

AFD Ep 468 Links and Notes - Home Economics/Domestic Science [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Apr 30, 2023

- [Rachel - Intro] This week we're talking about the field of home economics or domestic science. Was it really a science? To what extent was it a marketing exercise? Can it ever really overcome its founding racist and classist overtones? Does home economics even exist anymore? This episode is most heavily drawing from two books: Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (1978 version, has been reissued with updates in 1989 and also eventually a revised title in 2005); Danielle Dreilinger's *The Secret History of Home Economics* (2021). After we cover those four questions we will also briefly discuss one specific Second Industrial Revolution-era female home technology inventor, Josephine Cochrane.
- [Rachel] Science
 - Domestic science/home economics began as a way for women to break into higher education in a society that largely shut women out of the academy. After the Civil War, tertiary education expanded to include women and Black students. Land-grant colleges established in the West and South were the first to enroll these new cohorts, and these colleges offered more of an "industrial education" or "manual training" curriculum rather than a classical university education. Domestic science programs were meant to train women on the best ways to run a household using scientific methods. However, even from the beginning, women sought ways to break free from the constraints of the household. Ellen Richards, nee Swallow, taught at MIT in the 1870s while analyzing the water supply of Massachusetts for environmental hazards and testing wallpaper for arsenic for an insurance company (pgs 19-20). Richards did end up returning to the household sphere in 1890, when she and business partner Mary Hinman Abel opened up The New England Kitchen. The New England Kitchen offered takeout meals and recipes designed to teach customers how to make delicious and healthy - but cheap - meals (pg 21).
 - Home economists also sought to change people's diets on the macro level, and invented the field of nutrition science. When US Food Administration Director Herbert Hoover called for Americans to conserve food during WWI, he also called on Cornell home economics faculty Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer to develop delicious meals that also reduced the amount of meat, wheat and sugar that Americans were consuming (pg 56). Lenna Cooper and Lulu Graves created the American Dietetic Association in 1917, and Cooper became the supervising dietician for the army a year later (pg 58). Cooper recruited 350 dieticians, who were the first women besides nurses to serve in a US war. During the Great Depression, Cornell once again stepped up to the plate, developing "Milkorno", which was cornmeal mixed with dried-milk powder and salt, followed by "Milkwheato" and "Milkoato". Eleanor Roosevelt was a booster of Cornell's home economics program, and wrote that "the mother of a family should look upon her housekeeping and the planning of meals as a scientific occupation" (pg 91). FDR's New Deal expanded school lunch programs to serve the dual purpose of feeding children and dealing with agricultural surplus (pg 94). In WWII, nutrition once again became a war-readiness concern: in the fall of 1940, 1/3 of men called up for service failed their physicals due to nutrition-related factors. In response, the National Research Council created the Food and Nutrition Board, who developed the now well-known "recommended daily allowances" of various nutrients (pg 112).

- Clothing design was another field that home economists tackled. In the 1920s, the Bureau of Home Economics, run by Louise Stanley, worked on standardizing clothing measurements. (pg 66) During WWII, bureau scientists tested cotton stocking designs that replaced nylon and silk stockings. They also designed women's work uniforms. While this might seem frivolous, uniforms had to be safe to wear while working around heavy industrial machinery. *Most of the patterns had box-seamed crotches to allow for squatting and stooping. The two-piece farm suit had snap-on, snap-off sleeves, and ankles that could be cinched to keep out dirt and grasshoppers. The nurse's uniform remained crisp without starch, which provided the "dignity that nurses want." The belt of the mechanic's suit immediately unsnapped if it caught on anything, to avoid pulling the worker into machinery or damaging the suit. A dress for scientists had pockets high on the chest, out of the way of counters and vials; it was wraparound, with the back cut surplice-style and on the bias "so the arms have plenty of freedom for the reaching and stretching that laboratory work often requires."* (pg 111)
- Post WWII, however, the focus of home economics changed drastically. While women were a major part of the workforce during the war, they were pushed out to make room for returning veterans. *By 1960, more than one-third of women married before the age of twenty, and two-thirds married by the time they were twenty-four. Birth rates bounced up after more than a decade of deprivation and war. The share of female college students fell to one-third, down from half the total number of students in 1920. Almost every man aged twenty-five to thirty-four worked in the 1950s, but only one-third of women. Despite technological advances that made laundry and its like faster and easier, women spent as much time on housework in the 1950s as they had thirty years before: about fifty-two hours per week.* (pg 131) In response to these societal changes, home economists started extolling the virtues of the home, and the role of the homemaker as the pinnacle of womanhood. Rather than running the home in a scientific manner, the most important aspect of running a home became managing the emotions of the family unit. Many of the first generation of home economists had died, and in their place rose child development experts such as Dr. Benjamin Spock and the National Conference on Family Relations, largely made up of white men. The NCFR had a conservative view of family and gender roles, which trickled down to home economics curricula at the high-school level. *Though high school classes still spent most of their time cooking and sewing, now they learned to cook in order to please their family, cultivate strong relationships, gain confidence, and develop social competence. The point of sewing was not primarily to save money, become a savvy shopper, develop a marketable skill, learn math and geometry in a tactile fashion, or even do something useful with your hands, but to be a delightful woman with a strong and happy family.* (pgs136-138). It was this view of home economics and household management that created the perfect consumer for new products and technologies, and a captive audience for advertisements in ladies' magazines and on radio and television.
- [Bill] Marketing: (This section draws most heavily from Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (1978 version, has been reissued with updates in 1989 and also eventually a revised title in 2005))
 - Pages 144-145: Product marketing for cleaning products seems to have more influence on decisions about how best to clean the home than actual public health and sanitation research. Advertisements warn about how some other competing product leaves behind germs, even if the product being advertised

