



**HOME RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION**  
RENEWING THE CULTURE OF THE HOME

# **Home Renaissance Foundation**

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**A Brief History of Housework, 1900 to Present**

By Ann Brodeur

## **A Brief History of Housework, 1900 to Present**

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My grandmother, ninety-one year old Norma Wolfgram, recalls what household life was like when she was a girl in 1920s rural North Dakota. “It was hard work,” she said, describing the cycle of chores, from feeding the coal stove and emptying the ash pan, to hauling the water for cooking and for washing dishes, clothes and bodies. “Washing clothes on a scrubbing board was an all-day job!” Not only did her mother wash all the clothes by hand, she also sewed all the clothes on a little pedal-machine. She also grew and canned much of the food that fed her large family. The children helped with these chores as they were able. In spite of the challenges of maintaining a household without running water or electricity, my grandmother also speaks fondly of how chores drew everyone together. “Everyone helped out, and if there was a big job to be done, why, then the neighbors would be over to help, too!”<sup>1</sup>

There lies a big difference between the households of early twentieth century America and the households of the early twenty-first. Over the last hundred years, forces have wrought changes on households that had been largely unaltered for centuries. Industrialization, electrification, progressivism, feminism, and consumerism, among others, have dramatically altered the way households function. Homes have shifted from their role as producers to a new role as consumers. While my great-grandmother made her own food, today most families go to a store to buy what they need. Then, women

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, October 17, 2012.

made the family's clothes, but today each family member is a consumer, buying their own necessities, from the tween years on up. In the early twentieth century, the home was the focal point of conviviality, sociability and friendship, and work often was the occasion that drew families and neighbors together. Yet, in the early twenty-first, many homes struggle to find ways to bring family members, let alone neighbors, together. Thus, while modern advances have brought modern conveniences and efficiency into our homes, they have also introduced challenges to the social cohesion of family and community.

The turn of the twentieth century marked the beginning of a series of dramatic changes in the ways in which the home and the persons who lived in it were cared for and maintained. Also changing were ideas and attitudes toward that work: its purpose and goals, how it should be done, and who should do it. Over the course of the first half of the century, three women in particular were responsible for shaping current ideas and practices about the work of the home. Catharine Beecher (1800-1878) wrote prolifically on domestic issues and published many popular handbooks on the subject. In her many writings she envisioned the home as a dignified and noble sphere of development for women and children in particular, and her ideas, disseminated as they were through women's educational institutions and in print, came to shape antebellum ideas about why and how women cared for the home. Ellen Richards (1842-1911), the first woman to receive a degree from MIT, brought to bear on the work of the home her education in chemistry, and introduced ideas about science, sanitation and nutrition into the domestic sphere. Finally, Christine Frederick (1883-1970), a member of the early home economics movement, argued that the truly modern home was the efficient home, and advocated for

the adoption of technologies that made the home a place of professional, orderly, fulfilling work.

All of these women argued that caring for the home was a legitimate, necessary, dignified profession. They sought to promote this argument in the specific context of an urbanizing, industrializing America in which ideas about public and private spheres were shifting. Industrialization put new pressures on American society in a variety of ways. Prior to widespread industrialization, it was a common expectation that both men and women should be involved in the care of the home, and indeed it was not uncommon to see domestic advice manuals addressed to both husbands and wives.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as factory work drew more men away from homesteads, many came to regard home and hearth as the specific, primary sphere of action for women. Women, and urban, white, educated, middle-class women in particular, often regarded housework as drudgery unbecoming of their education and status.<sup>3</sup> Men regarded the home and its care as a sphere befitting a weaker, less capable sex, and lacking in broader scope or significance in its aims and influence.<sup>4</sup>

As the industrial economy expanded in the early twentieth century, the home and its work became a contested space. Radical material feminists railed against the gendering of work and private sphere, arguing that it made the home a prison and degraded women by preventing full development of their capacities. In this context,

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<sup>2</sup> For example, H.I. Harwell, *The Domestic Manual: Or Family Directory, Containing Receipts in Arts, Trades, and Domestic Economy* (New London, CT, 1816) and T. Green Fassenden, *The Husbandman and Housewife: A Collection of Valuable Receipts and Directions Relating to Agriculture and Domestic Economy* (Bellows Falls, VT, 1820).

<sup>3</sup> This perspective later found perhaps its most famous voice in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929).

<sup>4</sup> Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75 (1988), 9-39.

Richards, Frederick and others used the language and structures of industrialization to engage these prevailing conceptions. To one degree or another, these women used the growing emphasis on the professional and the expert, science and mechanization to reestablish the broader significance of the work of the home.

