demonstrate at least some of the ways that this division occurred. There is cause to suggest that these sorts of sorting mechanisms were almost not needed, considering how thoroughly businesses controlled the economic environment in the 1920s. It was the 1930s and 40s that would lead to the ascension of unions powerful enough to be a major factor, as will be discussed below in mentions of strikes during the 1930s, even in Help Wanted ads. Historical

trends, especially regarding bigotry and limiting of opportunities, were often overdetermined. When a forty year old woman, white, divorced or single mother, was sought... this was because of societal patterns and assumptions about women's work that hardly seemed to need reinforcement. Nonetheless, the ads reinforced this every time they asked for "girls" with an "amicable disposition", each time they just explicitly stated their preference for whites or Blacks, and for that matter each time they promised light work or worked to align their jobs with gender stereotypes.<sup>107</sup>

However unfair, women had to exist in the job market within these boundaries. They had to fulfill or match the positive stereotypes while, if they could, dismissing or turning around the negative stereotypes. This could mean defining themselves as businesswomen, or downplaying the link between service and servility. Unsurprisingly, many women adapted or accepted these pressures rather than fighting them. Situation Wanted ads did not, by and large, diverge from the cultural patterns being reinforced in the papers. The exception was very simple, and almost too obvious to state. Every single ad implicitly assumed that women belonged in the workplace, however temporarily and even if it was only in certain jobs. This was not the only view on the matter, even in the 1920s. The fact of women's work could not be questioned here, unlike everywhere else, especially at the height of the Great Depression. This was not a promise that every employer liked the idea that women worked for money, but they could no more denigrate it in the ads than they could ask not to get any employees. This placed fascinating limits

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<sup>107</sup> "Stenographer-bookkeeper," 2/20/21, 7B; Girl For Physician's Office," *Kansas City Star*, 6/5/21, 8B.

on the expressions of disapproval available. Culturally, there was still considerable opposition to the extent of women's employment and her right to higher-status jobs. In this one space, at least, women were assumed to be workers, even as most workers were assumed to be men. An example of this assumption was the 'Agent' section of the paper. Despite being primarily in the men's section of the Help Wanted ads, they sometimes sought out women specifically. Even when a job was for women, it could be listed in sections that specified men's jobs only. The newspaper was not always as clear cut a source as one might hope.

This broad assumption of workerhood did not include African-American women, certainly not as equal partners. African-American women, owing to the poverty that systemic racism brought, worked more often than white women. They were accepted as workers within their community, and for that matter among whites more easily than white women were, by the 20th century. They did so within narrow boundaries, however. African American women were workers, but usually only certain kinds of workers. Latinas were not mentioned at all, despite their undeniable presence in 1920s Kansas City. Even the most progressive-seeming company ultimately followed the lead of the women's suffrage movement in downplaying the agency of non-white women. But this does not mean that the Help Wanted ads were any less a space of women's employment, and even bounded and limited agency still included at least the illusion of choice and opportunity. Perhaps, in many cases, it was half a dream, like Alice and her Wonderland, but oh what a dream it was.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WOMEN'S HELP WANTED ADS

The Great Depression was not always as visible in the Help Wanted papers as might be expected. While economic and political news dominated the headlines, Help Wanted ads did not change in large ways in reaction to the Depression. During the 1920s, women achieved greater parity in Situation Wanted ads than Help Wanted ads, as previously discussed. This represented a disconnect between supply and demand that called into question explanations involving women's desire or lack thereof to work even more dramatically than the same trends in the 1920s. Women's Situation Wanted ads increased in the 1930s, suggesting a decline in job opportunities due to the economic impact of the Depression, even as their portion of Help Wanted ads shrank greatly. The purpose of the chapter is thus to examine what changed but also what did not. The continuities--similar language of opportunity as seen in the previous chapter--were as significant as the occasional signs of greatly changed circumstances.

While this era was not bereft of ambitious women and ads promising great success, there was a drop in some women's standards through the floor, especially in the rising tide of Situation Wanted ads. In one outstanding instance, a middle-aged "college graduate, former high school teacher" was asking to be a "companion and housekeeper or either", citing her "best references", her "good help" and her desire for "reasonable remuneration."<sup>1</sup> This was especially unfortunate as high

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<sup>1</sup> "Companion and Housekeeper," *Kansas City Star*, 2/19/33, 5B.

school teachers tended to be the best paid of non-professorial teaching positions. So, this was especially far down on the ladder of both economic and cultural acceptability for such a middle-class and at least reasonably well-educated woman that her desperation was evident. These moments of desperation were not, however, usually that clear. Understandably, a majority of people searched for jobs at least roughly corresponding to what they were trained for, even in the Great Depression.

The situation for women and men in the Help and Situation Wanted pages could be examined by looking at how the numbers of these ads changed during the Great Depression. The number of women's Help Wanted ads decreased far faster than their Situation Wanted ads. Women's Situation Wanted ads had always outnumbered their Help Wanted ads, but this trend only seems stronger during the Great Depression. Women's Situation Wanted numbers consistently outnumbered men's, with exceptions such as on June 4th of 1933, where their numbers were about equal.<sup>2</sup> This continued a trend from before the Depression, indicating that women had faced a strangled market even before the economic collapse. On July 1, 1934, men's Help Wanted ads outnumbered women's Help Wanted by almost three to one, while their Situation Wanted numbers were equal.<sup>3</sup> In other words, there was a disparity between the number of jobs offered women, and the relative interest of women in finding a job. Considering that this was the Depression, this is

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<sup>2</sup> Help Wanted (Men's), Help Wanted (Women's), Situation Wanted (Men's), Situation Wanted (Women's), *Kansas City Star*, 6/4/1933, 7B; Help Wanted (Men's), Help Wanted (Women's), Situation Wanted (Men's), Situation Wanted (Women's), *Kansas City Star*, 6/18/1933, 7B. The quotations don't make sense given that they are sections.

<sup>3</sup> Help Wanted (Men's), Help Wanted (Women's), Situation Wanted (Men's), Situation Wanted (Women's), *Kansas City Star*, 7/1/1934, 8B-9B.

understandable. Between Help and Situation Wanted ads, it was the latter that was closer to equal, with the ratio for women's Situation Wanted to Help Wanted at times being four to one.<sup>4</sup> Women had consistently found there were fewer jobs than women seeking them by far.

