



Common Core Connection

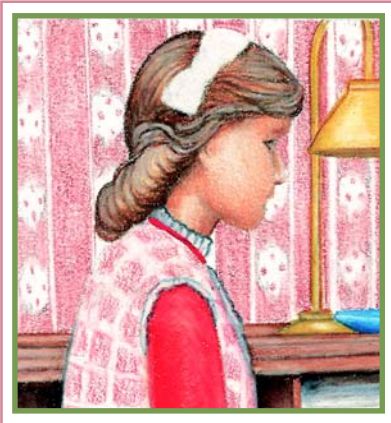


Chapter 6 Lesson 4

You Can Do It, Mrs. Bissell! (1889)

Story illustrated by Don Ellens

How was life different in 1889 for women and children?



The sawmills along the Grand River brought furniture makers. Good wood was close by. The flowing river gave their factories water power.

One year a small company began in Grand Rapids. It did not make furniture. Its workers did use wood though. They used it to make carpet sweepers. These sweepers were muscle-powered. They were pushed across the floor. Here is the story of that company and the people behind it.....

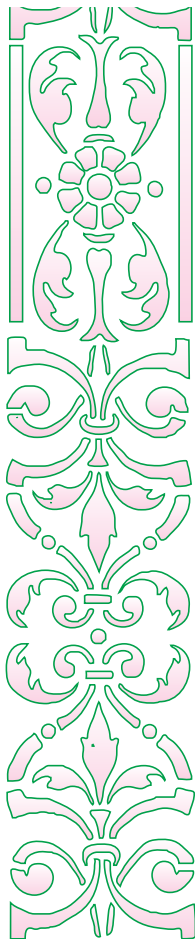
My name is Mary Maud Vandenberg. I am 10 years old and live in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I come from a big family— quite a big family actually. I share my parents with nine brothers and sisters! With so many children, Ma and Pa are often short of money. That means those of us who are old enough, work to help out.

Some places with jobs for children were dirty or not safe. Father said he would not have us labor all day making cigars. Mother said there were too many children hurt in the furniture factories.

I was very lucky. One of mother's friends found a place for me. Now I work after school and on Saturdays at the Bissell home. They are very nice to me.

You have heard of the Bissells haven't you? They have a big business making carpet sweepers here in Grand Rapids. They say Mr. Bissell thought of the idea all by himself. Lots of ladies buy his sweepers. Those

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sweepers save so much time. Now, no one has to haul all of the carpets out each spring and beat them! Just push a Bissell sweeper over the rugs every few days, and they are clean.

The Bissells just bought a big, beautiful house. The house is so pretty and has lots of rooms. It is grand to work there.

I dust the furniture, sweep the floors, and put the dishes on the table for supper. If it is cold, I bring wood for each of the six fireplaces. I am paid 25¢ a day! The money is a big help at home.



Lately it has been very sad at the Bissells. Mr. Bissell died of pneumonia. He was only 46 years old. Everyone was crying. Mrs. Bissell, Anna, is heartbroken. His death was mentioned in all the newspapers. Many people have come to comfort the Bissells. I helped hang up the visitors' hats and coats.

An important man has just come to the house. He has stepped out of his carriage. What a fine black horse he has! I must hurry to the door...

"Good afternoon, sir! May I please take your hat and coat. Thank you, sir. Mrs. Bissell is in the library. May I show you the way?" I think the visitor is Mr. Clark, the Bissell's lawyer.

I took the caller to the library. "Mrs. Bissell, a gentleman is here to see you."

He walked in and gave her arm a little squeeze. "Anna, I know Melville's funeral was only a few days ago. But, there are things to do. We must talk about the business. If you can't find a good man to take charge, I think you should sell."



Anna Bissell just looked at him with sad eyes. “But we have both worked so hard at the business. Perhaps I can carry on somehow?”

Mr. Clark continued, “Now Anna. You are not thinking clearly. How can a woman run a business? And it is a big business too. Just think of the troubles you had after the fire five years ago. Suppose something terrible like that happened again? No bank would give a woman a big loan to rebuild the factory! Let me write a letter to the Goshen Sweeper Company. Let me see how much they will offer.”



A Bissell carpet sweeper. In those times most of it was made of wood. Art by Don Ellens.

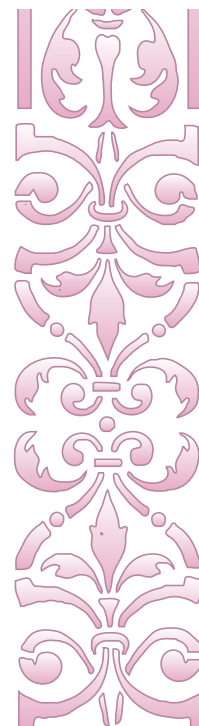
“Oh, I suppose. You are probably right. I shall think about it.”

“Well then, Anna. I think you are coming to your senses. Your place is home with the children. Running a business brings many worries. I will be at my office if you need me. Good day!”