## **I. The Work of the Home in Antebellum America**

Catharine Beecher's life and writing spanned the nineteenth century and were set in an America on the cusp of industrialization. Beecher, the eldest daughter of the prominent Calvinist preacher Lyman Beecher and sister of abolitionist novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, grew up in New England. Her exposure to the care of the home came early, after the death of her mother when she was sixteen years old. Catharine assumed management of the home and the servants until her father remarried. She greatly admired her stepmother's gracious handling of household affairs, and came to see the home as a sphere through which women could exercise leadership and influence. Although Catharine would never marry or establish and maintain a household of her own, she incorporated teachings from her Puritan background and lessons learned from her mother and stepmother into ideals about the home. She instead supported herself by concretizing these ideals through the establishment of educational institutions for young women and through the publication of domestic advice manuals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: Norton, 1976) and Jeanne Boydston, et al., *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 13-23.

Beecher's work made her a household name and one of the most famous women in America at a time when Americans were hungry for self-improvement literature. She published manuals on a variety of topics ranging across subjects such as housework, health, child rearing, and education, and was consumed by a primarily white, middle-class, urban female audience.<sup>6</sup>Beecher's books flew off the shelves and into homes around the country,<sup>7</sup>and her advice was so popular that she could support herself on writing alone. Thus Beecher was a powerful influence, shaping the attitudes and practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century home.

In her most popular and widely distributed work,*A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, Beecher specifically addresses women and their concerns as mothers and as managers of domestic economy. She encouraged them to see their work as serving a critical social task: forming the next generation morally and intellectually. To this end, the quality of the home mattered, and on the home depended the health of democracy.<sup>8</sup>

“The success of democratic institutions, as is conceded by all, depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of the people. ... It is equally conceded, that the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother writes the character of the future man...the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation. Let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same. The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman, and the interests of a whole family are secured.”

Thus, Beecher understood the home to be a critical vector for shaping an entire society.

Housework had a higher purpose, beyond the individual tasks or the demands of the day.

Home was a social, civic and spiritual school.

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<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Introduction” to *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*,” ix.

<sup>7</sup> W.S. Tryon, “Distribution in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” *Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America*, 41 (1947), 210-30.

<sup>8</sup> Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, p. 13.

Whereas earlier domestic advice manuals had offered barebones instructions for household duties, Beecher now offered a philosophy. She opened her *Treatise* with a hortatory preface calling American women to understand the importance of their household work, and follows with general sections on the latest ideas on healthy food and drink, properly caring for and clothing the body, manners, habits of order, economical uses of time and money, child rearing and social entertaining. Only after twenty-five chapters on such topics did Beecher address the nitty-gritty tasks of housework, thus indicating that she was trying to set the work of the home on a higher, more dignified plane. For Beecher, why a woman did her work was as important, if not more important, than how she did that work.

After calling women to realize the dignity and aim of their work, Beecher instructed her readers on various tips for caring for a home that was, in many ways, still pre-industrial. She offered tips for getting lamp oil out of carpets, dealing with smoky chimneys, cleaning kitchen hearths, organizing storerooms and cellars, myriad points for cleaning and arranging furniture, and care of gardens, orchards and domestic animals.

Beecher's nineteenth-century audience was primarily white, middle class urban women. However, her writing was so influential that her ideas about the home and housework held sway more broadly well into the twentieth century. Of course, as urban households industrialized, the methods by which a home was kept changed, but Beecher's philosophy as to the home's importance was still powerful. For rural households, later to industrialize and still relatively disconnected from the consumer distribution systems that came to alter urban societies, both Beecher's practical and philosophic advice remained quite relevant.

## **II. Work of the Home in Industrial America**

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, industrialization gradually made its way into American homes. As the American economy grew, mass production and mass distribution brought new products and services into homes.<sup>9</sup> Mass-produced clothing began to make the home sewing machine less necessary; mass-produced furniture and durable goods such as pre-fabricated iron stoves rearranged American homes. Urban homes throughout the U.S. received the benefits and conveniences of electrification and indoor plumbing and water service in the 1920s, with rural areas gradually receiving the same infrastructure over the next thirty years.<sup>10</sup> Domestic electricity made possible the introduction of a wide variety of innovative products to ease the burdens of housework, all vying for a place in American homes.<sup>11</sup>

Although the antebellum valorization of the domestic sphere continued to resonate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it adopted new emphasis in the context of the Progressive movement that sprang up in reaction to the effects of rapid industrialization. Progressive social reform encompassed a wide variety of issues, from labor law and educational reform to women's suffrage. It also came to influence attitudes toward the work of the home. Ellen Richards, an early pioneer of the home economics movement, like Beecher, argued that the home was a source of social change.<sup>12</sup> They

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1982.), 6.