In other words, to summarize the significance of these perhaps unsurprising findings, it was as much if not more a matter of economic opportunities being limited as women being culturally taught not to pursue jobs. Women were lining up for employment, though many of course were not seeking upwardly mobile jobs. Cultural factors, highlighted earlier, influenced both the jobs they sought and could seek, as well as their relative rarity. They also influenced Depression-era hiring patterns. There seemed to be a significant subset of women who sought jobs anyway, even as all of society began pushing back against the idea that they had any right to be in the workplace. Indeed, in 1939 Norman Cousins suggested that the solution to solving the lingering unemployment problem was to forbid women from working and then "Presto! No unemployment. No relief rolls. No Depression."<sup>5</sup> Employment has often been a matter of life or death in America and much of the world, and these all too serious suggestions had dire implications, if enacted, for women. Women in the 1920s generally needed the jobs, and the 1930s only increased the pressure on everyone, women included. In one sense, the 1930s brought only quite a lot more of the same, but worse. The Help Wanted ads were

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<sup>4</sup> Help Wanted (Men's), Help Wanted (Women's), Situation Wanted (Men's), Situation Wanted (Women's) *Kansas City Star*, 4/1/23, 5B-6B; Help Wanted (Men's), Help Wanted (Women's), Situation Wanted (Men's), Situation Wanted (Women's) *Kansas City Star*, 4/15/23, 3B-5B; Help Wanted (Men's), Help Wanted (Women's), Situation Wanted (Men's), Situation Wanted (Women's) *Kansas City Star*, 6/3/1923, 6B-8B; Help Wanted (Men's), Help Wanted (Women's), Situation Wanted (Men's), Situation Wanted (Women's) *Kansas City Star*, 6/17/1923, 5B-7B.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, *Forgotten Men and Fallen Women*, 97-8.

also something of a lagging indicator that under-represented the desperation of the times. No ad wanted to state the facts of lower wages and constricted hours. Yet there are still signs that things changed in the 1930s for both men and women.

First, expanding on earlier examinations, we should look more thoroughly at the rising tide of desperation. An early ad in this trend, on January 5, 1930, reads “Girl needs work badly; anything but housework considered.”<sup>6</sup> The girl wanting the situation might not have been able to survive the low wages of housework, but even more importantly likely thought that such work, often associated with African Americans, was beneath her even in her desperation. Women were still drawn to permanent work, as an ad on March 2, 1930 indicated when it asked for “girls for permanent work.”<sup>7</sup> However, at least at that point, companies could still be remarkably picky, with that work demanding the girl ideally be under 21, and another ad asking for a hemstitcher “not over 25.”<sup>8</sup> Women offered to teach other women driving, primary school teachers offered to be summer “child nurses”, and even a college degree left one asking for a “reasonable salary” and hoping.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile a self-professed “business woman” offered to keep house or tend to children, which

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<sup>6</sup> “Girl needs work badly,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/5/30, 7B.

<sup>7</sup> “Girls For Permanent Work,” *Kansas City Star*, 3/2/30 HW, 10B.

<sup>8</sup> “Girls For Permanent Work,” *Kansas City Star*, 3/2/30 HW, 10B; “Hemstitcher, must be experienced, not over 25,” *Kansas City Star*, 3/2/30 HW, 10B.

<sup>9</sup> “Driving Lessons,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/18/30, 11B; “Teacher wishes employment during summer as governess,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/18/30, 11B; “Teacher, refined, desires position as nursery governess,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/18/30, 11B; “Young lady in need of employment, have car, know city,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/18/30, 11B.

considering the lack of cultural cachet of these respective professions was a startling declaration.<sup>10</sup>

We cannot know the situations behind many of these Situation Wanted ads. However, when a twenty-nine year old secretary with “twelve years” executive experience advertises for a position it suggests catastrophe.<sup>11</sup> Many of the Situation Wanted ads, logically enough, consisted of people fired from jobs they had held for some time. Over a decade of experience was not enough to save the woman in question from unemployment, and now she--and her \$275 dollar salary, likely monthly--had to find a new place.<sup>12</sup> Some ads acknowledged, indirectly, the trouble, such as one that told those who “can’t find clerical employment” that if they had “sales capacity” there was a place for them.<sup>13</sup> There was, similarly, a rash of people searching for teachers, not only for sales jobs, but in two cases on the same day, “religious education”, and one for counselor at a Jewish camp.<sup>14</sup> However, despite all that plenty of ads came in seeking “ambitious” and “cultured” women.<sup>15</sup> The superlatives surely had to feel at least a little thin by this point, but they continued ceaselessly. As jobs dried up in Help Wanted ads, it seemed only the jobs that already promised far too much could promise employment with a straight face.

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<sup>10</sup> “Business Woman,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/21/30, 8B.

<sup>11</sup> “Secretary; Age 29, good education, excellent references,” *Kansas City Star*, 7/6/30, 7B.

<sup>12</sup> “Secretary; Age 29, good education, excellent references,” *Kansas City Star*, 7/6/30, 7B.

<sup>13</sup> “If you can’t find clerical employment,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/31 HW

<sup>14</sup> “Well educated woman (Protestant), age 23 to 45,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/31, 7B ; “Two ex-teachers (Protestant),” *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/31 7B; “Counselor wanted for well-established Jewish camp,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/1/31, 7B.

<sup>15</sup> “A Cultured Woman,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/5/31, 7B.



These Situation Wanted ads varied widely even within the same paper and the same day, with African-American housework Situation Wanted ads contrasted not only with college-educated ads, but also with some increase in the number of white women competing with them as well.<sup>16</sup> When a college graduate with two years of office experience sought a new job, it was hard to shake the impression that perhaps her office had been downsized, despite the relative lack of details.<sup>17</sup> Desperation, of course, could be visible both ways. Some ads would have seemed not particularly unusual at the time, but now seem odd and cruel. An ad sought a white girl “13 to 15” to be a “mother’s helper” for room, board, and “small wages” at a doctor’s “country home.”<sup>18</sup> The kicker? “Orphan preferred.”<sup>19</sup> What would today be seen as a deeply immoral act of exploitation might have been viewed by some as an act of charity for someone in a situation with few options other than starvation or work. Certainly, it was obvious that the Great Depression brought vastly increased rates of child homelessness, with and without parents.

