

November 2007

Arwen Mohun posted a request on behalf of a graduate student for leads to secondary literature on **post-WWII home economics education**. Literature in this area seems to focus on pre-1940. The student was inspired because we read Mike Rose's marvelous book, *The Mind at Work*, which includes an extensive discussion of vocational education. As someone in teacher training, he was particularly struck by the impact of cognitive theory on voc-ed curriculums. When he and I discussed the topic, we also speculated about what the social, technological, and consumer revolutions of the post-War era had done to the content of such courses. I reminisced about the "hippie" home-ec teacher in my high school who taught macrame as part of the sewing curriculum. Click **here** for resources and a record of personal reminiscences.

Bayla Singer and Rachel Maines recommended the HEARTH collection at Cornell University, pointing to a good bibliography of the secondary literature at <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/homeEc/bibliography.html>

Judith Hughes recommended a publication of the US Department of Commerce, "CONSUMERS ALL: The Yearbook of Agriculture," "a superb guide to all aspects of home economics and related household management activities."

Ruth Cowan: There is virtually no secondary literature, beyond the memoirs of some prominent home economists, many of them published as articles in home ec journals or as occasional publications of the AHEA. Indeed, I suggest that your student go on the website of the American Home Economics Association and see if they list their occasional publications; if not, there may be a library in their national offices in DC which may have a librarian, who will know about these memoirs. If memory serves, there is also some material in the second volume of Margaret Rossiter's book, particularly about the process of turning home economics into human ecology (so that the field would no longer sound so "feminine!") Also check a recent biography of Lillian Gilbreth by Jane Lancaster; the one by Laurel Graham does not cover the post war years.

Carolyn Goldstein: My book, when it comes out, will have a postwar chapter that focuses on home economists in business and government. It only minimally addresses home economics education in this period. (Thanks for the plug, Ruth!).

Margaret Rossiter's second volume of *Women Science in America* does have at least one chapter on home economics in higher ed. in this period. Also, Amy Bix had an article in *T&C* on home economics education at Iowa State and it spans both pre and post-WW2, but focuses on the latter. I would also direct your student to histories of specific university/college programs. Most home economics schools published them sometime in the postwar period. There's one on the University of Delaware by Carol Hoffecker, another on Cornell called *A Growing College*.

On high school education, I rely on John Rury's *Education and Women's Work*, but it covers only to 1930. This in need of scholarly exploration.

There are many articles on home economics extension work, but they do tend to focus on the decades before 1940. Katherine Jellison's *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* includes a discussion of agricultural extension in the postwar years.

Rethinking Home Economics, a collection of historical essays and "reminiscences" by home economics practitioners, includes a shorter version of Margaret Rossiter's study of postwar academic home economists as well as a number of other articles that do include some postwar episodes which could be somewhat helpful. There's a chronology there, too.

From Amy Bix: I covered some postwar material in my article on the history of equipment studies: "Equipped For Life: Gendered Technical Training and Consumerism In Home-Economics, 1920-1980", *Technology and Culture*, v. 43, no. 4 (Oct. 2002): 728-754.

As another source, your student might want to look at Ercel Sherman Eppright and Elizabeth Storm Ferguson, *A Century of Home Economics at Iowa State University* (Ames, Iowa, 1971).

From Bev Sauer: Carnegie Mellon's Margaret Morrison College was previously a women's college with a strong Home Ec Major.

I forget exactly the words on the entrance pillars, but it had to do with "preparing women for their highest calling--to serve men..." or something similar, which created a great deal of controversy when the college restored the building. I'm sure they have records and/or materials relating to the Home Ec curriculum and/or resources that would be useful to your student.

From Susan Serwood: Alderman, K. M. (1948). Expressing our philosophy. *Journal of Home Economics*.

