

The Butler Boom

Wealth Explosion Sparks

Labor Shortage; Starting Pay, \$70,000

By Robert Frank

The Wall Street Journal

Published June 1, 2007

Robert Frank's book "Richistan" documents how the newly wealthy are rewriting the rules of what it means to be rich. In this chapter, he chronicles the revival of a faded profession.

Denver

Of all the skills taught here at Butler Boot Camp, none is more technically challenging than the Ballet of Service.

The Ballet, used only for formal dinner parties, requires four butlers to glide into a dining room with their silver platters and serve the guests in perfect sync. The climax of the performance is a move called the "crossover" ~ a plate-juggling pas de deux in which the butlers slide one platter from their right to left hand with a quick body pivot, creating the illusion that the plate is suspended in midair while it's being transferred.

When done right, the Ballet displays all the desired traits of a butler-to-be ~ discipline, agility, poise and intimate familiarity with tableware. Yet on a recent evening here in the mansion of the Starkey International Institute for Household Management ~ better known as Butler Boot Camp ~ the butlers are botching their ballet. Dawn Carmichael, a chipper, blond, former Starbucks barista, begins her crossover before the three other servers, throwing off the whole routine. The other butlers freeze, before finally dispatching their platters and scurrying back into the kitchen.

"I lost the rhythm," Ms. Carmichael says.

James Hopkins, a fresh-faced college grad from Maine, is equally disappointed. "It felt awkward," he says. "We looked like robots."

STARKEY
INTERNATIONAL



Raymond Champion, the lead drill sergeant at Butler Boot Camp, is dismayed. A former marine, whose military specialties included martial arts, weapons training and decorative baking, Mr. Champion is a stickler for detail. The next morning he addresses the class with a stern frown. "I'm disappointed," he says. "Very disappointed."

They practice for several more hours. And that night, at another dinner party, they perform the ballet in perfect unison. "Congratulations," Mr. Champion says. "Now that was service."

Every year, more than 50 students from around the country converge for boot camp at Starkey. Their aim is to become masters at the care and feeding of the rich.

For eight weeks, the students hole up inside the



mansion to cook, clean, polish, dust, wash and fold. They learn how to iron a pair of French cuffs in seconds flat. They learn how to clip a 1926 Pardona cigar, how to dust a de Kooning canvas and whether to pair an oaky chardonnay with roasted free-range game hen. They learn how long it takes to clean a 45,000-square-foot mansion (20 to 30 hours depending on the art and antiques), where to find 1,020-thread-count sheets (Kreiss.com), and how to design a "stationery wardrobe" ~ envelopes and letterhead specially designed to reflect the owner's wealth and social standing. They will be taught that sable stoles should never be stored in a cedar closet (it dries them out), and that Bentleys should never, ever be run through the car wash.

Never Judge the Employer

Most of the students live in the Starkey mansion during Boot Camp, following Starkey's strict rules. Everyone has to wear the uniform of khakis, crisp white shirts, blue blazers and brown shoes. First names are banned; everyone is "Mr." or "Ms." to stress the importance of boundaries with their future employers. The students are required to rise from their seats every time a visitor enters the room. If there's a coffee cup that needs filling, a spoon that needs polishing or a visitor who needs welcoming, the Starkey students must spring into action. The Starkey students are so wired for service that when a class break is announced, they all pounce from their seats to fill each other's water glasses and coffee cups.

Most importantly, they learn never to judge their rich future employers, whom they call "principals." If a principal wants to feed her shih tzu braised beef tenderloin every night, the butler should serve it up with a smile. If a principal in Palm Beach, Fla., wants to send his jet to New York to pick up a Chateau LaTour from his Southampton cellar, the butler makes it happen, no questions asked.

Starkey students pay more than \$12,000 for Boot Camp. While that may sound steep, a good Starkey graduate can start at \$70,000 to \$120,000 a year, not to mention free room and board. And butlering has become one of the fastest-growing occupations in the United States after more than a half-century of decline, driven by the greatest surge in American wealth in



nearly a century. Over the past 10 years, the number of multimillionaire households has more than doubled. As of 2004, there were more than 1.4 million U.S. households worth at least \$5 million and more than 530,000 worth more than \$10 million, according to the Federal Reserve.

On the third floor of the Starkey Mansion, placement workers frantically answer phones from rich homeowners looking for help. A large white board lists more than a dozen job offers. "We have too much demand and not enough qualified graduates," says Mary Starkey, Starkey's charismatic founder, whose business card reads "The First Lady of Service." Starkey received about 300 applications for its 50 slots this year, up from barely filling the slots five years ago.

