Spring-Cleaning: A Bustling Tradition

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WE ARE dealing with a very timely and ticklish subject this week: spring-cleaning. Spring-cleaning is an old and honorable ritual in which the home, nest, cave or whatever was turned inside out and cleansed and renewed through an intensive scrubbing, polishing and purification that provided a seasonal, psychic and physical rebirth. Spring-cleaning is an ancient urge that comes with soft breezes and clear skies. It is a traditional time of upheaval and renewal.

Now I know that this is a subject fraught with connotations of sexism, chauvinism, inequality and exploitation: Heated controversies have been set off in the pages of this paper over such things as who does the housework in those films about liberated women, and the honorable status and spiritual rewards of homemaking are debated among its champions and detractors with partisan passion. Spring-cleaning is a made-to-order subject for feminist ardor. What I am about to do, however, is simply to tell it like it was, and is, without polemics or angst.

Still, anyone can see at least the roots of women's lib in the invention of electrical cleaning and household appliances, from the vacuum cleaner to the refrigerator. The single biggest break with the servitude of the past was probably the washing machine. (I would like to add a footnote here, in the interest of scholarship and history. It is no coincidence that the First Liberated Age came in the 1920's, when production of both washing machines and refrigerators soared. In an unpublished study called "Technological Visions of American Industrial Designers, 1929-1939," Jeffrey L. Meikle notes that more than 60 percent of Pittsburgh families owned washing machines by 1931, while only 13 percent had refrigerators, which remained a luxury item for a much longer time. The significance of the release from backbreaking and time-consuming labor and inexorable household schedules cannot be underestimated.)

I belong to a generation caught between servitude and freedom, between new and old ways — we honored the spring (and fall) cleaning rites of our mothers and grandmothers, but we did so with labor-saving devices. At some point, however, there were those among us who received a kind of divine illumination about cleanliness and godliness being an adjustable relationship, while we followed (not guiltlessly) the siren call of the world outside.

To today's youth, any account of those spring rituals will be as arcane as the practices of some ancient religion. But the fact is that the changes are not so much in the attitude toward cleaning, or in the way cleaning is done, as in the whole revolution in

Continued on Page C8

Spring-Cleaning: A Bustling Tradition

Continued from Page C1

family and life styles, in tastes and values, that divides the 19th from the 20th century. The portieres and antimacassars of our grandparents were part of a family life replete with accessorized ceremonies that could be as crippling as it was clean; the bare windows and inflatables of today serve a mobile society that is looking for something it doesn't understand but is clearly not going to find in a china cabinet.

For me, the trumpets of freedom blew when I finally got rid of my slipcovers. Traditionally, spring meant not only cleaning but shrouding. The original rationale of slipcovers had something to do with warm weather, open windows and no air-conditioning; it is impossible for those who have been climate-controlled all their lives to grasp the stickiness and grittiness of old-fashioned summers. But that relentless ritual of tugging and zippering had just as much to do with conscience, custom and a censorious society that enforced a strong sense of domestic duty. (Could I ever really have cared?)

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The renunciation of slipcovers was a symbol, of course, a cutting of the generational cord as much as a declaration of a simplified, more logical way of life. So I now note with alarm that some genius has just rediscovered slipcovers with a great hoopla about how you can change your "look" instantly by stripping them all off and throwing them into the washing machine in exchange for another set. This is to be the latest home fashion. Well, as Santayana said, those who don't know history are condemned to repeat its mistakes. To be fashionable is to be eternally in bondage.

But I digress. Let us take a little trip back into spring-cleaning history with that doyenne of proper Victorian household management, Mrs. (not Ms.) Beeton. This is spring-cleaning circa 1900, from my "new, revised" edition of "Mrs. Beeton's Everyday Cookery and Housekeeping Book," second only to her classic "Book of Household Management" as the most popular wedding gift of the late 19th and early 20th century. You couldn't fold a fluted napkin or run a linen press without one. This was the indispensable primer for "all mistresses and servants."