Lee, J.A. & Dressell, P. (1963). *Liberal education and home economics*. Teachers College Columbia University: Bureau of Publications pp. 89-9

The archives of the American Home Economics Assn (1909). might also be helpful. Its now the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, in Alexandria, VA <http://www.aafcs.org/>

From Kevin Borg: (a footnote from his forthcoming book) "The Smith Hughes Act [1917] required states seeking matching funds to file annual statistical reports to the Federal Board for Vocational Education at the conclusion of each academic year. These reports detailed which schools offered which classes, how many students of each gender were enrolled in each class, how many teachers taught each subject, and how much money the state sought in relation to each course in their vocational, agricultural, and home economics programs. Beginning in 1920, states with racially segregated schools were required to report statistics separately for those schools, thus racial statistics for

students can be at least partially recovered. . . . See Record Group 12, Office Education, Entry 82, Records of the Assistant Commissioner for Vocational Education, Vocational Education Division, State Files, 1917-1937, National Archives, College Park, Maryland."

I used this material to recapture data about vocational auto shop courses, but one can also find revealing data about home econ courses. Titles of a few specific courses taken from Florida's 1937 report are enticing: "Marriage and the Home," "Child Psychology," "Health and Hygiene," "Clothing Problems," "Food Selection," and "Budgeting the Income."

The record group I found stops with 1937, but more time and digging might turn up similarly detailed records for later years.

From Martha Trescott: To respond to the post about Home Ec and Rossiter, yes, certainly that was a field in which she was very interested and was a main reason she visited UIUC when I was on the engineering faculty there in the 1980s. (She was also a consultant in my women in engineering history project.) In fact, she was very impressed with the home ec holdings at UIUC, both in the archives and in the library system, including the home ec library there. We went over to the Isabel Bevier Home Ec building together and had their famous cornbread and soup lunch for just a dollar, a longstanding tradition at UIUC! She knew quite a bit about Bevier, whom she had covered in her work.

So Margaret's work, as someone suggested, would be a very good resource on the history of home ec, both before and after 1940, as would UIUC holdings. When she visited me at UIUC, her first volume had been published for a while, and I think she was working perhaps on a project in the history of home ec that stemmed from her two volumes on women scientists.

Also, for pre-1940 home ec, Ellen Swallow Richards was a major guiding light, of course, and really was a founder of the field, along with helping found the modern ecology movement. Gail Lippincott has done quite a bit of work on Richards and home ec, particularly the New England Kitchen and may be a post-1940 history of home ec resource, too.

Personal reminiscences on the subject:

From Karen Freeze: Home Economics was required for girls in Longview, WA, where I went to high school, but my mother managed to opt me out because I had excelled in 4-H, in sewing and cooking (well, baking). I remember being allowed in that time slot to work on projects in the boys' shop (which I did, but only rarely). I wasn't brave enough to try to "take shop" with the boys (not that it necessarily provided skills useful for life). Required high school "home economics" should have offered really practical subjects such as basic home maintenance (electrical, plumbing, carpentry) and financial management, as well as basic health care, nutrition, and textile maintenance and repair. And this for both boys and girls. Having thrown the subject out of the college-prep curriculum entirely, rather than reforming it, schools produce students even less capable in practical living skills than we were.

From Martha Trescott: I too was a student of home ec in the post-WWII era and could never have enrolled in shop in my high school in 1957-8. All the students in my home ec classes were female, and all the shop students were male. That had been the case from the inception of these classes and continued to be so for some years. I was recently talking with a teacher colleague who taught home ec in the post-war era, including in that same school system, and she said that that did finally change, but it took quite a while before females were admitted to shop classes there. I wish we as students could have had that option in the 1950s and 60s.

I have understood that this was the case elsewhere, in other states, too. When I was a guest speaker in freshmen women in engineering classes at Purdue in the 1980s, I often heard this from the students, who indicated that shop classes in high school would have been helpful when they decided to enter engineering. In fact, the lack of any knowledge of tools and hands-on experience in the past of many women students is why Purdue innovated their introductory, hands-on course for women and other students who lacked this background, the first course of that kind in engineering curricula in the U. S. And it did help and was very successful.

My women engineers interviews and questionnaire responses also contain some comments about home ec vs shop classes in both the pre- and post-WW II periods.

