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U.S.

Tips for keeping your tenement tidy (in 1911)

The Martha Stewart of early 20th century tenement living has some advice for young ladies

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Mabel Hyde Kittredge, activist and founder of the hot lunch program for public schools in New York, was the Martha Stewart of tenement living. She championed the cause of domestic science for the disadvantaged at her "housekeeping centers" — model apartments where young girls from the crowded tenements could, by observing and doing, learn all the particulars of home management. Her 1911 book, *How to Furnish and Keep House in a Tenement Flat*, was organized as a series of lessons to be used at the housekeeping centers in New York or in other cities which had started to establish centers of their own. The young girls who took the courses were meant to see the model apartments as "an illustration of the sanitation and beauty which lie within reach of the laborer's income." But in order to achieve that sanitation and beauty, there was an awful lot of work to be done.



Pro tip: Think of cleaning as an art form you are trying to master.

Photo: Topical Press Agency/Getty Images

CLEANING TIPS

Kittredge acknowledged that "housework can be very dull," but she emphasized that "when it becomes an art, it is interesting. When a child realizes that she is gradually mastering an art, she has the desire and the ambition to go on." The children were offered motivation in the form of a card with tasks that could be checked off as they mastered them. Here is what the child had to master in order to complete the first course:

The holder of this card has

Made a fire.

Washed dishes.

Washed dish towels.

Cleaned sink.

Prepared soda and cleansed pipes.

Scrubbed floor.
Scrubbed table or tubs.
Cleaned kitchen.
Washed and aired food tins.
Washed windows.
Made bed.
Fought bedbugs.
Cleaned toilet.
Dusted bedroom.
Cleaned drawers.
Scrubbed woodwork.
Dusted down walls.
Boiled out cleaning cloths.

Then they could move on to the card for the second course:

The holder of this card has

Swept and dusted dining-room.
Set table.
Prepared breakfast.
Served breakfast.
Cared for linen and lined drawer.
Cleaned silver.
Cleaned knives.
Cleaned brass.
Cleaned lamps.
Cared (daily) for lamps.
Thoroughly cleaned dining-room.
Made starch.
Washed and ironed bed linen or towels.
Washed and ironed table linen or curtains.
Covered ironing board.
Prepared meal for sick.
Made and served tea.

Kittredge gave the full details on how each of these tasks was to be done best: Clean the kitchen closets from the top shelf down. Wash bread box with soda and hot water, dry by the stove, and air in the sun. Take apart the kerosene lamps and boil all the parts. If you find bedbugs, wash the bed, alternating soap and water and carbolic acid. Soak the mattress in naphtha (basically, lighter fluid) "but be sure that no fire is near, open all the windows, and after pouring on the naphtha, lock the door of the room and leave it closed for a day to allow the gas to pass off."

TIME SAVING TIPS

How was all of this work to be done? Kittredge stressed the importance of sticking to a strict order of tasks because "confusion is due to lack of order, and running back and forth with no method." The morning routine, for example, has nine steps, from lighting the fire to washing up the breakfast dishes, and by the time it's all done, you are dressed, the family is fed, and the beds and rooms are aired and dusted. It was also important to "see before going to bed that the materials for breakfast are in the house," in order to avoid the inefficiency of the "almost universal tendency to 'run out and buy' before each meal."

MONEY SAVING TIPS

Kitteredge gives a complete list of everything a family of little means need to acquire — including furniture, dishes, utensils, and linen — in order to run a proper household. Helpfully, she lists the prices of everything — from the stove (\$9) to the pepper shaker (5 cents) to sandpaper for the laundry (1 cent). Other tips include things like how to convert a pickle barrel into a laundry hamper that doubles as a kitchen seat, or how to use a window box to cool food if you don't have an ice box. She also shows why the cheaper option is often the more attractive, as when she notes that not only is kerosene cheaper than gas, but "a low lamplight is better to read by and looks prettier."

BEAUTIFYING TIPS

The point of these lessons was not just to make tenement living more sanitary and efficient, but also more beautiful. Some thought given to decorating could go a long way. Kittredge advised yellow paint for all the rooms, "as tenement flats are apt to be dark." For decoration, pictures could be pasted on the walls and then washed over with liquid shellac. That way both pictures and wall could be easily cleaned at the same time. But most important was to take that little extra moment — after all the hard work was done — to see that your work pleased the eye. Because "a room may be clean and yet not attractive. See that the shades are even, the chairs straight, the blotter clean, inkwell clean and filled, plants watered and dead leaves taken off."

Then I suppose it was okay to put your feet up. Until it started all over again the next day.