“Why, you can’t go to town in a bathtub!” These words, uttered by a rural woman whose family owned a car but no tub during the 1920s, are the stuff of legend in the history of the automobile and American life. In the inter-war years, “automobility” became the surest sign of a family’s social status and its aspirations for membership in the middle class. As people invested financially and culturally in consumer society, they elected to spend their durable goods dollars on transportation items rather than on household improvements, including better facilities for human waste disposal, which makes the rural woman’s perceptions of the bathtub even more pertinent. According to a three-year survey completed in 1928 under the auspices of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, more than twenty million Americans—some 17 percent of the population—still lived in dwellings without bathrooms. To sanitary fixture manufacturers like the Kohler Company of Kohler, Wisconsin, such statistics marked a durable goods niche ripe for development by a firm with a sophisticated, well-oiled marketing organization.¹

More than other firms in this study, the Kohler Company tried to stimulate desire and to “make people want things” by using three interrelated strategies of enticement: product design, national advertising, and consumer credit. The
fundamental goal revolved around converting the trinity of basic bathroom fixtures—the toilet or water closet, the sink or wash basin, and the bathtub—from producer goods bought by builders into major durable goods purchased directly by consumers. The company unfolded this plan at the peak of the so-called durable goods revolution of the 1920s, as manufacturers of cars, refrigerators, stoves, and radios all offered their alluring products to consumers on credit. In many respects, the firm fits the well-known model of the family-dominated entrepreneurial enterprise that tried to achieve economies of scope and scale through product diversification and the coordination of an extensive marketing force. During the interwar years, Kohler struggled to find a place in an oligopolistic market dominated by Chicago’s Crane Company and Pittsburgh’s Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company. In the shadows of these diversified giants, Kohler’s feisty, visionary president, Walter J. Kohler Sr., developed a distinctive approach to design, innovation, and marketing.

At the helm of his family’s firm from 1905 to 1937, Walter Kohler expanded its manufacturing base, making the Kohler Company into a “full-line” plumbing supplier. Rather than emulate the practices of big business—expanding his company through horizontal consolidation, vertical integration, and the establishment of bureaucratic hierarchies—Kohler embraced a corporate strategy that emphasized continuity between the family firm, its community, and its customers. An eclectic set of ideas about citizenship, consumption, and efficiency lay at the heart of his philosophy. Kohler’s amalgamated ideas drew sustenance from his readings of John Ruskin and Frederick Winslow Taylor, the Americanization movement that grew out of the Great War, and his financial interests in a plumbing fixture firm. At the same time, his belief in the power of the en-
vironment to shape character revealed his sympathies with the loosely defined progressive reform tradition. Like other civic-minded businesspeople who came of age in the Progressive Era, Kohler saw politics, economics, and society as part of a seamless web. Good citizenship rested both on the assurance of political freedom and on the guarantee of economic security and its material manifestations. In this calculus, business leaders shouldered responsibility for minding the nation's wealth-generating machine, the corporation, and for fostering loyalty to the state by ensuring that deserving citizens enjoyed higher living standards. As chief executive, Kohler saw it as his duty to fortify the status quo that nourished good citizenship through mass consumption. In his schema, the American home—the site of biological re-creation, social reproduction, and the setting for plumbing fixtures—was an object of veneration, rejuvenation, and ideological conveyance.

Kohler spent much of his time grappling with the identity and the desires of his household customers. During his thirty-two-year presidency, bathroom aesthetics passed through three stages: the age of woodwork, the age of efficiency, and the age of modernity. In the first two periods, a handful of interest groups—architects, reformers, and engineers—competed for audiences among bathtub manufacturers, lobbying for fixtures that met local sanitary specifications. By the third era, a mind-boggling cacophony had emerged, as Kohler's product mix became more complex. The big question was, Which customers really mattered—branch managers, sales promotion men, jobbers, jobbers' salesmen, architects, builders, plumbers, landlords, apartment dwellers, or home owners? In the interwar years, Kohler faced the job of identifying, understanding, and satisfying the wants of these very different customers. By the 1920s, the firm had earned the trust of some six hundred jobbers and their clients, the plumbers, on whose loyalty sales depended. Nevertheless, its president recognized that security bred indifference. When he discovered feminine purchasing power during the prosperity decade, his biggest problem became to convince the men in the plumbing trade that Mrs. Consumer was the customer who really mattered. Repeatedly, the sales organization resisted efforts to inject fashion into the fixtures market. Jobbers' sales agents scoffed at colored products, and plumbers insisted on selling the cheapest goods, even to well-heeled customers. Futilely, Kohler did everything in his power to pry open new niches; marketing expenditures grew, but sales and profits plummeted. 3

During his three decades as president, Walter Kohler experimented with promising business elixirs, from brand-naming to national advertising, in an ef-
fort to shape consumers’ perceptions of sanitary plumbing fixtures and to increase sales. In rural America, Kohler aimed to meet the basic human need for healthful sanitary equipment; in wealthier urban areas, to stimulate consumer interest in home modernization and create a replacement fixtures market. If Kohler had appreciated the great satirist Sinclair Lewis, he might have chosen a different path. When the novelist allows his quintessential middlebrow, real estate agent George F. Babbitt to luxuriate in a “curving porcelain” bathtub to the dulcet “drip, drip, dribble” of “beautiful nickel taps,” he comments on a bubbling splendor that seemed decadent to many Americans. Sensuous bathing was fine for fictional characters or for movie stars; when Gloria Swanson sponged down in a mammoth tub in Cecil B. DeMille’s *Male and Female* in 1919, her bath represented the epitome of Hollywood hedonism. In real life, most consumers thought sanitary fixtures should be neither seen nor heard. Perhaps embarrassed by the obvious reference to bodily functions, few cared about the style, color, or shape of fixtures. As Americans chose how to spend surplus cash in the 1920s, they satisfied their yearnings for novelty with dime store trinkets, for luxury goods with items like crystal, and for status demarcators with cars, radios, and other electrical appliances. During the Great Depression, even better-off consumers had little money to spend on installment sales. In the late 1930s, Kohler retired from his executive office possessed with new wisdom about consumers and their motivations. Although people valued certain objects as signifiers of identity, they understood plumbing fixtures in a far more utilitarian way.4

**Cleaning Up, Branching Out**

K for Knowledge assuring success,  
O for Organization which is the best.  
H for Harmony dominating us all,  
L for Loyalty come at your call.  
E for Efficiency best of its kind,  
R for Reliability none better can find.  
C for Confidence show by our Sales,  
O for Originality which ends our tale.  
—William H. Barth, Kohler Company, 1917

Americans spent much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries devising new gadgets, gizmos, and concoctions to brush away, suck up, cover up, or wash
away the visible and invisible manifestations of dirt. During the Progressive Era, reformers added campaigns against germs, odors, and filth to the list of causes designed to remake America in the image of the white middle class. From social workers to home economists, the new professionals spread the gospel that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had espoused in the eighteenth century: cleanliness was “next to godliness.” Once the infrastructure of modern sewage systems was in place, architects, builders, and engineers brought bathrooms to buildings inside the homes of both wealthy Americans and the middle class. In new residences, the one-stop bathroom replaced the hodgepodge of hygiene equipment—bedroom toilet sets, stove-top washbasins, chamber pots, outdoor privies, water closets, and other makeshift expedients.5

This clean craze portended the expansion of the enameling and pottery trades, which supplied the fixtures. By 1901, J. M. Kohler Sons Company, a foundry operated by the brothers Robert, Walter, and Carl Kohler, in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, was making farm equipment as well as enameled fixtures, including bathtubs, washtubs, sinks, and drinking fountains. After the untimely deaths of his two siblings, Walter Kohler in 1905 assumed the presidency. With the help of his younger half brother Herbert V., he began to build the Kohler Company, incorporated in 1912, into one of the “big three” plumbing supply houses in the United States.6

The Kohlers approached the burgeoning sanitary-ware trade in several ways; their tactics in market research are especially pertinent to this story of manufacturers imagining consumers. During the late nineteenth century, many small and midsized enamelware manufacturers and jobbers followed associationist tactics, establishing cartels for controlling markets. In 1894, those in the Midwest, including Kohler, formed the Central Supply Association to facilitate relations with truculent regional members of the National Association of Master Plumbers. By contrast, the largest enamelware makers followed in the footsteps of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company, and the National Cash Register by building impressive marketing organizations. In Pittsburgh, the gigantic Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company, created by a merger in 1899, phased out sales to independent distributors and began to build a wholly owned network of branch offices and wholesalers. The Kohlers started to emulate parts of this model, establishing in 1905 a Chicago branch office, which within three years was selling half their products. Between 1909 and 1916, the company opened branches in thirteen cities: Atlanta, Denver, Detroit, Houston, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, London,
Los Angeles, St. Louis, St. Paul, San Francisco, and Seattle. Unlike Standard, Kohler used branch offices staffed by managers and “sales-promotion men” as platforms for catering to established distributors. The offices sold fixtures to jobbers, who in turn sold them to plumbers; as the last link in the distribution chain, plumbers dealt directly with home owners. However, selling fixtures constituted only part of a showroom’s job. Top managers at Kohler also depended on display room managers as fashion intermediaries.7

“K for Knowledge assuring success”—a line of the jingle by William H. Barth, manager of the Kohler Company’s flagship showroom on West Forty-second Street in New York City—referred to the customer feedback loop critical to the firm’s product innovation formula. Branch managers had trained well for their assignments as data gatherers. Barth, a Cooper Institute graduate who could speak architectural lingo, had been a plumbing supplier for four decades; Pittsburgh’s Harry E. Clark had worked for Standard; and Philadelphia’s H. J. Hanna Jr. had sold fixtures for the Potteries Selling Company, a short-lived distributor for Trenton sanitary-ware factories. Born “with a plumber’s ladle in his hand,” Lewis Phillips, manager of the Indianapolis office, had worked for both Standard and Crane. As seasoned veterans of the plumbing supply business, such managers comprehended the technical difficulties faced by architects, builders, and plumbers. They combined this experience with the salesman’s bag of tricks to size up customers. The smallest details, from vocal intonation to personal grooming, yielded vital evidence about a customer’s character and truthfulness. Just as competent salesmen differentiated between shoppers and browsers, astute branch managers readily distinguished whiners from clients with legitimate concerns. Anyone could walk through the door of a Kohler showroom to praise or castigate products. Showroom managers reported anything newsworthy to Walter Kohler.8

By the 1910s, Kohler’s reading of branch managers’ reports corroborated his theory that a seismographic shift was under way in the sanitary trade. Reformers condemned the bathrooms that late nineteenth-century sanitarians had heralded as crowning achievements of the plumber’s craft: ornate wainscoting, Eastlake-style cabinetry, wooden floors, concealed pipes, and marble lavatories all reportedly provided breeding grounds for germs. When Standard introduced its new lines for 1911, the “bathroom of the hour” boasted a porcelain toilet, a porcelain sink, and an enameled tub. Everything about the room—its smooth tiled walls, small window with tinted panes, exposed pipes, and stunning white fixtures—spoke to a clean, durable, and efficient sanitary ideal. This new design
came on the market at an opportune moment. For decades, women from the well-to-do and comfortable classes had complained about the so-called servant problem. As more and more white working-class women opted for factory and clerical jobs, upper- and middle-class homemakers had trouble finding maids willing to work for low pay, to live in, and to perform arduous chores without grumbling. Free of nooks and crannies, the new all-white bathroom promised fewer chores than its Victorian wood predecessor, making it appealing to women who supervised difficult servants or who did their own housework. 

