

[ITEM 01]

Catalogue of Women's diaries

[ISSUE 02]

DIARIES

On the most fundamental level, the interest in, and demand for, biographies of women shook up the larger genre of biography by introducing a different type of person as worthy of biographical treatment. Moreover, because the contours of women's lives were often different from those of men, the format and goals of biography had to be rethought; the male plot did not work. For many historians of women, the end result was an interpretive and narrative strategy that put gender at its center. The insistence of feminist biographers that the personal is political, and that the same attention must be paid to the daily lives of their subjects as to their more public achievements continues to ripple through the field of biography as a whole. By insisting that private experience is not trivial but revealing, feminist biographers

made visible the structures of power that had rendered women's lives invisible for so long. In recovering those lives, they not only reshaped the genre of biography but also redefined what counts as history itself. - Susan Ware, 2010

Women diaries

This project began with a close examination of early 20th-century American women's diaries—small, private books that held entire worlds within their pages. Written during a time when the domesticated female role defined much of social life, these diaries often existed at the fragile intersection between self-expression and self-policing. Women's personal writing was rarely neutral: it moved between duty and desire, between confession and restraint.

As the statement **“the personal is political”* reminds us, the smallest gestures of daily life—laundry, childbirth, friendship, illness—can reveal the same mechanisms of power that govern public institutions. In their quiet insistence on recording private experience, these diaries perform an act of reclamation. What was once dismissed as trivial now reads as political evidence, emotional data, and testimony to survival.

Purpose and Method

The collection presented here was compiled and annotated by a team of archivists and researchers working to recover under-examined female narratives from the early twentieth century. The goal of this ongoing initiative is to catalogue these diaries within their historical and cultural frameworks, drawing attention to how women translated prescribed ideals into lived experience.

Each diary has been studied not only for its autobiographical value but also for its relationship to surrounding systems of representation — periodical publications, advertisements, and

domestic handbooks that defined acceptable forms of femininity. Through cross-referencing language, recurring imagery, and tone, the research team sought to understand how such sources infiltrated private thought and emotion.

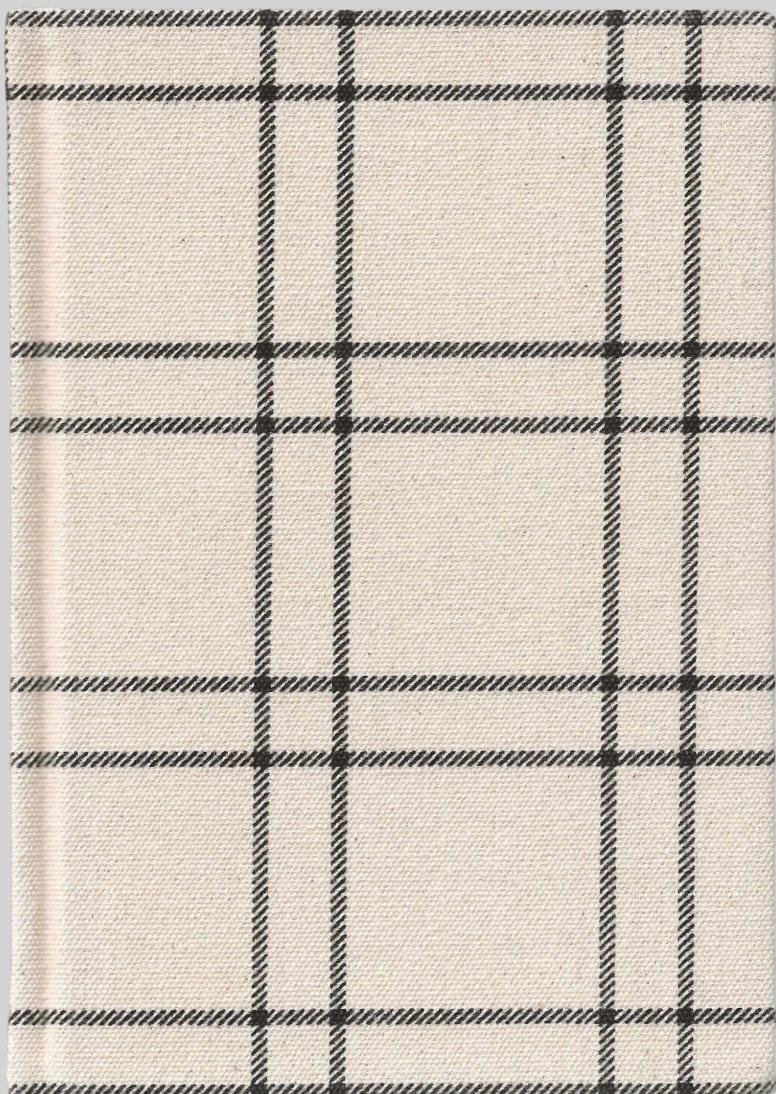
[item 1]

DIARY OF MARGARET WILLIAMS

Margaret Williams lived in a small town in Illinois, educated, articulate, and quietly restless within the boundaries of domestic life. Before marriage, she studied Liberal Arts at the University of Pennsylvania, where she developed a love for history and writing. Her marriage, arranged through her parents' friends, offered comfort but little affection.

In her diary, Margaret writes to find solitude and preserve a part of herself that life at home slowly eroded. Her entries reveal both tenderness and fatigue — a woman torn between duty and desire for self-expression. The birth of her daughter, Edna, brought her deepest happiness, though also the burden of expectation.

After her father's death and growing distance from her mother, her writing became more introspective. She briefly worked as a clerk, searching for independence, but the pressures of motherhood and household routine drew her back. Through her diary, she negotiates the tension between intellect and care, freedom and obligation — using writing as a quiet act of endurance and self-remembrance.



