

# Catalogue of women's diaries

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ISSUE [02]

[ITEM 01]

# 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

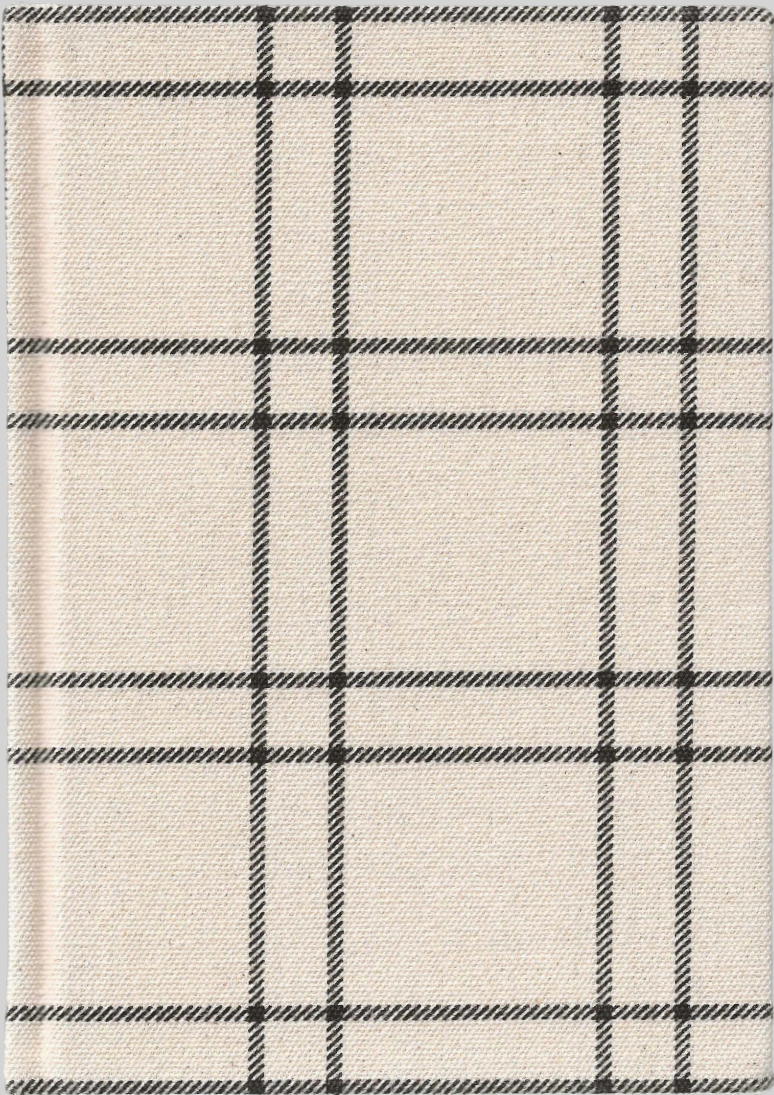
domestic handbooks that defined acceptable forms of femininity. Through cross-referencing language, recurring imagery, and tone, the research team sought to understand how such sources infiltrated private thought and emotion.

# [item 1]

## DIARY OF MARGARET WILLAIMS

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.