Kohler responded to this ultraclean aesthetic with the so-called apron tub, precursor to the built-in unit common today. Previously, cast-iron tubs fell into several categories, including those in wooden frames or with four feet, neither of which fit progressive notions of cleanliness. To be sure, these tubs cleansed immersed subjects effectively. Their dirt drawbacks related to construction, as bacteria lived inside dark wooden frames or between the floorboards under footed models. While some box-shaped bathtubs existed, these units, cast in multiple pieces by enameling shops, depended on a plumber’s skills in fitting. At the joints, crevices harbored moisture, soap residue, and germs. Kohler’s engineers overcame these problems with foundry practices that enabled the one-piece casting of large enamelled items with big folded rims, or aprons. Denied a patent claim, Kohler watched other manufacturers, including Standard, adopt his methods and designs. By the Great War, several types of tub competed for consumers’ bathing dollars, but the apron tub soon became the preferred unit. 

With the apron tub, Walter Kohler established the product development model that he favored for the next two decades. He collected information about the market through branch offices, using this customer data to design new lines, keep track of regional taste preferences, and fathom how his products compared with those of competitors. As irrational as this seems to those accustomed to late twentieth-century analysts who use computers to correlate zip codes and consumption habits, Kohler’s methods for reading the market paralleled those used by Thomas Hawkes, Jesse Dean, and W. Edwin Wells. Yet Kohler operated in a market that stratified rather than segmented. As fashion intermediaries forwarded information about this layered market—composed of people with disparate preconceptions about dirt, cleanliness, and fixtures—Kohler sifted through the mass of incoming letters for useful data. In many respects, he faced a culturally more complex challenge than did Wells at the Homer Laughlin China Company, whose fashion intermediaries—retail buyers working for mass merchandisers—stood closer to the ultimate consumer. In the long run, Kohler
In this "Colonna" bathtub you buy exactly the same superior quality as in KOHLER "Viceroy" built-in tubs.

We wish to emphasize as strongly as possible that there is but one Kohler quality—the highest. Whatever the price of the bathtub, lavatory, kitchen sink or other enameled plumbing ware you select for your home, if it is Kohler ware it is always the same high quality. The same workmen use the same materials and make every piece in the same way. Without regard to price, you get exactly the same quality-value in all Kohler fixtures.

Choose enameled ware made by Kohler of Kohler

Every Kohler piece is thoroughly modern. The lines are artistic. Every woman will appreciate the absence of grooved ornamentation which affords lodging places for dust and grime.

Your architect will tell you that Kohler designs are handsome and that Kohler enameled ware is most durable—it will last a lifetime. Your plumber is glad to install it, because he has no trouble with it—its hygienic features and its ease of cleaning always satisfy his customers. The cost of installation is no more than for cheaper, inferior ware.

Kohler production

When you buy a piece of Kohler enameled ware you secure the product of the largest factory in the world devoted exclusively to the production of enameled plumbing ware, made by an enthusiastic, efficient organization imbued with high ideals.

"It's in the Kohler Enamel"

KOHLER CO.

Kohler, Wis., U. S. A.
would see how long-distance communication, involving four or five nodes on the production-consumption continuum, proved a drawback in gauging consumers’ tastes, desires, and outlooks.

**Better Homes, Kohler Style**

Whatever helps to make the American home a better and more attractive place to live contributes to the physical and spiritual up building of the nation.

—Walter J. Kohler, 1929

From the 1910s to the 1930s, Walter Kohler literally put his own house in order, building an industrial town that embodied his ideas of beauty, cleanliness, efficiency—and Americanism. By the turn of the century, the Kohlers had moved from Sheboygan to a new manufacturing complex some four miles west, in the hamlet of Riverside. Disturbed by the “nondescript” houses that workers hurriedly erected close to the hot, dirty, smoky foundry, Kohler undertook the project of building, piece by piece, one of the most publicized early twentieth-century factory towns: Kohler Village. Rooted in progressive visions of social perfection, Kohler Village assumed a distinctive character under the influence of 100 percent Americanism—a wartime campaign against hyphenated Americans, specifically German-Americans. As the offspring of an Austrian immigrant, Kohler hoped to make his quaint little Anglo-Saxon village the incarnation of his loyalty and nationalist sympathy. In this context, Kohler Village in the 1920s joined other communities that supported Better Homes in America, the standard-bearer of the campaign to make the detached, single-family suburban dwelling the agent of conformity, racial purification, and moral regeneration. What better home for an unwashed American-in-training than one outfitted with modern plumbing fixtures made by the Kohler Company? Even more important, what better imagery for national advertising campaigns than pictures of Kohler Village, a model company town filled with full-blooded American, colonial-style, Better Homes?

Kohler Village belongs to a group of approximately forty company towns built throughout the United States between 1910 and 1929. These villages differed from nineteenth-century company towns, like Lowell, Massachusetts, and Pullman, Illinois, in significant ways, most important of which were their creators’ progressive commitments to both the physical separation and the visual disas-
sociation between spaces for living and working. The professional architects, planners, and landscape architects who designed them decried the monotony, repetition, and shoddy construction that characterized conventional industrial housing. Widely publicized as solutions to labor unrest among immigrant workers, these new company towns provided, through contract, rental, or purchase, each head of a household with the object that most symbolized middle-class status: a single-family dwelling in an idyllic suburban setting. The model villages used site plans with cul-de-sacs, curvilinear streets, shade trees, landscaped islands, pedestrian walkways, town squares, playgrounds, parks, and a variety of culturally uplifting architectural styles. In theory, the immigrant worker who owned a beautiful Colonial Revival home would absorb American ideals from his tangible surroundings, developing an appreciation for the employer and nation that made the good life possible.12

Shortly after moving to Riverside in 1899, Kohler embraced the potpourri of ideas that connected environmental factors to social uplift under the banner of Progressivism. With several architect companions, including W. C. Weeks and Richard Phillip, he toured Europe in 1912 to examine planned industrial communities, including world-famous model industrial villages built under the auspices or influence of Sir Ebenezer Howard, father of the English Garden City movement. Impressed, Kohler returned to Wisconsin determined to remake Riverside in the image of British beautiful. In particular, Kohler appreciated the British planner’s concept of decentralization. Critical of the haphazard, unhealthful congestion of nineteenth-century cities, Howard invoked the sylvan image of the “machine in the garden,” urging factories to relocate in picturesque planned communities far away from noisome urban blight. This garden idea struck a chord with Kohler, who had inadvertently initiated a decentralization plan by leaving Sheboygan. Almost a decade after arriving in Riverside, and only a few months after touring Europe, he incorporated the three-thousand-acre site surrounding his foundry as Kohler Village. A few years later, he applied the lessons of the Garden City movement to this site, where running water was at a premium and the streets unpaved.13

In the interim, he busily dealt with a major reorganization, recapitalization, the opening of branch sales offices, and technological improvements at the foundry. When the booming economy of the early war years temporarily stimulated construction, Kohler faced a housing crisis as his factory output tried to keep pace with demand. In 1916 he mobilized by hiring a team of housing and landscape experts, including the German-born planner Werner Hegemann, to
appraise real estate holdings with the aim of laying out a new company town on
the Garden City model. In collaboration with Elbert Peets, a young landscape
architect from Cambridge, Massachusetts, Hegemann laid out a master plan for
the “Kohler Garden City.”

Built in several stages between 1916 and the Great Depression, Kohler Vil-
lage followed a town plan that divided the landscape into discrete industrial, com-
mercial, and residential zones. The layout conveyed a sense of order, harmony,
beauty, and affinity with nature. In contrast to new company towns built from
scratch, Kohler Village integrated existing structures into the quaint landscape
by modifying them to blend in, like workers melting into the pot. In Walter
Kohler’s description, when older houses were “painted white” and their “lawns
prepared and planted,” the “entire village” took on a “very interesting and pros-
perous appearance.” Richard Phillip, the architect from Milwaukee’s Brust &
Phillip who had toured England with Kohler, designed most of the new struc-
tures built from 1916 through the mid-1920s. Anglo-Saxon styles became tools
for conveying a distinctively American way of life. Phillip’s picturesque com-
cmercial block on High Street, across from the factory, featured Tudor-style stores
with arched windows, stone coping, and steep roofs and gables. His American
House, which opened in June 1918, was an enormous structure with rental rooms
for some three hundred male workers and resembled a large English country
house in the Queen Anne style. For married men, Phillip filled neighborhoods
with worker-owned houses in Colonial Revival styles. Fittingly, Kohler resided
a short distance from the town’s center, at Riverbend, a cloistered waterside
estate designed by Phillip in the style of a lordly manor house.