<sup>10</sup> The Rural Electrification Administration was erected in 1935, and a year later the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 offered federal loans to local cooperatives for the distribution of electrical infrastructure to rural homes. In 1930, 56% of the U.S. population lived in rural areas.

<http://www.census.gov/population/censusdata/urpop0090.txt>

<sup>11</sup> Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: the Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Stage, "From Domestic Science to Social Housekeeping: The Career of Ellen Richards," in *Power and Responsibility: Case Studies in American Leadership*, D.M.



differed, however, in two important ways. First, Richards approached the work of the home through the lens of science, believing that a scientific, professionalized approach would legitimize it. Second, she had a clearly articulated vision of the home as a political tool, a place from which women could actively influence public life and politics.

Richards' very modern notion that science alone could provide solutions to social issues originated in her training and research as a chemist. Although she earned a B.S. in chemistry at MIT, she was unable to find a firm willing to hire a woman chemist.

Richards returned to MIT and persuaded them to open a Women's Laboratory, where she taught chemistry to women interested in the sciences. Richards also created a niche for herself, applying chemistry to the everyday concerns of women. This would lead to teaching courses on sanitary chemistry and publishing texts on household sanitation and on the chemistry of food preparation.<sup>13</sup> Richards pioneered work on water quality, domestic sanitation and household bacteriology, which coincided with the burgeoning public health movement's crusade to eradicate infectious diseases like typhus and tuberculosis.<sup>14</sup>

Richards conceived of housework as "domestic science" and believed that every educated woman should strive to apply scientific principles to the needs of her home. It was her great hope that women would further relate this approach to broader social issues in their communities. Science could not only ameliorate the problems of home and home-keeping, but could better the condition of mankind in general. Indeed, Richards

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Kennedy, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 211-228.

<sup>13</sup>*The Chemistry of Cooking and Cleaning* (1880) and *Food Materials and their Adulterations* (1885). For a general biography, see Caroline L. Hunt, *The Life of Ellen H. Richards* (Washington, DC: American Home Economics Association, 1958).

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Tomes, "Spreading Germ Theory: Sanitary Science and Home Economics, 1880-1930" in *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, S. Stage and V. Vincenti, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 34-54.

attempted to dub this approach “euthenics,” or the practice of inducing social change through the scientific alteration of environments.<sup>15</sup> Housework, then, was broadly conceived, and reached beyond the walls of the home to society at large. Richards and others fully expected that women should and would take the scientific principles of home management and apply them to social ills: “social housekeeping,” as many referred to it.<sup>16</sup>

In many ways, the early home economics movement influenced, and was influenced by, the Progressive movement. Richards and others were keen to see women find a greater role in public affairs, and they did this by using the work of the home as their fulcrum. Home economics became a way for women to find professional work outside of the home, not simply to professionalize their work in it. The concern for sanitation, cleanliness, and health was shared not only by Richards and her fellow home economists, but also by other activists championing Progressive causes from food and drug safety to public sanitation. Sarah Stage notes that Richards’ vision of bettering society through environment “fit squarely in the reform Darwinist tradition that informed the broader movement for social melioration contemporaries called the Progressive movement.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> E.H. Richards, *Euthenics: The Science of Controllable Environment* (Boston: Whitcomb and Barrows, 1910).

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Stage, “Ellen Richards and the Social Significance of the Home Economics Movement,” in *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, S. Stage and V. Vincenti, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). See also L.J. Rynbrandt, *Caroline Bartlett Crane and the Progressive Reform: Social Housekeeping as Sociology* (New York: Garland, 1999); B. Richardson, “Ellen Swallow Richards: ‘Humanistic Oekologist,’ ‘Applied Sociologist,’ and the Founding of Sociology,” *The American Sociologist*, 33 (2002): 21-57.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Stage, “Ellen Richards and the Social Significance of the Home Economics Movement,” in *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, S. Stage and V. Vincenti, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 27.