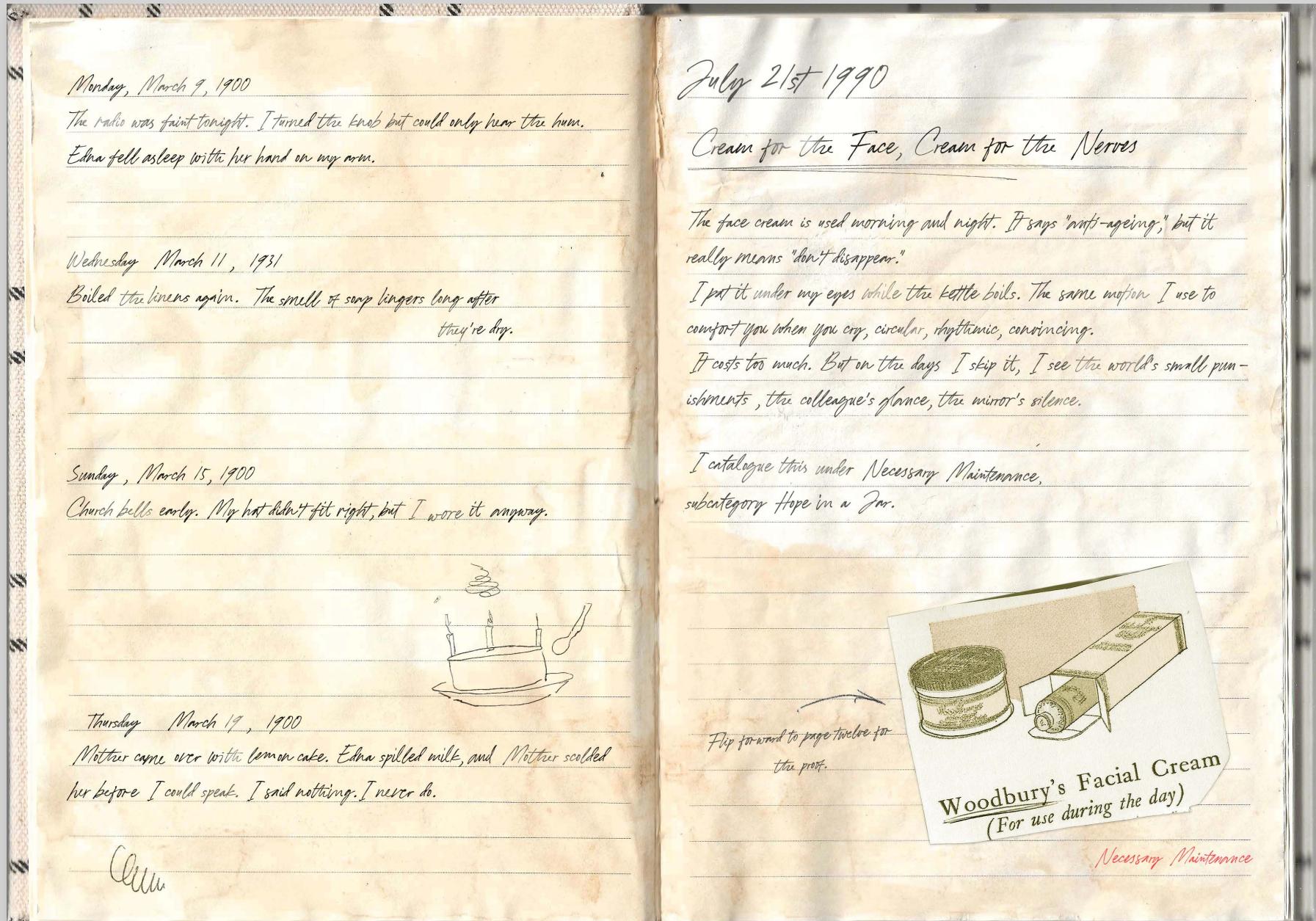
[DLD-MW-03]