Like other manufacturers who sponsored new company towns, Kohler be-
lieved in the ability of the village environment to shape the stable workforce
critical to steady production and potential expansion. For decades, the Kohlers
had struggled to retain highly paid foundry workers whose skills were at a pre-
mium in the burgeoning iron-making and enameling trades. Even after the
installation of casting machinery, the foundry still relied on skilled labor for cer-
tain operations. Artisanal knowledge of metalworking operations remained inte-
gral to the company’s output, and Kohler elevated the craftsman to the status of
folk hero in his corporate culture. By the mid-1920s, visitors entering the ves-
tibule of the company’s general office building, predictably bedecked by archi-
tects Brust & Phillips with a symbolic clock tower, faced seven breathtaking wall
murals that exalted foundry labor. Painted by Arthur Covey, a corporate mural-
ist whose clients included William Filene & Sons in Boston and Lord & Taylor

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Muralist Arthur Covey installing *Pouring a Mold*, 1925. Kohler Company

In New York City, scenes like *Tapping a Cupola* and *Pouring a Mold* depicted muscular workers toiling amid hot, dangerous equipment, capturing what the Kohler Company described as the “dignity and nobility” of factory work. Although modeling his figures after real Kohler workers, Covey used considerable license with the machinery, juxtaposing foundry men against fantastical or antiquated devices. Through this legerdemain, Covey focused the viewer’s gaze on the men, emphasizing the human element central to flexible batch production. Yet his murals hid the stark reality of high turnover rates. Lured to Wisconsin by the promise of steady employment at high wages, early workers grew frustrated with housing shortages that forced them to live miles from Riverside. When many deserted Kohler, the company faced production backlogs.¹⁶

From Kohler’s perspective, village housing was a hedge against labor scarcity, industrial instability, and an influx of unwashed greenhorns; but it also was fodder for corporate promotions designed to build goodwill and profits. There was no better way to harness what Kohler described as the village’s “sentimental advantages” than through participation in Better Homes in America (BHA), a voluntary organization backed by Herbert Hoover’s Department of Commerce. The brainchild of Marie Mattingly Meloney, the reform-minded editor of the
Delineator, BHA mixed a tempered version of nineteenth-century domesticity, the progressive impulse for efficiency, and Herbert Hoover's brand of associationism to promote the detached single-family dwelling as the ideal American residence. Among supporters, BHA meant different things. To Meloney, home ownership provided an avenue for promoting family life; to Hoover, it offered a dual-purpose tool that alleviated housing problems and stabilized wages, prices, and the economy; and to the Kohler Company, it presented an unparalleled opportunity for using Kohler Village to market new products.17

One BHA propaganda device was the national Better Homes in America Week, which featured an annual contest for the best demonstration home. Following guidelines published in the Delineator and circulated by the Commerce Department, local committees—usually composed of women from civic, philanthropic, and educational organizations—set up model houses, educational programs, and home economics demonstrations, which competed for prizes and for publicity in Meloney's magazine. Model homes showcased furnishings, appliances, and fixtures donated by manufacturers, who advertised their sponsorship. The Better Homes idea spread rapidly. In 1921, there were 521 demonstration homes across the country; in 1925, 1,700; in 1930, 6,700; in 1932, 8,300. The movement gained momentum during the early 1930s, as sponsors saw the model home as the ideal family-oriented entertainment for hard times; by inference, BHA pageantry advocated family unity as a problem solver over social protest.18

Walter Kohler's sister, Marie Christian Kohler (1876–1943), was the driving force behind Kohler Village's participation in BHA. As a director and major stockholder in the Kohler Company, she comprehended the public relations value of Better Homes activities. Every year, beginning in 1925, she oversaw the local celebration of Better Homes in America Week, which featured a new model home that tourists could visit throughout the summer. Kohler Village's demonstration units—sold at cost by the Kohler Improvement Company and financed by the Kohler Building & Loan Company—embodied conservative ideas and the "character-building" power of domesticity. A typical model was a Cape Cod–style cottage for a family of four, outfitted with new Colonial Revival furnishings and with hand-me-downs that showed "the continuing of family life" and the "cherishing of family traditions." The houses also had "smart and modern" appointments, including the latest plumbing and heating systems, which promised efficiency and comfort. As educational devices, Marie Kohler's exhibits trained visitors to think about careful, moderated consumption. As mar-
keting tools, the homes showed how particular products—Kohler products—could augment the consuming experience.\textsuperscript{19}

**Advertising the Kohler Way**

The whole purpose of our advertising, both in our magazines and our own literature, should be to induce action on the part of the consumer, and goodwill and cooperation on the part of the dealer.

—L. L. Smith, Kohler Company, 1921

The Kohler Company took advantage of the celebrity accorded to its model village and Better Homes exhibits in several ways. Foremost, the firm simply basked in the glory of newspaper headlines and magazine articles that touted Kohler Village’s virtues. In this respect, Walter Kohler emulated Henry Ford, who smugly noted how much gratis publicity his five-dollar-a-day wage policy, initiated in 1914, had generated; however, unlike Ford, Kohler did not scoff at national advertising. With the aid of his in-house expert, L. L. Smith, Walter Kohler learned to see how Kohler Village’s spotless streets, trimmed landscape, and quaint houses might serve as advertising leitmotifs to build dealer loyalty and stimulate home owners’ desires for his brand of fixtures. Not by serendipity had Walter Kohler opened a corporate advertising office in 1916 nor by accident did his firm’s selling expenses steadily increase from $606,000 in 1921 to $2.4 million in 1929, from 10.1 to 15.3 percent of net sales. During the Great War, two aspects of federal policy had encouraged American manufacturers to take advertising seriously. First, advertising men working for the federal government in George Creel’s Committee on Public Information demonstrated their prowess by successfully mounting emotionally powerful poster campaigns that sold Liberty and Victory Bonds, rallied support for the Red Cross, urged men to become ‘doughboys, promoted food and resource conservation, and generally stirred American patriotism. Once morally questionable showmen, advertising men exited the war as confident professionals who had earned the respect of businessmen like Kohler. More important, the federal government’s imposition of an excess profits tax in October 1917 (raised in February 1918 and repealed in 1921), which defined advertising expenses as fully deductible business costs, provided a real economic incentive for corporations to invest in advertising. Every dollar spent on advertising by a profitable firm translated into sixty to sixty-five cents
saved in taxes; in other words, a business could buy a dollar’s worth of advertising for only thirty-five to forty cents. Needing to spend their excess profits quickly and as a legitimate business expense, manufacturers hiked promotional budgets during the war. Fully aware of the scarcity of both goods and cash in the inflationary wartime economy, many businesses in the short term embraced what *Printers’ Ink* described as goodwill advertising. In anticipation of a postwar boom in consumer spending, firms like Kohler promoted themselves as worthy, patriotic, stable institutions that would again deliver the goods after the Armistice.20

Collaborating with Smith, Walter Kohler adopted an advertising strategy designed to foster dealer cooperation and build brand recognition. Although managers still imagined their consumer as an amorphous jobber-architect-plumber amalgam, they started seeing the benefits of sparking home owners’ interests in their particular brand of fixtures. Under Smith’s aegis, Kohler advertising shifted in scale, tone, and thematic focus. The firm bought space in national magazines like the *Literary Digest* for “reason-why” campaigns announcing the “superior quality” of Kohler products. With Smith on board, advertisements emphasized the benefits of Kohler-brand fixtures in the context of home-centered family values. When the reality of the new tax code hit, Walter Kohler hired a national agency, Erwin, Wasey & Company (EW), to design an enlarged consumer-oriented advertising campaign. Walter Kohler and Smith also continued to invest in dealer and trade advertising. Dependent on branch offices for the burden of product promotion, Smith upgraded the firm’s “dealer helps”: large plumbers’ catalogues; architects’ leaflets, folders, and portfolios; window units for showrooms; electrical signs for distributors; exhibits for plumbers’ conventions and state fairs; booklets on Kohler Village; and a monthly house organ, *Kohler of Kohler News*. In short, Kohler typified durable goods manufacturers who took advantage of federal tax policy to continue trade advertising at a steady pace while enlarging campaigns aimed directly at consumers.21

Thereby, Walter Kohler joined the ranks of industrialists struggling with the great paradox of modernity. Sustained productivity required the expansion of consumer demand, but the task of stimulating self-indulgence seemed contrary to the asceticism that lay at the heart of the Kohler way. Just as the architect Richard Phillip used Anglo-Saxon motifs to teach village dwellers about American values, the advertising agency EW manipulated the printed medium to create a visual culture that encouraged consumption through participation in a clean, robust American lifestyle. Professionals knew how to get multiple audiences in focus. The EW imagery readied both the Kohler Company and the
home-owning public for a durable goods revolution in plumbing fixtures. Kohler Village figured as a key variable in this equation.

When account representatives from EW’s Chicago office visited Wisconsin in September 1918, their zeal for Kohler Village impressed the president. “They have outlined a policy,” he excitedly wrote to his brother, “that Kohler stands not only for the Kohler Co., but for a quality, a product, a community spirit, an inspiration, etc., and the story will be told in a series of advertisements.” Walter Kohler trumpeted: “They were all very much inspired by the community development, which is now sufficiently advanced to be conspicuous.” EW’s proposals included a new corporate seal—a bronze medallion showing a foundry man in his work clothes—to serve as both a community emblem and an icon in all of the Kohler Company’s advertisements. “The publicity will be handled in a manner that the Kohler Co. will benefit, to a great extent,” Walter Kohler told his sibling, “by being located in the village of Kohler.” Ultimately pleased with EW’s campaign proposals, he acceded to copywriters: “Kohler products,” boasted a typical advertisement from the mid-1920s, “are made in a village where houses are homes and yards are gardens, where civic pride and pride of good work go hand in hand.” In the firm’s executive offices, advertising imagery exerted a mighty sway over managers, who came to imagine that the fantastical village depicted by the company’s powerful public relations machine was the real thing.22

Throughout the 1920s, in-house publicists used Kohler Village to teach members of the Kohler organization—branch managers, sales promotion men, jobbers, jobbers’ salesmen, and plumbers—how to promote products. Each month, the house organ, Kohler of Kohler News, published lively articles on village activities, chatty vignettes about production processes, and full-page magazine advertisements. Browsing through the News, readers learned to think about Kohler fixtures as components in a larger system for better living. Schooled in these basics, members of the company’s marketing organization traveled to Wisconsin for annual conferences prepared for a high old time. They were not disappointed. For example, in August 1927, a parade of executives, branch managers, town officials, high school bands, and scout troops escorted the entourage along High Street to the American Club for breakfast and a speech by Walter Kohler. Saturday afternoon’s activities included visits to factories and showrooms, a tour of Kohler Village with its Better Homes model, and a fete at Riverside, featuring a horse show, music, dancing, and movies of a recent plumbers’ convention and the Lindbergh flight. On Sunday, exhausted jobbers finally got down to business. After church services, they attended a morning session devoted to product
demonstrations; after lunch, bands accompanied the men, whose trunks were filled with folders, catalogues, and display units, back to their train. They left imbued with an idea of systematized living, Kohler style.  