Middle-class mothers, meanwhile, had their own way. The Matrons Vocational Alliance deserves some brief attention for what it says about employment attitudes. It was a club whose 1931 directory claimed that the women within it were seeking new “industries” without competing with men. It argued that “home means partnership” and that these jobs were to help relieve boredom for women. But

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<sup>16</sup> “Girl, White; Christian,” *Kansas City Star*, 6/21/31, 9B; Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989), 67.

<sup>17</sup> “College graduate with 2 years office experience,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/21/33, 6B.

<sup>18</sup> “Girl--White, 13 to 15, for mother’s helper,” *Kansas City Star*, 6/18/33, 7B.

<sup>19</sup> “Girl--White, 13 to 15, for mother’s helper,” *Kansas City Star*, 6/18/33, 7B.

coming in 1931, it would be absurd not to realize the financial straits that caused such calls. However, oddly enough, as seen below, the jobs were not always particularly practical-minded. It was a lunge towards employment, and while gift choice advice seems to the modern eye unprofitable, it was still a sign of effort.<sup>20</sup>

<hr/> <p><b>EDUCATIONAL</b>  Residence Conference Groups. Classic and Current Literature. Circulating Books. Cultural Subjects. Current Events. Conversation Teas.  Business Conferences with talks for women. Commercial and Parliamentary Law. Public Speaking.  For further information call LO 2014, 10 to 12 o'clock a. m. daily.  (Mrs. Geo. W.) Carolyn Farwell Fuller Program Leader. University Guild, 3521 Harrison Blvd.</p> <p><b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>  To provide entertainers, musicians, readers, speakers, etc., for social or business gatherings. Dramatic art.  Mrs. Roy Crans WE 5178</p> <p><b>FURRIER</b>  Furs reconditioned. Coats made and re-modeled.  Mrs. M. L. Worthley VA 7758</p> <hr/>	<hr/> <p><b>GARDEN COUNSELOR</b>  Consultation on planning and planting is less expensive than mistakes. Landscaping and Rock garden plants my specialty.  General information on plants, bulbs and shrubbery.  Mrs. R. M. Courtner Overland 240</p> <p><b>GIFTS</b>  Suggestions regarding gifts for every member of the family.  WE 1940 EL 3341-J</p> <p><b>HANDKERCHIEFS—SCARFS</b>  Handmade and different. Suited to each ensemble.  Mrs. Harold Hornby LO 2021</p> <p><b>HOME SERVICE</b>  Information regarding visiting-maids, cooks and companions. Care of children and invalids by the hour. Mending service and numerous other needs in your home.  Mrs. A. R. Buch LI 0917</p> <hr/>
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(Figure F. Matron's Vocations, Matron's Vocational Alliance 1931 Directory)

While sales jobs sprung forth in the Help Wanted ads, they were relatively absent among the Situation Wanted ads. On September 3, 1933, there were two ads for "salesladies", one of them openly seeking department work, and with a preference of jewelry, and on September 17, 1933 only one, mentioning "ready to wear" dresses.<sup>21</sup> Even department store sales jobs seemed to be a one way street.

<sup>20</sup> Brochure, "Matron's Vocational Alliance 1931 Directory" [1931], SC8-1, "Matron's Vocational Alliance," SC8-1 Local Clubs Collection, Missouri Valley Reading Room, Kansas City, MO.

<sup>21</sup> "Saleswoman--experienced, wants position in jewelry or any line sold in store," *Kansas City Star*, 9/03/33, 11B; "Saleslady--suits, coats, dresses, or fitter," *Kansas City Star*, 9/03/33, 11B; "Saleslady--ready to wear dresses," *Kansas City Star*, 9/17/33, 8B.

We know from *Counter Cultures* that the Great Depression saw, albeit differing in different areas, a rise in part-time sales jobs in department stores, taking over for lost full-time jobs.<sup>22</sup> People were willing to work for whatever they could get, including a woman seeking a secretarial position who emphasized how little wages mattered compared to a chance to prove herself and presumably hold down a steady job.<sup>23</sup> Few cases were as dramatic as two examples of women with Master's Degrees, rare among either sex, willing to act as a tutor, or a companion to an educated lady. It was quite likely a preview into a miserable job market for such well-educated women that grew even worse with the Depression.<sup>24</sup> Women, in both the 19th century and the 20th century through the 1930s, could do remarkably little with PhDs relative to the degree's incredible status among white men at the time. They were already rare enough: the first Black woman to get a PhD received it in 1921.<sup>25</sup> Roughly four percent of white women attended college at all, compared to six percent of white men, and two percent of Black women.<sup>26</sup> Men, especially white men, could also do more with higher degrees, by and large. Needless to say, the above ads were relatively rare, all the same.

Despite how limp the market was, it was not dead. Occasionally there were interesting and unique ads. An interior decorator--itself a relatively new job--

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<sup>22</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 184-8.

<sup>23</sup> "Office work--small office; more for experience than wages," *Kansas City Star*, 12/17/33, 7B.

<sup>24</sup> "Teacher--Tutoring, Latin or History; Master's Degree," *Kansas City Star*, 5/28/33, 7B; "Tutor and Companion--experienced teacher; master's degree," *Kansas City Star*, 7/31/32, 7B.

<sup>25</sup> Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), 127.

<sup>26</sup> Evans, *Black Women In The Ivory Tower*, 59.

advertised her “seven years” of skill at selling furniture in her Situation Wanted ad.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, an employer sought a “Woman Organizer” for what sounded like a sales team, considering the requirement of a car and the ability to learn how to employ “high-class women.”<sup>28</sup> A search for a “social secretary” and separately a “culturally refined woman as ‘stylists’” for clothing seen in “such style publications for vogue” both happened on the same day.<sup>29</sup> “Ambitious women”, especially former teachers, were sought for work in a corporation that was “the leader in its field.”<sup>30</sup> Bridge players, as mentioned earlier, were apparently needed as well, at times.<sup>31</sup> Artists, both fashion artists and cartoonists (male or female potentially for both instances) were sought, as were women willing to direct “amateur theatrics.”<sup>32</sup>

However, individual examples do not a vibrant economy make, and the very fact that so many were Situation Wanted ads, including for prospective employees with over a decade of experience in their field, only demonstrated the disparity. Teaching as a profession was hit hard, considering its reliance on the taxes and support of strapped local governments, which had a history of cutting teachers’ salaries, especially female teachers’ salaries, first in times of troubles. African-

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<sup>27</sup> “Interior Decorator--Young Woman Desires Position, *Kansas City Star*, 8/02/31, 6B.

