

Breadwinner or Breadmaker?

DOROTHY VAN DOREN

That the average woman is more valuable as a breadwinner than a breadmaker is one answer to "The New Woman Goes Home" in our February issue

FOR seventeen years I was gainfully employed outside my home. During more than half of that time I was married and the mother of children. I feel, therefore, that I know something about the working woman; just as I grant that Mrs. Borsodi knows something about the woman who is a homemaker. I was not an average wage earner; for one thing, my salary was too high. But Mrs. Borsodi is not an average homemaker. Which ought to make us about even.

Mrs. Borsodi urges her plan for the "average woman," but by her own figures the average wage for gainfully employed women was about \$800 a year in 1929. Today she estimates it at about \$500 to \$600. If these women stayed at home, she promises that they could save from \$5 to \$20 a week. This saving would be effected, however, not by the ordinary hit-or-miss home management, but by scientific management with mechanical equipment. The minimum necessary equipment is an electric range, a "large" electric refrigerator, an electric mixer, a pressure cooker, a washing machine, a mangle, and an electric sewing machine. This equipment would involve an expenditure, I estimate, of something over \$500. Mrs. Borsodi computes carefully how much it costs her to make bread in her modern kitchen and notes a saving of a little more than five cents a loaf for a more nourishing and palatable product. Other items show a corresponding saving. But nowhere does she compute how \$500 worth of equipment can be bought by a woman earning \$600 a year.

The official census for 1930 showed roughly thirty million families in the United States, and ten million women gainfully employed. The average gives us one family in three with a woman wage earner. Why do these women work for wages outside the home? The answer, I believe, lies in other figures. In the "good" year of 1929, the average family income was \$2,600.

Since this includes high-income families, it is fairer to take the typical income, which in that year was \$1,600 or less for a family. Today the average family income is \$1,700, the typical family income is \$1,100 to \$1,200. Mrs. Borsodi admits that the initial cost of her equipment is high, but declares that it must be regarded as

an investment paid for out of income. Practically, however, the income in this case does not appear until the equipment is in operation. And it is clear that a twelve-hundred-dollar-income family cannot pay \$500 for domestic equipment. The poor cannot afford investment, any more than they can afford the economy of quantity buying.

When income figures are considered, it is clear that the vast majority of women — what Mrs. Borsodi calls the average women — who work outside the home do so because the cash they earn, little as it is, is a necessary part of the family earnings. Let us not delude ourselves. Most women do not work because they hate housework, be-

cause they would rather feed their families out of a can, because they prefer to neglect their children (and particularly in the lower-income groups, children often are neglected). It is not a caprice which takes women to the factory loom, to the clerk's desk, to the retail-store counter. It is the harsh compulsion of economic necessity.

The vast majority of working women, therefore, fall into the low-income groups where extra cash is a grim necessity, where the cost of the Borsodi equipment is prohibitive, and in most cases where the necessary education to use it economically is lacking. Moreover, probably the majority of gainfully employed women are not mistresses of their own homes. They are daughters waiting for marriage; they are single women or widows with no other means of support. In many cases, of course, they are young wives who keep on with their jobs after marriage in order to make marriage itself possible.

"Most people believe today that the industrial age has demonstrated the economic futility of homemaking. As a result of this belief, millions of women have abandoned the production of things at home to earn money in business, and those who have remained homemakers let outside agencies perform many home tasks. . . . But I am convinced that this decision by many women, that they could be of greater economic value to their families in business than they could while performing homemaking tasks, is based on an economic fallacy. . . . Money-making, for the overwhelming majority of women, does not pay. It pays neither them, their families, nor society."

—MRS. RALPH BORSODI

A minority of wage-earning women are members of an income group which could afford the equipment necessary for Mrs. Borsodi's mechanical household. A smaller minority are earning salaries large enough so that savings under the Borsodi plan would be negligible. A woman who earns \$50 or even \$30 a week, unless she is strongly inclined to domesticity, cannot be easily convinced on purely economic grounds that it is better to stay home and, by her efficient management of the home and a good deal of hard work, save \$5 to \$20 (minus her salary, of course). Even in the higher-income groups, the additional income of the wife is often an indispensable part of the family income. Not, as it is in the lower-income groups, for minimum necessities, but for obligations which the family may have incurred in happier days—property, for instance—and which cannot be denied without grave financial loss today. Certain women are temperamentally disinclined to, and many are woefully untrained for, the very real job of home management involved in the Borsodi plan. I said at the beginning of this article that Mrs. Borsodi was not an average woman. She is the one woman out of the many, many thousands of average, more or less educated, more or less competent women who is fitted for a high administrative post. She has chosen to use her extraordinary talents in the home, which is wholly admirable. But these talents are extraordinary; they are not average, and the average woman does not own them or would, I believe, lay claim to them.