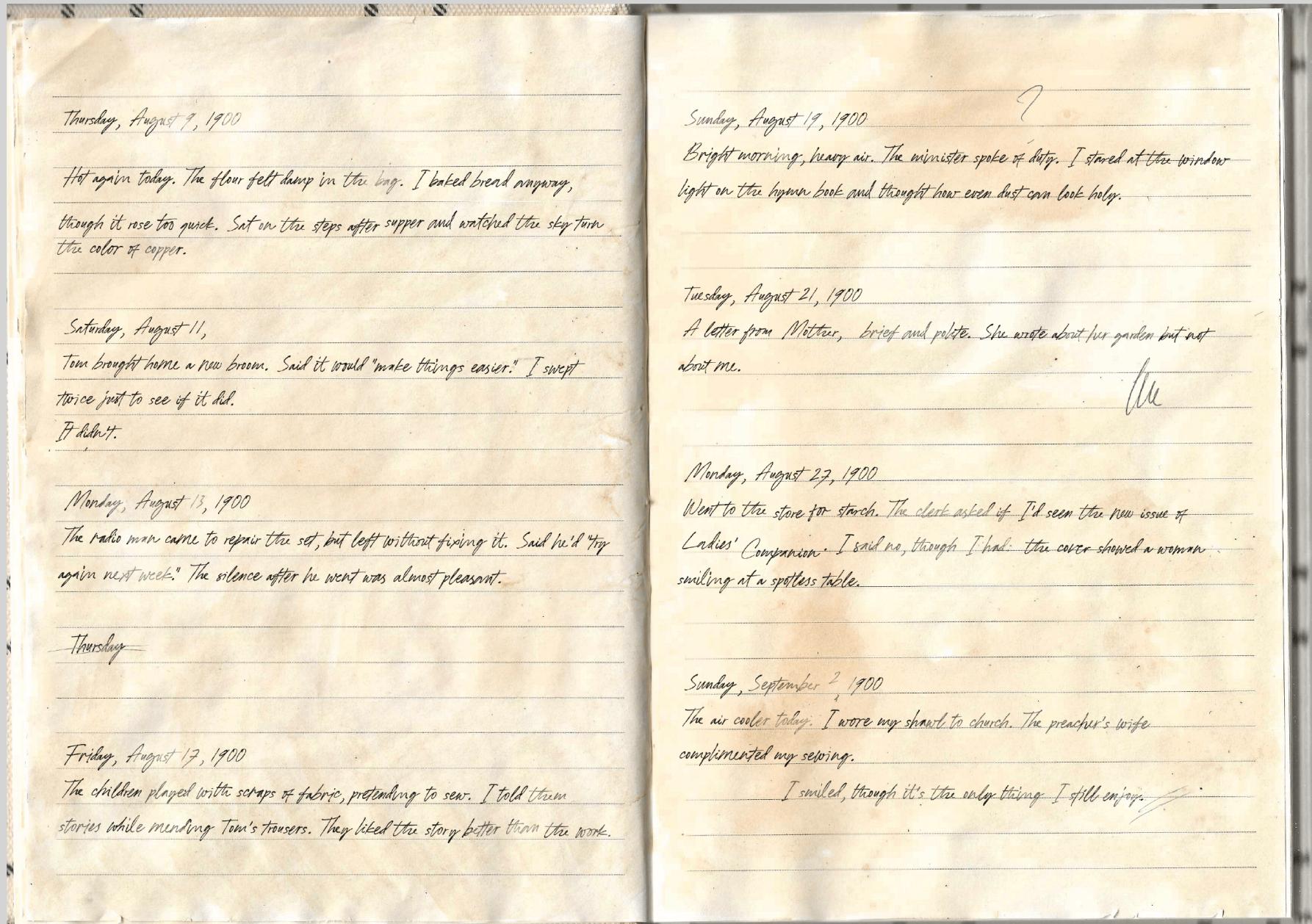
DIARY INFORMATION

Owner of the diary	Margaret Williams
Approximate years	1929–1936
Location	Springfield, Illinois, USA
Material	Cloth-bound, checked cover; lined paper
Dimensions	7.5 x 5 inches
Acquisition	Donated to the Domestic Life Documentation Unit

**Only a selection of pages from the original diary is presented in this publication. The reproduced entries have been chosen for their condition, legibility, and relevance to the broader themes of the catalogue.*