*\*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.*

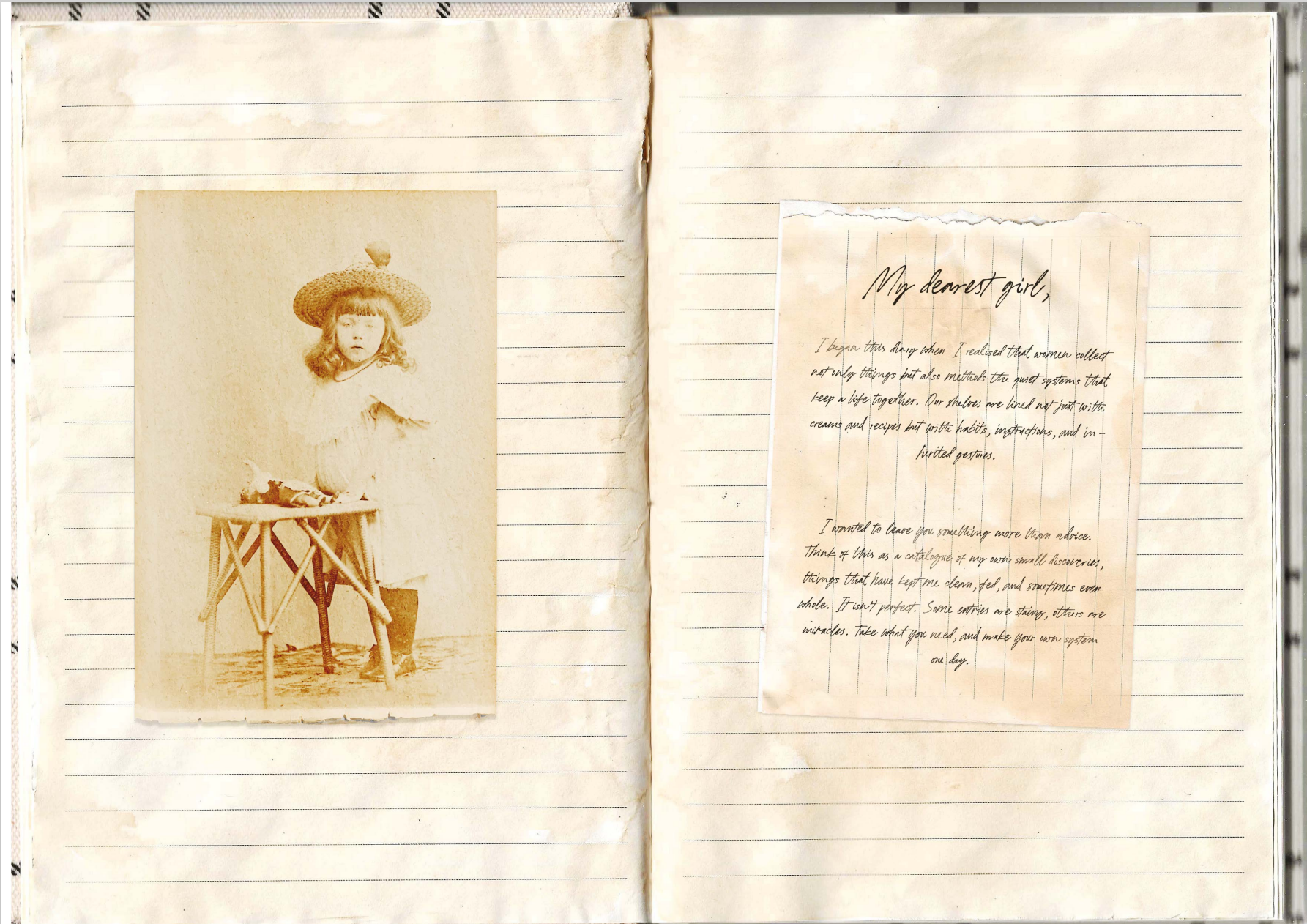


[DLD-MW-03]

### 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

Under      Image of her daughter Edna



Under      Cutout from the advertisement

Right      Taxonomy developed throughout the diary that can be  
bottom      found on many pages

Monday, March 9, 1900

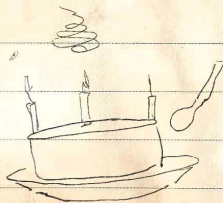
The radio was faint tonight. I turned the knob but could only hear the hum.  
Edna fell asleep with her hand on my arm.

Wednesday March 11, 1901

Boiled the linens again. The smell of soap lingers long after  
they're dry.

Sunday, March 15, 1900

Church bells early. My hat didn't fit right, but I wore it anyway.



Thursday March 17, 1900

Mother came over with lemon cake. Edna spilled milk, and Mother scolded  
her before I could speak. I said nothing. I never do.