**Rule of Thumb**

The material progress of humanity has been brought about by discovering and devising more and better kinds of goods and the means of producing them.

—Walter J. Kohler, *Mill and Factory*, 1940

Walter and Herbert Kohler learned important lessons during the Great War that shaped decision making over the next two decades. The ban on residential construction (housing starts fell from 421,000 units in 1914 to 118,000 in 1918) combined with the U.S. Fuel Administration’s request for half-time production of enamel dampened sanitary fixture sales. Profiting from wartime contracts for shells and other metal castings, the brothers recognized that reliance on a single line of products—especially one linked to the volatile construction trade—was risky business.

During the 1920s, the Kohler Company built on the legacy of other family-owned durable goods manufacturing firms that focused on product diversification and highly refined marketing organizations. The brothers aimed to build on the firm’s strength in household durable goods while expanding beyond the bathtub realm. First, the Kohlers had to find a product with a demand cycle that complemented enamelware; plumbing fixtures found their largest market in urban areas, with sales peaking during warm weather when construction was under way. The brothers’ initial diversification efforts targeted year-round rural, marine, and industrial markets with an electrical generator introduced in 1920 at the National Tractor Show in Kansas City. A four-cylinder gasoline-powered engine, the new Kohler Automatic Power and Light unit generated 110-volt direct current. For rural America, the timing was perfect; offered on three different installment plans, the expensive Kohler Automatic—one model cost $595 in 1921—enabled better-off isolated households to power the new electrical appliances, from sewing machines to corn grinders, then flooding the market. But the Automatic had other applications. In 1920, a U.S. Department of Agriculture extension survey found that nearly 70 percent of farmhouses, isolated from municipal water systems, were without running water. With electricity
from portable generators, farm families could pump water indoors, eliminating the backbreaking chore of hauling water and replacing their cold, smelly outdoor privies with indoor flush toilets. Within the Kohler Company, the Automatic’s introduction enhanced core technical competencies, as the firm hired electrical engineers to design and develop the new line.  

The next stage of product diversification entailed the mastery of an entirely new area—pottery manufacturing. Although the Kohler brothers had mulled over ceramics since November 1918, they delayed entry into this line for several reasons. In part, their attentions were focused on the Automatic, the village, and the Kohler organization, and their actions responded to larger trends in the plumbing supply business. As a small player in an oligopolistic market, Kohler was caught in a bind. Although the firm might introduce new lines, the success of those items was limited by the jobbers’ conservative expectations and issues of volume, delivery, and price rather than design. Furthermore, Standard’s chief executive, Theodore Ahrens, ruled the enamelware industry’s trade association with an iron fist. Walter described him as an “erratic dictator” with “arbitrary inclinations,” whose impulsive actions led enamel men down dead-end paths, such as the decision to reduce prices during the 1919 building boom—when new housing starts numbered 315,000—despite increased costs and high inflation. The president recognized that he had to find “some line of work” that developed his firm’s “individuality.”

By early 1919, Walter Kohler contemplated the expansion of his bathtub empire with the addition of continuous-flow vitreous sanitary pottery for making sinks and toilets. When the construction business collapsed and new housing starts declined to 247,000 in 1920, he minded the store, keeping a watchful eye on Trenton’s sanitary pottery trade, which, hurt by the recession and in a protracted fight with labor, eventually collapsed. Up until that point, New Jersey potteries, mostly small to midsized family firms, produced almost half of the ceramic plumbing fixtures used in the United States. They employed skilled and semiskilled union workers, organized into sanitary locals of the National Brotherhood of Operative Potters, to make fixtures under craft and batch production setups. The largest of these firms, Thomas Maddock’s Sons Company, operated a twenty-one-kiln plant, with a weekly output of five thousand pieces, including sinks, toilet bowls, tanks, drinking fountains, showerheads, urinal stalls, and general bathroom accessories. With a few years, this bastion of flexible production lay in ruin, victims of overlapping battles with labor, national plumbing supply houses, and Justice Department monopoly busters.
Following the trade upheaval, Standard and Crane revved up for a race to win dominance of the market as the construction business regained momentum. In 1921, new housing starts numbered 449,000; in 1923, 871,000; and in 1925, 937,000. Standard bought potteries in Ohio, Indiana, and California, gearing up for expanded ceramics production, while Crane opened a foundry in Louisiana, leaving Kohler, its major supplier of cast-iron fixtures, in the lurch. In 1924, Crane added the Trenton Pottery Company to its holdings, reorganizing production to ease skilled labor out of the picture. By mid-decade, Trenton’s sanitary business was turned upside down; its only hope for salvation appeared to rest in the hands of the plumbing suppliers who were partially responsible for the ruckus.28

For Walter and Herbert Kohler, the bedlam in Trenton provided entry into the pottery business through the backdoor. Unable to compete, small factories looked eagerly for bailouts. In September 1925, Kohler purchased the business of Cochran, Drugan & Company, which operated a bottle kiln factory close to Trenton. One of the greatest attractions was the location, which provided ready access to major northeastern markets. Another lure was the expertise of the city’s ceramists. Andrew Cochran, a veteran of the potteries, agreed to stay on to tutor Herbert Kohler. At first, Cochran-Drugan seemed a solid, low-cost investment; before long, Kohler’s managers discovered that their bargain purchase was a nineteenth-century rat’s nest.29

Kohler’s managers entered the pottery business with a blank slate. Either they knew little about Cochran-Drugan’s standing in the trade, or they refused to listen to local gossip and credit reports. When long-standing customers refused to buy fixtures made at the plant, Kohler began to suspect that something was rotten. Outspoken jobbers scoffed at Kohler’s pottery, doubting the ironmonger could whip Cochran-Drugan into shape. Jobbers who did buy fixtures complained about quality. Architects, plumbers, building managers, and home owners—growing accustomed to high degrees of standardization in quantity-production goods—expected perfection from even the most utilitarian durable goods, including bathroom fixtures. Kohler’s customers read advertisements that touted the company’s commitment to exacting craftsmanship, and they recoiled from the flawed goods emerging from its Trenton factory.30

First and foremost, consumers objected to the color of Cochran-Drugan’s fixtures, which failed to fit their ideas of whiteness. Ever since germ theory gained currency in popular culture beginning in the 1880s, sanitary reformers usurped white for their cleanliness campaigns. At the World’s Columbian Exposition in
1893, whiteness bedazzled fair goers. In the new century, reformers, doctors, teachers, and manufacturers deemed white as ideal for bathrooms, a color suggestive of a clean, germ-free environment. The vermin- and disease-ridden encampments of the Great War contributed to the heightened fetish for cleanliness. In 1924, journalist Estelle H. Ries, writing for *Fruit, Garden, and Home*, the precursor to *Better Homes and Gardens*, praised the “all-white bathroom” as the apex of sanitary modernity. Like other enamelware manufacturers, Kohler pledged to endow its fixtures with “snowy purity,” but challenges from technology and labor at the Trenton factory fractured that promise. 31

Consumers accustom to exacting standards made possible by quantity-production techniques recognized that not all whites were snowy. Minor differences in hues and tints resulted in chromatic chaos when distant factories were involved; and the job of creating uniform and matching colors, textures, and densities for glassy coatings applied to different bases—iron and ceramics—doubled Kohler’s troubles. Problems were exacerbated when the firm, concerned for worker safety, abandoned the inexpensive, widely available lead fluxes that had long been used to melt enamels and glazes. As chemists developed lead-free formulas, products bore the telltale signs of their experiments—mismatched, speckled, grayish, and otherwise imperfect white coatings. Sam Wolff, president of the Wolff Supply Company, reported that one of his “best accounts” complained that Kohler pottery failed to “harmonize” with the “the snow white color of Kohler Enamelware.” Compared to its tubs and sinks, the Kohler toilet tanks had “a decided grayish color.” 32

Herbert Kohler’s spirits dampened by the hour. A devotee of efficiency, the vice president grew annoyed with the rule-of-thumb practices that dominated Trenton’s pottery trade and with Cochran’s difficulties in modernizing the plant. From Herbert’s perspective, the problems stemmed from a lack of shop floor discipline. When black specks marred glazes, he blamed foremen who did not force workers to take precautions against contaminants on the production line. Although their union was broken, Trenton’s sanitary potters remained fiercely independent, resisting supervision they saw as a threat to craft autonomy. The bottle kilns built in 1898 coughed up coal dust that contributed to the dirt dilemma. Within a few months, Herbert urged moving pottery production to Wisconsin, where foreman schooled in scientific management could keep tabs on manufacturing. Managers started planning a new tunnel kiln facility in early 1926. 33

Kohler’s decision to make vitreous plumbing fixtures in Wisconsin dramati-
cally changed the firm’s marketing practices. Burdened with high shipping and selling costs, Kohler could not compete with volume price leaders like Standard; hence, by necessity, the firm focused on carving a niche for high-class plumbing supplies. Kohler decided to tap into home owners’ expectations for cleanliness, efficiency, and beauty and placed even greater responsibility for reading consumer tastes and pushing fixtures on branch managers. “We should not underestimate the difficulty of distribution,” confided Herbert to Walter Kohler. “Our managers,” he emphasized, “should be able to sell and teach others to sell.” For almost a decade, Kohler used design, advertising, and public relations to help dealers break down customer resistance to sanitary ware as a consumer durable. For fixture houses, the emphasis on the style-conscious world of shoppers proved a big step, and the Kohler Company blazed the path.34

The Cinderella of Housework

The time will come when people who have Chevrolets will wash their dishes mechanically.
—J. Robin Harrison, Kohler Company, 1927