<sup>28</sup> “Woman Organizer--College trained or equivalent,” *Kansas City Star*, 8/16/31, 6B.

<sup>29</sup> “Social Secretary,” *Kansas City Star*, 11/20/32, 7B; “Cultured refined women as ‘stylists’ for Miami Sportswear,” *Kansas City Star*, 11/20/32, 7B.

<sup>30</sup> “Ambitious woman--former teacher or of equivalent education and interest; age 28 to 45,” *Kansas City Star*, 8/06/33, 7B.

<sup>31</sup> “Bridge Players Wanted--ladies and gentlemen,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/5/33, 6B.

<sup>32</sup> “Fashion Artist,” *Kansas City Star*, 1/7/34, 7B; “Artists, 5 for designing of greeting cards,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/21/34, 9B; “Woman to coach amateur theatrics with established firm,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/16/34, 7B.

American teachers had it doubly hard, as a Situation Wanted ad from one of them indicated. She sought housework, and was willing to work with children.<sup>33</sup> At twenty-two, she had entered the job market at exactly the wrong time. As outlined above, women who were not unemployed often had to accept even more egregious underemployment than normal. Women who had already obtained college degrees typically fared less well than men with equivalent or even lesser education. This much was a well-known trend then, and now. But financial desperation brought new lows, and these lows were subtly visible, if not always evident. This was often by design.

What seemed more evident was the continuity, however strained, between the ads. Acknowledging the Depression at all was very rare, even though signs were present. Women asked for anything they could get, and sales jobs seemed to take over the Help Wanted section, but by and large most ads were at most oblique about the financial state of the country. This was unsurprising. Advertisements of every kind tended to construct the world they sought to sell. So far as I can tell, no company during the Great Depression released an ad talking about what they were doing to help “In these trying times.” If they did so, it was not in the Help Wanted ads. One potential mention of the Depression seemed instead to be a misplaced room ad, stating the room prices for the Aster Hotel and the fact that it was fireproof.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “Teacher, 22, colored,” *Kansas City Star*, 10/04/31, 8B.

<sup>34</sup> “Depression Prices--Astor Hotel, Fireproof,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/18/32, 6B.

Such mistakes were not entirely unknown, and were certainly more common than direct references to the most pressing fact for most jobseekers. We should consider the few references to the Depression we do have. One of the more striking was as follows, from August 1933: “Cooperating with Roosevelt’s recovery act, our organization on 40-hour-week-basis; can use 10 more women to take over territories that have been worked 12 years and have thousands of customers in each; about 60 cents an hour, commissions, and bonuses; Real Silk Hosiery Mills, 316 Long blds.”<sup>35</sup> Many questions arise from such ads, including what specifically the job has to do with the Recovery Act, and why sales territories had been left to sit after over a decade of work? This seemed like a sign of optimism and a belief that the nation’s economic fortunes were going to rise. This was still within a few months of FDR’s rise to public office, and his New Deal programs were, and would remain, very controversial throughout his term. The government tried a wide variety of programs, many of which were eventually abandoned unceremoniously.

The National Industrial Recovery (NIRA) seemed to appear in another ad of the time, also representing a moment before businesses fully soured on the matter. One of the means by which the National Recovery Administration (NRA) tried to enact the details of NIRA was through the drawing up of “industrial codes” to, ideally, ensure fairness.<sup>36</sup> These facts help provide context to an ad by the Karosen-Rice Cloak Company. It declared they were “operating under national code for coat manufacturers” and were looking for “experienced operators and finishers” as long

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<sup>35</sup> “Co-operating with Roosevelt’s Recovery Act,” *Kansas City Star*, 8/06/33, 7B.

<sup>36</sup> “National Industrial Recovery Act (1933),” Our Documents - National Industrial Recovery Act (1933), accessed September 17, 2020, (<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=66>)

as they accepted an “open shop” and wages of \$16.45 and up.<sup>37</sup> The story told by the ad grew only more interesting in the final sentence: “Misled strikers will be given first opportunity to their jobs. Police departments guarantee full protection.”<sup>38</sup> There were several possibilities, including that this was a matter of the company caving but framing it as a “mistake” to save face. Or perhaps the strikers still had major unfulfilled demands. Certainly, the emphasis on ‘misled’ and bringing in the police-- who were not particularly well thought of among union organizers, for obvious reasons--revealed a fascinating bit of tension in labor relations and history for this one particular factory. Moreover, since it was an ad aimed at women, it revealed elements of women’s striking and even union-organizing activity. The women in this coat factory were willing and able to strike, and the owners were apparently worried about union organizing.

There was also the “notice” to employees at the H.D. Mercantile Company that they were to “report for work Monday morning.”<sup>39</sup> Quite a lot of speculation could and should follow, though one of the likely possibilities was that employees had been fired but were now being let back out of a belief that the economic circumstances existed for them. It could also be a notice to employees who were striking. Without further study, which is likely warranted, the details remain unclear. Such incidents were clearly not unheard of, since the Help Wanted ad was run without apparent trouble. It was also hard not to wonder at an ad for female

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<sup>37</sup> “Karosen-Rice Cloak Co,” *Kansas City Star*, 8/20/33, 6B.

<sup>38</sup> “Karosen-Rice Cloak Co,” *Kansas City Star*, 8/20/33, 6B.

<sup>39</sup> “Notice to Our Employees Only,” *Kansas City Star*, 3/05/33, 8B.

“Graduates of K.U and M.U” that offered department store work in November and December for them.<sup>40</sup> This confirmed Benson’s point about the “two track” system of full versus part time department sales workers, and the increasing reliance of department stores on the latter.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, as the years dragged on, there were several instances of ads specifically for recovery jobs. An ad on May 20, 1934 in the Educational section just before the Help Wanted sought, in two ads at once for different locations, “Men--Women” or “Boys--girls” between eighteen and fifty for “steady government jobs” with wages between \$105-\$175, presumably monthly.<sup>42</sup> Ads like this seemed to repeat themselves with even more minor variations than were normal for the somewhat formulaic genre of Help Wanted ads. Other sources tell us all we need to know about the promises and opportunities for women in the Depression. All these ads revealed was one avenue of promises that could not possibly be fully fulfilled.