Finally, someone mentioned home ec extension work, and I think I have commented on this list earlier re my grandmother as an assistant to the county extension agent in Texas in both the pre- and post-WW II periods. She went out to homes in the county and taught the women how to make and dye rugs and curtains out of readily available materials such as burlap and also took plantings from her own yard and helped to beautify the county in both public and private places.

From Bayla Singer: Looks like my alma mater, Bronx HS of Science, may have been a pioneer in this matter. All students, male and female, took both an introductory drafting ("mechanical drawing") course and a shop course -- the shop course being labeled "Scientific Techniques Lab" with nary a test tube or microscope in sight, only lathes and drill presses and the like. I don't know when the course was instituted, just that it was not a new thing when I attended in 1953-56.

I vividly remember the banner poster on the shop wall which told us to take along a severed finger to the hospital, if the occasion arose; when it was time for me to pick my 'term project' I carefully avoided all of the power tools! But there, *finally,* was validation of my basically 'tomboy' nature and interests!

From Autumn Stanley: As I probably indicated in a previous post, I refused to take Home Ec because I rejected the drudge role I saw as trapping most women in that era (I was in high school in the late '40s to 1951)--and I saw Home Ec as training for that role. I don't recall whether I wanted to take Shop or not, but probably not. Apart from the fact that I would have known it was impossible, I would not have had a model. I had no brothers,

and my father was a totally nonmechanical, nontinkering kind of guy who took his car to a mechanic and left it to my mother to fix anything that needed fixing around the house (or hired it done if necessary). What I remember is wanting to take art, and getting in at least one class of that--and later being forced to take typing and shorthand, so that I would always be able to support myself if worse came to worst. However, I do know of one guy--my brother-in-law--who succeeded in getting in to a home-ec/cooking class in Hollywood High School in the same era. He is STILL one of a kind!

From Daryl Hafter: When I was in high school my father INSISTED that I take shop, So I chose wood shop and made a birdhouse.! At least I knew what a jigsaw was for. Home ec came along as a requirement, and all I remember is making pudding and jello (the '50's after all) in cooking class, and a really ugly dress in the sewing class. But there, too, I learned at least about the range of needles and why you need facing.

From Carolyn Cooper: Well, now that we are wandering down memory lane instead of bibliography, let me suggest that the Whitman College (actually U. of Delaware) student who is awaiting bibliographical help might instead set out in Walla Walla to interview women of different ages and different locations of their secondary education (i.e. geographical and chronological spread) on their experience with home ec and/or shop in teenagehood. I'm sure they will be able to remember whether or not boys were allowed in home ec and girls in shop. It sounds to me from the small sample we have here provided that the schools varied greatly on these matters, geographically and presumably also over time.

Here's my offering: Denver junior high school 1947-49, offered, indeed required, co-educational shop and co-educational home ec. Actually, there was a both a sewing class, from which I think boys were absent, and a cooking class, where they were present. There was a period of woodworking shop and a period of metalworking shop. Nobody's fingers got sliced in shop; can't remember whether or not they did in cooking class. Whenever I cook swiss steak I follow what I learned then.

Then, in New Haven in the 1970s my daughter and her friends faced a much different situation, also in junior high age (but middle school, so it was 8th grade). The boys wanted to take sewing with the girls, but were forbidden. The reason given by the neanderthal principal was that the girls would be so much better at it than the boys that the boys would feel inferior! So the compromise was that the boys would take sewing in separate but equal class instruction from the girls. This was counted as a great step forward. The next year, when these excessively adventurous boys and girls had left that school, the rules reverted to the previous situation: shop for boys, sewing for girls.

From Nina Lerman: My impression also -- having looked more systematically at the question in Philadelphia up to around WWI, but therefore being given many anecdotes about later parts of the 20th c -- is that these requirements followed general regional and chronological patterns, but varied locally. I'm pretty sure most easterners would have thought Denver fairly radical in the late '40s for teaching co-ed shop and cooking; I think the co-ed experiments were not uncommon in the '70s.

For the anecdotal evidence collection: my jr. high taught co-ed shop and divided the class by gender for cooking and sewing, I believe they claimed it was to make measuring and try-ons easier in sewing class, though I seem to recall a comment about boys' ignorance from the antedeluvian cooking teacher.