By the 1920s, most American manufacturers paid attention to women’s purchasing power. Products with the greatest “she appeal” included electrical appliances—from irons to washing machines—that promised to lessen burdensome household chores. By the middle of the decade, plumbers saw appliance sales as a way to supplement income earned through installations and service. Whereas department, hardware, and electrical stores and utility showrooms stocked costly “electrical specialities” like refrigerators, plumbers needed products that allowed them to use their unique installation skills to take advantage of the prosperous Christmas season. Sears, Roebuck & Company and General Electric made complicated appliances like refrigerators; but Kohler, whose expertise lay in foundry work, was unprepared to manufacture goods that required sophisticated electrical design and labor-intensive assembly lines. The trick entailed adapting foundry skills to making relatively simple plumbers’ specialities. In addition, Kohler had to refine its marketing mechanisms to help plumbers push the new durable goods to women consumers.35

The Kohler Company’s venture into the market for consumer durables grew out of another aspect of its affiliation with BHA—the aspect that rallied behind the drives for rationalization and standardization. Within Herbert Hoover’s bu-
reacucracy, efficiency advocacy extended to matters of personal finance and industrial production. Knowing that consumers hesitated to borrow money to purchase expensive durable goods, the Commerce Department published pamphlets that explained the ins and outs of installment selling. To Walter Kohler, the urges to Hooverize and Americanize could be used to advance his firm’s market position. Hoover’s department gave federal priority to the rational home, and his BHA provided the ideal advertising venue for efficient home products. President Kohler decided to take advantage of all this visibility and introduce innovative durable goods that might be sold directly to consumers on the installment plan.36

In late 1926, the Kohler Company announced the first of its consumer durables, a plumbers specialty product designed expressly for Mrs. Consumer: the Kohler Electric Sink. A solution to the drudgery of doing dishes, the electric sink bridged the eras of hand and automatic washing. Little remembered today, electric sinks flourished briefly during the Jazz Age. Like other short-lived devices, they resolved the need of a particular moment. During the 1920s, the appliance craze combined with consumers’ perceptions about the scarcity of servants into an imperative for “labor-less dishwashing through electricity.” Any mechanical device that promised to save time and energy appealed to well-off women who suddenly had no dependable domestic helpers. Kohler was in a good position to respond to the demand for so-called mechanical servants. In terms of production, the firm’s engineers—who designed the electric sink, maintained the factories, and worked for Kohler subsidiaries on village construction projects—possessed the requisite electrical and mechanical knowledge for creating the new line. As for distribution, Kohler’s showrooms could be easily fixed up for demonstrating, promoting, and selling kitchen appliances.37

Other equipment manufacturers had similar devices on the market. In May 1926, Country Gentleman assessed several of these contraptions, designed for use with or without electricity. Some performed notoriously, leaving scraps of vegetables, gravy, and meat on cups, bowls, and plates; others were portable appliances, requiring the homemaker to fill and drain water by hand; still others simply consisted of a wire sink-shaped basket with a hose attachment for manually squirting soapy and clear water on the dishes. These drawbacks meant that Kohler engineers decided to design a machine that not only was easy to use but also washed dishes clean. Ultimately, the Kohler Electric Sink, available in seven models, large and small, combined the functions of a conventional sink and a dishwasher. Modeled after the Walker Electric Dishwasher Sink introduced in

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BE T T E R PRO D U C T S F O R B E T T E R H O M E S · 189
The Kohler Electric Sink—yours for no more than a servant’s wage for a few months

It is economy to pay money for some luxuries. The Kohler Electric Sink is an economy. It does effortlessly, three times a day and year after year, a task that by the old way of doing costs physical fatigue, and mental weariness, and money, and time worth more than money.

Every woman knows the cost. And no American woman, in these “Electric Twenties,” intends to keep on paying that cost forever. The Kohler Electric Sink is here. Now is the time to stop paying tribute to the tyrant of the dishpan.

The Kohler Electric Sink washes dishes shining clean, as you would wash them. It rescues hands from harassing dishwater; saves precious chins from old-time hazards of breaking and chipping them; its easy task completed, it becomes the best of all sinks for every other use, ahead of its day in features of practical convenience.

Ask your plumber about buying the Kohler Electric Sink on convenient payments — installation cost included.

A servant’s wage for a few months — that’s all it means. The coupon will bring more information about this and other fine Kohler fixtures for modern homes.

Kohler Co., Founded 1873. Kohler, Wis. 

Kohler Plumbing Fixtures
1925. Kohler’s one-piece enameled sink had a compartment outfitted with a revolving spray tower, whose openings propelled jets of soapy hot water onto silverware, dishes, and glasses in a basket. Within two minutes, dishes dirtied by five people came clean. Using the electric sink, a homemaker might save twenty-two minutes in washup time each day. A Salt Lake City woman reported that her pots and pans were “cleansed perfectly” by the appliance, while a Lexington, Massachusetts, consumer marveled at her hands, which lacked dishpan “redness and roughness,” thanks to the electric sink.\(^{38}\)

Anton Brotz and other Kohler engineers achieved the electric sink’s final design after two years of experiments, drawing on feedback wherever they found it. Throughout 1925, housewives in Kohler Village operated prototypes in their homes, with engineers looking over their shoulders, scribbling down notes, and hurrying back to their drawing boards to make adjustments. As the release date neared, Kohler’s advertising manager, L. L. Smith, asked the Good Housekeeping Institute (GHI) for an endorsement. Established in 1909, this Manhattan-based research wing of the magazine Good Housekeeping analyzed household equipment and other consumer products in the interest of its middle-class readers. Like many products, the electric sink failed to win a seal of approval on the first round. GHI’s consulting engineer George W. Alder reported a major design flaw: silverware never got clean, primarily due to a faulty basket that bunched together knives, forks, and spoons. When long-standing customer A. W. Prescott of the Prescott Supply Company in Binghamton, New York, also complained about the silver arrangement and sent rough sketches of other possible improvements, Kohler’s product developers knew they were in trouble. The next few months were frantic, as Brotz and his helpers rushed to fine-tune the electric sink for 1927.\(^{39}\)

The electric sink also presented the Kohler organization with a complex marketing problem. First, Kohler had to educate consumers to accept the idea of a successful mechanical dishwasher. Despite the servant shortage, housekeepers nevertheless resisted spending money on a device that lacked a track record. Even more challenging, the firm had to convince potential purchasers to choose its electric sink over other models. Even Katherine A. Fischer, GHI’s director, lamented consumers’ uneven response to electrical dishwashers. Personally averse to greasy water, Fischer welcomed the day when dish-cleaning machines would be commonplace, transforming the arduous chore into a painless activity, into the “Cinderella of housework.” To overcome consumer distrust, Kohler invested in a comprehensive marketing plan.\(^{40}\)
J. Robin Harrison, the Kohler specialty salesman in charge of promoting the electric sink, tried to build customer confidence in several ways. Targeting the dirt-and-germ phobias of stay-at-home mothers trying to keep things clean without servants, Harrison touted the electric sink’s hygienic qualities. If Americans of the Progressive Era liked to scrub away dirt, those who remembered the horrible disease and fatalities of the Great War and who survived the influenza epidemic of 1918 had become obsessed with cleanliness. The U.S. Army medical researcher James G. Cumming reported that people eating off machine-washed dishes were less likely to catch the flu than those using hand-washed utensils. Roy L. Dearstyne, a public health official from northern Virginia, corroborated Cumming’s findings with data from a restaurant study. Eventually, word of these investigations trickled down to mass magazines. Nell B. Nichols, household editor for *Farm & Fireside*, warned women that improperly washed dishes harbored dangerous bacteria, as did dirty dish mops and dishcloths. All of this fueled Harrison’s fires. In 1927, *The Proper Use of the Kohler of Kohler Sink*, a sales booklet for established customers, told readers that the electric sink rid the home of the dish mop, dishpan, and other “germ-infested” implements, making possible hospital-level sanitation. By 1927, the Good Housekeeping Institute, the H. J. Heinz Company in Pittsburgh, and the Aluminum Goods Manufacturing Company in Manitowac, Wisconsin, had installed Kohler Electric Sinks in their model kitchens, where visiting home economists, including businesswomen and teachers, saw the labor-saving machine as an avenue to clean living.41

Branch offices assiduously promoted the electric sink; showrooms installed special alcoves with dishwasher exhibits and placed cutaway models in windows, so that curious pedestrians might study the machines’ mechanisms. In these showrooms, electric sink saleswomen labored to convince jobbers, architects, plumbers, and homemakers to sell, specify, or buy the Kohler dishwasher. Much like corporate home economists demonstrating for public utilities and appliance companies, these saleswomen—seen within the Kohler Company as experts on “the woman’s viewpoint”—infused a technologically intimidating product with a feminine accessibility. Specially briefed by Kohler’s top executives, they tried to override resistance to the dishwasher’s novelty, price, and luxury status with pragmatic pitches to homemakers’ worries about household sanitation and the servant problem. These intensively trained saleswomen ventured into the field ready to counter every imaginable consumer objection, from “don’t need it” to “untried product.” On the road, they lectured home economics classes, women’s clubs, master plumbers, and jobbers’ salesmen about the virtues of all Kohler
fixtures. Their responsibilities also included sizing up prospective buyers to recommend appropriate colors, sizes, and models and to report back on the different likes and dislikes of potential purchasers. On the heels of Kohler demonstrators came plumbing fixture salesmen, who earned big bonuses on electric sink sales—such as they were.\(^4\)

Even to cutting-edge architects, home economics devotees, and well-heeled urbanities, the electric sink had a major drawback: high price. In 1929, homemakers could wash dishes using a few inexpensive supplies—soaps, water softeners, rubber scrapers, mops, cloths, and drainers, or they could clean up by using basket contraptions outfitted with hoses, priced at $12 to $15. An electrical dishwasher required a more significant investment; portables cost $150, and sink models ranged from $300 to $400. The Electric Sink cost $400 plus a $40 plumber’s installation fee. Its price exceeded that of a Frigidaire refrigerator, which sold on average for $350 in 1927, and came in slightly below an economy car such as the Chevrolet ($595) and the Ford Tudor Model T ($495). As a luxury durable good, the electric sink had to be sold on the installment plan. Under this system, the seller granted conditional possession of a product to a consumer who had signed a contract to pay for the item in regular monthly installments. “While it does seem wrong for manufacturers to utilize the conditional sales plan because it induces the consumer to make artificial purchases,” Walter Kohler confessed to Herbert, “seventy percent of the automobiles are sold today on that basis, as are talking machines, pianos, houses, and practically everything except the bare necessities.” To create a market for the electric sink, Kohler executives spent much of the late 1920s trying to teach the ins and outs of credit or budget sales to its marketing organization, including showroom managers, jobbers, and plumbers. Although the electric sink intrigued mechanically minded plumbers like the Bostonian who immediately ordered one for his “old lady,” many of these small businessmen were bewildered by this expensive consumer durable good—and even more frightened of installment selling.\(^4\)