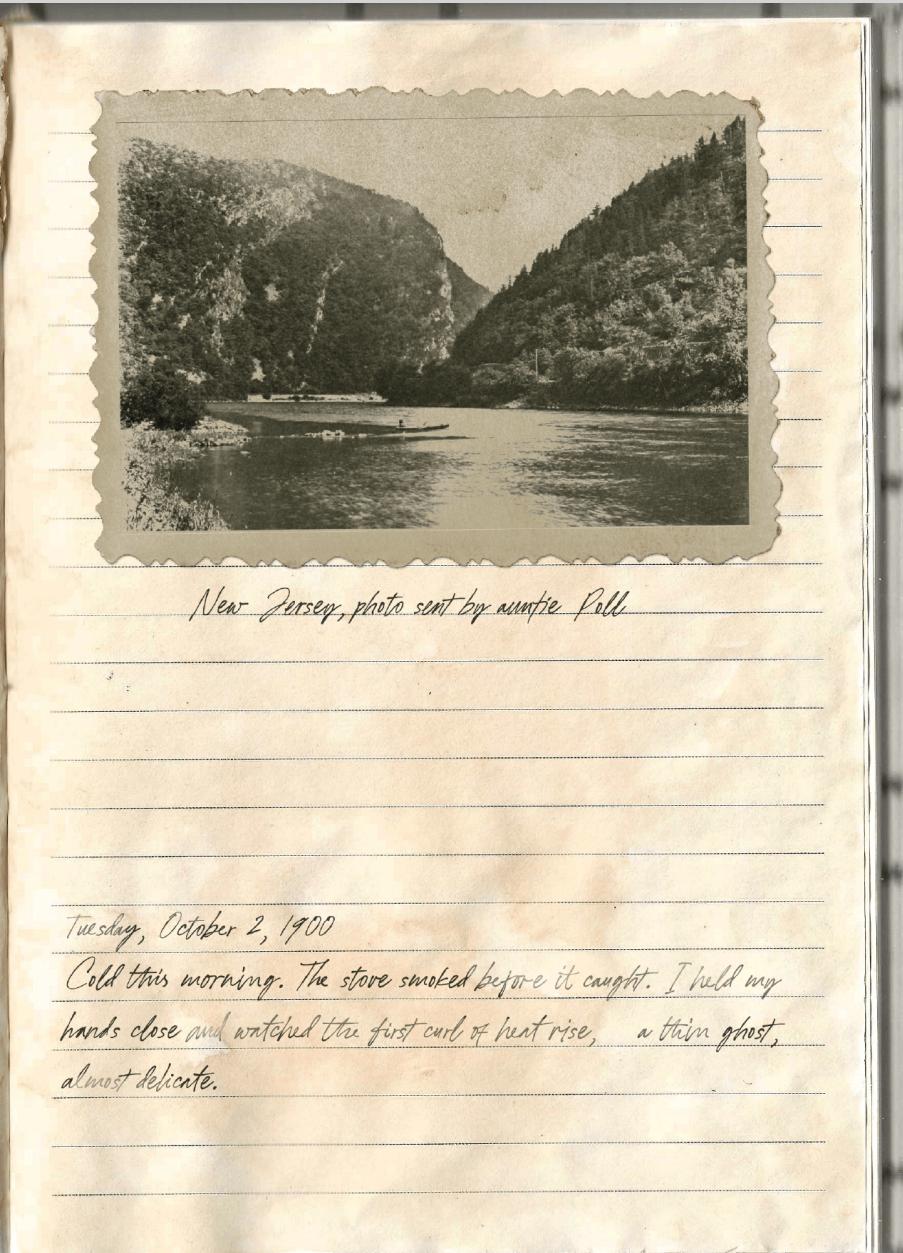
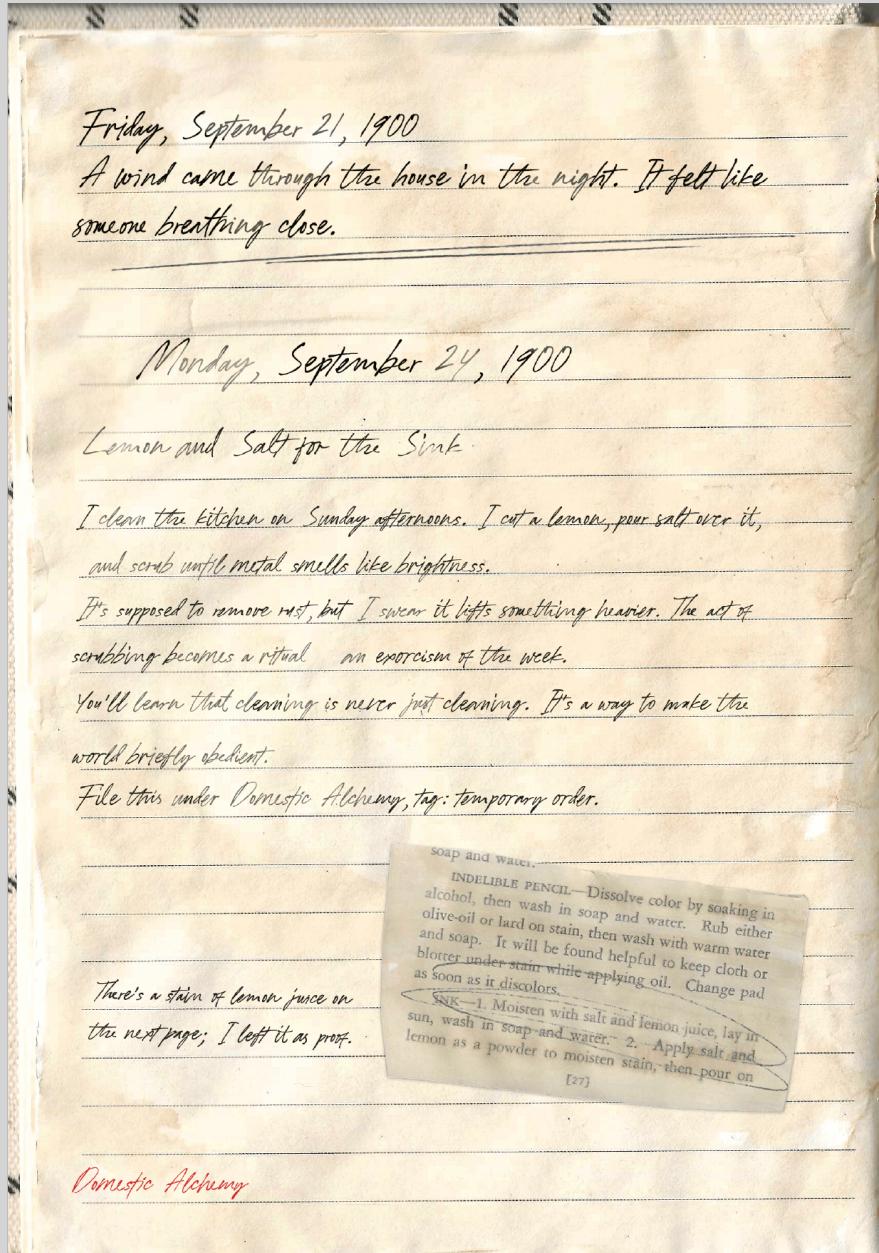