Richards was not content to disseminate these ideas in the classroom or through books only. In order to fulfill this vision, Richards organized the Lake Placid Conference in 1899. The major aim of the meeting was to make more widely available the message and methods of “domestic science,” and to obtain for it recognition as a valid course of academic study in universities. In this step, Richards was combining her two great passions: creating more avenues for women’s education and elevating housekeeping to a subject worthy of academic study. Furthermore, with the creation of departments of domestic science, more university-level jobs could be made available to women. Over the next decades, the Lake Placid Conference came to inform a new academic field, home economics, and shaped how housework was perceived and carried out through its involvement in curricula at the elementary, secondary and university levels.<sup>18</sup>

The birth of the home economics movement and its establishment in schools and in universities throughout the U.S. marked a shift in ideas about the nature of the work of the home. It institutionalized a notion of the work of the home as “home management,” a profession that required intelligence, thought and study. Out of the Lake Placid Conferences sprouted cooking schools all over the east coast, and land-grant universities in the Midwest developed courses on cooking and nutrition, textiles and garment-making, and housekeeping and home design and décor.<sup>19</sup> For home economists and women trained in their courses, no longer was it sufficient to cook food out of habit or tradition; one needed to consider the nutrition science behind diet and food preparation.<sup>20</sup> Nor should a

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<sup>18</sup> E. Weigley, “It Might Have Been Euthenics: The Lake Placid Conferences and the Home Economics Movement,” *American Quarterly* 26 (1974): 88-94.

<sup>19</sup> Megan J. Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 18-63.

<sup>20</sup> Richards’ work in nutrition was shaped by the Progressive movement’s efforts to guarantee food safety after Upton Sinclair’s work exposing dangerous industrial food production practices. These efforts resulted in the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906,

woman simply clean her house, rather she should consider efficiency and sanitation. Moreover, as the home economics movement gained prominence in the schools at every level, a new philosophy began to subtly reshape Beecher's original conception of the home as a social and spiritual school. Leaving aside the nineteenth-century emphasis on spiritual training, this new philosophy rather emphasized the home as the primary site in which physical and emotional well-being was maintained and ensured. The focus shifted to the material quality, organization and maintenance of the home.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, many professional home economists also began to shift their thinking about the purpose of a course in home economics. In the early days of the movement, the twin goals of creating careers for women and improving the domestic sphere seemed to hold equal importance. In time, however, many leaders in the movement increasingly saw it primarily as a means to a career. Indeed Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that it was a woman's ticket out of the home. "We have never thought of the economic waste of the labor of the woman in the home," she wrote, "...It is not possible for mothers to rightly fulfill their work while they practice at the same time that combined and chaotic group of industries which goes on inside the sacred circle of the home."<sup>21</sup> For Gilman, the home was de-sacralized, a space which hindered the development of women and burdened her with drudgery. Yet, her statement indicates a birth of a tension that many women of the age experienced in trying to balance work and

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which ultimately paved the way for the Food and Drug Administration.

<sup>21</sup> In 1915, Gilman delivered a series of lectures for a course entitled "Women and Industry: Her Opportunities in Business Today," hosted by New York University's School of Commerce. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Women and Vocations," *Women in Industry* Lecture no. 1 [4 October 1915], pp. 23-41, carton 1, file folder 3, BVI Records.

home, particularly women in lower socio-economic classes who had entered the industrial workforce apace with men.<sup>22</sup>

If Richards' emphasis was on housekeeping as "domestic science" and Gilman's was on home economics as an entrée into paid work, Christine Frederick's was on making the work of the home less burdensome and more attractive through industrial efficiencies. Frederick famously declared in the official journal of the American Home Economics Association that the profession's "...greatest enemy is the woman with a career."<sup>23</sup> Frederick's solution to the modern woman's intractable problem of balancing paid work and housework was to make the work of the home easier, more attractive and fulfilling. To accomplish this, Frederick joined to Richards' "domestic science" the new ideas in systematic production efficiency promoted by Frederick Taylor. "Taylorism," as it came to be known, espoused systematically planning one's work and arranging one's workspace to achieve maximum efficiency. By applying these principles to their own workspaces, Christine Frederick believed, women could engineer their workflow to ease the time burden of housework and thereby come to find fulfillment in domesticity.

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<sup>22</sup> Bettina Berch, *Endless Day: The Political Economy of Women and Work* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982: 32-43.

<sup>23</sup> C. Frederick, "Points of Efficiency," *The Journal of Home Economics* 6 (June): 278-280.