Ellen

July 21st 1990

Cream for the Face, Cream for the Nerves

The face cream is used morning and night. It says "anti-ageing," but it  
really means "don't disappear."

I put it under my eyes while the kettle boils. The same motion I use to  
comfort you when you cry, circular, rhythmic, convincing.

It costs too much. But on the days I skip it, I see the world's small pun-  
ishments, the colleague's glance, the mirror's silence.

I catalogue this under Necessary Maintenance,  
subcategory Hope in a Jar.

Flip forward to page twelve for  
the post.



Thursday, August 9, 1900

Hot again today. The floor felt damp in the bag. I baked bread anyway, though it rose too quick. Sat on the steps after supper and watched the sky turn the color of copper.

Saturday, August 11,

Tom brought home a new broom. Said it would "make things easier." I swept twice just to see if it did.

It didn't.

Monday, August 13, 1900

The radio man came to repair the set, but left without fixing it. Said he'd try again next week. The silence after he went was almost pleasant.

~~Thursday~~

Friday, August 17, 1900

The children played with scraps of fabric, pretending to sew. I told them stories while mending Tom's trousers. They liked the story better than the work.

Sunday, August 19, 1900

Bright morning, heavy air. The minister spoke of duty. I stared at the window light on the hymn book and thought how even dust can look holy.

Tuesday, August 21, 1900

A letter from Mittee, brief and polite. She wrote about her garden but not about me.

Monday, August 27, 1900

Went to the store for starch. The clerk asked if I'd seen the new issue of Ladies' Companion. I said no, though I had: the cover showed a woman smiling at a spotless table.

Sunday, September 2, 1900

The air cooler today. I wore my shawl to church. The preacher's wife complimented my sewing.

I smiled, though it's the only thing I still enjoy.

Under      Cutout from the book

Under      Photo sent by relative

Friday, September 21, 1900

A wind came through the house in the night. It felt like someone breathing close.

Monday, September 24, 1900

Lemon and Salt for the Sink

I clean the kitchen on Sunday afternoons. I cut a lemon, pour salt over it, and scrub until metal smells like brightness.

It's supposed to remove rust, but I swear it lifts something heavier. The act of scrubbing becomes a ritual — an exorcism of the week.

You'll learn that cleaning is never just cleaning. It's a way to make the world briefly obedient.

File this under Domestic Alchemy, tag: temporary order.

There's a stain of lemon juice on the next page; I left it as proof.

Domestic Alchemy



New Jersey, photo sent by auntie Poll

Tuesday, October 2, 1900

Cold this morning. The stove smoked before it caught. I held my hands close and watched the first curl of heat rise, a thin ghost, almost delicate.

Wednesday, October 17, 1900

*The Red Lipstick for Courage*

Bought it when I had my first job interview. Still use it for every confrontation — meetings, arguments.

It stings cups, masks, pillows. It claims to be long-lasting — it lies, but beautifully.

Once I read that Cleopatra mixed crushed insects for pigment.

I think of her each time I reapply — how survival is always a performance.