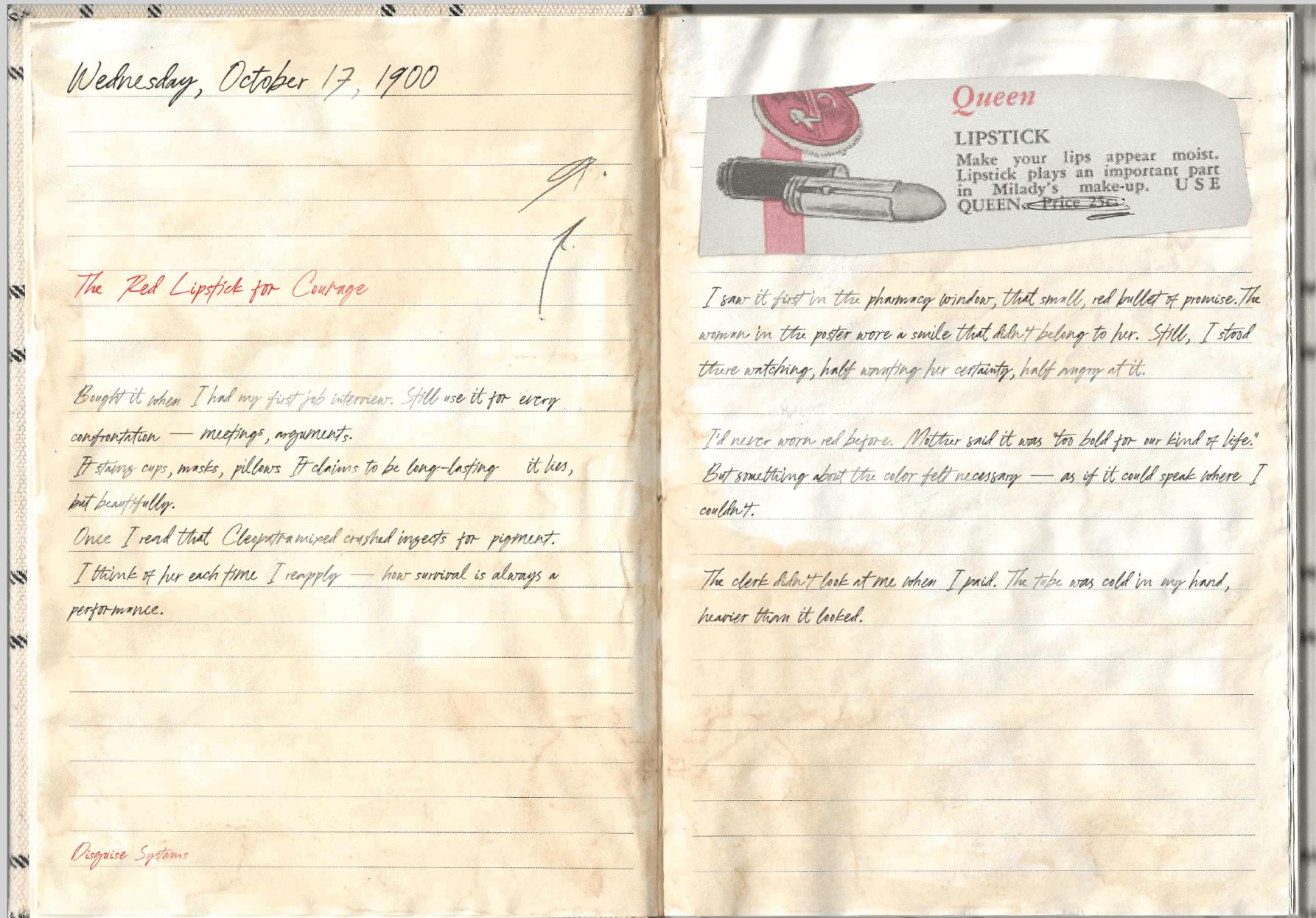
Under *Cutout from the advertisement*Right
bottomTaxonomy developed throughout the diary that can be
found on many pages