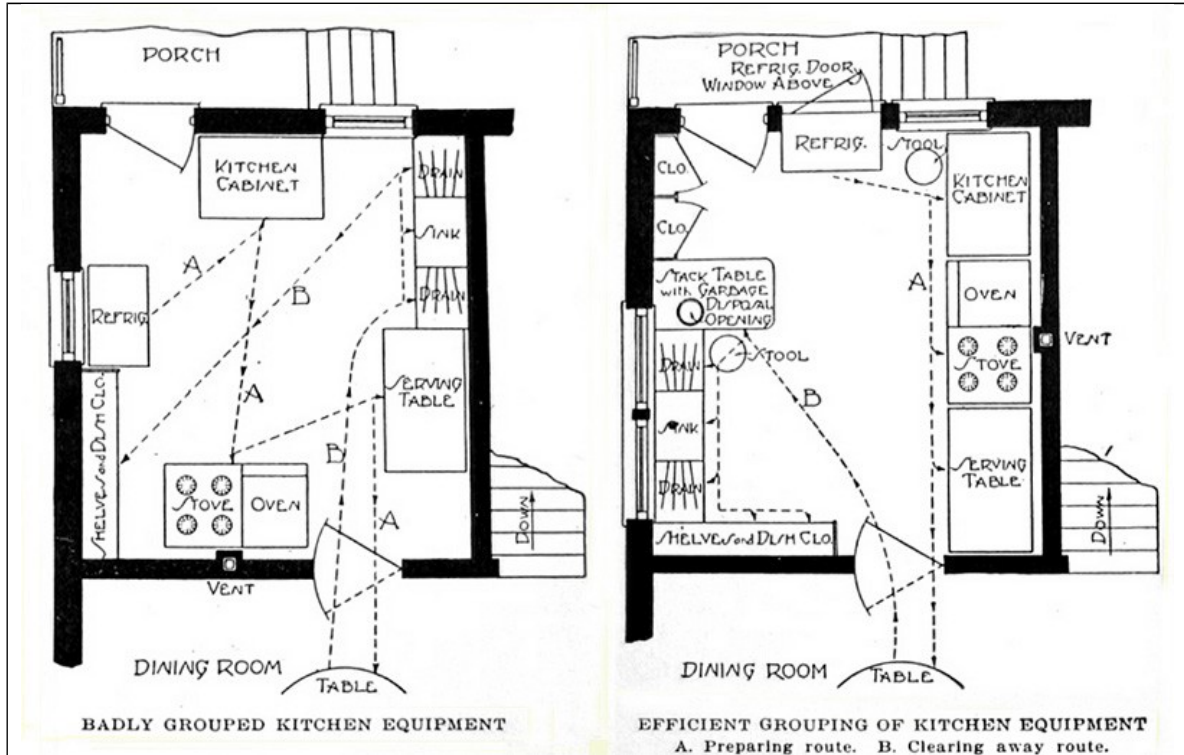
A Dover Egg Beater is tested for ease and efficiency at Frederick's Applecroft Experiment Station, 1910

Frederick also recognized that time and labor savings could also be found by fully modernizing the home with the latest products. Frederick solicited sample products from manufacturers for testing in her own Taylor-ized home. She would test the product in working conditions and then offer comment back to the manufacturer for improvements, perhaps later publishing an informative article about the product in a women's periodical.<sup>24</sup> Taylor freely dispensed advice on modern home keeping, publishing pamphlets, books and articles in both academic and popular journals.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Janice W. Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 59-67.

<sup>25</sup> Christine Frederick's work found a following in Europe. She traveled throughout Europe promoting her ideas. Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, 133-135. Much of her English work was translated into German. Nancy Reagin, "Comparing Apples and Oranges: Housewives and the Politics of Consumption in Interwar Germany" in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, S.



Plans for an efficient kitchen, based on Taylor principles, from Frederick's *Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home* (1921)

Frederick's work was not without controversy. She not only offered product reviews, but also wrote advertising pamphlets for manufacturers throughout the 1920s. Perhaps her most controversial move was her decision to publish an advice manual aimed at advertisers about how to promote their products to women. *Selling Mrs. Consumer* aimed to tell manufacturers and advertisers what women wanted and what they were most concerned about. Frederick saw it as a natural extension of her earlier efforts to educate the female consumer. Indeed, she saw it as essential to consumer satisfaction and protection that women should have a "closer entente cordial and co-partnership with

Strasser, C. McGovern and M. Judd, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press for the German Historical Institute, 1998): 243-44.

industry and trade.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, some in the home economics profession felt that she enjoyed too close a relationship with industry to really speak for the needs of the ordinary housewife. They saw *Selling Mrs. Consumer* as selling out.