*Disguise Systems*

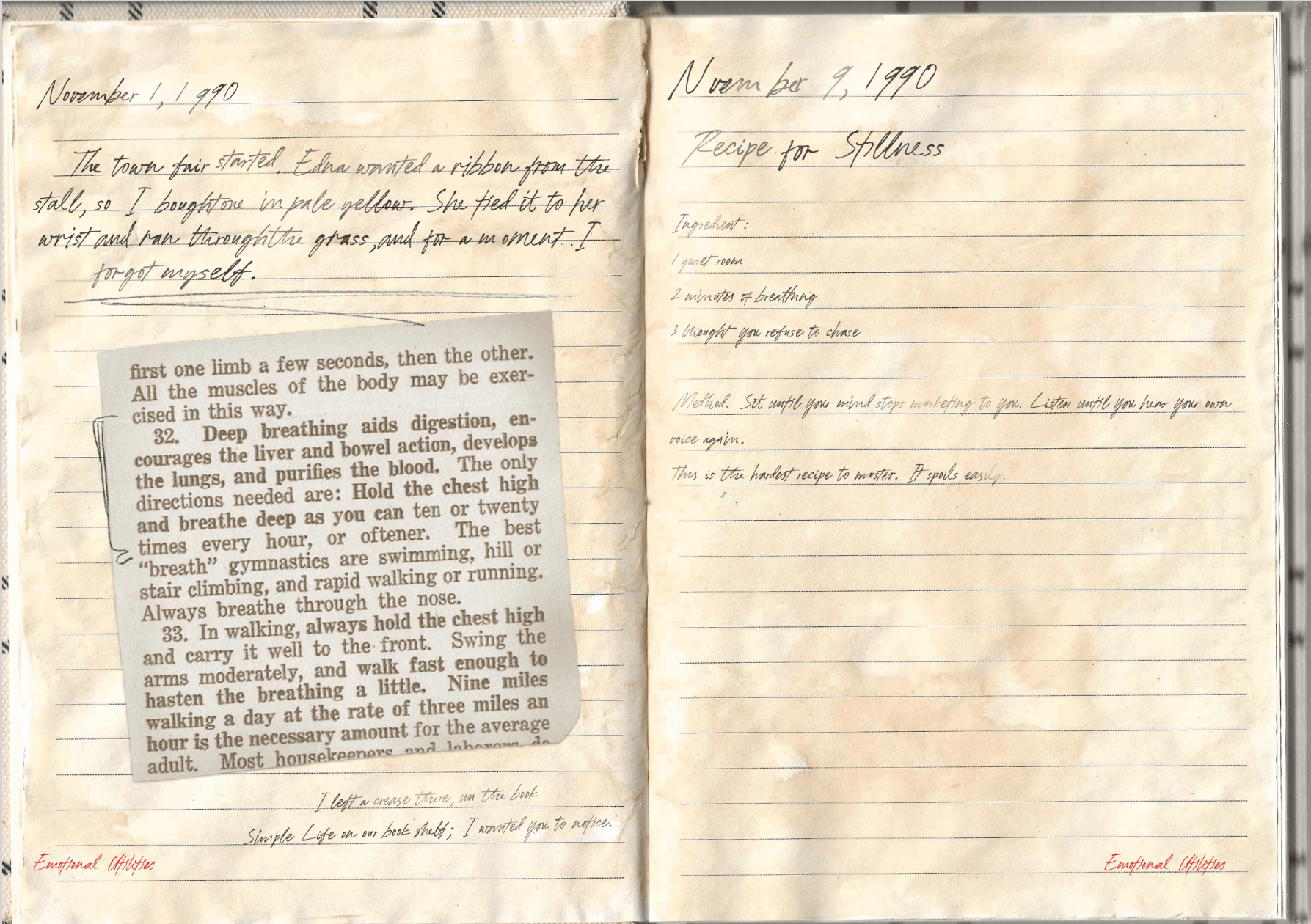


I saw it first in the pharmacy window, that small, red bullet of promise. The woman in the poster wore a smile that didn't belong to her. Still, I stood there watching, half wanting her certainty, half angry at it.

I'd never worn red before. Mother said it was "too bold for our kind of life." But something about the color felt necessary — as if it could speak where I couldn't.

The clerk didn't look at me when I paid. The tube was cold in my hand, heavier than it looked.

Under      Cutout from the book



November 1, 1990

The town fair started. Edna wanted a ribbon from the stall, so I bought one in pale yellow. She tied it to her wrist and ran through the grass, and for a moment I forgot myself.

first one limb a few seconds, then the other. All the muscles of the body may be exercised in this way.

32. Deep breathing aids digestion, encourages the liver and bowel action, develops the lungs, and purifies the blood. The only directions needed are: Hold the chest high and breathe deep as you can ten or twenty times every hour, or oftener. The best "breath" gymnastics are swimming, hill or stair climbing, and rapid walking or running. Always breathe through the nose.