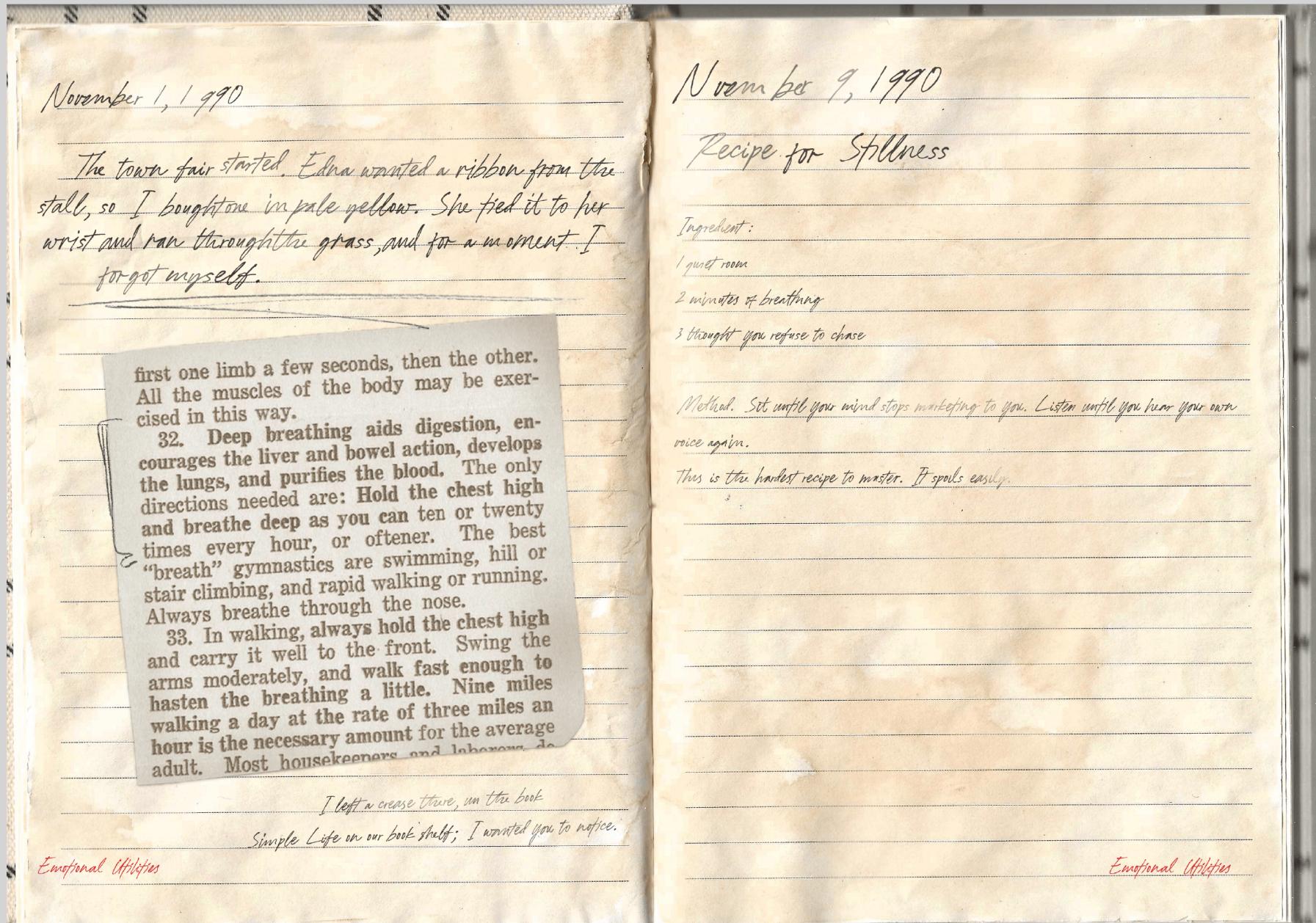


Under Cutout from the book

Under Photo sent by relative







Under

Cutout from the advertisement

Under

Cutout from the book

November 30, 1990

Laundry Day Philosophy

The washing machine hums like a low prayer. I separate colours carefully — not from habit, but because order feels like safety.

Sometimes I add vinegar to remove the smell of detergent. Sometimes I forget.

Each cycle is an invisible labour: you clean the clothes, but also the evidence of living.

The alkalis commonly known and used in the household are:

AMMONIA, a gas dissolved in water, and mild in its action if diluted; it readily evaporates if heated. It is comparatively expensive.

BORAX, a powder, mild and expensive.

SAL SODA, OR CARBONATED ALKALI, a crystal or powder, stronger and cheaper than borax.

POTASH, OR LYE, a liquid or solid, strong but little used in modern times. It is derived from wood ashes by a process of leaching; is used in making "soft soap."

CAUSTIC POTASH AND CAUSTIC SODA are very strong and not expensive, but are rarely known in the household. One or the other is almost invariably used in the manufacture of laundry soaps.

SOAP, a very essential purifier, is discussed in a separate chapter.

RUBBING, POUNDING AND RINSING are valuable mechanical aids in purifying clothes.

Repetition as Redemption

exception, are made from fats with chemicals, and which act essentially through the medium of the injurious alkali, caustic, potash or acids which they contain.

It is a pure product of nature in fine powdered form and is absolutely harmless. Its high activity and effectiveness comes through its natural soapine and cleansing qualities.

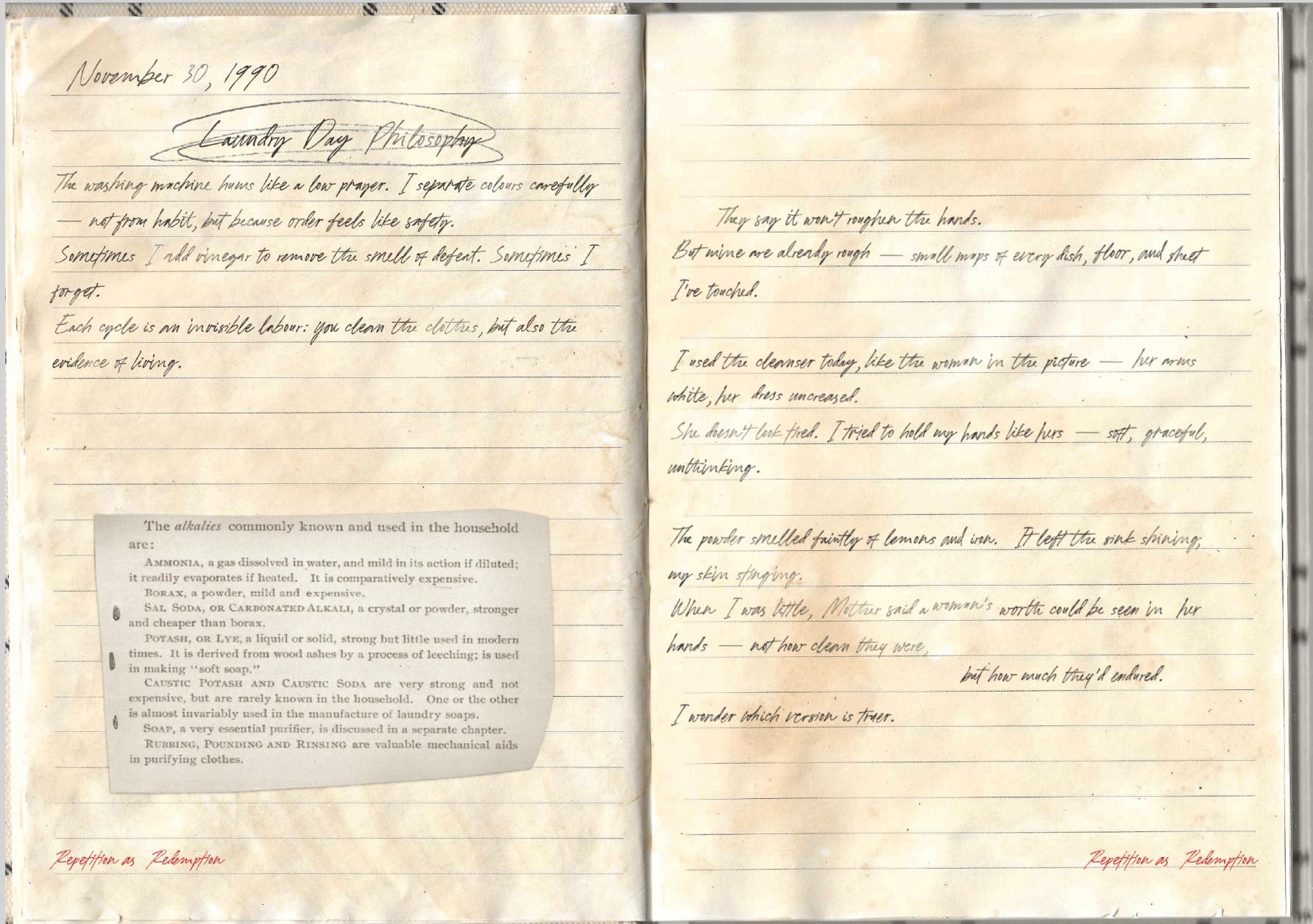
A striking illustration of the superiority of Old Dutch Cleanser over soap is in their respective action on marble. Soap of any kind will ruin the beauty of marble, causing it to become yellow and unsightly, whereas Old Dutch Cleanser will not only make it spotless-white, but will also restore to its original beauty marble which has been discolored and damaged through the use of soap.