As the electric sink sales specialist, Harrison decided that his firm would have to overcome “the many factors in the plumbing industry which make for conflict, overlapping of activities, jealousies, and even enmities” in order for the dishwasher to succeed. In an incisive critique of the distribution chain that linked Kohler to consumers through company showrooms, jobbers, jobbers’ salesmen, plumbers, and plumbers’ salesmen, Harrison laid out a comprehensive plan for rationalizing this antediluvian system; however, his was a voice in the wilderness, for he was a powerless middle manager. L. L. Smith advocated another approach:
color advertising. “One big advantage that the Standard Sanitary Mfg. Co. appears to have gained,” Smith noted, “was through sending out color proofs, which the plumbers, who are always looking for attractive pictures, quite generally posted up in their stores or windows.” Seniority won out. In 1927, Smith’s office devoted 27 percent of its $1.1 million budget to electric sink advertising, the largest sum ever spent by a sanitary-ware company to promote a single fixture. The watershed campaign included full-page advertisements in mass-circulation magazines and a plethora of dealers’ helps designed for jobbers, for jobbers’ salesmen—and especially for plumbers.44

Throughout the life of the electric sink, plumbers proved unresponsive to Kohler’s wooing and uncooperative partners in advancing installment sales. They distrusted multiple-party transactions, which they saw as infringing on their autonomy. Like other appliance manufacturers, Kohler had arranged for a sales finance company, CIT Financial Corporation, to handle installment contracts, and CIT could repossess an item after a buyer defaulted on one payment. As merchant-craftsmen who valued amiable customers relations, plumbers balked at the thought of becoming involved in repossession. The plumbers’ nonparticipation doomed the electric sink scheme to failure. Backed by plumbing supply houses, associations like the National Trade Extension Bureau labored to make plumbers into better merchants, but to little avail.45

When sales of sanitary fixtures slumped during the Great Depression, the electric sink fared worse than any other product in Kohler’s line. In 1934, accountants listed a $1.5 million loss on the firm’s operating statement; net losses on the electric sink totaled 137 percent of the product line’s net sales. The company dropped the product.46

**Beauty Meets the Bathroom**

> Color means Kohler.
> —N. W. Ayer & Son, 1930

Taking heed of ongoing marketing problems with the electric sink, Walter Kohler—like W. Edwin Wells at the Homer Laughlin China Company—began to recognize how the Jazz Age design craze fit into his goal for converting sanitary plumbing fixtures from a producer good to a consumer good. At the moment when Stuart Chase and F. J. Schlink, authors of *Your Money’s Worth*, a critique of profligate consumption published in 1927, advocated product standardization
as a cure for industrial waste, sanitary-ware manufacturers confronted sagging sales rooted in declining housing starts, saturated urban markets, and resistant rural markets. Looking to the auto industry, Ceramic Industry prodded sanitary men to embrace styling as a mechanism for stimulating demand. Why not, trade journalists argued, emulate General Motors, famous for its diversified line of automobiles, by responding to consumers’ desires for variety in styles, shapes, colors, and prices? Why not add the pink bathroom to the list of desirable durable goods available on the installment plan? The risqué image of Gloria Swanson’s soapy splendor had titillated moviegoers, and DeMille continued to film exotic actresses like Myrna Loy in bubble baths. The sleek stylish tub was fast becoming one of the leading fixtures in Hollywood films; to the millions of women who attended the movies every week, sensuous bathing scenes represented the glamor, beauty, style, enjoyment, and wealth that epitomized the pinnacle of consumerism. The material world awaited the ascent of a bathtub genius, an Alfred P. Sloan Jr. of enamelware, who could give form to the fantastic bathing equipment shown on film. Theoretically, women who took delight from these fictions might willingly transfer their sensual longings to real-life objects of desire, if those bathtubs fulfilled the right promises in the right ways. With the feminine penchant for style in mind, between 1927 and 1934 Kohler’s managers entered the world of fashion, stopping at the kiosks of color, modern styling, advertising, and credit sales. The outcome was the modern bathroom ensemble, the matching holy trinity of toilet, sink, and bathtub that we know today.

Like Detroit’s automakers, Walter Kohler aimed to use colorful, stylish designs, mass advertising, and installment sales to reorient consumers’ perceptions of his product lines, converting utilitarian sanitary equipment into fashionable goods. This objective fit into his larger schemes for remaking the American house into a Better Home and for reshaping American workers into conscientious middle-class citizen-consumers. To be sure, Kohler did not try manipulate purchasers into buying sanitary fixtures by creating a need and filling it, as did the makers of soap, perfume, hand lotion, and other disposable goods. Rather, much like Wells at Homer Laughlin, Kohler created durable goods that tapped into people’s nascent desires. Through Kohler Village and Better Homes activities, Kohler learned how to combine his own imperative for a dependable workforce with his target audience’s greatest material longing: home ownership. What most mattered about Kohler’s BHA affiliation is what it taught him about consumers: they welcomed suggestions about gender roles, the superiority of Anglo-Saxon architecture, and the importance of affluent consumption as long as the
required goods were within their financial grasp. By the same token, the electric sink's uneven reception provided Kohler with a tutorial of a different sort: consumers rejected high-price durable goods of questionable utility. From these object lessons, Kohler crafted his beauty-in-the-bathroom strategy.

Building on the new fascination with the automobile as a symbol of financial security, class status, mobility, and personal taste, Kohler decided that consumers saw other durable goods as similar repositories of meaning, and he sought to tap into this perceived reality. He maintained that the family who completed monthly installment payments on a piano, radio, stove, refrigerator, or dish set felt a great financial and emotional release, and sometimes transferred this exhilaration to pride in possession. These goods represented sacrifice, discipline, and material achievement. To some, the ownership of brand-name durable goods—a Ford or Victrola purchased on credit—signified judicious spending habits. By tapping into these symbolic meanings, Kohler hoped to resolve one of the greatest problems facing fixture firms: underconsumption. If people endowed cars, stoves, and dishes with special meaning, might Kohler not use the tools of enticement—design, advertising, and credit—to direct their desires toward bathroom fixtures? After all, Americans had already shown their appreciation of the bathroom as a dual-purpose household space; it was not only a machine for clean living but also a place for sensual indulgence. From the electric sink campaign, Kohler well knew that plans for the bathroom beautiful had to include designs aimed at different income levels. Although sanitary-ware firms had always made fixtures in a hierarchy of prices, perhaps Kohler could refine this somewhat haphazard practice to create—emulating General Motors—a line of fixtures for every taste and pocketbook. If consumers upgraded their cars from Chevrolets to Buicks as their incomes grew, might they not also replace old-fashioned white fixtures with smart, up-to-date, colored bathroom accessories? What better reflected a family’s upward mobility than its ability to indulge in the luxury of bathroom remodeling?

Initially, Kohler embraced color as the “style note” that would encourage Americans to take just as much pride in their kitchen sinks, laundry tubs, and bathtubs as they did in Frigidaire refrigerators, Victrola phonographs, Steinway pianos, and Buick automobiles. Like other contemporary businessmen, he perceived something magical in color that might stimulate the “more frequent” buying of sanitary fixtures. In large measure, Kohler’s chromatic imagination was stirred by the immensely successful color-in-the-kitchen movement. This merchandising fervor, inaugurated by urban department stores in mid-decade,
inspired the Fostoria Glass Company to create its remarkably popular pastel glassware and pushed Homer Laughlin to toy with tinted materials, leading to products like Yellowstone, Fiesta, and Harlequin. Helping to pioneer the chromatic vogue in the appliance field, enamelers introduced brightly colored stoves and refrigerators at the American Gas Association's annual trade show in 1926. Soon, several foundries and sanitary potteries—including the Universal Sanitary Manufacturing Company of New Castle, Pennsylvania, and the Eljer Company of Ford City, Pennsylvania, and Cameron, West Virginia—introduced bathroom fixtures in black, tan, green, and other colors. New Jersey's General Ceramics Company made porcelain fixtures to architects' specifications, filling requests for unusual sizes and colors if the contracts proved worthwhile. While General Ceramics had a ready market in the Northeast, small inland manufacturers like Universal suffered from high freight charges and the lack of metropolitan showrooms essential for placing speciality products in the urban limelight. Watching these firms carefully, Kohler's managers began to speculate how their customers might respond to color.

Kohler broached the field of color merchandising circuitously, testing the waters during the mid-1920s by promoting brilliant faience tiles as appropriate backdrops for white bathroom fixtures. Branch offices joined the tile crusade in a major way, for color added visual appeal to showrooms. On the coasts and in the heartland, faience window displays attracted the attentions of consumers tired of the sterile look of white. Venturing into showrooms, they found even more visual delights. In Chicago, Kohler's refurbished display area in the Tribune Tower looked deliciously chromatic, with a richly painted coffered ceiling, a floor of green and purple slate, and fixtures set against faience tiles. The capacious Los Angeles showroom featured bathrooms and kitchens embellished with colorful tiles, and the small Indianapolis branch office installed faience exhibition platforms in colors that harmonized with its walls, rugs, and furnishings. Those in the know praised the dazzling bathroom dressed in color. Interior design expert Helen Koves reminded budget-conscious readers that colored tiles cost no more than white ones, while highbrow journalist Margaret McElroy of House and Garden reveled in the possibilities for tiling, painting, and wallpapering the bathroom in any and every color—except hospital white.