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"It is not until May that many among us begin to turn the house out of windows," says Mrs. B. under the heading of "Spring Cleaning." "But a fine, hot April will sometimes tempt us to begin before the sun gains much power."

And so, let us start. Of course, your blankets will already have been washed (tub soaked, with scrub board and wringer) and hung out in the brisk wind to dry (to be brought in like frozen boards) some time in March. Before beginning, please don the correct attire; you will need a long, enveloping starched apron and a mobcap. (Mobcap: "a woman's cap, having a full crown and frills, chiefly historical," according to the dictionary. You've seen them on "Upstairs, Downstairs.")

Next, get your equipment together. You will require a carpet broom, dustpan, damp tea leaves, banister brush, house-sweeping brush, quantities of large, coarse cloths and clean dusters, a house flannel, bath brick, soap, washing soda, sponge, scrubbing brushes, cinder pail, pails of hot and cold water, a ladder and a housemaid's box supplied with brushes, black lead, emery papers and leathers. You will also need a rattan rug beater, camphor, bran and tar paper. It's a long way to Easyoff and Mr. Clean.

Take down the curtains and curtain poles, and wash the poles with vinegar; then rub them bright with furniture polish. Remove all ornaments and bric-a-brac and carefully wash or relacquer them. Clean dust and cobwebs from walls with a broom or brush covered with a dustcloth, or blow off the dust with a bellows. If paneled, the walls must be washed down; if papered, they are to be rubbed clean with stale bread. This is done by dividing a loaf of white bread in eight pieces. Then, holding the crust, wipe downward with the crumb, half a yard at a time. Go around again, with overlapping stokes.

Sweep the carpets with tea leaves to remove surface dust and hang all rugs on the line in the yard. Wallop them thoroughly with the rattan beater and leave them to "air." (This creates a great dust in the eyes and the nose and makes the virtues of the mobcap clear.) Scrub the floors with sand and hot water and allow to dry.

Clean, black and polish the fireplace fenders, fire irons and grate with the black lead, emery papers and leathers. Dust the furniture, using the cloth with a wiping, not a flapping motion. Now wash it with weak vinegar and water and make a polish of beeswax, white wax, curd soap, turpentine and boiled soft water. Apply with a flannel and polish first with a duster and then with a silk handkerchief.

Hang the heavy winter curtains in the air for three or four days, bringing them in every night. Before packing them away, beat them lightly with a thin stick. Then fold them carefully, scattering a handful of dried bran between each fold, and add a big lump of camphor. Next, do the bedrooms. Take the bedding out of doors, including mattresses and pillows, and beat and brush it and leave it out in the air. Take the bedstead, whether of wood or iron, to pieces and wash well with soap and hot water.

This is also the time to turn out every box, drawer and cupboard in the house. That includes emptying china and glass cabinets and washing "company" and "daily" sets of dishes and goblets, as well as polishing the silver plate. Be sure to keep windows wide and chill breezes whipping through the rooms during the entire cleaning operation, until everyone who has not fled congeals. This is extremely healthful.

Whatever needs to be laundered will be carried to the soapstone set tubs in the kitchen or basement. Whitewash will be boiled in huge oval boilers on top of the stove, releasing clouds of steam and humidity. Then everything will be rinsed, pushed and pulled through the wringer, carried outdoors and hung to dry, carried in again, sprinkled, starched and ironed with flatirons kept heating on the stove, hung on clotheshorses and put in linen presses.

As soon as the house is in order, and assuming you are still alive (I am exhausted just writing about it), Mrs. Beeton reminds you to have the pianos tuned and the locks and hardware oiled. For the summer season, the clean furniture must be protected with dust covers (genesis of slipcovers) and mirrors, chandeliers and shades all wrapped, mummylike, in clean cloth. The good housewife never forgets that the condition of her home, according to Mrs. B, "is an index to the character of its mistress." Better dead than dirty.

When I was young, this process had become a still-intense, but vestigial ceremonial. The vacuum cleaner and a battery of commercial products had eased the chores. But the house was still "turned out of windows" at the appropriate time. Winter curtains were taken down and "camphored away" and fresh summer curtains were hung. The rugs were rolled in tar paper to make great, ghostly lumps under sofas and chairs. And, finally, the summer slipcovers were put on.