Exceptions to the continuity stood out, but should not be overemphasized. It was in Situation Wanted ads that you saw the largest change, and even in that case most ads were functionally the same. The careers changed, as did their availability, but this was a medium always constrained by its economic considerations. Each new word was yet more expense that had to be eaten by the employee or employer. Employers evinced more willingness to roll the dice by creating sprawling ads filled with extraneous details and specifications. Our sources cannot attest as to their

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<sup>40</sup> “Graduates of KU and MU, classes of ‘31, ‘32, ‘33, and ‘34,” *Kansas City Star*, 11/3/35, 9B.

<sup>41</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 193 and 250.

<sup>42</sup> “Work for ‘Uncle Sam’,” *Kansas City Star*, 5/20/34, 6B.



efficacy, beyond noting when they were continually posted over weeks, expensive but earning a discount on its cost. It was hard to imagine that long paragraphs of specifications were strictly necessary in every case.

By 1936, while employment numbers had not recovered, the Depression seemed to be receding. This was illusory, as 1937 and 1938 would show. Research beyond 1936 might reveal a little more about the second dip of the depression, before it would then shade into looking at the impact of WWII on the job market. While of interest to scholars, this paper remains focused on the 1920s and what followed from there in the American economy and culture, all the way into a Great Depression. We can see, most of all, the way the vibrant economy was spread thin for women from the very start. In such a case, the prosperity was, while not illusory, very easy to imagine folding in on itself. The feminist promises of the 1920s never ended, but they gave way to an increased focus on promised sales jobs rather than positions of potential authority. Women in the Great Depression needed help far more than employers had situations available for them, and this informed and shaped the market. Yet through all of it, hope, or at least a willingness to put themselves out in Situation Wanted, never dwindled and only seemed to increase. Women were not, at any point, passive objects which the job market acted upon, for all the limitations they faced. Their desperation could and did drive down women's standards overall, but many individuals seemed to resolutely hold to their own sense of standards.

## CHAPTER 5

### HELP WANTED! A SOURCE ANALYSIS

Help Wanted ads as a source have only begun to be explored, despite all the words this thesis has spent on the topic. As a category of study, it has been relatively unexamined before this point. However, the ecology of job hunting outlined above has revealed and uncovered further topics and clarified some points on the nature of women's work in the 1920s and 30s. This section seeks to summarize, specify, and explicate not only what has been learned, but also the ways such information could be used in the future to continue to expand our knowledge of women's job options and how they found employment in the 1920s and 30s. Owing to the continuity I have noticed between the 1920s and 30s, the techniques and tools I have used are also still applicable for the 1910s and 40s. Ads changed, but some of the same systemic impulses that drove them persisted across decades. Thus, this section will consider the following topics: how representational the ads were of the job market, how quantitative analysis of these sorts of data can be done, what these ads have to say about race and class, details about the use and nature of Situation Wanted ads, and finally for what historical uses can these ads be deployed.

When reading these sources, the question will likely arise as to how representative of the job market Help Wanted ads were? They were themselves a market, but the population of Kansas City was just short of 400,000 in 1930, and women made up over half of that population, with children under fourteen, using rough Jackson County numbers as a temporary approximation, making up--again

roughly--17% of the total.<sup>1</sup> A majority of women at the time nationwide in fact took the unpaid job of housewife, but even so the number of women potentially seeking work was larger than one might expect. Even so, an incomplete but comprehensive picture of a September 21, 1930 situation Wanted ad, shows somewhere north of 146 different women advertising for employment.<sup>2</sup> This was not unusual and fits with the data from the charts below. This was certainly a considerable resource, if every Sunday hundreds of women sought jobs and some each week gave up, ran out of money, or found employment. On top of that, plenty merely read the Help Wanted without spending their time, money, and energy on their own ads. While the casual job market was beyond the reach of these ads, they were at least representative of real and persistent patterns of employment seeking. Not only was the existence of ads persistent, but also so were the advertisers. Year after year, some ads happened in common across weeks, and some Help Wanted and Situation Wanted ads persisted. This was not different from modern times, and represents a point of continuity. The job market was no more forgiving then than now, and if anything there were fewer recourses. In the game of job hunting, you won or you starved.

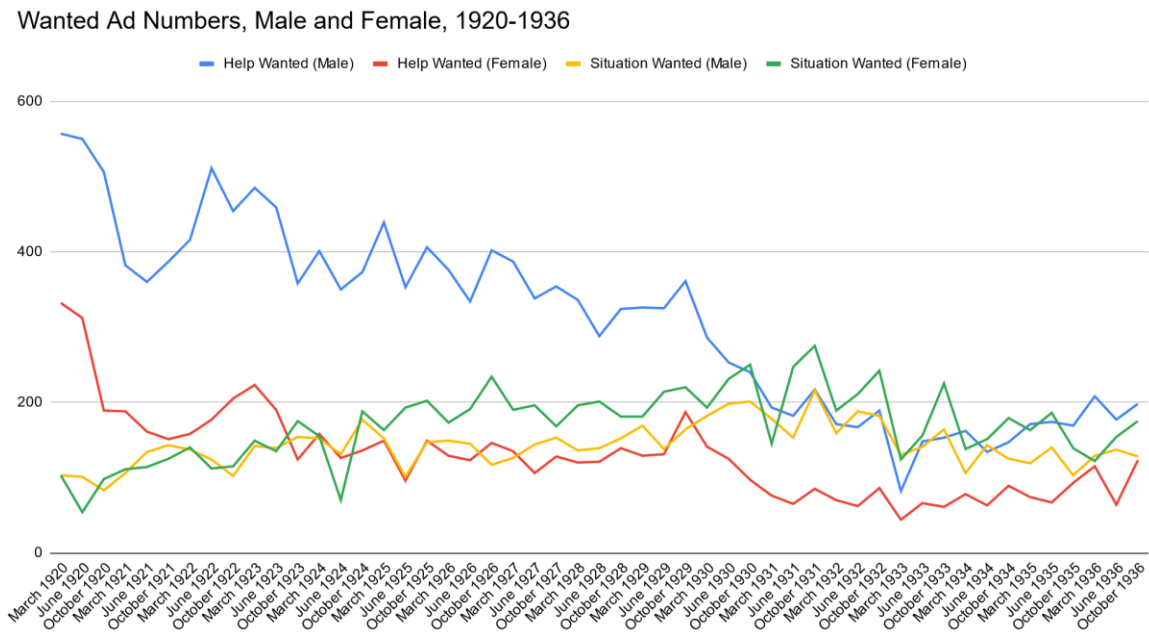
All that considered, how would someone engage in quantitative analysis in order to get a larger view of the overall market? As an example of what quantitative analysis might look like, I have done several different sorts of analyses. They are all based on a sample of looking at the second Sundays of March, June, and October

