The New American Woman of the 1920s

Within the usual American home, Monday was always “wash-day,” attended by a soapy, steamy scent of suds. Water frequently had to be carried in buckets from a well some distance from the house. The clothes were “put to soak” the night before, and washing was begun as early as four in the morning. It was a matter of pride with housewives to have the washing hung before breakfast, and neighbors would vie with one another in seeing whose washing appeared earliest on the line. Tuesday was “ironing-day.” The irons were heated on a hot stove. Men’s “boiled” shirts, linen collars and cuffs, and women’s and children’s dresses and underwear with many yards of ruffles, starched to a wooden inflexibility, were “done up” at home. Wednesday was sewing and mending day. Women’s and children’s clothing was made at home, and usually the shirts of the men of the household. Darning huge piles of socks and stockings so perfectly that the darning could hardly be detected was a prized accomplishment of a good housewife. The best silk dress was often turned and remade to serve for a few more years. No man was ashamed to wear an honest patch. Thursday was a kind of mid-week rest-day: so far as it had fixed tasks, they were usually crocheting or embroidering, quilting, making rag carpets. Friday was cleaning-day. The thick carpets had to be swept with a broom: the housewife usually word a dust-cap or towel wrapped around her head to protect her hair. After a through sweeping of rooms and stairs, furniture was dusted. Kitchen floors and porches were scrubbed, usually on hands and knees. The stoves were brightly polished. Saturday was “baking-day.” All the bread and pastries were made n the home, large solid loaves, pies, cakes, doughnuts, and the delicacy most prized by the small boy – “cookies,” usually made with a coating of white sugar and with a solitary raisin set like a jewel in the centre, and kept in a crock on an inaccessible shelf of the pantry to be doled out for good behavior or withheld for discipline. To use much “baker’s bread” was an indictment, at once, of a housewife’s industry and of her pride in her calling. Sunday was called the day of rest, but for the housewife it meant, often, the arrival of “company” and extra cooking. It was at this period that the old adage was most apt: “A man may work from sun to sun, but women’s work is never done.”

1. Make a list of at least 5 appliances or innovations of today that would have lightened the housewife’s work-week.
2. What additional tasks of the housewife are not even mentioned here?
3. How much time, in your opinion, would the housewife have had for personal interests and needs?
4. Do women today compare to the women of the 1920s? Explain your answer.
5. Explain how the lives of women changed in the 1920s for each of the following:
   1. Housekeeping duties:
   2. Leisure time activities:
   3. Careers:
   4. Clothing/dress: