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An examination of the Home Economics program in British Columbia during the
20th Century

Home economics, the educational program created as an attempt to bring manual training to girls in the public education system, first began in Eastern Canada in the 1890s, though it quickly made its way to British Columbia by the early 1900s.¹ However, it took several decades for the program to become a fully recognized part of the BC curriculum. A close examination of not only the history of home economics but also the various textbooks used throughout the 20th century in British Columbia provides insight into general attitudes towards women. In this paper, the history of the home economics program will be detailed by decade, from its early beginnings to the end of the 20th century and into the early 21st century. Furthermore, three separate home economics textbooks from the 20th century will be analyzed to discuss the changing attitudes towards women in the 20th century in British Columbia. Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the status of the home economics program in BC is linked with the societal perception of women and what is deemed their collective "role" in society.

¹ Jean R. Irvine. "History of home economics in British Columbia schools – 1896-1975," *THESA Journal* 14 no. 1 (1975): 8.

The beginnings of what became to be known as "home economics" in Canada can be traced back to a multi-national conference called the World's Congress of Representative Women in Chicago, Illinois in 1893.² The Canadian women involved in this, very quickly after the conference, formed two separate organizations back in Canada: the National Council of Women of Canada and the Canadian Young Women's Christian Association. Both of these organizations worked diligently to establish "the introduction of industrial (or manual) training for girls into the public school system of Canada, believing that such training will greatly conduce to the general welfare of Canadian homes..."³ There are a number of contextual reasons why the advent of home economics took place in the late 19th century and early 20th century, including industrialization and an increased importance placed on family and the home life.⁴ In the first decade of the 20th century, both Vancouver and Victoria adopted a number of "domestic science" courses for girls, including needlework, cookery, laundry, home nursing and "housewifery."⁵ By 1907, a curriculum for the British Columbia Department of Education was developed and implemented into BC schools. It recommended that "each girl should receive a minimum of two hours instruction per week."⁶ Generally this training was done while the boys participated in manual training in subjects such as shopwork and industrial work. This says a lot about what was perceived as

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Christie Jane Thomas, "Forces influencing home economics curriculum change in British Columbia secondary schools 1912-1985" (Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986), 1-2.

⁵ Jean R. Irvine. "History of home economics in British Columbia schools – 1896-1975," *THESA Journal* 14 no. 1 (1975): 10.

⁶ Ibid.

"women's work" as opposed to "men's work" during this time period. Girls were not expected to learn about industrial work because they women were not expected to be performing manual labour or technical work. Rather, they were expected to be housewives and mothers, and thus were required to learn about these topics in school.

Once home economics was developed and recognized in public schools in the early 1900s, many women argued that home economics should be a subject offered at the post-secondary level as well. However, not all women stood united on this topic; two divisive opinions were argued at the onset of the program. On one hand, some feminists believed that "domestic science" courses were an assault to both women and traditional academic universities. Those who argued against the creation of home economics as a university subject were "reluctant to attribute professional status to homemaking."⁷ They believed that creating a program for women to learn about domestic duties was a step backwards for women's equality rather than a step forward because it seemed to encourage and accept the belief that women's interests were "overwhelming domestic."⁸ However, to the majority of women who did not have a university degree, this viewpoint seemed elitist. The opposing view argued that home economics was based a number of domestic sciences and this justified the subject as a legitimate university field. Alice Ravenhill, the chief proponent of this point of view, also argued that female university graduates were ill-prepared for motherhood and that "the right care of human life"

⁷ Lee Stewart. "The Politics of Women's Education: Establishing Home Economics at the University of British Columbia, 1914-1949." *Historical Studies in Education*, Fall 1989: 261.

⁸ *Ibid*, 262.

should be a subject taught to women at the post-secondary level.⁹ Ravenhill's opinion triumphed in the end, though not without a lengthy political battle; in 1942 the home economics program was finally established at the University of British Columbia. This meant that teachers could finally train to become home economics teachers without leaving the province.

In these beginning years of home economics in public schools, a number of textbooks were published for the purpose of using them in classrooms. One example, though published in America, showcases the types of lessons girls in British Columbia were learning in home economics class in the early 20th century. The title itself, "*Housewifery: A Manual and Text Book of Practical Housekeeping*" is indicative of what types of lessons are inside; chapters include "Housewifery as a Business" and "Cleaning and Care of Rooms, Beds, Bathroom, Kitchen, Metals." Passages such as "...the accepted fact to-day is that every housewife ought to become as proficient in her realm as the business man is in his" demonstrate the way of thinking at the time.¹⁰ It seemed to be an established fact that wives were in charge of caring for the home, while husbands were in charge of "business" outside the home. Consideration was not even given to that fact that a man could be reading a book about cleaning and home management, let alone that a woman could be working outside the home and not managing the domestic staff and

⁹ Ibid, 263.