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<sup>1</sup> "Population by County By Age By Sex, 1940-1990," Missouri Census Data Center, accessed September 18, 2020, <http://mcdc.missouri.edu/population-estimates/historical.html>; "Employed population by county by industry by sex, 1930-1990," Missouri Census Data Center, accessed September 18, 2020, <http://mcdc.missouri.edu/population-estimates/historical.html>)

<sup>2</sup> Help Wanted (Men), Help Wanted (Women), Situation Wanted (Men ), Situation Wanted (Women), *Kansas City Star*, 9/21/30, 8B.

of 1920-1936, and counting the number of Help Wanted (Male), Situation Wanted (Male), Help Wanted (Female) and Situation Wanted (Female) ads on each of these days. Owing to noticing a strange pattern starting in 1926 I began to also count how many of these Help Wanted ads came from Help Wanted--Sales advertisements in each category. Thus, the first graph reveals sixteen years of change, while some of the other tables reveal something about the composition and meaning of these.



(Graph 5.1. Numbers of Help Wanted and Situation Wanted ads for Men and Women, March 1920-October 1936)

There are a few facts about the above graph that are worthy of attention. First, the highest point for Help Wanted ads was in March 1920, in which there were 557 ads for males and 332 for women. The lowest point for both was in March 1933, when there were only 82 men’s Help Wanted and 44 women’s ads. Between those

two dates the number of ads tended to decline, but only moderately. This could be explained by differences in the disparity of costs. Help Wanted ads went from 2.5 cents a word to four cents a word between 1920 and 1927, while during that period Situation Wanted ads held steady at 3.5 cents a word.<sup>3</sup> It could be, in the latter half of the decade, greater scrutiny on Sales ads, which as Table 5.2 demonstrates, declined as a consideration in the total for men's Help Wanted. It was never as significant in women's Help Wanted. What happened?

One possible answer to this question relates to greater standards, or salesman jobs being particularly badly hit by the Depression, and never really recovering. There are, however, a few caveats. The most significant issue is that these are not particularly clean or segmented ads. There are ads for sales jobs in the Help Wanted section, the Agents Wanted (Men) section includes ads aimed exclusively at women, and for that matter Situation Wanted ads submitted by a couple could be in either category (male or female) entirely by an arbitrary decision. Thus, any information we can gather is approximate. However, we can notice a few facts about Situation Wanted ads. First, women's Situation Wanted ads were always higher relatively to men's, as outlined earlier. After 1923, they were generally more numerous than women's Help Wanted ads. The Great Depression led to a modest spike and then a modest decline in Situation Wanted numbers. This decrease, however, was nothing compared to what happened to Help Wanted ads.

It is plausible that two different competing pressures cancelled themselves out. First, it cost money to make a Situation Wanted ad. A worker in dire straits likely

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<sup>3</sup> "Help Wanted--Male," *Kansas City Star*, 3/14/1920, 4B; "Situation Wanted--Male," *Kansas City Star*, 3/14/1920, 6B; "Help Wanted--Male," *Kansas City Star*, 3/13/27, 7B; "Situation Wanted--Male," *Kansas City Star*, 3/13/27, 7B.

did not have that much money to spare. In contrast, if a worker lacked a job, then they would desperately need to get one and fast. These two pressures led to the slight spike, the mild decline, and the overall inelastic nature of Situation Wanted ads. It would do well to remember the context section, near the start of this paper. Women's unemployment rose less than men's, though some were jobs gotten through the WPA, which were intentionally made less remunerative than the open market to encourage seeking other work. Help Wanted ads dropped off the cliff and did not really recover, but for men, as the table below shows, it was especially Sales ads that represented the largest decline of jobs that were available. The shift among men away from Sales jobs was more dramatic than among women.

Whether these trends connected to the national or were strictly local is hard to guess. It is reasonable to conclude that Kansas City's status as a city certainly influenced its job market, though the effects of bosses and corruption are not particularly visible in the papers. There were other trends visible in the *Kansas City Star*, however. Men's Situation Wanted even briefly outnumbered Help Wanted, something that was par for the course for women. In some ways, it might be said that women's already depressed and narrow newspaper job market meant they had less far to fall.

We can also see that some datasets are not particularly revealing, or have weird bumps and dips. For Graph A, some days there would simply have been fewer people seeking work, and the large decline of female Help Wanted from 1920-1923 was hard to parse, lasting too many years to be the result of any single event, whether a minor recession or the end of WWI. Certainly, recessions influenced it, but

women's Help Wanted ads never peaked above two hundred after 1923. Something changed, and we lack data to know what. Similarly, the Help Wanted/Situation Wanted percentage is an incredibly noisy indicator, which can conceal as much as it reveals.

Finally, there are two more tables to examine, those helping to back up some of the information regarding the ratio of the three categories of Help Wanted ads. The first thing an astute viewer would notice was that Help Wanted--Agent (Women) was a category almost never used. This was because Help Wanted--Agent (Men) at times included ads that at least hypothetically hired women, or even ads that specified women only. Women had to scan the men's and women's Help Wanted sections, while men almost never found a job aimed at them advertised in Women's sections, other than jobs looking for couples. In such jobs, which section got the ad seems rather arbitrary. Second, while men's Situation Wanted ads only surpassed Help Wanted ads at the height of the Depression, women's Situation Wanted ads consistently outstripped their Help Wanted since 1925, with not a single exception. Some of this might be down to the first point, the misplacing of ads, but a larger point, made earlier and reinforced here, is that women often wanted but could not get jobs. Men's situation wanted ads underwent a transformation that made them closer to women's in terms of the ratio between them and men's Help Wanted, but they could never consistently surpass them. Women, qualitatively and quantitatively, had it rough in the job market through most of the Roaring Twenties, when it came to newspaper ads, at least. This confirms my previous conjectures, to some extent. Many more women wanted work than got it, even if many bought into the cultural

assumption that work would cease upon marriage. Even that can be overstated. The question is, what changed in 1925? While the Help Wanted numbers for women did decline somewhat, the largest drop was in the first few years, and they held rather steady until the Depression came around. Could it be that the social situation changed over the decade? If so, how?