33. In walking, always hold the chest high and carry it well to the front. Swing the arms moderately, and walk fast enough to hasten the breathing a little. Nine miles walking a day at the rate of three miles an hour is the necessary amount for the average adult. Most housekeepers and laborers do

I left a crease there, in the book  
Simple Life on our book shelf; I wanted you to notice.

Emotional Utilities

November 9, 1990

Recipe for Stillness

Ingredient:

- 1 quiet room
- 2 minutes of breathing
- 3 thought you refuse to chase

Method. Sit until your mind stops marking to you. Listen until you hear your own voice again.

This is the hardest recipe to master. It spoils easily.

Emotional Utilities

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 defeat. 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 leeching; 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 redden 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-



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*Repetition as Redemption*

They say it won't roughen the hands.  
But mine are already rough — small maps of every dish, floor, and sheet I've touched.

I used the cleanser today, like the woman in the picture — her arms white, her dress uncreased.

She doesn't look tired. I tried to hold my hands like hers — soft, graceful, unthinking.

The powder smelled faintly of lemons and iron. It left the sink shining, my skin stinging.

When I was little, Mother said a woman's worth could be seen in her hands — not how clean they were,  
but how much they'd endured.

I wonder which version is truer.

*Repetition as Redemption*

December 4, 1990

They say there's freedom in the kitchen now.  
Freedom from the old ways, from effort, from time itself —  
as if time were the enemy.

The advertisement spoke of economy and ease, and I almost  
believed it. The women in the pictures always look so sure of  
themselves — clean aprons, calm smiles, nothing boiling  
over.

Today I tried one of their "simpler methods." The soup thickened  
too fast, and the baby cried while I cleaned the pot. I thought  
of their words (economy of effort) and wondered whose effort  
they meant.

They call it modern living.  
But sometimes, as I stir and wipe and measure, I think we've  
only traded one set of chains for another — lighter perhaps, but  
polished to a shine.

Efficient Living

December 8, 1990

Perhaps I was too harsh.  
Maybe this new freedom they speak of is real, only smaller than  
I imagined.

Today the cake rose evenly — no sinking in the middle —  
and for a moment I felt almost proud. The recipe said it would  
save time, and it did. I even sat by the window with my coffee  
before anyone woke.

Maybe that's what they mean — a few spare minutes that  
belong to no one but me.