The faience moment served Kohler well, for it visually accustomed potential customers, from architects to household consumers, to the chromatic bathroom while the firm geared up for pottery production. Once its Wisconsin pottery opened, Kohler's engineers pressed ahead to develop ceramic and enameled fix-
The faience moment. In 1926, Kohler transformed its Chicago showroom into a beaux arts delight with rich chromatic appointments. Kohler Company
tures in six signature shades: Autumn Brown, Lavender, Spring Green, Old Ivory, West Point Grey, and Horizon Blue. In March 1927, Standard, whose chemists had been busily working behind the scenes on a parallel development of colored glazes, used the trade press to announce its plans to introduce chromatic fixtures within a year. Immediately, Walter and Herbert Kohler gave top priority to their color project; by April, they were scrutinizing enamel and glaze trials. In August, the managers unveiled colored prototypes to visiting wholesalers, who responded enthusiastically. Adapting preview methods used by Detroit automakers, the Kohler brothers put samples of colored fixtures on display in their showrooms in the fall and watched consumers’ reactions. Top executives cheered when branch managers reported that women in particular took pleasure from the “striking and beautiful color effects.” The gendered dimension of Kohler’s sales strategy appeared to be working. Following these market tests, Kohler introduced Color Ware in December 1927 through a full-page color advertisement in America’s most widely read magazine, the Saturday Evening Post.  

Designing glazes, previewing markets, and undertaking a mass-circulation advertising campaign constituted the first steps in the drawn-out development of Color Ware. Riding on the Saturday Evening Post campaign, Kohler had become the nation’s leading maker of colored sanitary fixtures by early 1928. In the following year, the architect Ely Jacques Kahn selected jet black Kohler fixtures for his bathroom installation in the Metropolitan Museum’s annual Exhibition of American Industrial Art (plate 7). Acknowledgment from architects aside, Kohler soon uncovered major trouble spots in its marketing organization. Just as plumbers were the fly in the ointment of the electric sink campaign, the showrooms proved irksome in the Color Ware project. With factory engineers laboring to fine-tune chromatic glazes and enamels, Kohler’s managers cautioned branch offices against aggressively pushing colored fixtures. There was no sense in accumulating orders that the Wisconsin factories were unprepared to fill. Instead, Kohler’s executives urged branch offices to use lavish displays of chromatic fixtures—sometimes accounting for half of the products in a showroom—as prestige builders, showpieces of the firm’s artistic and technical skills. In this way, Color Ware could serve as an excellent talking point about Kohler’s quality engineering commitment in dealing with customers primarily interested in staple lines. The architects, engineers, and builders who entered the Kohler showroom fully anticipated hearing eloquent lectures from the sales staff while they pondered fixture requisitions. Although branches effectively negotiated Color Ware previews, their sales personnel seemed unable to fathom the concept of
using a luxury line to create goodwill, enhance corporate prestige, and stimulate desire for stock items. Something was amiss.

Unlike the salesmen who ran retail showrooms for potteries and glass factories, Kohler’s branch managers—men who had grown up in the hot, dirty, dusty foundry trade—felt ill at ease with matters of style, fashion, design, and taste. At home in the world of producers’ goods, Kohler’s branch managers squirmed when top executives expected them to remake the company’s showrooms into stages for consumer goods and become salesmen. Their well-established selling practices, grounded in fact-based product descriptions, simple displays, and price advantages through discounts, worked fine as long as Kohler made standard lines, because jobbers, jobbers’ salesmen, and plumbers understood plain talk, which also reflected the integrity of snow-white bathroom fixtures. Branch offices tolerated the fad for faience tiles, which served as props for pure white fixtures; and they endured the electric sink, which had its own team of demonstration ladies. But they never hid their distrust of Color Ware and its prestige-oriented sales plan. Trained to promote cleanliness, efficiency, and family values, branch managers felt ill at ease with fashion. While top management had evolved, branch managers had stood still. If Color Ware were to succeed, it was essential that the front line carry its banner high.51

Kohler executives struggled with unanticipated contingencies that upset the chromatic apple cart in the larger sanitary fixture market. By the late 1920s, fastidious shoppers exercised their veto power by objecting to variations in the hues and tints of Color Ware. Earlier in the decade, consumers had demonstrated their expectations of aesthetic and technical precision by rejecting off-quality white fixtures produced at Kohler’s pottery in Trenton. As problematic as it was to ensure the purity of white glazes and enamels, the task of consistently creating uniform bright colors was even more exacting. Variations in shades of purple and green, perhaps indiscernible in factory inspection rooms, became blatant in domestic installations. Burdened with technical difficulties, Kohler warned showroom managers that its factories could not guarantee precise chromatic matches; from Wisconsin, managers urged salesmen to tell customers that fixtures, if slightly off-tint, still harmonized with each other. Consumers rejected such sales patter. Priced at from 25 to 100 percent more than white fixtures, Color Ware had to match. As consumers resisted the multiplicity of hues, tints, and shades coming out of Kohler’s factories, slow turnover and excessive returns plagued the manufacturer and its distributors. Color exacerbated sales problems,
rather than helping the company penetrate consumer markets with a new durable good.52

Kohler did not grapple with its color dilemma in a corporate vacuum. The firm’s chromatic nightmare dovetailed with a riot of color that started to plague the entire sanitary fixture industry before the stock market crash of 1929. As companies large and small—Universal, Eljer, Standard, Crane, and Kohler—competed for consumers’ dollars by rushing to color, they inundated distributors with a rainbow of hues. Each company produced its own purple, its own green, and so forth. Although manufacturers saw signature colors like Standard’s Rose du Barry and Kohler’s Spring Green as mechanisms for differentiating among their lines, nothing prevented consumers from buying fixtures made by different companies. Before long, jobbers and plumbers complained about surplus inventories of mismatched fixtures. Those initiated in the fixture trade recoiled at reports of inventory buildups, which conjured up images of the dreaded underconsumption plague. Consumer demand fit into the equation, but in less obvious ways.53

Within a short time, this chromatic nightmare attracted attention from the Commerce Department, dedicated to spreading the gospel of simplification through public-private cooperation. By 1929, the department’s National Bureau of Standards (NBS) established a planning committee for manufacturers, distributors, builders, plumbers, architects, and home economists interested in creating standards for six sanitary fixture colors: green, orchid, ivory, blue, light brown, and black. As experts on the woman’s perspective, home economists especially supported commercial standards that would “assist the homemaker who is untrained in color ensembling to combine equipment in her home more artistically.” This project paralleled hundreds of similar ventures within the NBS’s “simplified practice” program, designed to eliminate the excessive variety that presumably caused oversupply, industrial waste, and stagnant markets. Following Hoover’s interpretation of the associationist tradition, the NBS encouraged but did not force manufacturers to comply with simplified standards. In the sanitary-ware industry, smaller factories rejoiced at the new standards, first published in 1931 and revised in 1937. Nonplussed by special orders for fixtures in “almost every conceivable shade,” the Abingdon Sanitary Manufacturing Company in Illinois readily adopted the NBS hues. When customers ordered fixtures in other colors, Abingdon treated those requests as special orders, subject to a surcharge. At Kohler, managers resisted the simplified practice, decrying the
prospect of joining a flock of sanitary sheep. In their minds, a firm’s palette was a distinctive signature, a tool for competing in a style-conscious market. The solution to the color riot did not lie in industrywide conformity but in greater efficiency at the level of the firm.\(^5^4\)

While the NBS wrestled with chromatic chaos, Kohler’s managers struggled to cope with a mounting economic crisis. When housing starts fell from 753,000 in 1928 to 93,000 in 1933, Kohler’s sales and profits declined. The company reduced prices to keep up with mail-order houses that sold cheap colored fixtures made by small factories like Universal and Eljer. Yet price cuts only contributed to the misery. As Walter Kohler told his executive staff in June 1929, the “tightening economic situation” made “fundamental research vitally important” to the company’s welfare. Like other executives exploring industrial science, Kohler defined “fundamental research” in a pragmatic way: developing new processes to lower both manufacturing costs and retail prices and making a renewed commitment to styling.\(^5^5\)

As design became a keynote in the home furnishings trade, sanitary fixture firms one by one picked up the gauntlet. As with color, smaller firms like Universal led the way; before long, the big three—Standard, Crane, and Kohler—followed suit. Design patents offered little protection, and copying became the rule of the day. Thus when Standard introduced a staple lavatory with a “square bowl,” Herbert Kohler urged his brother to make a high-class sink with “a distinctly modern note.” Also following Standard, Kohler created an upbeat line of plumbers’ brass, the Octochrome.\(^5^6\)

In the sanitary fixture trade, firms had long relied on in-house expertise to make the limited aesthetic decisions that went into creating standardized lines. Kohler’s early twentieth-century products most likely stemmed from a collaboration among the firm’s managers, mechanical engineers, consultant architects, and, later, pottery modelers. During the late 1920s, Standard broke away from this form-follows-function tradition of engineer-driven design by hiring industrial designer George Sakier to establish a Bureau of Design Development. Sakier had studied engineering at Columbia University, learned about art in Paris, worked as a commercial illustrator, and designed glass tableware for the Fostoria Glass Company. Rather than set up an in-house design department, Walter Kohler whetted his appetite for styling by turning to familiar fashion intermediaries—women and advertising executives—for help.\(^5^7\)

Pleased by the input of GHI’s home economists, consultants at the Delineator Home Institute, and his own electric sink saleswomen, Walter Kohler judged
that the “woman’s viewpoint” might make a difference in Color Ware development. His sister’s enormous success with BHA also reinforced his appreciation for women’s skills in domestic matters. Kohler’s aesthetic research program included sessions with the former advice book author Hazel H. Adler, president of the Taylor System of Color Harmony, the New York consulting firm that helped Henry Ford select colors for the Model A. In September 1929, Adler and her assistants, Misses Cook and Heile, overhauled Kohler’s chromatic portfolio. Blending color theory, good design principles, and the woman’s viewpoint, the Adler team lectured Kohler men on chromatic facts: carefully chosen colors alleviated eyestrain among industrial workers, stirred shoppers to buy, and reduced the psychological burden of housework. On the principle that color affected mood, Adler and her assistants invented the colors Silver Green, Bisque, and Thrush Gray for kitchen and laundry fixtures. Arguing that certain colors conveyed a sense of high style, they created Tuscan, a rich golden tint that suggested “modernity and good taste,” to replace dirty-looking Old Ivory in the bathroom. Adler’s designer hues produced gratifying results; Tuscan became one of Color Ware’s best-sellers. As the saleswoman Mildred D. Strauss reported from Massachusetts during the mid-1930s, this golden hue was the Boston showroom’s “most popular color” due to its clarity, warmth, and reliability.58

