

# HOW GIRLS CLERK

*Hired by the St. Paul Globe to investigate the lives of working women, typesetter-turned-journalist Eva McDonald Valesh (1866–1956) posed as a job seeker in various trades for about a year. Her resulting series, published under the pseudonym Eva Gay, looked at women in factories, offices, shops, and homes and launched Valesh as an investigative journalist, labor organizer, and speaker on the national scene. This excerpt from her June 17, 1888, column explores working and living conditions for clerks in downtown Minneapolis. Microfilm copies of the newspaper (daily, weekly, semi-weekly, and Sunday editions) can be viewed in the Minnesota Historical Society Library.*

## AN UNDERCOVER REPORTER TRIES ON THE LIFE OF A SALES CLERK IN 1888.

“Why don’t you get a chance to clerk?” asked one of my girl friends who was interested in my attempts to learn various trades. . . . It’s more genteel than factory work. A clerk can always be dressed neat and pretty: It’s pleasanter to handle fancy goods and see people coming and going all day than be shut up in a hot factory. Then people call you a saleslady, and it sounds more high-toned than working girl or servant.”

I wasn’t much impressed by my friend’s argument, because there was

a dim remembrance floating in my mind of a week’s experience at clerking in one of the large dry goods stores during the holidays. It wasn’t wholly a pleasant remembrance.



*Eva McDonald Valesh*

“It seemed to me that we worked almost fourteen hours a day, were docked for being late, had to have our baskets O.K.’d before going home. In fact, any number of disagreeable things happened,” I said reflectively.

“It isn’t fair to judge of the work by your experience during the holidays because they work longer hours during that time, and the new girls who only expect to stay a couple of weeks see the hardest side of the life,” she replied. “You try to get a regular place in a large store and you’ll like it better.”

I was willing to try it, “but I’ll look through all the stores” was my mental comment. “Of course a person of my ability can have an opportunity to select her own place, and I’ll take the best of the lot.” I changed my mind on that subject in a short time.

Along Nicollet Avenue the many dry goods and millinery stores formed a tempting array. I made my first application at a store on Nicollet Avenue. The store is pleasant and spacious. Their clerks seemed quite contented. The ordinary working hours here, as in other large stores, are from 8 in the morning until 6 in the evening. I could not see that seats were furnished so that employees could rest when not busy, but the only complaint that I heard came from one of the gentlemen clerks; he thought it quite tiresome to stand all day.

I found the manager and asked not for work but for a position.

“Have you had any experience?” he asked.

“No sir,” I replied, resolutely crowding out the memory [of] my former short experience.

“Then it’s almost useless to ask for work,” he said, “for we have now a list of applications that will supply all the help we need for the next year. Many of those on that list are experienced and also recommended, and of course they have the first chance.”

“Then you don’t hire girls who want to learn?” I asked.

“Yes, occasionally we do. If they come recommended by one of our good customers.”

“What wages do you pay them?”

“About \$4 a week until we think they are worth more; then we advance wages as we see fit. Some of the girls in our employ now earn as high as \$10 and \$12 a week.”

“How many years have they been working for you?” I asked.

“Oh, four or five years, probably. Our help, if they give satisfaction, always stay with us until they get married or save enough to retire from business as old maids.”

It struck me that their tastes must be simple and easily gratified if they could save anything out of \$10 or \$12 a week after spending as much for fine raiment as many of them do. . . .

Taking the hint, I wore my best

dress and most impressive air during the rest of my investigations.

It was tiresome work. In every store there were a multitude of applicants. Some of them didn't need to work at all; they didn't care what the wages were; they only wanted to clerk so as to get away from the restrictions of home or school and have a jolly time, as they expressed it. Others, claiming that they couldn't do rough work, were willing to endure any privation in order to keep up appearances. . . . even willing to work without pay for a while for the remote possibility of being able to make living wages after a year or two.

At another Nicollet Avenue store they did not need help, and the manager told me that he paid \$4 a week for about the first year.

“If you have your living to earn,” he said, “it's of no use to try clerking,

because you'd starve to death. Our new clerks are those who live at home. Their wages furnish car fare and pocket money.”