## Two Tables: Men's and Women's Help Wanted and Situation Wanted

### *Men's Help and Situation Wanted Ads*

Table 5.1. Men's Help and Situation Wanted ads, and Situation Wanted ads as a percentage of Help Wanted ads

Date	Help Wanted (Men)	Situation Wanted (Men)	SW as % of HW
March 14, 1920	557	103	18.49%
June 13, 1920	550	101	18.36%
October 10, 1920	506	83	16.40%
March 13, 1921	382	106	27.74%
June 12, 1921	360	134	37.22%
October 9, 1921	387	143	36.95%
March 12, 1922	416	137	32.93%
June 11, 1922	511	124	24.26%
October 8, 1922	454	182	40.08%
March 11, 1923	485	142	29.27%
June 10, 1923	459	139	30.28%
October 14, 1923	358	153	42.37%
March 9, 1924	401	152	37.90%
June 8, 1924	350	131	37.42%
October 12, 1924	373	177	47.45%



Date	Help Wanted (Men)	Situation Wanted (Men)	SW as % of HW
March 8, 1925	439	152	34.62%
June 14, 1925	353	101	28.61%
October 11, 1925	406	147	36.20%
March 14, 1926	376	149	39.26%
June 13, 1926	334	145	43.41%
October 10, 1926	402	117	29.10%
March 13, 1927	387	126	32.55%
June 12, 1927	338	144	42.60%
October 9, 1927	354	153	43.22%
March 11, 1928	336	136	40.47%
June 10, 1928	288	139	48.28%
October 14, 1928	324	152	46.91%
March 10, 1929	326	169	51.84%
June 9, 1929	325	138	42.46%
October 13, 1929	361	164	45.42%
March 9, 1930	286	182	63.63%
June 8, 1930	253	198	78.26%
October 12, 1930	240	201	83.75%
March 8, 1931	193	178	92.22%
June 14, 1931	182	153	84.06%
October 11, 1931	217	216	99.53%
March 13, 1932	171	159	92.98%
June 12, 1932	167	188	112.57%
October 9, 1932	189	182	96.29%
March 12, 1933	82	130	158.53%
June 11, 1933	148	141	95.27%

Date	Help Wanted (Men)	Situation Wanted (Men)	SW as % of HW
October 8, 1933	153	164	107.18%
March 11, 1934	162	106	65.43%
June 10, 1934	134	143	106.71%
October 14, 1934	147	125	85.03%
March 10, 1935	171	119	69.59%
June 9, 1935	174	140	80.45%
October 13, 1935	169	113	66.86%
March 8, 1936	208	129	62.01%
June 14, 1936	177	137	77.40%
October 11, 1936	198	128	64.64%

*Women's Help and Situation Wanted Ads*

Table 5.2, Women's Help and Situation Wanted ads, and Situation Wanted ads as a percentage of Help Wanted ads

Date	Help Wanted (Female)	Situation Wanted (Female)	SW as % of HW
March 14, 1920	332	103	31.02%
June 13, 1920	312	54	16.26%
October 10, 1920	189	98	51.85%
March 13, 1921	188	111	59.04%
June 12, 1921	161	114	70.80%
October 9, 1921	151	125	87.28%
March 12, 1922	158	140	88.60%
June 11, 1922	177	112	63.27%
October 8, 1922	205	115	56.09%
March 11, 1923	223	149	66.81%
June 10, 1923	190	135	71.05%

Date	Help Wanted (Female)	Situation Wanted (Female)	SW as % of HW
October 14, 1923	124	175	141.12%
March 9, 1924	158	155	98.10%
June 8, 1924	126	70	55.55%
October 12, 1924	136	188	138.23%
March 8, 1925	149	163	109.39%
June 14, 1925	96	193	201.04%
October 11, 1925	149	202	135.57%
March 14, 1926	129	173	134.10%
June 13, 1926	123	191	155.28%
October 10, 1926	146	234	160.27%
March 13, 1927	135	190	140.74%
June 12, 1927	106	196	184.90%
October 9, 1927	128	168	131.25%
March 11, 1928	120	196	163.33%
June 10, 1928	121	201	166.11%
October 14, 1928	139	181	130.21%
March 10, 1929	129	181	140.30%
June 9, 1929	131	214	163.35%
October 13, 1929	187	220	117.64%
March 9, 1930	141	193	136.87%
June 8, 1930	125	231	184.80%
October 12, 1930	97	250	257.73%
March 8, 1931	76	145	190.78%
June 14, 1931	65	247	380%
October 11, 1931	85	275	323.53%
March 13, 1932	70	189	270%
June 12, 1932	62	211	340.32%
October 9, 1932	86	242	281.13%
March 12, 1933	44	124	281.81%
June 11, 1933	66	156	236.36%

Date	Help Wanted (Female)	Situation Wanted (Female)	SW as % of HW
October 8, 1933	61	225	368.85%
March 11, 1934	78	138	176.92%
June 10, 1934	63	151	239.68%
October 14, 1934	89	179	201.12%
March 10, 1935	74	163	220.27%
June 9, 1935	67	186	277.61%
October 13, 1935	93	139	149.46%

What all of these charts and tables can show us is that there is a future in quantitative analysis of Help Wanted ads, of a type that goes even further than the existing quantitative research. However, it cannot answer a number of fundamental questions, some of which can be helped by an examination of the language and content of Help Wanted ads. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, we can better understand the job-search environment under which women's choices operated, an environment economic, social, and cultural.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Help Wanted ads represented the market, but they also represented what employers and employees thought the market was or should be. Thus, the quantitative methods I outlined in the previous chapter are best when one asks questions about what might be called the metamarket, that is to say the numbers and division of the market by ad categories or types of ads, rather than the content and context of the ads themselves. While quantitative analysis can and does reveal facts about job markets, no analysis using only these sources can reveal the lived experience of looking for work, though it could reveal a gap between theory and practice. Qualitative examination of the ads can allow us to better understand, as is demonstrated in this paper, the place of the actors within the market and their aspirations within it. Through this, we can understand perceptions of the market as well as realities. If pure economic data does not fully represent the lived experiences of women's--or anyone's--jobs and desires, then neither do these sentences and paragraphs. But both have something to say about lived experience.

