

Dignity (Continued)

that when they use these names properly they are showing respect for both the men and their calling.

Unnecessary formality? We don't think so. Our country today needs more scientists, engineers, doctors, teachers. Yet, instead of building up in young minds a respect for the professions, we often tear them down. Subtly disparaging, we call doctors *sawbones*, and lawyers *shysters*.

From our cleaning woman to our minister, we and our children address everyone by his correct name—and we like our own names to be used and respected. Our children have "family" names, and we refuse to shorten or change them. "Don't call me Annie," my small daughter protested to a friend. "My name is Anne, after my grandmother. I'm not a poor little orphan girl!"

We don't encourage nicknames; often they take away from a child's natural dignity by calling attention to physical traits which he cannot help. No child really enjoys being called *Skinny* or *Freckles*. And when these nicknames carry over into adult life, the result can be ludicrous. The fattest woman on our street is called *Tiny!*

Comic-strip names, like Pop, Mom, Unk, Gramps, are taboo in our family. The children call us Father and Mother—what better?

The Prells, our neighbors, complain that their youngsters show them no respect. "The boys yell for Fred as if he were one of the gang," Mrs. Prell says. She forgets that she and her husband encouraged the children to call them by their first names when they were tots. It sounded cute; besides, they wanted to be "friends" with their children. But children can be made to feel that their parents are their friends without using first names. Besides, the words Father and Mother have a connotation of authority—and the Prell children miss this reminder of respect for their elders!

WHEN THEY go abroad, Americans usually are astonished at the time which Europeans spend over their meals, and the ceremony attendant on them. In Portugal, for instance, the youngsters go around the table and kiss their parents before leaving—a wholesome reminder of the gratitude they owe them.

Perhaps one reason for the closer family life observed abroad lies in the number of hours the family spends together, savoring their meals. And perhaps one reason for the decay of family life in our own country is the disappearance of the leisurely family meal of more gracious years.

Few of our homes have dining rooms any more. We have dining areas, dinettes, nooks, or we copy the drugstore and install a counter in the kitchen. The least formal among us descend to lapboards, on which we balance our food with our eyes glued to the TV screen!

In our family, we insist on eating

together at a sizable table and with a degree of formality. As mealtimes are among the few occasions when we are all assembled, we try to make them as pleasant as possible. Unpleasant sub-

jects are taboo, and the give-and-take of "real conversation" is encouraged. Meals are served simply, but as attractively as we can manage.

"It's always like a party at your

house," a small neighbor once said, admiring the flowers on our table. "Well, not quite," my little son answered thoughtfully. "We have fun, but we don't have favors every day."

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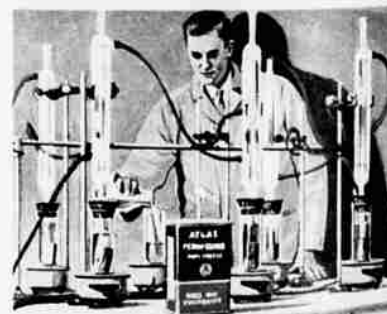


