

Washing & Sewing: A Diary & Tins

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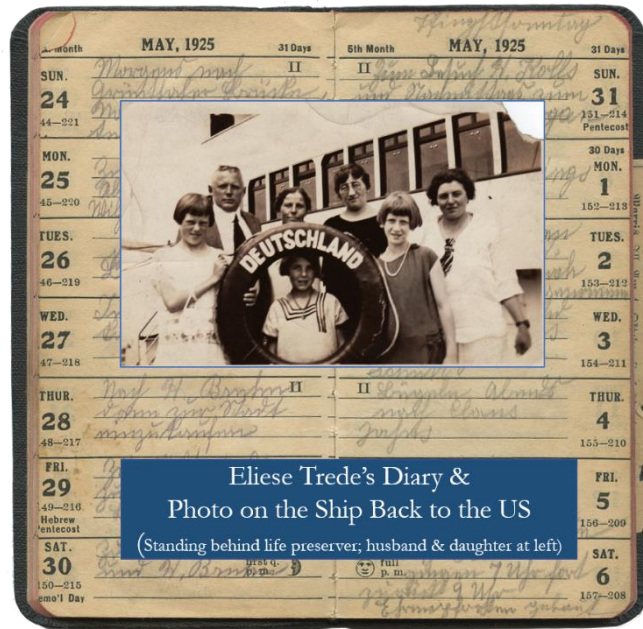
By Pamela Israel

Sewing, in addition to laundry, used to be a responsibility that almost every woman had. And yet it can be tough to get insights into this part of women's lives from times past. We hear about cooking and food, but laundry and even sewing....not so much.

When I think about a few items our family has from my great-grandmother, I realize we have some gems.

Laundry

First gem: a diary written in the old-style German cursive (Sütterlin) from a trip back to Schleswig-Holstein, Germany from Chicago. Among the multiple photos, we find one of Eliese and her family on the return trip, on the *Deutschland*.



Some translated excerpts from the vacation diary:

May 1925

Fri 1. [1st day on the ship] Got seasick. Cinema in the evening
 Sat 9. Landed at 3 at night in England
 Mon. 11 Arrive in Lütjenwest at quarter to noon. Joyous reunion
 Thurs. 14 **Washing**. Visits in the evening
 Fri 15 Visited Mother and Father
 Tue. 26 Did **laundry**. To Teacher Reuss

June

Wed. 3 did **laundry** and to Uncle Hans
 Thurs 4 **ironing**. In the evening to Claus Jahns
 Fri 5 to Hademarschen, bought spoons, had lunch
 Tue. 9 **laundry and ironing**

So went the 1925 diary kept by Eleise Trede on her only journey back to her native Germany after 17 years. Eliese jots down short phrases and names to remember this remarkable visit to the home she'd left as a teenager. One of the fascinating elements of looking at a diary are the everyday moments that people don't later remember but ones that help you put yourself back in

time. Interspersed with the "joyous reunion" we find frequent mentions of doing laundry and ironing.

Such a diary is a rich trove for digging into family relationships. Yet the surprise is the glimpse of the day-to-day life. Laundry was surely not what she described to all her friends upon her return Chicago, or later her grandchildren if they asked about her trip. And yet, these chores regularly pop up in Eliese's notes of this trip. It's pretty telling how much time they took.

Sewing

On the sewing front, I've a rectangular red and gold tin full of brightly colored embroidery floss and thread. Perhaps this tin holds threads used for the myriad hand-crocheted doilies or embroidered handkerchiefs passed down to me.



Less colorful on the outside is my great-grandmother's button tin. As a young girl I loved fingering my mother's different buttons. Then I fell in love with this button collection when she got it from her mother. This tin is especially marvelous because it has a spinning shelf with a peak-through hole in one section so you can access the bottom layer. It's like a secret compartment!

Through the Generations

What's remarkable is knowing my mother's grandmother wrote in this diary during a particularly moving trip. She also fingered the buttons in the delightful tin, maybe playing with ones she especially liked - just like me. There's a special connection: mother to daughter to daughter to daughter.

So what got me focused on all this women's work? September is National Sewing Month. It got me thinking about how significant an investment in time women often spent on sewing and washing in times past. Also, I checked: April 15, better known as Tax Day, is also National Laundry Day!

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