¹⁰ Lydia Ray Balderston, *Housewifery. A manual and text book of practical housewifery, etc*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia & London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1919), 1.

tending the home.¹¹ More surprising chapters include "Plumbing" and "Heating and Lighting," which seem to be more technical topics than cooking and cleaning. Included in these chapters are descriptions of different plumbing methods and equipment, such as hydraulic rams and gravity water systems. These topics are definitely not "common knowledge," so it makes sense that classes should be offered to teach women about these types of things if they are expected upon marriage to run a home, especially during this time when maintaining a plumbing system was not as straight-forward as it is today. Overall, this textbook from 1919 exemplifies the attitude that only women were expected to learn "home economics." The subjects taught to women included all aspects of home management, from cooking and cleaning, to household pests and the hiring of domestic help.

In the 1920s, home economics as a program underwent a number of changes. As it gained popularity in North America and textbooks were published on the topic, curriculums began to change and evolve. In British Columbia, two new high school programs were established in 1927, the General Home Economics class and the Special Home Economics class. The "special" class lasted for three years instead of two, took place more frequently throughout each week, and most importantly, was accepted for matriculation credit at the University of British Columbia. This fact increased the perceived legitimacy of the home economics program, and likely played a substantial part in the growth of the program throughout the 1920s and 1930s, even through the Great Depression era. Even in

¹¹ Interesting to note, however, that a man was in charge of the book series this book is part of, "Lippincott's Home Manuals."

areas of the province that were forced to shut down their home economics centres due to lack of funding and depleted budgets, "public confidence in the value of home economics as a school subject was increased."¹² The creation of the Canadian Home Economics Association in 1939 also increased the reputation of the program and allowed for its expansion throughout Canada, including British Columbia. The association also added professionalism to the subject, as it included nutritionists, dieticians, businesswomen, professional homemakers as well as teachers, all of whom would help contribute to the creation of the home economics curriculum.¹³ The expansion of the program continued within British Columbia throughout the 1940s and 50s, with a number of new courses developed for the home economics program in secondary schools; these courses included Child Care and Home Nursing, Homemaking, Clothing Selection and Construction and Foods and Nutrition.¹⁴ These course titles and topics are indicative of the types of things girls were learning in home economics during these decades. The focus was on learning to become a well-informed and efficient mother and homemaker, as that is generally what was expected of women. Even though women were definitely part of the work-force, albeit in mostly teaching, nursing and administrative roles, they were still expected to be running the household and raising the children. During this time,

¹² Jean R. Irvine. "History of home economics in British Columbia schools – 1896-1975," *THESA Journal* 14 no. 1 (1975): 12.

¹³ Mary Leah DeZwart and M. Gale Smith, "Education for Everyday Life: Curriculum and Pedagogy in Home Economics," *B. Faculty Research and Publications*, 2011, 5, doi:10.14288/1.0054648.

¹⁴ I Jean R. Irvine. "History of home economics in British Columbia schools – 1896-1975," *THESA Journal* 14 no. 1 (1975): 14.

only girls participated in home economics training, often during the same period boys were taking "industrial arts" or shop.¹⁵

In 1961, a change in the public school curriculum resulted in the elimination of the home economics program in elementary schools due to an increased emphasis placed on "core" subjects like math and science.¹⁶ This could, perhaps, be seen as a shift in thinking in regards to gendered curriculum. The school system determined that it was beneficial for "even" girls to learn academic subjects like math and science, rather than the traditional home economics topics like cooking and home management, at least at the intermediate level. In addition, the 1960s brought to Canada many changes, including the introduction of the birth control pill as well as a shift in attitudes towards topics such as homosexuality and pre-marital sex and cohabitation. Second wave feminism highlighted women's changing role in society; women were fighting back against the idea that they belonged strictly in the home.¹⁷ This shift in attitude perhaps had an effect on the home economics curriculum in British Columbia; with women working away from the home more commonly, the focus shifted away from home management and the housewifery skills taught by home economics. Instead, secondary schools revised their home economics curriculums to focus primarily on "family studies" and "nutritional science" rather

¹⁵ Robert M. Stamp, "Growing Up Progressive? Part I: Going to Elementary School in 1940s Ontario," *Historical Studies in Education*, Spring, 17, no. 1 (1975): 191. Though this specific source is from Ontario, it is indicative of Canada as a whole during this time period.

¹⁶ Mary Leah DeZwart and M. Gale Smith, "Education for Everyday Life: Curriculum and Pedagogy in Home Economics," *B. Faculty Research and Publications*, 2011, 5, doi:10.14288/1.0054648.