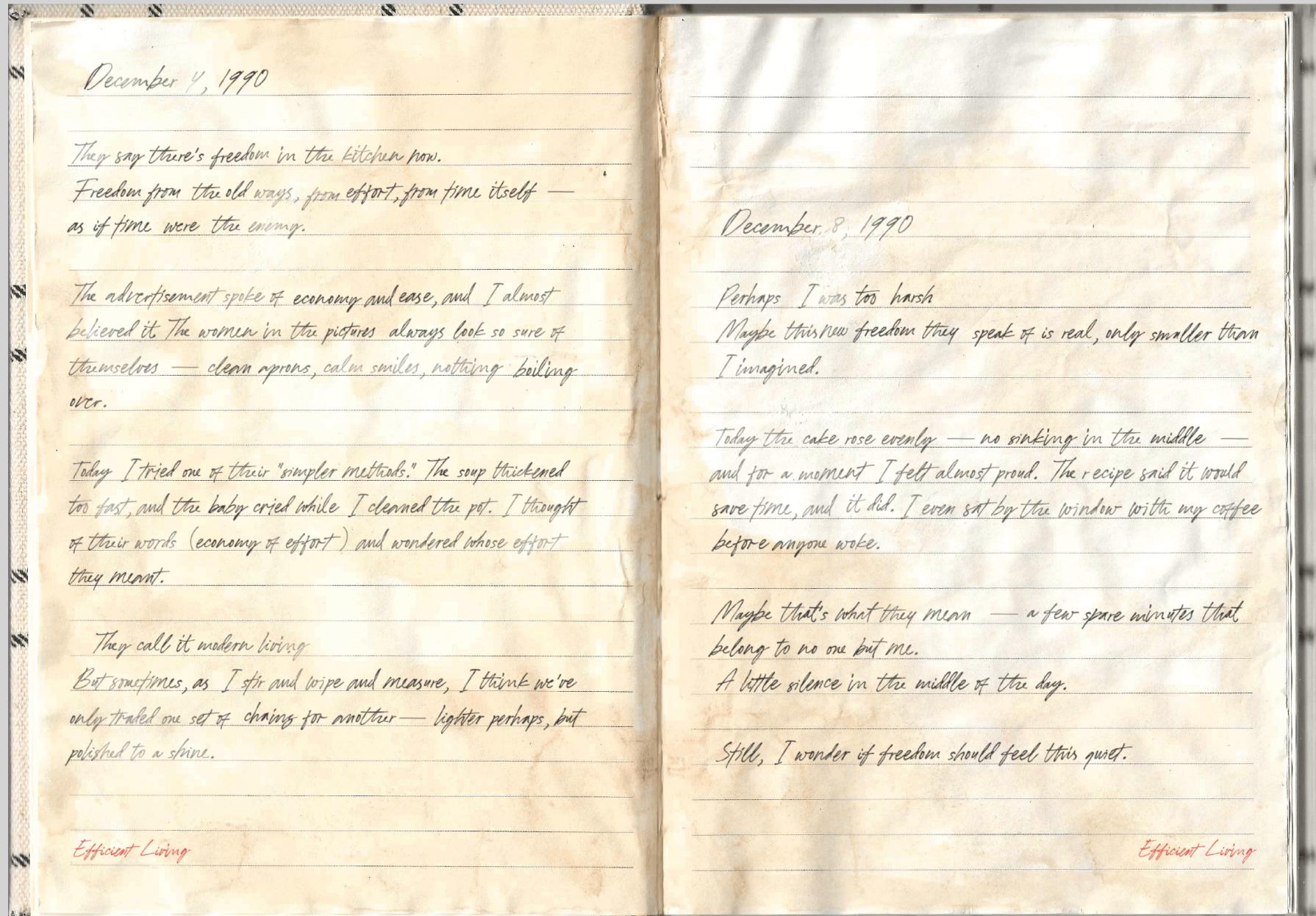
Won't Roughen the Hands We desire to emphasize in favor of Old Dutch Cleanser the fact that it contains no alkali, caustic, potash or acid and that in this respect it is the only thing of the kind on the market. It does not roughen or reddens the hands no matter how long they are exposed to its action.

The Name The Dutch people are known for their almost severe cleanliness and for the immaculate condition in which their splendid little Holland is maintained.