Other butler placement agencies are also swamped. EstateJobs.com, a placement service for household staff, had more than 100 job listings on its site just months after it launched in 2005. One ad read: This New York City family needs someone extremely organized. They summer in the Hamptons and need someone to assist in running and staffing their new summer home.... They also need someone techie-Mac and BlackBerry savvy to set up systems in the new beach house and facilitate entertaining, travel arrangements and coordinate with all appropriate vendors. Other duties involve shopping for presents.

The butler boom is part of the story of how wealth has changed in America. Today's rich, with their high-tech estates, globe-trotting schedules and complicated lives, don't want traditional butlers. They want a hands-on



manager, a kind of chief operating officer for My Life Inc. So Jeeves, with his white gloves, British accent and impeccable manners, has been replaced by Jeeves 2.0 ~ now known as the household manager.

While Jeeves fetched the slippers and served tea, the household manager oversees dozens of "vendors" ~ from the pool cleaner and arborist to the home-theater installer and dog groomer. The household manager is part accountant, managing multimillion-dollar budgets, and part techie, keeping shopping lists on spreadsheets and networking computers for three vacation homes. The acronym CHM, for Certified Household Manager, can now be found on business cards.

"We don't use the word 'servant' anymore," Ms. Starkey says. "Being a household manager is a real profession."

Today's butlers are more likely to be younger women than older men. Most have experience in hotels, resorts, major companies or the military. Ms. Carmichael's class included three military personnel, a former foundation director, a college graduate who had majored in hospitality, and a bed-and-breakfast owner from upstate New York.

One student, Kevin Stafford, had his life transformed by butlering. A 48-year-old Floridian with a bushy red mustache, thick glasses and earnest demeanor, Mr. Stafford worked for years as a bartender in Coco Beach. One day he met a wealthy couple who had just moved to town and got to know them over the years. When they decided to move into an 11,000-square-foot penthouse on the beach, they turned to Mr. Stafford to be the household manager. They not only paid his tuition to Starkey, but also bought him a new truck, renovated his house and hired his wife.

"I'm so grateful," Mr. Stafford says after class one day, tears welling up in his eyes. "It's like a dream."

Yet just as new butlers need training, so do the New Rich. Since most of today's wealthy grew up middle class, many are uncomfortable with the stuffy formalities that often come with household staff.

Take the case of Bob, a real-estate tycoon and ranch owner in the Far West who asked that his last name not be used. Bob, his wife and two kids live on 800 acres with 10,000 square feet of living space. Describing his middle-class upbringing as "like the 'Wonder Years,'" he says he never had experience with household staff growing up. "It's bizarre," he says. "It's not as glamorous as it sounds to have a house staff. You have all these people touching everything from your underwear to your medicine. It's not really our preference."

The reason he hired help was to give him and his wife more time with their kids. Since they run their own business, they're not home much and wanted to spend all their free time with their two sons, rather than cooking, cleaning or mowing the lawn.

Yet Bob quickly discovered that managing a house staff has its own headaches. "Suddenly there's all this funky politics going on in your house. Like the housekeeper might be nice to us, but she's threatening to the other employees. So we had to get rid of that housekeeper."

His first household manager was a nightmare. An exacting woman who specialized in formal entertainment, she aspired to throw lavish parties for prominent guests. Instead, she got Bob and his family, whose idea of a big Friday night is a mountain-bike ride followed by a big salad. The household manager was deeply disappointed. "We weren't the rich, famous people she was hoping for," Bob says.



The Mouse in the House

She tried to convert them anyway. Every Friday night, she presented a formal dinner. Bob, his wife and two sons would sit down at the dining table and the household manager would serve them from silver platters. She even bought an expensive steam press to form the napkins into perfect triangles.

"During one of these dinners my wife and I turned to each other and said, 'What's the deal? Does she think this is how we're supposed to live?'"

Eventually, Bob got fed up and hired a new household manager, this one from Starkey. A former bank worker, the household manager runs the house the way Bob likes it ~like a business. And Bob pays him accordingly, at \$80,000 a year. "He keeps everything on an Excel spreadsheet, including our shopping list and our pool temperatures," he says.

Still, Bob still has moments when he wonders how his life got so complicated, with a home that's more like a company.

"The other day we saw a mouse in the house. Before, I would have just gotten a broom and gotten rid of the thing. But now it's different. I emailed the household manager. He called the vendor, a pest-control firm, and the pest-control firm caught the mouse. Then the household manager directed two other staff members to dispose of the mouse. That's five people to catch a mouse. It all seemed normal at the time. But then I thought about it, and I wondered, how did our lives get like this?"



Adapted from "Richistan: A Journey Through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich" by Robert Frank. Copyright © 2007 by Robert Frank. Published by Crown Business, an imprint of the Crown Publishing, a division of Random House Inc.



SETTING STANDARDS IN PERSONAL SERVICE