might actually be worse for health (for example, wet cleaning is in fact more microbe-friendly than dry dusting, but ads portray dusters as just moving dust around and not making the house safer).

- Homemaking journals and magazines are filled with product advertisements. (Not really a surprise, but it does skew the framing of their politics and prescriptions, hyping up the exciting and fulfilling world of a conservative life at home, keeping house for a husband or employer.) These publications sought to transform a particular way of life into a respectable professional Career, which just happened to be at home. Servants were declining in availability and affordability, and middle class homemaker women needed to use technology and methodology to run an efficient home without servants, just as any other industry was mechanizing production lines and applying the Scientific Management of Taylorism to reduce waste and time mismanagement.
- These publications also seized upon the growing social concern around public sanitation and slum housing to tell women that they needed to redouble their cleaning efforts – with plenty of cleaning product purchases – in order to maintain a hygienic home for their families. The small nuclear family living in a single-family unit, instead of multi-family tenement rooms, was the only right and safe way to live. They were also the only way to stop the spread of communism. Homeowners are a better target market for homemaking products, as well, because a home is an investment to be maintained, not a rental property one happens to reside in as a tenant for now.
- The publications (as well as home economic classes taught in schools) also propagandized the idea that “right living” and bourgeois manners were superior to the ways of the unsophisticated urban poor, which helped to create and maintain rifts among women from the urban proletariat who might otherwise have stood in solidarity with each other during labor struggles. This phenomenon was reported by anarchist Emma Goldman at the time. If you didn’t own the right cleaning products (or the right home decor and furnishings those products were used on), then you weren’t good enough and needed to strive for a better material station.
- Cleaning work was now mechanically easier than ever, but there was a constant message to women managing a home that they needed to be using that equipment and those cleaning products constantly to keep the home and possessions spotless every day, instead of maybe leaving it for once a year or once a week, depending on the type of cleaning.
- Page 162: Home economics specialists (and their publications) enthusiastically endorsed domestic products and appliances and took active roles in marketing them to women.
- Page 163: In the 1950s, companies were completely uninterested in cultivating any kind of genuine education on savvy home management in women. These women might be choosier and more sensible about what they spent their money on. Instead, the companies dumbed down the marketing and product user instructions and tried to turn base consumption itself into empowerment, if they even bothered to emphasize the latter anymore at all. The act of choosing a product to buy, from among all the other identical products at about the same price, was the only freedom and independence a woman needed from her man, who shouldn’t get involved in this kind of women’s business. The ideal female shopper for a major corporation was “dazed and suggestible.” The more “isolated” and “insecure” she could be made to feel, the more likely she could be manipulated into buying whatever they wanted her to buy. This was a good fit

with the growing postwar suburbia lifestyle and the separation of generations into different housing. No one was around to give you a pro tip from years of experience or to confirm that you weren't stupid and should believe in yourself.