In adopting as a distinguishing mark of trade the figure of the earn-

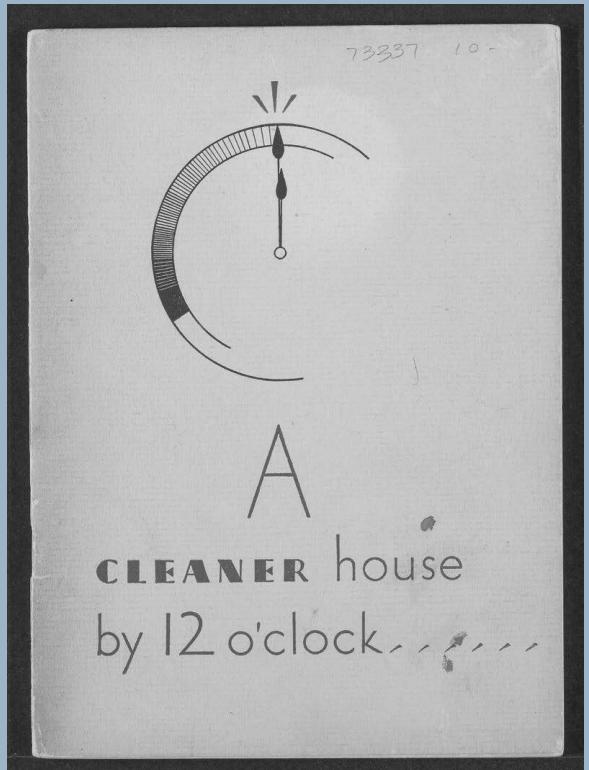
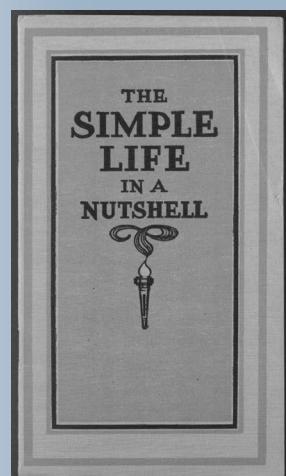
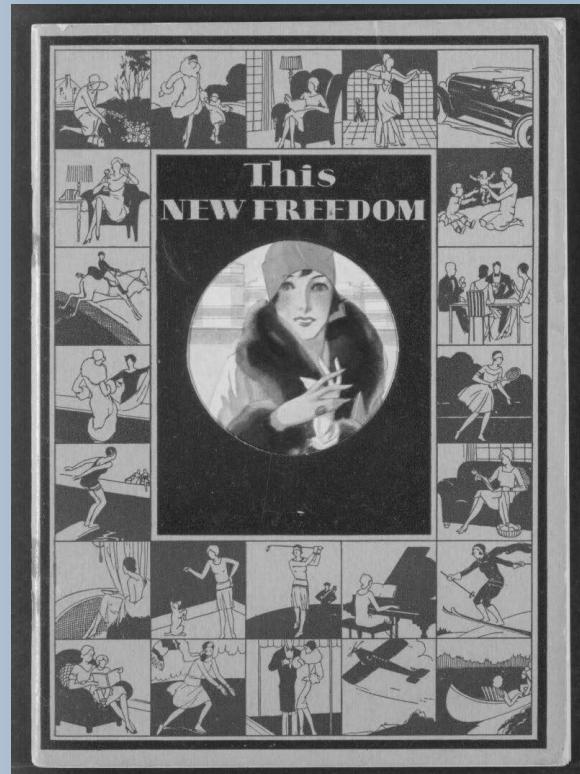


Under *Cutout from the advertisement*



[catalogue]

From the cutouts and references found within the diary, we were able to trace several of the publications and printed materials that shaped Margaret Williams' world. Many of these texts were located and cross-referenced with items preserved in the *Harvard Collection*. Together, these materials help reconstruct the historical and social conditions in which the diary was written. They reveal the language, imagery, and domestic ideals that informed women's daily lives, offering a fuller context for understanding the entries that follow.



1

title A skin you love to touch



dates	[between 1920 and 1929?]
publisher	The Andrew Jergens Co.
origin	Ohio, Cincinnati

3

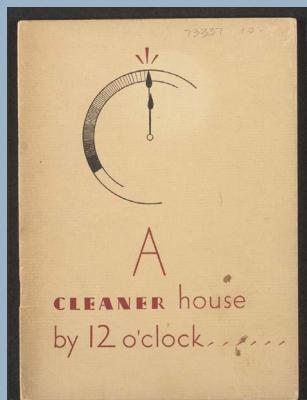
title A complete beauty treatment



dates	[between 1920 and 1939?]
publisher	Newbro Manufacturing Co.
origin	Georgia

2

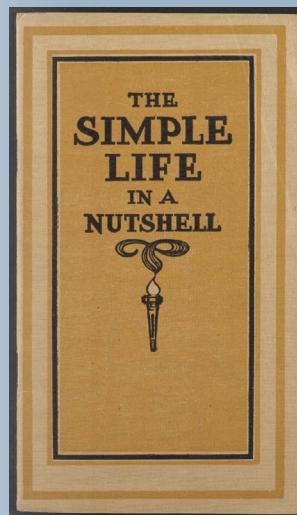
title A cleaner house by 12 o'clock



dates	1930
publisher	Cleanliness Institute
origin	New York

4

title The simple life in a nutshell; rules for "right living"



dates	1921
publisher	publisher not identified
origin	Michigan

5

title

Hints for housewives; cleans, scrubs,
scours, polishes



dates

1915

publisher

Cudahy

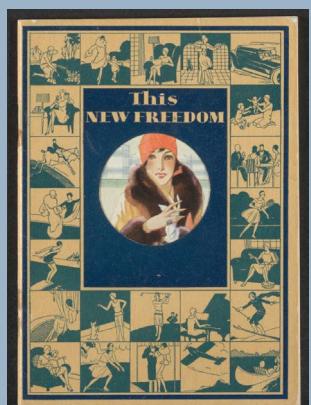
origin

Nebraska

6

title

This new freedom



dates

1928

publisher

Borden Co.

origin

New York

UNIT 1. Methods of Cataloguing.

MA GCD