There are, of course, extraordinary women in business. A few women are outstanding; their names are known to all of us; they command large salaries; and some of them have husbands and families. There are, in addition, a number of salaried women who have jobs which they enjoy, and who are paid \$5,000 a year, or perhaps less, and who manage their homes as well as their jobs with surprising success. For them the economic advantages of Mrs. Borsodi's plan are not important. A woman of this sort employs a competent cook and house manager who serves palatable food, economically bought, properly cooked, and not dished out of a can. Her home is neat and orderly. Her children probably go to a play school when they are small and to a "progressive" school later on, where provision is made for keeping them until nearly supertime because "mother is at the office."

In such homes the working mother performs a couple of full-time jobs. She must be companion and entertainer before she leaves for business in the morning and after she comes home at night. She must exercise supervision over her household as well as her desk. But whatever the strain on her body, it is likely that she is a more interesting companion both to her husband and her children than many women who spend all their days in the home. It is not necessarily so, but it often happens.

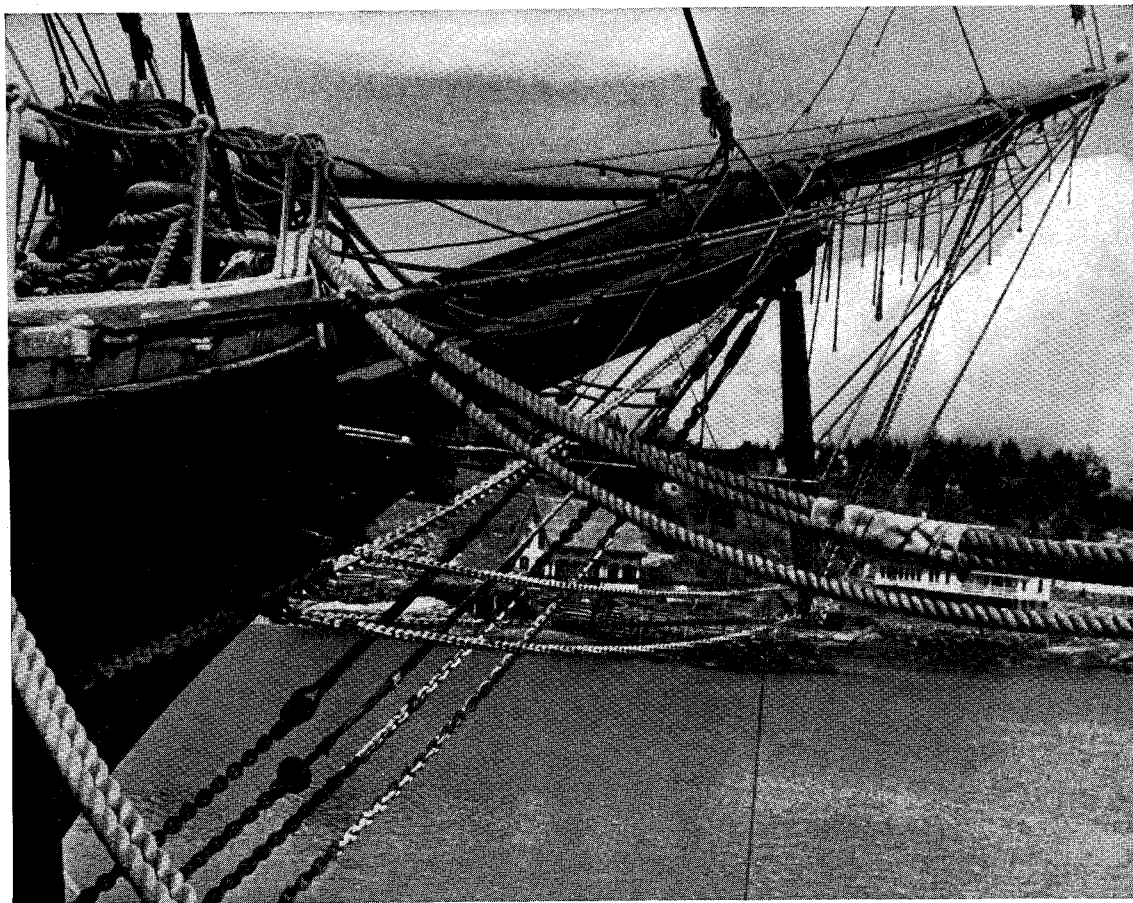
Superficially, it would seem that the division which modern industry has brought to the family results from the factorizing of processes which were formerly performed in the home. I believe that this is putting the cart before the horse. The factory, and all it brought with it,

