

Income of Working Wives Forming Buffer to Inflation

By JERRY FLINT

The other day Jerry Brown of Houston found what he wanted in a flea market. The massive antique oak sideboard cost \$550. He paid cash.

His wife, Jeanette, is buying things she would have passed up last year. "There's the corduroy suit I bought," she says. "Last year we would have looked at it and just said, 'Oh, isn't that nice.'" And in the grocery, she says, "I buy the brand I want rather than picking out the cheapest one now."

Inflation is America's No. 1 problem, politicians and polls agree, but it isn't crimping the Browns. The reason: Seven months ago Mrs. Brown went to work.

Compensation for Living Costs

Mr. Brown, who works for Southwestern Bell, earns about \$25,000 a year. Mrs. Brown's job — she is a secretary at a computer service company after 15 years as a housewife — pays nearly \$10,000. That more than compensates for any climb in this year's living costs.

The Browns are not unusual. Across the nation women have swarmed into the work force by the millions, swelling the numbers of multi-income families.

That trend can mask the effects of inflation, since a substantial number of families are living better than they did. It can explain why, on the one hand, workers' real spendable earnings are dropping while, on the other, signs of consumer wealth persist — the spending in department stores, the crowded restaurants, the lines at the box office for \$4 movie tickets.

3 Million More Families

From 1973 to 1978, the percentage of wives in the paid labor force climbed to 53.5 percent from 45.8 percent. With 38.8 million married couples in which the husband works, that means almost 3 million more families with combined incomes.

Over 10 years the increase is more than 5 million families.

Those figures do not include unmarried couples living together and pooling money, but indications are that that number has climbed enormously, too.

Some women, of course, say they have gone to work just because of inflation, but the trend is tied to more deeply rooted changes in the society. The education and aspirations of American women have changed, technological advances have eased housework burdens, and child-bearing can more easily be controlled.

Sylvia Wolak of LaGrange, Ill., went to work at a bank three years ago, and her family still feels the income surge.

The original idea was to put away money for a down payment on a house. "And let's face it," Mrs. Wolak said, "in order to have fun, you need money. I had a lot of time before I started working, but no money to spend."

The Wolaks are not rich; the combined family income is about \$25,000. But now they do not scrimp.

Before the second-income days the family shopped at discount houses. "I'd go look at things at Marshall Field, but I never thought of buying there," Mrs. Wolak said. "Now I have a charge account at Field's." Previously the five-member family did not eat out a great deal; now there is Sunday morning breakfast at a restaurant.

Masking Is Only Temporary

That masking effect is only temporary, however, because, as families become accustomed to higher incomes, "any kind of curtailment on capacity to buy is felt," said Fabian Linden, director of consumer research of the Conference Board, a business research group in New York City.

Living styles change to match added income, he said, and "paying 8, 9, 10 percent more to live next year is painful." But, he added, "it is pleasanter to be broke on \$20,000 a year than on \$15,000."

Mr. Linden noted that a fifth of the

nation's families had incomes of \$25,000 a year or more and that three-fourths of those were multi-income families. He predicted that in the next decade the multi-income family would have even more money since the new generation of women, with more education and higher aspirations, would win better jobs and higher pay.

Basic economic theory, said Carolyn Shaw Bell, professor of economics at Wellesley College, would suggest that the added earnings in the multi-income family in fact contribute to inflation. However, she said this is not considered an important factor in the current economic situation.

Mrs. Bell pointed out that the added earnings of the multiple-income family were certainly not a protection against inflation, since those extra dollars could not buy as much as they used to. But to many Americans two incomes disguise the effects of the shrinking dollar.

"We lived from check to check," said Tom Black, a lawyer in Tampa Fla., until his wife took a job last year. "It made a big difference in our lives. Without her working, we couldn't have the things we have. Right now, we need her income to maintain our standard of living."

That combined \$36,000 is buying a home in the better part of town, a private school for their daughter, and a maid.

'We're Not Reluctant to Spend'

"We really like our life style, too," Connie Black said. "When I sit down at a restaurant I don't worry that the entree is \$6.95."

"We're very conscious of inflation, but we're not reluctant to spend," Mr. Black explained, "especially now, because the items will be more expensive tomorrow."

Sometimes the wife's job starts out as temporary but turns out to be permanent.

"I was going to work for three months to pay off a bunch of bills," Jeanette Brown said.

Money had become scarce after the family moved into a more expensive house with higher payments. "Once we finally got into the house, the movies, eating out ceased," she explained.

But now, "we're eating out more often, we're buying more" and "paying cash instead of charging," she said.

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Jeanette and Jerry Brown relaxing at home by their newly purchased antique sideboard. The Houston couple are able to purchase more this year since Mrs. Brown went to work seven months ago.

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