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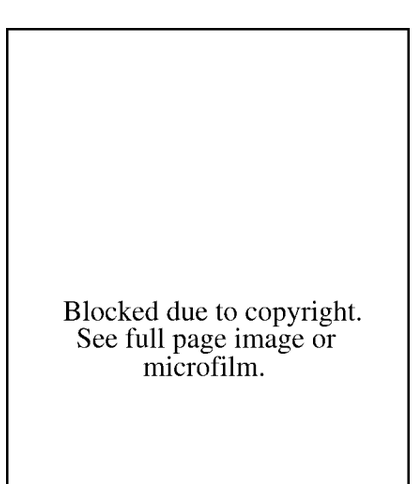
As a schoolchild, I would come home on a May day to a house smelling soap-and-camphor clean, dark fabrics and colors exchanged for fresh, light cottons, the floors bare and shining and the windows in sheer, summer dress. My husband remembers his family rearranging the furniture by moving beds toward windows with the lengthening, warming days — a change that delighted him then and that he still misses now.

Spring-cleaning has always been an apocalyptic, seasonal rite that combines duty, pride and guilt. It was not uncommonly pursued to the point of masochism, followed by a state of euphoric exhaustion and certifiable virtue. On the purely practical side, it is no longer really necessary, because modern appliances and products and air-conditioning can keep a house clean all year, and the modern taste for light fabrics and colors neither needs nor encourages change. It is hard to argue that there aren't better things to do with one's time and stale bread.

But I am still old-fashioned enough so that I do not feel, yet, that backpacking is preferable to housekeeping; for one thing, I don't want my possessions with me all the time, and for another, I want some familiar and beautiful objects around me that suggest continuity and charm in a world that has little of either. I wash fine old china when the mood strikes me, for the pleasure of the way it looks and feels. I open the windows to the sun in the spring and bring in tulips and forsythia. A house is a home if you care.