was the answer to certain problems which had been felt in the home long before the factory existed. Prepared foods, store-bought clothes, the corner grocery store came after the decline of the domestic arts. They did not cause that decline. Our Puritan forefathers had no factories, no chain stores, no vegetables raised in California and shipped on ice to New York. The family was not only the domestic unit but the economic unit as well. Clothing was made in the home from wool woven in the home from yarn spun in the home from sheep raised on the home farm. It was dyed in the home from dyes made from plants plucked in the adjoining fields. The same thing was true of food. Meats and vegetables came from the farm. Imported items were few. Such a home was large, and such a family was numerous. Not only parents and a hearty group of working children but also aunts, uncles, cousins, bond servants, and innumerable hangers-on contributed to the incessant labor necessary to provide food, raiment, and shelter.

It was in some ways a good life. Nostalgic dwellers in the twentieth century are prone to look back on it and sigh for the lost frontier. Yet both spiritually and in fact that frontier is irrevocably lost. It was disappearing before the factory got started. The family was shrinking, the old days of labor from sun to sun—particularly for women—were falling out of favor, just as the stern Puritan morality fell out of favor, just as the reign of master over his household declined. Like it or not, the factory has come to stay because it answered deep wants in men and women. The urge for freedom, less consoling perhaps when it is possessed than it seemed in prospect, is a factor in our modern life. We have renounced our old labors as we have renounced our old gods.

Mrs. Borsodi, of course, does not advocate the back-breaking drudgery of those old times, although she does, I believe, minimize the labor involved in her home-management plan. But in a sense she wants to eat her cake and have it. We have given up our time-honored gods for our new god, the machine, and Mrs. Borsodi would like to combine the best features of each. I do not believe it can be done. We must alter the concept of the family which we now have before we can stop eating prepared food or sending the shirts out to the laundry. It will not help to bring mother back into the home. It will not help much to increase the income of the male wage earners to the point where the wages of the females are no longer needed.

We must restore the domestic arts to their former place—if indeed we want them restored. Then women will cheerfully give their lives and their labor to homework, with or without mechanical aids; then daughters will learn to cook and sew before marriage, and not to manage a typewriter. I don't want to sound too optimistic about all this. Perhaps the old days are gone forever. But I am very sure that their decline was not the result of women going out to work. And I am equally sure that the "new" woman, providing we are sure who or what she is, is not going home—at least not just yet.



PHOTOS, BLACK STAR

Sharecroppers of the Sea

BERTRAM B. FOWLER

As the fish go, so goes the coast of Maine—unless something is done to remedy conditions which have sapped the morale of the fishermen from Portland to Canada

THERE are a hundred places like the cove in Frenchman's Bay where George Bradley has his shack. Some of them are better, some worse. The coast is dotted with shacks like George's. Some of them, also, are better. And some are worse. The coves and the shacks along the strip of coast from Portland to the Canadian border represent a new problem. Or, perhaps I should say, the sign of a trend. Something has happened to Maine, just as it has happened to the farmers of the Middle West. It is the appearance of the same evil that has blighted the whole of the South. Tenancy has come to replace ownership. It is there, showing the same face of ugliness along the Maine coast that one finds in the sharecroppers' shacks from Arkansas through the South and East to the coastal plain and the sea.

Let us study more closely the case of George Bradley

who lives in the cove on Frenchman's Bay. His shack faces the massive bulk of Cadillac Mountain and Bar Harbor. He can see the yachts of the summer people lifting white wings against the sharp blue of the sky. The nearer view isn't so impressive. Waist-deep in the tide wash stands an old canning factory. It is several hundred yards out from the rocky shore, out where there was sufficient depth of water for boats to pull alongside and unload their fish.

The boats have vanished now. The pier that connected the cannery with the shore has rotted away. Here and there a pile leans disconsolately, a perch for the scavenging sea gulls. The cannery, with its blank windows staring out of the still-substantial brick walls, stands as a monument to a day that has passed, to a prosperity that to George has become like a half-forgotten legend.