Whatever the estimation of her contemporaries, Christine Frederick’s work marked a new era in which the work of the home and women’s relationship to it was politicized and contested. As industrialization came to influence the domestic sphere more directly, some, like Richards and Frederick embraced it. Others argued that it had the effect of delegating most of the housework to women. Household tasks that had required the involvement of men—the lifting and beating of carpets, for instance—now were the sole province of women with vacuums. Hauling water, carrying coal or firewood—all tasks that had also tied men to the work of maintaining the home, were made obsolete with the advent of electricity and gas delivery into homes.<sup>27</sup> In response to the hardening and gendering of public and private spheres in middle-class America, feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that the private home was an antiquated mechanism of female oppression and dependence and proposed its abolishment.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, material feminists argued for rethinking the home altogether, proposing socialist model villages, communal kitchen and housework cooperatives as a way to counter the growing isolation that was industrial-age, middle-class urban housekeeping. Certainly, Gilman’s perspective on the home continued to offer a

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<sup>26</sup> Christine Frederick, *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (New York: The Business Bourse, 1929), p. Also available online at <http://archive.org/details/sellingmrsconsum00fredrich>.

<sup>27</sup> Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Married to the Mop: Housework and Housewives in American Advertising* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 2-5; Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 16-101.

<sup>28</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981); Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 102-150.



competing discourse on women and housework, later to find voice in Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*.

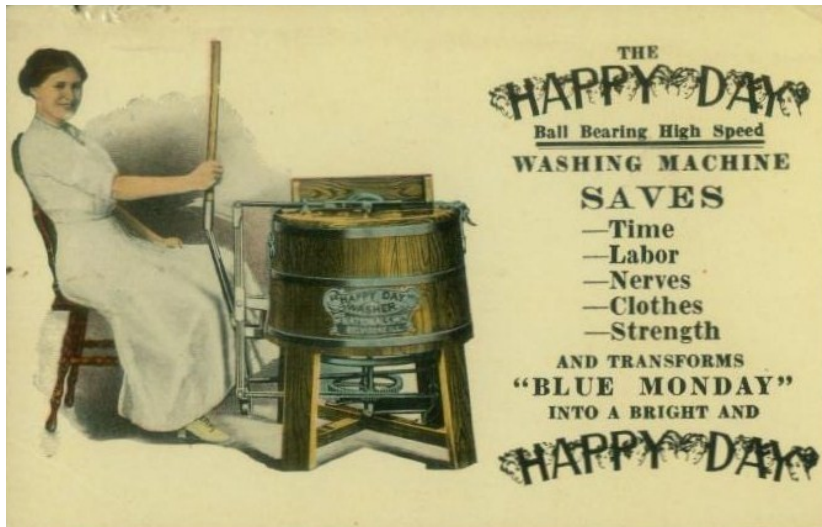
For Frederick, however the individual home was a necessity to society and could be a place of fulfillment and development, given the right application of modern approach and purchase of appropriate tools. She countered Gilman's assessment of the future of the home. "I believe that the individual home is going to last," she declared to a classroom of women at NYU. "That is why I say that home making as a profession has a bigger future than any single occupation."<sup>29</sup>

Frederick also signifies the nearly complete transition of the home from being a locus of production to a locus of consumption. Women were the primary consumers in the expanding post-war economy, and Frederick saw it as her aim act as a mediator between women and industry, and to make women intelligent, informed consumers. Her emphasis on time and labor savings found their way into advertisers' TV commercials as well as print and radio ads. "Convenience" became the catch-word of the day, and was an advertising strategy aimed at housewives and growing numbers of working women struggling for the elusive work-life balance.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Women in Industry Lectures, School of Commerce, New York University, 1916.

<sup>30</sup> Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Married to the Mop*, passim. Several book-length studies have been published on women and advertising: Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of a Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Victoria de Grazia, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Katherine J. Parkin, *Food is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).



*Circa 1910 postcard advertising Happy Day washing tub machine.*

*Selling Mrs. Consumer* was published between the wars in 1929, and while consumption fell during the depression years of the 1930s, it came roaring back after WWII in the tremendous economic expansion of the 1950s. Economic expansion meant that more and more homes had access to modern conveniences and amenities. Before the war, only 25% of Americans had indoor plumbing, 53% had access to automatic washing machines or electric refrigerators, and 30% still relied on coal and wood for cooking and heating.<sup>31</sup> By 1970, approximately 60% of homes had washing machines, nearly all had some form of central heating, and 96% had a television.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 1940 Census of Population and Housing, available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1940.html>.