This thesis has claimed a number of things. First, that corporate reaction to feminism could be observed in their invocation of women's equality and sheer quality. This invocation did not go so far as to treat them as equal to men, merely to say they were equal in ads. Second, the atomization of women helped divide them out among dozens of different job categories which they had to willfully try to fit. Indeed, women's Situation Wanted ads did not challenge stereotypes and assumptions except in very limited ways. Ambitious women portrayed themselves as

ambitious in socially acceptable phrases. Those whose ambitions were to put food on other families' tables had to emphasize their own subservience and reveal their demographic details. This feeds into a third observation, that unsurprisingly there was a racial element to the sorts of jobs advertised and asked for. Black women did not even need to state what job they were looking for in Situation Wanted ads, because there were very few jobs for which they would be hired. The environment encouraged cooperation with the status quo of how to seek out jobs, lest you get nothing. Fourth, certain types of work--such as maid work--saw greater levels of obvious atomization than others. This, I argued, was a function of the needs of the employers. Employers had fewer layers to weed out 'undesirable' women in maid work than they did in the several layers of clerical employment. Fifth, I used these Help Wanted ads to further confirm and modify other academic claims about the employment situation of female office workers, department sales workers, teachers, and others. In most cases the scholars' insights held up, but in some areas they did not, such as the lack of emphasis on traveling sales work, or a lack of focus on specific industries that represented a large number of female factory workers. Sixth, I examined the area of traveling sales and other less visible jobs. I found more questions than answers when it had to do with women's traveling and door to door sales efforts. Finally, I showed how useful quantitative and qualitative analysis of the ads could yield interesting results, including confirming the paucity of the market even compared to female demand for work.

This thesis allows us to show how women represented themselves. Posting a Situation Wanted ad could be a remarkable display of optimism in the face of the

difficulties of the economy in both the 1920s and 1930s. While women found jobs in both decades, it certainly was not without its problems. The adage that you had to have money to make money was in full force with the Situation Wanted ads. African-American women would have to spend scant resources simply to appear in the *Kansas City Star*. No wonder the informal networks of employment were so very popular with African-American women seeking some of the only employment open to them as housekeepers. Within these ads, one of the most significant decisions was also one of the first. What did these women call themselves? For some it was easy: an accountant wanted to be known as an accountant, and the operator of a comptometer, an early mechanical calculator, stated it up front before also outlining her first-aid experience and knowledge of factory comptometer work.<sup>1</sup> But there were also many “ladies”, “young ladies”, “women”, “young women”, and “girls” seeking jobs. These were somewhat interchangeable, since plenty of ladies sought maid work. It is, however, an interesting divide, since Help Wanted jobs aimed at girls tended to be somewhat different in framing than those aimed at women. At some point in her twenties, perhaps, a girl might finally become a woman, if she was white. An ad on February 22, 1920 sought a “girl--colored” while at other times Situation Wanted ads often have these women referring to themselves as, well, women.<sup>2</sup> Yet in another ad, on April 10, 1921, four such women called themselves “Girl--colored.”<sup>3</sup> How women labeled their ads seemed to be in part a personal decision based on

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<sup>1</sup> “Comptometer, or Borroughs Operator,” *Kansas City Star*, 9/04/32, 12B.

<sup>2</sup> “Girl--Wanted, neat colored school girl,” *Kansas City Star*, 2/22/20, 4B.

<sup>3</sup> “Girl, colored,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/10/21, 8B; “Girl, colored wants housework,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/10/21, 8B; “Girl, colored, housework, reliable,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/10/21, 8B; “Girl--colored, housework whole or half days,” *Kansas City Star*, 4/10/21, 8B.

their understanding of both themselves and the market. In the case of many African-American women, it was of course a devil's choice between dignity and employment considering the racist bent of their domestic work.

Situation Wanted ads were a source that more thoroughly represented women's individual aspirations, or at least the sorts of women who would have read and responded to Help Wanted ads. We can evaluate the women who posted Situation Wanted ads for their self-presentation of their finances, values, and beliefs. Women with the time and money presented themselves proactively, talking up every possible advantage they had, while those with less money practiced parsimony in their ads. In neither case were the women particularly apologetic, and just as Help Wanted ads offered good positions, women sought them. These ads, at least, were unapologetic. They were also competitive. Every woman with a Situation Wanted ad was not competing with every other woman. But considering the limited options available to women, there were definitely winners and losers. Whereas other sources represented some level of support networks among women, albeit incomplete and often riven by rivalries as well, this revealed and emphasized their competition.

Above and beyond all this has been the implicit argument that these are useful sources that could use further examination, both by myself and others. These ads give us a peek into a strange sort of wonderland, in which cutthroat competition met exacting standards and self-serving ads on both the employers' and employees' parts. Like newspapers, these ads were a disposable touchstone of the culture of the 1920s and 30s. They are an important source, tapped at length in this paper.



This pool of information, however, has only been skimmed, not explored in depth. We could likely learn much more by comparing several midwestern cities or midwestern papers to the Wanted Ads of New York, Los Angeles, Savannah, or Seattle, or by focusing on a certain profession such as the Traveling Sales jobs, to name a few possibilities. But these further comparisons and explorations remain in the future. For the moment, there is only the wonderland of Kansas City ads, and, Alice like, our dreams of it.

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## VITA

Jeremiah David Laurent was born December 9, 1992, in Kansas City, Missouri. They were educated in local public schools in the northland, and graduated from Park Hill High School in 2011. They went to the University of Rockhurst, Kansas City, a Jesuit University, in which they graduated in December of 2014, Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and History.

Several years later, in Spring of 2018, Jeremiah returned to higher education, seeking a Master of Arts degree in History from the University of Missouri, Kansas City. Upon completion of their degree requirements, Jeremiah will focus on writing fiction, studying history, and preparing for a Doctoral run after their life and finances are more well stabilized. They are also considering university education as a career path.