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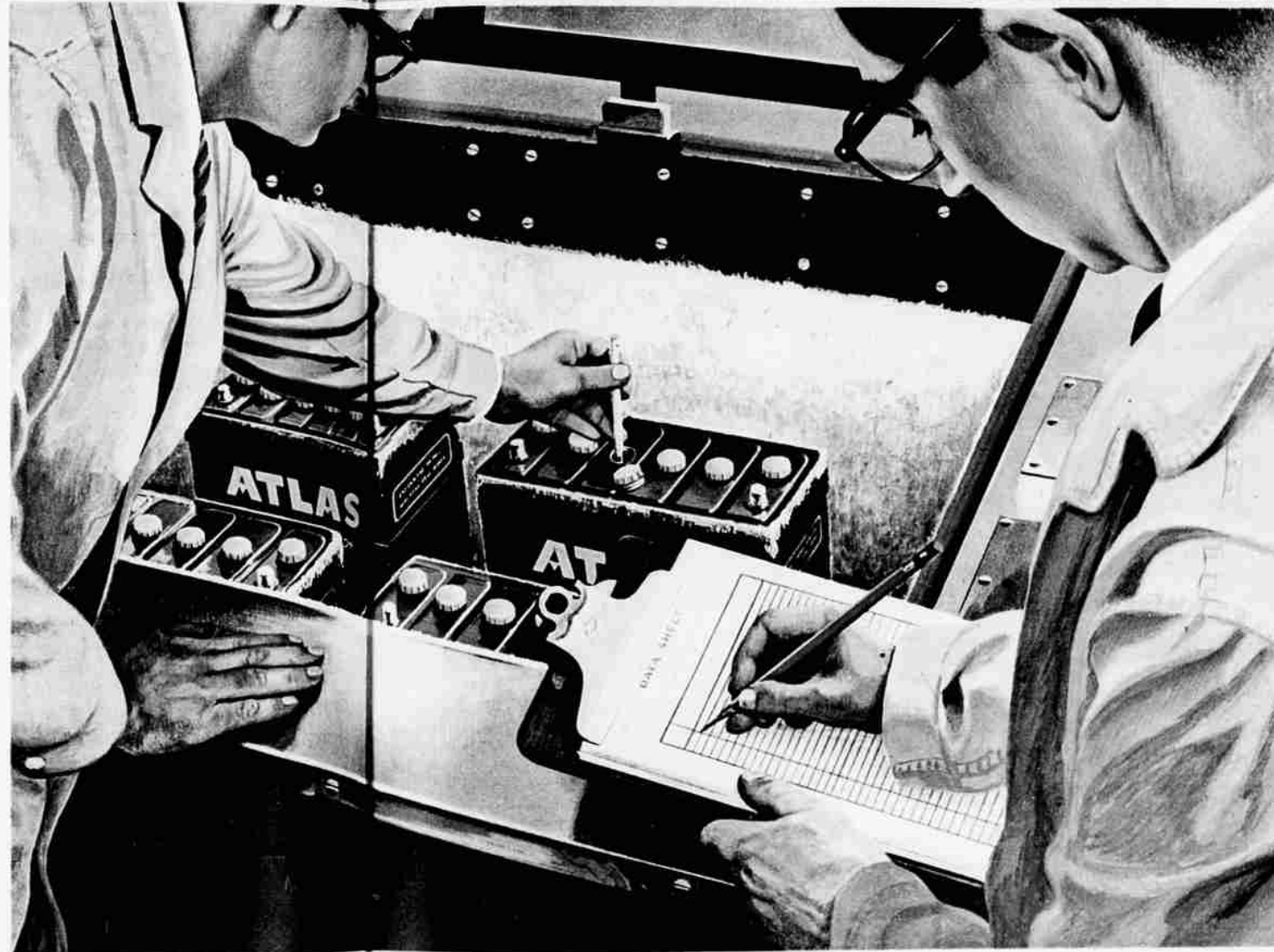
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Guests provide an opportunity for more ceremony. Naturally, they get our best china and silver, and a more elaborate centerpiece. And we cater to their tastes; we don't want them to

feel "at home"—we want them to enjoy a change, to be fussed over and waited on. We wouldn't dream of letting them set foot in the kitchen to help with the dishwashing chores!

Our youngsters are learning such formalities as pulling out chairs, offering lights for cigarettes, watching the guests' comfort. We don't want them ever to be as embarrassed as our

neighbor's son was not long ago. Returning from a week end at the home of a college friend, Paul flung himself on the divan. "So that's that," he said grimly. "I don't imagine I'll ever go there again."

Hadn't he enjoyed himself? Didn't the Brewsters make him welcome?

On the contrary, they were wonderful. "It was me," he said, aggrieved. "I was out of step most of the time. The Brewsters are so darn polite. Sort of formal—but it's natural to them. John calls his father 'Sir,' and he pulls out chairs at table, even for his kid sisters. Stuff like that."

His mother flushed. To me, she said, "It's our fault, I guess. We've always been very informal. I'm afraid Paul's grown up a bit of a roughneck. We should have given him more polish—everyone isn't as informal as we are."

WHERE CALLERS are concerned, our family definitely stands on ceremony. No, we don't expect folks to leave calling cards. And we don't have *At Home* days. But neither do we keep open house, urge people to "take us as they find us," or encourage the neighbors' children to use our back door. Too many families, especially those who live in the close quarters of housing developments, have found that this type of informality has unfortunate results. It leads to unwanted intimacies, to lack of privacy, to waste of time.

"I wish I'd never told that Mrs. Gray to drop in when she felt like it," Dolores says wryly. "She's forever on my doorstep. She trails through the house after me—and it doesn't matter if the telephone rings. She says, 'Go right ahead, don't mind me.' And she sits there with her ears flapping!"

Mrs. Warren, mother of three, complains that she gets nothing done. "The women around here are more than neighborly—running in and out to borrow things, and hanging around until you practically have to make coffee for them!"

We feel, like the Englishman, that our home is our castle. We like a measure of privacy. We think the living room, not the kitchen or laundry, is the place for callers. If one of our youngsters answers the door, he says, "Come in, won't you?" He sees that the caller is seated, and then says, "Excuse me—I'll tell Mother."

Formal, perhaps, but we have found this vastly preferable to the usual teen-age "Hi—go right on in. Mom's in the back someplace." Lack of formality, in this case, gives Mother no chance to take off her apron or collect her thoughts.

There are, of course, many times and places where informality is permissible and pleasant: in the Summer cottage, the camp, the bungalow at the shore, for example. And there are old and intimate friends with whom we can be as informal as we please. But informality should never be an excuse for lack of self-discipline, laziness, sloppiness, or failure to respect and consider others.



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