<sup>32</sup> 1970 Census of Housing, available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1970cenhousev1.html>

**NEW G-E AUTOMATIC WASHER CLEANS AND RE-CLEANS WASH WATER TO GIVE YOU CLEANER CLOTHES**

Here's how the new Filter-Flo Washing System removes lint, sand and soap scum!

**Removable Filter** fits on the Activator® in the G-E Automatic Washer. Acts as detergent dispenser. Here you see the removal of lint and soap scum. Filter slips out to empty.

**1** Hot looses so clothes are individually dipped, flooded and cleaned by thorough G-E Activator Washing Action.

**2** Flooding lint and soap scum are carried away as wash-water continuously overflows into water tub.

**3** Heavy suds and silt drop out here.

**4** Pump continually forces water up and through filter and (B) back into washbasket.

**Today's best buy—G-E Automatic Washer—about \$1.35\* weekly. Only G-E gives you so much for your money—1, continuously filtered water, 2, big capacity, 3, 3-tone Activator**

**Washing Action.** This famed dependability! Also see matching G-E Automatic Dryer that saves you extra ironing. General Electric Co., Appliance Park, Louisville 1, Ky.

**Now a new kind of washer—**takes dirt out of the water while you wash—the General Electric Automatic with Filter-Flo Washing.

This wonderful new system circulates and filters the wash water at the rate of six gallons per minute.

As the Filter-Flo Washing System circulates the water, lint and floating soil are trapped in a filter which lets only the cleaned sudsy water flow back into the washbasket.

Rinse water stays clear of lint. Soap scum can't dull clothes. You get a dazzling clean wash . . . simply by setting a dial.

**Big capacity, too!** This G-E washer has over 50% more clothes capacity than many other automatics.

In one load, you can wash a big family wash that would take two separate loads in some other automatics. Water-Saver Control lets you select from 17 down to 11 gallons of water for small washes.

\*See your dealer for his price and terms. Specifications subject to change without notice.

Not the "lifty-water" way. These dangerous loads filter this suds and discarded by lint filter after 11 washings in an ordinary washer. Lint often gets stuck in seams, too.

But the "clean-wash-water" way. After 11 washings the G-E way, these identical dangers looked like this—on last wash! Washing in filtered water leaves clothes sparkling clean.

for whiter, brighter washes . . . **GENERAL ELECTRIC**

1955 General Electric Filter-flo washer/dryer combo advertisement in the Saturday Evening Post

### III. Turning Point: Second Wave Feminism and the Sexual Revolution

Christine Frederick died in 1970, at a time second-wave feminism was beginning to crescendo, reaching a significant milestone with the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972. Originating in the progressive movements of women's suffrage and education, second-wave feminism reinvigorated these concerns. Three factors account for its emergence: feminist intellectuals and activists such as Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Betty Friedan (1921-2006) offered a critique of the work of the home, of the institution of marriage and the gendering of public/private spheres around which activists could galvanize; the rapid increase in women obtaining paid work outside the home,

combined with falling birth rates; and protests movements of 1968 and later offered a model for activists.

Simone de Beauvoir's works, particularly *The Second Sex* (1949), served as inspiration for many feminists in the postwar years. She was highly critical of the work of the home, arguing that the domestic sphere limited women and constructed them as "other" and inferior in the male-dominated public sphere. "Few tasks are more similar to the torment of Sisyphus than those of the housewife," she opined "...the wife's work within the home does not grant her autonomy; she justifies her existence through [her husband and children]: she is no more than an inessential mediation in their lives...."<sup>33</sup> Beauvoir's criticism influenced women in the U.S. as well. Betty Friedan distilled these condemnations, rearticulating them and echoing arguments of Charlotte Perkins Gilman a generation earlier in *The Feminine Mystique*.

Women's participation in the workforce had steadily increased in the postwar years, partly driven by the strong demand for labor in a rapidly expanding economy. By the 1970s, women's participation rate in the workforce climbed to 40%,<sup>34</sup> eventually reaching its peak rate of 60% in 1990.<sup>35</sup> The percentage of married women with children

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<sup>33</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Knopf, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlftable2-2010.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *The Editor's Desk*, Changes in men's and women's labor force participation rates at <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2007/jan/wk2/art03.htm> (visited Nov. 1, 2012).

participating in the workforce also jumped. In 1950, 28% of women with children aged 6-17 engaged in paid work; in 1986, 84% did. For women with children under age six, so few women worked outside the home in 1950 that the Bureau of Labor did not track it, but by 1986 fully 50% of mothers with young children worked outside the home.<sup>36</sup> By 1989, dual-career families accounted for 58% of all married couples with children.<sup>37</sup> This last number has held relatively steady over the last twenty years.<sup>38</sup>