The clerks in this store don't let any grass grow under their feet. They are always in a rush, and either too tired or afraid to talk about their work. I found one, however, who told me she received \$4 a week and lived on it. She hired a room in company with three other girls. They paid \$5 a month in rent, boarded themselves at a cost of \$1 a week each, did their own washing, ironing, and sewing after or before working hours. The girl who told me this was neatly dressed, and I would not have guessed from her appearance that it cost her such a desperate struggle to exist.

I went home with her. It was thirty-two blocks from the store.

*Female clerks assist shoppers in what appears to be the notions department of Donaldson's Glass Block, Sixth Street and Nicollet Avenue, about 1900.*



I carelessly remarked: "Let's take a car; it's too hot to walk so far."

She flushed painfully as she explained that she always walked because car fare would amount to 60 cents a week, and she couldn't afford it.

She lived on the second floor in a room 10 x 15 and about seven feet high; there was one window in the room. Here four girls ate, slept, cooked, washed, ironed, and sewed. The girl looked thoroughly worn out; she had been clerking about eight months and I venture to say that in eight months more some other girl will stand in her place. . . .

The wages and conditions of employes in the other stores were similar to those just mentioned.

Finally, I was fortunate enough to get employment. I brought forth a handful of references, mostly of my own manufacture, glibly informed the manager that I had a business college education, was perfectly willing to work a year or more for \$3 a week. In fact, I had learned by experience that it's the proper thing to be quite elated at your good fortune in getting a position. . . .

I found that advancement in wages depends upon the number and amount of sales made. This encourages a girl to bring all her friends to trade in the store where she clerks; it also has a tendency to make each girl smiling and affable to wealthy customers who make big purchases, and rather careless of the plainly-dressed stranger. In the innocence of my heart I treated every customer alike, but the girls soon taught me the distinction between the various classes. I think clerks are good students of human nature. It didn't take long for me to learn to smile and bear with the exactions of the wealthy customer

and revenge myself by being "sassy" to the humble purchaser.

The girls get all their goods at a reduction from regular prices, so that their wages buy more than one would think. The temptation to spend all one's wages in dress is great. Many girls have their wages taken up for weeks ahead. It isn't a bad plan, because she doesn't dare ask for a raise of wages or grumble at any exactions of her employer while in debt.

I brought my dinner in a basket the first day, and came near losing caste forever by so doing. All clerks who don't go home to dinner go to the restaurant, or at any rate pretend to. I went to the restaurant the next day with the girls to see how they managed it. Hardly anybody bought a full meal: a cup of coffee and a sandwich would do to keep up appearances. Or, perhaps each would order a dish apiece, and then share with each other. The only trouble with the restaurant plan is that you didn't get enough to eat without paying from 25 cents to 50 cents a meal, and I found it impossible to live on thin air as some girls seemed to. . . .

I found that many girls after working four or five years do not earn more than \$4 a week, and that does not mean as much to her as it would to the factory girl, because it costs her more to live in proper style. . . .

The life to me seemed very monotonous: there are not as many rules about work as in the factory, but the unwritten laws are numerous and forcible. The clerk is always shivering in her skin for fear that the employer will not be pleased with the amount of her sales, her personal appearance, or her manner towards customers. The large number who are always looking for this sort of work keep the wages of those

who are lucky enough to have a place down to the lowest notch. . . .

It is probably due to my want of appreciation that I had as soon work in a factory as to clerk in a store. The girls do not agree with me in this view.

In the millinery stores the usual method of getting a clerkship seems to be to go as apprentice in the trimming room and progress upwards. The rate of wages is slightly higher than in the dry goods line, but steady employment is the exception rather than the rule.

I also visited many confectionery stores, but didn't succeed in getting work. . . . "We want handsome young girls about sixteen years old," they said: "It doesn't take much ability to handle this line of goods. A pretty girl with a lively tongue can draw lots of trade. Then we don't have to pay those girls more than from \$2 to \$4 a week" . . . .

Although the larger stores do not require employes to work more than one evening in the week, yet I find many stores in other parts of the city which still keep open every evening. They do not pay any higher rate of wages on account of long hours. . . .

I notice that some employers make a practice of keeping only a few experienced hands, then hiring new girls at \$3 a week and then discharging them as soon as they ask for more.

There seems to be a perfect understanding between employer and clerk as to the amount of gratitude, humility, and hard work which should be given by the clerk in return for a position in his store. But if the clerk is satisfied, certainly no one else would wish to see such a harmonious arrangement disturbed. ❖

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