The Kohler Company also changed advertising agencies, replacing Erwin, Wasey & Company with N. W. Ayer & Son. With Madison Avenue offices, Ayer fit the swank image that Kohler hoped to project with Color Ware. The agency’s track record spoke for itself. In 1927, a nervous Henry Ford, witnessing the eclipse of his leadership in the auto industry, hired Ayer to promote his new Model A as “a smart stylish car,” and its high-class campaign helped to change Ford’s reputation for dowdiness. Outstripping Standard and Crane on expenditures for consumer advertising, Kohler wanted the most for its dollar—for if any piece of household equipment needed a new image, it was the bathroom fixture. Ayer knew something about bathroom styling, as its clients included Cannon Mills, the textile firm that revolutionized towel merchandising with designs for “mass” and “class” markets. Following the changeover to the new agency in January 1930, Herbert Kohler, writing to his Philadelphia branch manager, divulged his hope that Ayer, which had departments devoted to market research and design, could develop “an effective program for increasing the prestige of the company and the acceptance of our products by the public.” In charge of the Kohler account from 1930 to 1944, Ayer’s executives never hesitated to put in their “two cents” about design, encouraging the fixture manufacturer to switch
visual gears. Color remained in the firm's design lexicon, but it became part of a larger marketing strategy for promoting "matched beauty in plumbing fixtures."59

The company reimagined the bathroom fixture market in feminine terms, building on earlier attempts to reach women customers with the electric sink. This time, however, Kohler avoided the wildly unfamiliar; taking heed of home furnishings trends, in 1931 it introduced the bathroom "ensemble," a philosophy that became the cornerstone of the company's Depression Era lines. At the most basic level, Kohler reached out to housekeepers, whose daily routines exposed them to "sets" of everything from tableware to bedroom furnishings. Kohler's venture into Matched Sets also reflected other factors, including the color problem. Generally, sanitary-ware vendors sold sinks, toilets, and tubs separately, doing little to encourage architects, builders, and consumers to buy fixtures made by one company, a strategy that contributed to mismatched hues and "dead" inventories. In part, producers were to blame, for they provided few financial incentives for Joe Jobber or Peter Plumber to push fixtures in threesomes, until Sears, Roebuck & Company started undercutting the market with inexpensive "bathroom outfits" costing less than $100. Kohler responded with Matched Sets at different price points, from the luxurious Mayfair at $1,150 to the modest Colonna at $98. In Kohler's case, the switch to bathroom suites took fortification from Ayer imagery that highlighted women as the important decision makers responsible for selecting the right Matched Sets (plate 8).60

Here, too, Walter Kohler's pet project, the Better Home, exerted special sway over his corporate strategy. In 1928, he had spearheaded the Home Modernization Bureau (HMB), a voluntary arm of the Home Industries Bureau concerned with stimulating building activity, stabilizing the labor market, and promoting prosperity. Supported by Hoover's White House Conference on Home Ownership and Home Improvement, HMB urged consumers to consider small remodeling projects that could be financed on credit. Taking inspiration from things Hooverized, HMB strove to rehabilitate or "renovize" substandard housing. In New Orleans, where more than 80 percent of residential bathrooms predated 1920, a Bathroom Beautiful Contest urged renovizers to weed out "baths with fancy claw feet, embossed toilet bowls, high wooden tanks, worn-down painted seats, [and] hopper-type toilets." Kohler of Kohler News urged plumbers, who now received higher discounts on ensembles than on single items, to follow the Louisiana example, touting the "unified design" of Kohler's Matched Sets to inspire renovizers.61
In the long run, Kohler's stylish bathroom fixtures, including the economy Matched Set models, failed to stimulate consumers' desires to “want things.” More than any other stylistic feature, color suffered a big blow during the 1930s. Increasingly, landlords noted renters' negative responses to colored fixtures. Just as they refused to live in apartments with outmoded kitchens and bathrooms, people resented paying higher rents for units just because they had colored tubs, sinks, and toilets. Take, for example, the quintessential low-cost renter, “Mrs. Brown,” who found herself “constantly moving” from one apartment to another as her husband migrated from job to job. Like other participants in American consumer society, she understood the ensemble concept and appreciated things that matched. Having experienced the “color epidemic,” she also understood “color harmonies” much better than her working-class grandmother. About to take an apartment in 1937, Brown declined after seeing the bathroom. She found it wasteful to buy “new towels, face cloths, shower curtains, bath mats . . . [and] draperies” to go with the room’s permanent color scheme. Like Mrs. Brown and other renters, home owners looking for visual variety appreciated towels in luminous lavender, but they responded negatively to large, unchangeable, and immovable fixtures in bright hues. As Christine Holbrook reminded readers of Better Homes and Gardens in 1934, painted wooden accessories, such as dressing tables, clothes hampers, hanging shelves, and towel racks, provided renovators with simple, inexpensive decorating solutions to dreary bathrooms. Wallpaper, fiberboard, and linoleum counted among the favorite face-lifters of the magazine’s Margaret White, who argued that these materials added “novel distinction” to “horse-and-buggy” bathrooms without burning a hole in a family’s pocket. For even less, paint enabled renovators to tailor chromatic effects to individual tastes. At a time when one-third of America’s homes lacked bathtubs and one-fifth had no kitchen sinks, expensive colored installations of fixtures and faience tiles found few markets below the “better class” of dwellings, including the mansions of Hollywood movie stars or high-priced apartment hotels in large cities.62

By the mid-to-late 1930s, the Kohler brothers reconsidered their approach to consumers. Through repeated experiments, they had learned much about people’s preferences in household goods. No matter what the Kohler Company did, bathrooms remained at the bottom of Americans’ list of desirable durables. Whether or not fixtures had eye appeal mattered less than their price, performance, and versatility. At Kohler, the persistent demand for the Cardinal bathtub, a built-in unit predating the apron tub, drove this point home. For several
years, Kohler attempted to drop this single-shell unit from production, but consumers kept asking for it. In the late 1930s, Kohler made twenty-four models of Cardinal tubs; Standard made twenty; Crane made fourteen; and six smaller firms made from six to eighteen. Not only cheaper than apron tubs, the popular Cardinal had features that other built-in units lacked. As product engineers reported to Herbert Kohler and other top executives, “the design of the Cardinal tub permits the user to step closer to the tub and also provides a grip rim.” A good deal had changed since Progressive Era sanitarians rejected Cardinal-type tubs in favor of apron units. Whereas consumers once fixated on germ-harboring crevices, they now appreciated the handy rim they used to steady themselves with while getting in and out of the slippery bath. Concern over cleanliness never disappeared; germs simply took a back seat to price, safety, and utility.63

In 1937, Kohler’s promotional booklet, Planned Plumbing and Heating for Better Living, expounded on the wonders of color, but it conceded that there was “much to be said in favor of white fixtures.” In a fitting acknowledgment of consumers’ desires for change, the firm reminded readers that white fixtures afforded the opportunity to renovate a bathroom “at will and without restraint.” Kohler’s pronouncements dovetailed with snowy reawakenings among other household equipment businesses. Within a few years, tile contractors deserted faience in favor of white installations with fine accents of bright color. Appliance manufacturers like Iowa’s Maytag phased out grey, brown, and green washing machines in favor of white models. In many respects, the chromatic revolution experienced a backlash: white, the darling of Progressive Era reformers, triumphed over the brilliant palette favored by modernist designers. No longer primarily a symbol of cleanliness, white became the color of choice as the consumer society matured. It provided a standardized, neutral backdrop around which housewives could construct personal statements about identity, comfort, and beauty. As Walter and Herbert Kohler discovered, there was no better testimonies to consumer power than the revival of white.64

When his prescription for better living fell apart during the Great Depression, Walter Kohler, dressed in a three-piece suit, a starched white collar, and a Panama hat, endured a deluge of hisses and boos as he crossed picket lines outside his factories during its 1934 strike. For several years, the Kohler Company had operated in the red, with losses totaling $2 million in 1932 and $700,000 in 1933. As the demand for sanitary fixtures fell, Walter and his brother, Herbert, took measures to assure workers of steady, if not full, employment in anticipation of
a building trades recovery. When the company announced plans to adhere to minimum wages and hours approved by the National Recovery Administration (NRA), workers balked. Under the aegis of the recently formed Federal Union No. 18545, they requested more pay for less work—sixty-five cents per hour and thirty-hour weeks, instead of forty cents per hour and forty-hour weeks. These demands heightened labor-management tensions, for employees were also unhappy with the health hazards of foundry work, a company-sponsored union, speedups initiated in the name of scientific management, penalties for defective workmanship, and mandatory wage deductions for mortgages. Many complained that only managers could afford to buy houses in Kohler Village. From Walter Kohler's perspective, these complaints spoke to the cluelessness of workers, who understood little about the problems of keeping a sanitary-ware firm afloat. As economic conditions worsened, Kohler's seven warehouses grew bloated with excess inventory. In April 1933, the firm closed its branch offices in Atlanta, Indianapolis, and Omaha. While the NRA hoped codes would encourage management-labor cooperation, Walter Kohler and his workers locked horns at the feet of the agency's mascot, the patriotic Blue Eagle. 65

When an aging Walter Kohler stepped down as president in 1937, he left behind more than a disgruntled workforce and a fractured version of the American dream. His real legacy concerned product diversification and design innovation. With six corporate divisions, the Kohler Company had become a full-line plumbing supplier making electrical generators, ceramic fixtures, enameled fixtures, brass accessories, boilers, and radiators. Indeed, the electric sink and Color Ware counted among Kohler's few failures, in part because they were products ahead of their time. With these items, Kohler had tried to reorient people's perceptions of enameled and pottery plumbing fixtures, so as to redefine and expand the category of consumer goods. Drawing on methods pioneered by Sloan at General Motors, Kohler created a bathroom for every pocketbook. Intrigued, consumers swam toward the lure, nibbled at the bait, and then hurried away in search of more tantalizing objects: autos, radios, phonographs, refrigerators. In a few decades, postwar consumers would behave differently, with the automatic dishwasher and the chromatic bathroom joining the list of desirable consumer goods. The time would come when people who drove Chevrolets actually did wash their dishes mechanically.