- [Rachel] Racism

- Home economics was founded by white, middle- and upper-class women (and Melvil Dewey), and formalized in Lake Placid, New York at Melvil and Annie Dewey's Adirondack resort. The Deweys, and their wellness resort colleagues the Kelloggs, were into eugenics. Eugenecists embraced home economics because it was thought that "right living" could cure some heritable ills (pg 52). Although many of the Lake Placid group didn't subscribe to eugenics, none went out of their way to publicly condemn the racists in their cohort.
- The Lake Placid group at best ignored - or at worst fully disparaged - Black and Native American women, as well as the Midwestern land-grant colleges that took the first steps in domestic science. Black women were left to develop their own curricula and create their own institutions. From the very first Lake Placid conference, Margaret Murray Washington, the woman who developed Tuskegee Institute's domestic science curriculum, was excluded. Home economics developed segregated professional associations, with the rich, white American Home Economics Association ignoring the contributions of Black home economists. For her part, Washington was busy as the editor of the National Association of Colored Women's Club newsletter and the president of the Tuskegee Women's Club (pgs 36-37).
- As home economics started appearing in high school curricula, it was a way for schools to shunt girls of color into job training for their futures as domestic servants. In California, a superintendent created a segregated school for Chicana girls to learn home economics as job training for becoming maids, laundry workers and factory seamstresses (pg 48). Even white immigrants didn't escape the judgment of the AHEA; high school curricula encouraged immigrant families to Americanize their diets, and the industry journal, the *Journal of Home Economics*, painted immigrant communities as threatening to public health (pg 49).
- In the 1940s, the AHEA created a national teen home economics organization called the Future Homemakers of America. To appease segregated southern white schools, a separate sister organization for Black high schools was created called the New Homemakers of America. The two organizations remained segregated well after *Brown v. Board of Education*. It wasn't until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that Education Commissioner Francis Keppel forced the issue. Federal money went to both Future and New Homemakers, and Keppel could withhold funding from noncompliant entities. Finally, on July 1, 1965, the New Homemakers of America were folded into FHA (pgs 212-213). As for AHEA itself, it didn't elect a Black president until 1975 (pg 246).
- The legacy of these racist roots can still be felt today. A [2020 New York Times article](#) pointed out that dietetics and nutrition often ignore diverse diets in favor of bland chicken breasts and steamed broccoli, which can alienate clients who are ethnic minorities. Also, people of color who seek to become registered dieticians face obstacles such as difficulties getting placed in internships, and feel ignored by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. *More than 71 percent of the nation's roughly 106,000 registered dietitians are non-Hispanic white, according to the academy's Commission on Dietetic Registration. Nearly 84 percent are women.* Although the academy has promised to try to diversify their recommendations, many dieticians are skeptical.

- *In June, the organization responded to pressure from disaffected members by committing to developing action plans to address inequities in the profession. It has created a new Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Group, and conducted virtual forums to hear the concerns of 126 randomly selected members.*

Shannon Curtis, 30, a Houston dietitian who helped found a group called Dietitians for Change, attended one of the sessions. "Although it was empowering to know that we are not the only ones screaming about this," she said, "it was kind of a waste of time, in my opinion, because I am not exactly confident that they will take this information and put it into an action plan they will actually act on."

- [Bill] **Josephine Cochrane, inventor of the dishwasher**
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephine_Cochrane (This article clearly sounds like it was written by a child doing a book report.) In the 1870s and early 1880s, Josephine Cochrane was a Chicago high society wife and mother in her 30s and 40s. Hosting dinner parties meant a lot of dishwashing for her servants (and by some accounts – like Ed Sobey's *The Way Kitchens Work: The Science Behind the Microwave, Teflon Pan, Garbage Disposal, and More*, a book we've previously cited on this show – she didn't like how they were doing it, chipping the dishware). Josephine Cochrane's husband died in 1883 and she decided to get serious about developing an idea she had long had to invent a mechanical dishwasher, working with a mechanic, who would eventually manage her factory. By the end of 1885, she had filed her patent application, and by the end of 1886, she received approval. Cochrane's key design innovation – beyond just her very carefully constructed wire holders for plates, cups, and saucers – was to focus on using water pressure to clean the dishes, rather than trying to use machinery to replicate the scrubbing process a human would use to clean the dishes. (I think that's what other inventors working on the idea of a machine dishwasher had been attempting.) However, her prototype faced two key challenges to being turned into a mass-market product: 1) It required the home to already have a very large hot-water boiler, which very few homes at the time had although they later would. (Gas water heaters arrived in the US in 1889, but didn't begin to take off until the first decade of the 1900s
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_heating#History
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Ruud) 2) It was too expensive for middle class women to buy. However, at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, she exhibited her design, and it became clear that there was an institutional market for a machine dishwasher. Bespoke, small-scale production of her dishwasher filled initial orders for restaurants and hotels (and later colleges and hospitals, once they could get it allowed under sanitation laws). In 1898, demand was high enough to justify opening a factory to produce the dishwashers at a larger scale, and sales were being made all around North America. She did not live to see her invention become a common feature in middle class homes, which did not occur until the 1950s, and she passed away in 1913. Her company was sold to the Hobart Manufacturing Company (best known by the brand line KitchenAid) in 1926. We will probably do a mini-episode on Hobart at some point, because that's a fascinating company too.