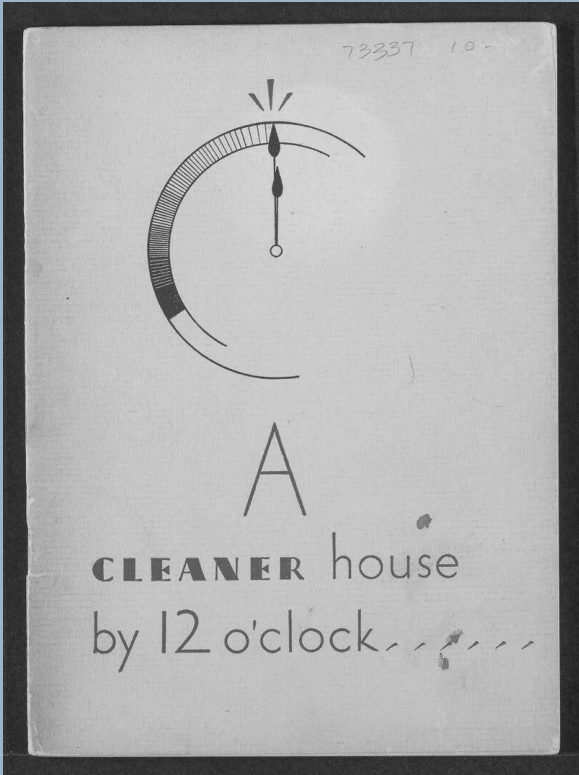
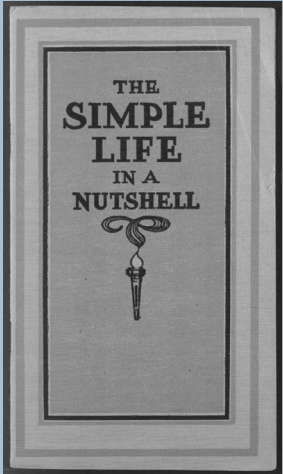
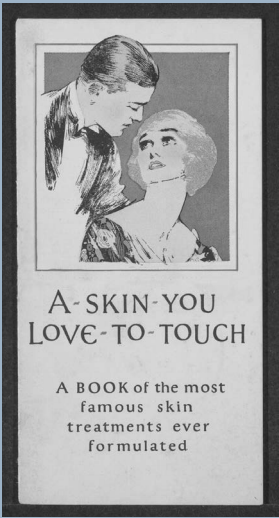
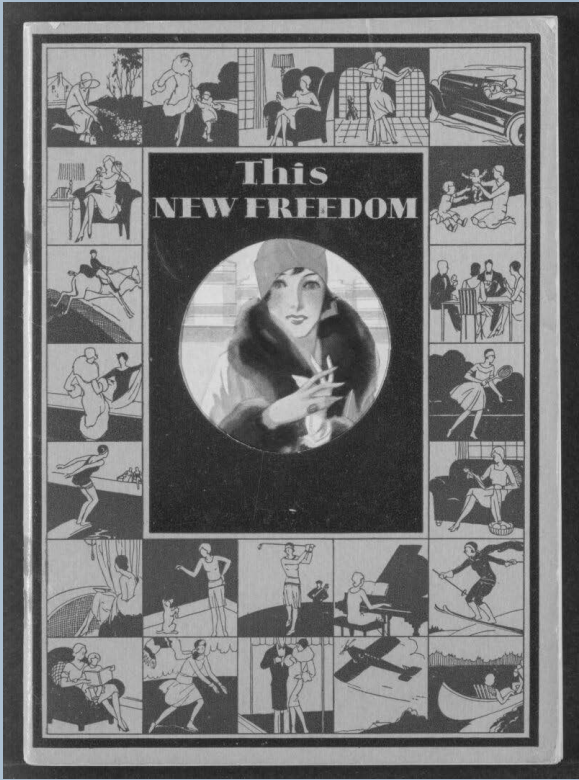
A little silence in the middle of the day.

Still, I wonder if freedom should feel this quiet.

Efficient Living

# [catalogue]

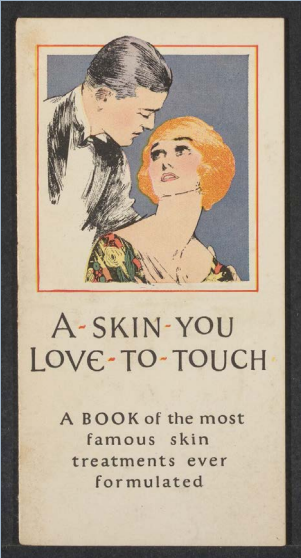
From the cutouts and references found within the diary, we were able to trace several of the publications and printed materials that shaped Margaret Williams' world. Many of these texts were located and cross-referenced with items preserved in the *Harvard Collection*. Together, these materials help 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

2

title

A cleaner house by 12 o'clock



dates

1930

publisher

Cleanliness Institute

origin

New York

3

title

A complete beauty treatment



dates

[between 1920 and 1939?]

publisher

Newbro Manufacturing Co.

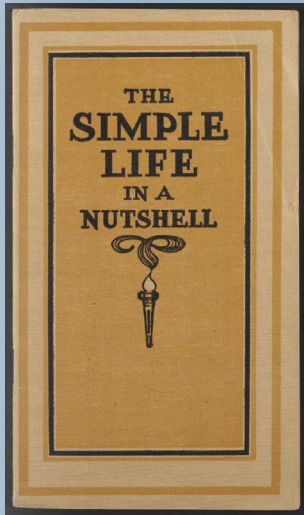
origin

Georgia

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