

## Service

I've long thought that I would have enjoyed living in the eighteenth century - provided, selfishly, I could have been among those in the upper stratum of society. Too much poverty, too much dirt, and too much hard work was the lot of the majority living then. If I could have worn fine clothes, heard beautiful music during the time Mozart was living, for instance, and have had many people to wait on me, I dreamed that life would have been ideal. Thinking along those lines caused me to compare the personal service people in even modest circumstances received not very long ago - within my memory, actually.

The area of personal service has been eroding for most of my lifetime, and we continue to lose some of the few remaining *personal* services, though maybe not the services. Although I regret their loss, I must admit that in a few instances, we're better off without them. I've been reading about banking services, for instance. Automatic teller machines are replacing live tellers, and I understand that banks are already planning to phase out the face-to-face teller to receive our deposits and cash our checks in the near future. Already some checking accounts furnish a miniaturized xerox copy of checks which have cleared; some don't even do that much, giving only a promise to supply a canceled check on special order to the payer who needs it, but only for a fee. I don't look forward to all that electronic service, although I'm sure it's more cost effective than what we have.

I remember when mail was delivered to our homes twice a day during most of the year and four or five times a day during the Christmas rush season. Postage was just two cents a letter, with one cent postal cards available. Nor did we have to add a five- or nine-digit zip code to addresses. Although we didn't see them, real people sorted our mail to the right part of the country and to the right neighborhood when it arrived. Now machines handle all that work, I am sure much more expeditiously than people ever did.

I have only dim memories of asking someone always named "Central," except in small towns where she had a real name, to connect the caller to the appropriate number. It is easy to remember when we placed a telephone call across the country by talking to a long-distance operator who knew how to route the call. I used to enjoy hearing the various exchanges through which my call went from, say, Dallas to San Francisco. It's easier to punch in an eleven-digit number and have almost instant contact with the person we're calling, but wasn't it a nice service to be able to request the operator to try that busy number again for us while we went on about our business? I also recall too well supplying the personal service at an office switchboard, connecting my boss with any number he wished, either locally or long distance, provided, of course, I didn't get the wires crossed on the switchboard. I don't miss that aspect of personal service at all. The multi-stationed telephone systems in offices today are much more efficient and not nearly so subject to operator error. The impersonal yet personalized service of the answering machine or voice mail is a great step forward.

And then there's the matter of filling my car with gas. I've become accustomed to the necessity of pumping the gas myself, but I do miss the eager service station employee,

sometimes even two of them at a time, washing my windshield, checking the oil, adding air to a slightly soft tire, and checking the battery. I found it comforting, especially on an out-of-town drive, to have the car's belts checked for wear and any number of other services, not to mention those intriguing free road maps in a rack inside the station office. Those services still available at considerable cost in a few places, are, alas, no longer available to the average motorist.

There are many other personal services I miss. After reading a short article in the paper the other day about the ritual of buying gloves, I recalled with nostalgia the service I used to anticipate when I sought to buy new hose or a new pair of kid gloves.

Always having rough hands and ragged nails myself, I was impressed with the smooth hands of the hosiery saleswoman who would show me a new shade of hose. She would fold her thumb across the palm of her hand, curl her fingers down over the thumb, and insert her hand into the stocking. When she reached the foot, she would carefully spread her fingers and show me the fabric stretched across the back of her hand so that I could assess the color of the silk, or later, nylon. I admired the obvious smoothness of her hand; a rough fingernail or a chapped finger could quickly snag and ruin the beautiful hose. Most important was the fact that I knew exactly what color I was buying. Now I consult a printed chart of hosiery colors and select a well protected pair of hose encased firmly in plastic. The pair of hose I take home is frequently not the precise color that I would like to have. There's a particular shade of black stocking that I keep looking for, in vain, for example.

But the best personal service ritual that I recall accompanied the buying of a new pair of kid gloves. One of my proudest teenaged moments came the first time I was directed to perch on the tall upholstered stool in front of the glove counter at Titcher-Goettinger's Department Store in Dallas. I carefully placed my right elbow on the small velvet pillow, as I had seen my mother do. The sales clerk had already measured the palm of my right hand and determined the color glove I desired - white on that occasion. Then, she dusted the inside of the right glove with a bit of powder and inserted into one of the fingers a cunning wooden instrument with a pincer arrangement on the end. Gently, she used the instrument to slightly stretch each finger. Then, she gathered the glove in her hand and placed it over my extended fingers. I knew that I needed to hold my wrist taut, not easy for me to do, while she gently eased each finger into the proper finger of the glove. Once she smoothed down those four fingers, I folded my thumb compactly across my palm so that she could pull the balance of the glove over the rest of my hand, adroitly, so that my thumb popped into its proper place in the glove. After she smoothed the leather across my palm and inspected each finger to eliminate any wrinkle, I was free to admire my grown-up hand in its sleek, soft covering. I don't remember any time when the first try was entirely successful; however, I learned that my fingers are unusually short and "stubby" (the description most often applied to them) and that my palm is unusually long. Because gloves do not have those comparative dimensions, I've nearly always had to compromise a little in order to have a glove reach the proper place on my wrist. Usually, that means that the fingers are a trifle long, a problem that is never obvious once I've worn the gloves a couple of times. Leather is a wonderfully forgiving material. For

a time before World War II there was a brand of gloves that fit my fingers and palm admirably without the surplus at the tips of my fingers. That brand was a casualty of the war, apparently, for I've not found it again. Now I have to fit my own gloves. The wonderful feeling of being cosseted and cared for is gone, although I sometimes dream that perhaps some store which caters to an old-fashioned clientele still fits gloves on women's hands - and maybe that store also employs a salesperson with beautifully soft, manicured hands so that she can show me that pair of sheer black hose I covet.

On careful thought, I realize that the pampering I received and liked would be very expensive to provide today, so I believe now that self service is worth my extra effort.