Mr. Clark walked briskly out of the library. As he passed me, he pulled a cigar from his coat pocket. I just stood near the door. Mrs. Bissell sat there and looked like she was ready to cry. I slowly walked over to her.

I said, “I don’t think that man is very nice.”

“Mr. Clark? Oh, Mary Maud, he is just trying to do his job. He is trying to do the best thing for us.”



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“But if you don’t want to sell your company, why should you? You are smart. At least I have always thought so. You know all about the sweeper business.” Anna Bissell had a little tremble. Then I blurted out, “Mrs. Bissell, you CAN do it! I just know you can!”

Mrs. Bissell looked up at me. A bit of a smile slowly came to her face. Her eyes twinkled. She slapped her hand down on the desk. “Mary Maud, I do think you might be right. You are so sweet to say so. You don’t have to be a man to run a business!” Mrs. Bissell gave me a big hug. She said, “I have some work to do and had best get started!”

Mary and Mrs. Bissell.
Art by Don Ellens.



Within four years Anna Bissell's company was **manufacturing** or making 1,000 sweepers a day! She started **exporting** Bissell sweepers around the world. Britain became her second largest market. The customers or **consumers** there really liked them.

Mrs. Bissell was always concerned about her workers. Once she had a party for them at her home. Four hundred people came!

Anna ran the Bissell company for 30 years - from 1889 to 1919. She became a leading **entrepreneur** in Michigan. Anna died in 1934 and Grand Rapids felt it was a great loss. By the way, the Bissell company is still in business today!



When Anna Bissell lived, life was different than today. Often women were not thought to be equal with men. **Equality** between men and women was rare. When Mrs. Bissell took over the sweeper company, women could not **vote**. They could not help decide who would be president, governor or mayor. They could not vote for higher taxes or lower taxes.

Those times were different for children too. Some days you may not want to be in school. Would you rather be working in a factory? Would you rather spend long hours deep in a mine? Maybe you might like to get up at 4 AM and help the cook in a logging camp? This is how many children spent their days in the 1800s.

Children often had to help earn money for their families. They had to work long hours at hard work. Sometimes they were hurt in accidents at work. If that happened, it was just too bad.

When those children had the chance to go to school, they thought it was great! Many of them had to walk a mile or two to get there. There were no



EXPORTS

are products made here and sold in other countries.

IMPORTS

are products made in other countries and sold here.



entrepreneur
(an *treh pri* newer)- the person who takes risks to start and manage a business

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Years ago children had to do lots of work to help their families.

This girl is making butter from cream.

buses. They knew an education could help them reach for their dreams. But often they could not take the time to go to school. Today, anyone who works hard can be almost anything they want to be! It is important to realize how valuable your education is.

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Common Core Connections

Social Studies Themes

Cultures-

During the time of the story, men controlled most industry and most women did not work outside of their homes. Children were often expected to help their families by getting jobs and working at a young age. School was not seen as very important once students understood the basics.

People, places and environments-

Location: near a supply of wood used to make the carpet sweepers, near a supply of workers, near transportation resources such as a river and railroads.

Questions to think about

1. What is the theme of this story? List two supporting facts. [Common Core Standards, READING: LITERATURE-GRADE 4 (Key Ideas and Details)] 2. Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.
2. How is Mary Maud's life like yours? How is her life different? [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (Culture)]
3. Whose viewpoint is told in the story? [READING: LITERATURE-GRADE 4 (Key Ideas and Details) 1. Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.]
4. How has our culture changed since 1889? Think about young children having to go to work. [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (Culture)]
5. Make a timeline with the years from this story. Go to the Internet. Find two new events to add to the timeline. [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (time, continuity and change)]
6. Why is the word Bissell capitalized in the story? [LANGUAGE-GRADE 4 (Conventions of Standard English) 2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.]

7. Today, fewer people use the kind of carpet sweeper from the story. Why is that? [Science, technology & society]
8. The Bissells worked in Grand Rapids. Which nearby natural resources helped their business? [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (People, places & environments)]
9. Use your own words to define *entrepreneur*. [LANGUAGE-GRADE 4 (Vocabulary Acquisition and Use) 4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grade 4 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies. (a) Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.]
10. Which right was denied women when this story took place? [National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (Civic ideals and practices)]

Brain Stretchers

Imagine you are helping Mrs. Bissell make carpet sweepers. List some of the natural resources, human resources and capital resources you will need to make this product.

Take a Stand!

Imagine you are living in the 1880s. Write a letter to a newspaper taking a stand. Should children work in factories and mines? Include at least one core democratic value to support your position.

[Go to the activity on the next page.]



Common Core Connections

(Library of Congress LC-DIG-nclc-04469 by Lewis Hines)



Look carefully at this photo taken in 1908. Two boys are cutting boards, probably to make furniture.

Can you see the two round saw blades?

Can you see the large belt that makes the saw move?

What kind of accidents could these boys have?

Why do you think these boys have this job?

Today we have laws that do not allow young people to do this kind of work. Why do you think those laws were made?

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