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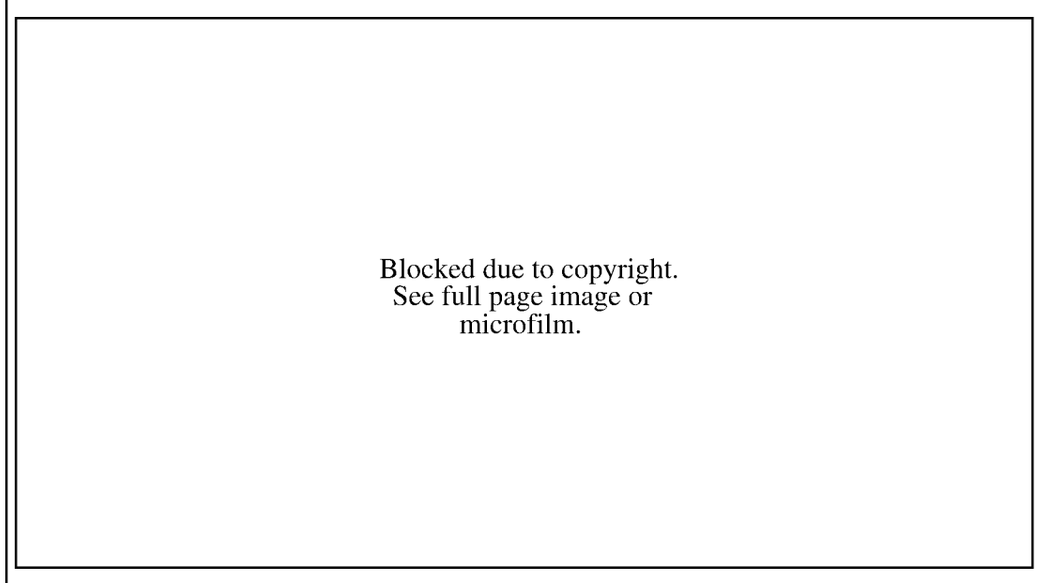
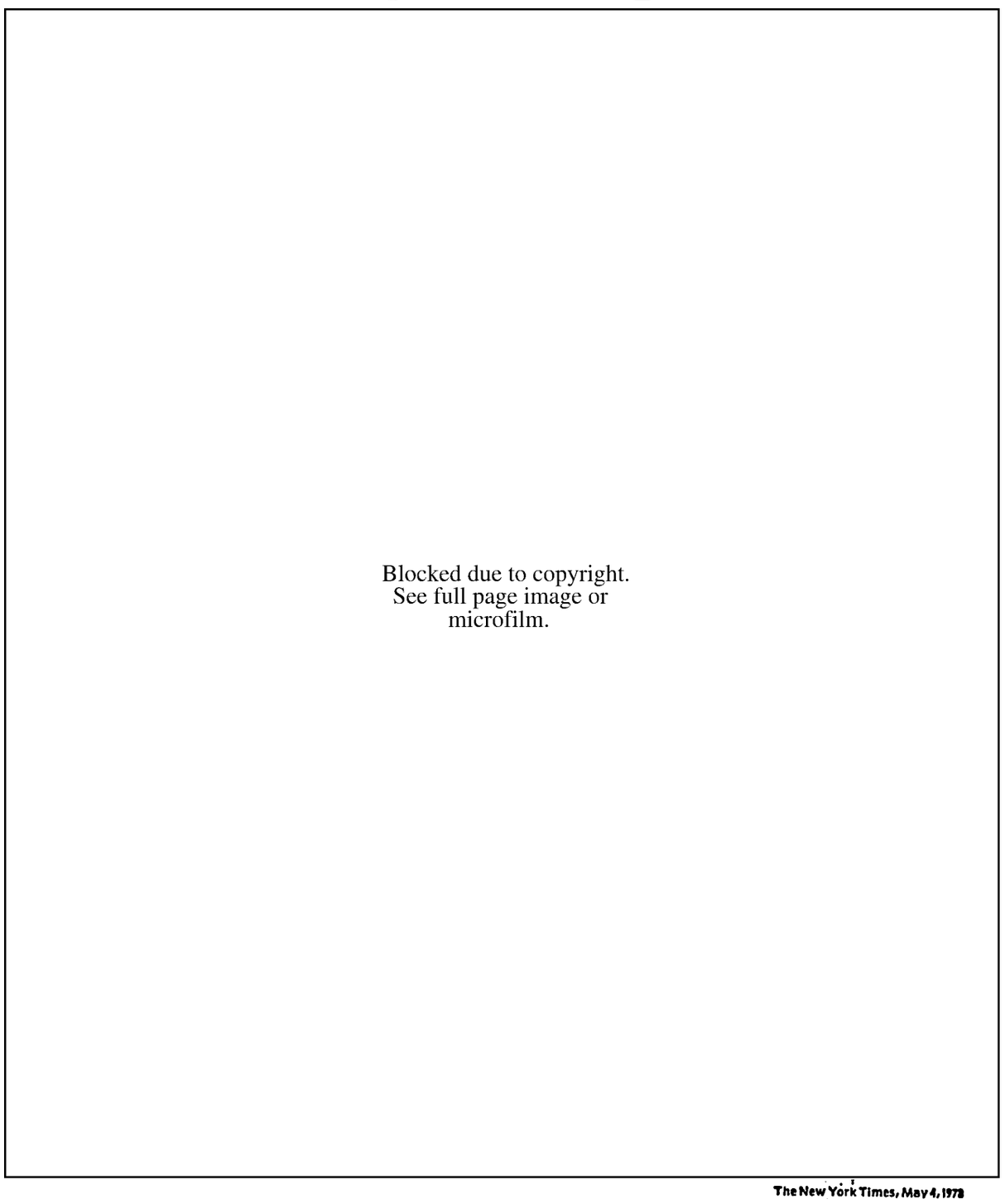


A Sampling of Cleaning Services



The New York Times, May 4, 1978