¹⁷ Mary Leah DeZwart and M. Gale Smith, "Education for Everyday Life: Curriculum and Pedagogy in Home Economics," *B. Faculty Research and Publications*, 2011, 6, doi:10.14288/1.0054648.

than the stereotypical "cooking and sewing" courses that had been offered for the first half of the 20th century.¹⁸

A close look at the two British Columbia home economics textbooks from the 1960s and 1970s demonstrates the shift in curriculum. The first textbook, *Recipes for Young Adults*, was originally published in 1967 and focuses primarily on recipes.¹⁹ The second book, *Management and Foods*, has a heavy emphasis on recipes, but also teaches the reader about the nutritional value in the recipes being prepared.²⁰ The most obvious difference is the explicit assumption that the student reading the textbook will be female. Unlike the textbook from 1919, these two textbooks avoided words like "housewife" and were created to be, at least outwardly, more gender neutral. *Recipes for Young Adults*, in fact, even features both a girl and boy on the cover, holding serving plates. However, the references to gender are often implied, rather than explicitly stated. For example, the author refers to the oven as a "homemaker's" best friend. Even today, but especially in the 1960s and 70s, a homemaker was traditionally viewed as a woman. It would be incredibly rare to refer to a man by this term, even if they were the keeper of the home. This gendered language shows that home economics continued to be aimed towards girls. It was obvious that despite the lack of explicit gendered assumptions, girls were still the target audience for home economics textbooks. In fact, it was not until

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Recipes for young adults* (Lethbridge, Alta.: Canadian Sugar Factories Limited, 1967).

²⁰ Myrtle Siebert, *Management and foods* (Victoria: Publication Services Branch in co-operation with the curriculum Development Branch of the Dept. of Education, 1975).

1979 that boys were technically allowed to take home economics classes in British Columbia.²¹

Management and Foods shows the shift in focus from simply teaching cooking and sewing, to teaching students about the nutritional science behind cooking. More emphasis seems to be placed on understanding things like carbohydrates and proteins, compared to the textbook from 1919.²² Overall, the science behind cooking is explainer, rather than just teaching recipes. In addition, the newer textbook does not include as much on home management. *Housewifery*, in contrast, spends many chapters teaching the reader about how many hours per day to spend on each cleaning task and what chores to delegate to the domestic help.²³ These examples show both the changing curriculum and the social changes that occurred between the early 1900s and the 1970s.

The last two decades of the 20th century could be seen as perhaps the beginning of the end for the home economics program in British Columbia. The revisions made to the curriculum in 1979 introduced, for the first time, a co-educational program that included both girls and boys.²⁴ Once again, the units under the home economics program were revised to meet the “renewed attention to equal

²¹ Christie Jane Thomas, "Forces influencing home economics curriculum change in British Columbia secondary schools 1912-1985" (Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986), 90.

²² Myrtle Siebert, *Management and foods* (Victoria: Publication Services Branch in co-operation with the curriculum Development Branch of the Dept. of Education, 1975).

²³ Lydia Ray Balderston, *Housewifery. A manual and text book of practical housewifery, etc*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia & London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1919).

²⁴ Christie Jane Thomas, "Forces influencing home economics curriculum change in British Columbia secondary schools 1912-1985" (Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986), 90.

opportunity in education.”²⁵ While the title of home economics still existed, many schools offered “Life Skills” as an alternative. The intent was to teach every individual, not just girls, the basic skills needed to survive on one’s own. This indicates, once again, the changing social mores. Eighty years after the creation of the home economics program for girls, our societal views finally deemed cooking, cleaning and basic life skills as something both girls and boys should be taught in schools. Furthermore, the public opinion now frowns upon separating boys and girls in terms of educational goals. It became widely believed that girls should be taught the same things as boys, as girls are just as capable.

However, the idea that girls should be learning the same things as boys has resulted in the decline of food and nutrition education in secondary schools. Rather than both genders participating in these classes, they seem to have fallen out of favour all together.²⁶ Many educational researchers are concerned that the elimination of the home economics program in Canada has resulted in poor nutritional choices made by young adults. Joyce Slater argues that the re-integration of “food literacy” programs in schools would result in healthier adults, both today and in the future.²⁷

In conclusion, the rise and fall of home economics in British Columbia can be traced to society’s ever-changing views. In the beginning, a program was needed for

²⁵ Ibid, 92.

²⁶ Joyce Slater, "Is cooking dead? The state of Home Economics Food and Nutrition education in a Canadian province," *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 37, no. 6 (2013): 617, doi:10.1111/ijcs.12042.

²⁷ Ibid, 622.

girls to take while boys learned the industrial arts. From there, it developed into a professional program aimed at legitimizing the role of homemaker and housewife. As society's views on women changed and became more progressive, the program adapted, to a certain extent, to include boys and teach all students about necessary life skills. The textbooks used throughout the 20th century showcase the changing curriculum, and in doing so, also showcase society's view on women. While one can argue that the decreasing popularity of the home economics program has a detrimental effect on the health of individuals, it seems clear that society's view on women has changed significantly; so much so that we no longer believe girls should be taught to cook and clean while boys are taught to enter the workforce.

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