With demands of both work and home bearing on both husband and wife, household appliances adapted to offer even greater time and labor savings. Microwave ovens and TV dinners quickly invaded American kitchens. The Amana Corporation developed the first microwave oven for domestic use in 1967; by 1986, 25% of homes had one, and 90% of homes today have one.<sup>39</sup> The market for prepackaged dinners, which found a niche in 1950s grocery stores, and processed foods expanded as time constraints on working families increased. In 1970, 58% of homes lacked an automatic clothes dryer,<sup>40</sup> but the mid-Nineties, 78% of homes benefitted from their convenience.<sup>41</sup> Prizing convenience, however, was not without its critics and reactions, exemplified in the anti-industrial sentiments underlying the environmental, back-to-earth, and slow and organic food movements from the 1970s until today.

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<sup>36</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings, Characteristics of Families* (Washington DC: U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking, 1989), 2-4.

<sup>38</sup> In 2011, 58.5% of families were dual-earner families. Data available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.t04.htm> (visited Nov. 1, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> P.R. Liegey, Jr., "Hedonic Quality Adjustment Methods for Microwave Ovens in the U.S. CPI," (2001) available at <http://www.bls.gov/cpi/cpimwo.htm>, (accessed Nov. 9, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> 1970 Census of Housing, available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1970cenhousev1.html>

<sup>41</sup> P.R. Liegey, Jr. "Hedonic Quality Adjustment Methods for Clothes Dryers in the U.S. CPI" (2003), at <http://www.bls.gov/cpi/cpidryer.htm> (accessed Nov. 9, 2012)



Left: 1960s advertisement for Swanson's TV Dinners; Right: 1970s recession-era Kraft processed convenience dinner.

The time pressures presented by dual-earner families affected attitudes toward the work of the home. The intensification of the critique of the gendering of housework and acceleration of women in the workforce and the practical considerations of the home generated tensions for families about how to balance paid work with the work of the home. This tension manifested in the proliferation of time-use studies throughout the 70's, 80's and 90's, examining the balance of labor between dual-earner husbands and wives in attending to household tasks. Time-use studies indicated that women spent far more time attending to the care of the home, conveniences or not, than their spouses.<sup>42</sup> Other studies posited that inequity in time spent caring for the home contributed to

<sup>42</sup> Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, passim.

marital dissatisfaction among women,<sup>43</sup> indicating that women experienced strain in reconciling the practical demands of paid work with housework, and integrating the competing roles, desires, and expectations of career woman with wife and mother.

#### **IV. Concluding Thoughts**

The story of housework in the last hundred years is a complicated one, justifying detailed study in many directions. Nevertheless, some general conclusions can be drawn about changes in attitudes toward and methods of the care of the home. Industrialization unleashed powerful changes into the American home. First, Beecher's conception of home as a civic, social and spiritual school gave way to a conception of the home as primarily a locus for providing material and emotional well-being. Second, not only did industrialization simplify housework through the introduction of time- and labor-saving devices, but it also shifted the bulk of the care of the home to women. Third, it transformed homes from sources of production into sources of consumption. Women became the primary consumers for the home in the second half of the twentieth century, although children are also fast becoming consumers in their own right in the twenty-first century. Fourth, industrialization made the home a contested place, with feminists questioning the divisions of labor and who should do the work of the home. Fifth, the expanding economy and the exodus of women into the workplace has had significant

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<sup>43</sup> Among many studies in the last thirty years: A. Booth, D.R. Johnson, L. White, and J.N. Edwards, "Women, outside employment, and marital instability," *American Journal of Sociology* 90 (1984), 567-583; C.E. Bird, "Gender, household labor, and psychological distress: The impact of the amount and division of housework," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 40 (1999), 32-45; M. Frisco and K. William, "Perceived Housework Equity, Marital Happiness, and Divorce in Dual-Earner Households," *Journal of Family Issues* 24 (2003), 51-73.

impacts on the work of the home, and also on marriages, as women struggle to strike the balance between the demands of work with the needs of the home.

When I asked my grandmother about marrying and establishing a home in the 1940s, she said that one of the first things she made sure they had was an automatic washer. She praises the conveniences that the booming American economy afforded her young family, and she appreciates the security that a mobile phone offers. Yet she is ambivalent about industrialization's effects on family and home life. She observes that people seem tired, lonely, too busy to attend to home life. Her only comment: "there's got to be a better way."