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Community Laundry of the Des Moines Roadside Settlement House

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American standards of living demand cleanliness of wearing apparel. The Roadside Settlement house of Des Moines, through a laundry department maintained for the last twenty-one years, has furnished the means for attaining these standards to the people within a three mile radius. Those who might otherwise have no better way of washing than by rubbing the clothes by hand, may now take advantage of an opportunity to use modern equipment. This arrangement has been particularly fortunate for those who have no room to store the necessary machines, as well as for those who are unable to purchase the needed equipment. In fact, many women who could easily wash at home prefer to come to this convenient laundry rather than put up with the confusion in their own homes.

Aside from providing an opportunity to do the washing, the community laundry is also helpful as a gathering place for women who would otherwise be tied down by home duties. While talking and visiting with friends, much of the monotony, which is usually present while washing, is removed. A special feature of this institution is the privilege which allows housewives with young children to leave them, for a small charge, in the settlement nursery in an adjoining building.

The laundry department as it is today, one of the main divisions of the Roadside Settlement, has grown from a humble beginning in 1906, when but cold water and portable tubs were furnished. Each patron brought washboard and soap along with her clothes. Today this laundry occupies two large rooms in the southwest corner of the ground floor. These rooms are well ventilated and sufficiently lighted by means of ten large windows. The laundry consists of three electric washing machines, which are about twice as large as those in the average home; thirty steam heated dryers that are built into the wall, and a large extractor which whirls the water out of the clothes. Stationary tubs and laundry stoves complete the equipment. Formerly irons and ironers were included, but at the present time no ironing is done because of the misuse of the equipment due to operation by unskilled workers and the high cost of the necessary repairs.

Tubs and stoves are furnished free of charge to those who do laundry work at the settlement house. The customers are fortunate also in being able to obtain soft water, hot or cold. However, a small charge is made for the use of the other equipment, as follows: twenty cents an hour for the washing machines, five cents an hour for a set of three steam dryers, and five cents for the extractor. Soaps, washing powders, starch and bluing are all furnished by each individual customer. The cost of using the laundry varies from about forty to seventy cents a week. However, the average cost is about sixty cents, forty cents for the use of the washing machine for two hours, five cents for the use of the tubs and water, five cents for the dryers, five cents for the extractor and a five cent allowance made for the soap.

Is it surprising that people come from distant parts of the city when they can do their laundry here for less than it would cost them to do it in their own homes or in a private laundry? This laundry makes no profit; in fact, a considerable share of the expense is borne by the city. For this reason, those who use the laundry are required to pay for the services after the work is completed and before they leave. This eliminates the complication so common with charge accounts.

The laundry rooms are under the supervision of one man, who instructs the people in the use and care of the equipment. He is at hand to watch for all emergencies that may arise and attends to the necessary repair work.

The laundry is open every day except Thursday, although on Friday there is no steam. Saturday afternoon is reserved particularly for those who cannot come at any other time. At this season an average of about 250 family laundries are done in a month. This average shifts with the season, for in the winter time there is a much greater demand for the use of the laundry than in the summer. To avoid confusion, a period for work is scheduled with the caretaker, who assigns the time in the order for which it is spoken. About three hours is allowed for each family washing.

Although cooperative enterprises may not be generally successful, the laundry department of the Des Moines Roadside Settlement has been eminently so. Almost all available time is taken and women come from as far as three miles to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this laundry. In fact, one of the problems that confronts the laundry today is the need of more space. This Iowa laundry is exceptional because, contrary to what has generally been true throughout the United States, it demonstrates what great value a truly cooperative institution may have.