

Chapter One

"Sewed Considerable":

Home Sewing and the Meanings of Women's Domestic Work

In 1934, a Mrs. H.S. from Illinois wrote to the editor of the *Woman's Home Companion* to ask for advice on how to arrange her furniture in the house she shared with her railroad engineer husband and seven-year-old son. She went on to explain that she "reads everything" in the magazine as she "tries to be a good wife and mother."¹ Part of her efforts included sewing, even though by the 1930s, she could have easily purchased clothing for her family. Mrs. H.S. ostensibly lived in a comfortable home; after all, she had furniture and a living room and dining room to arrange. She was probably white, had one school-age child, and does not mention working for wages herself. From this short letter in a women's magazine, we have a snapshot of a member of the middle class.

Mrs. H.S., however, was anxious about her class status and her ability to fulfill her domestic role. After all, she was asking for advice from "experts" on setting up her house and found it necessary to say how hard she tried to fulfill her roles. As a member of the middle class, she was the target market for the rapidly expanding ready-made clothing industry and could probably afford to purchase her family's wardrobe. Nonetheless, she still did some sewing at home and evidently believed that this work was an integral part of fulfilling her role as family caretaker. Like many women, she felt that sewing was one way to allay some of the anxiety she felt about her place in the home and in the larger culture.

Sewing provided a refuge of traditional ideas about women in an age of dramatic change. This chapter will explore how sewing was understood to be a key aspect of women's duties and roles. Sewing was for many a routine component of a household economy, usually (but not always) cheaper than buying items ready-made. Many women of a variety of backgrounds expected to make at least some clothing for themselves and family

members. Sewing represented the home, women's conventional role of caring for her family, and was associated with concepts of thrift, discipline, domestic production, even sexual morality. These values intersect with other issues of identity and cultural understanding. What can we learn from looking carefully at this routine and often invisible work? What exactly does it mean to be "thrifty" or to provide a "good home" and to whom? Meanwhile, cultural meanings are not static. This chapter will also examine the reasons why women sewed clothing for themselves and their families even as items became increasingly affordable and more women worked outside the home. As sewing became less of a basic economic function, how did it persist as a cultural behavior? Did the gendered assumptions surrounding sewing shift along with the expectations and experiences of the women and girls who were taught – or not taught – to sew?

Because sewing offers a distillation of ideas about women's role in the family and home, it also illuminates class, ethnic, and racial distinctions. This chapter will therefore examine how sewing served as a way for people to enforce ideas about their position vis-à-vis others of another class or race. Because sewing was an embodiment of gender roles, it could also serve to propagate social hierarchies. Sewing could be used to express personal and group identities, but it could also reinforce social divisions. Home dressmaking was a task shared by working- and middle-class women, black and white, native-born and immigrant. The same skills could be used for different purposes according to one's economic, cultural, and geographical circumstances. Sewing fulfilled white, middle-class ideals of domesticity and provided African Americans and working-class women a way to dress "respectably." In some ways, sewing was a unifying behavior, connecting women of different backgrounds. In other ways, it served to underscore distinctions between them and enforce social and racial hierarchies.

"Women Just Sewed"

For most of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, most women had few choices other than to sew at home. Factory-made men's clothing was available for purchase starting

in the mid-nineteenth century, but the women's ready-to-wear industry took longer to gain a foothold. In 1890, women's styles accounted for only 25 percent of factory-made clothing.² According to the Middletown survey of an Indiana community in the 1920s, advertisements for fabric far outnumbered those for dresses in local newspapers until 1910.³ As Edith Kurtz, who grew up in the Midwest in the early 1900s, put it, "Women just sewed. It was cheaper to make your own clothes, and I presume that had something to do with it, but ready-made clothes were not available."⁴

An alternative of course was to engage a dressmaker.⁵ Wealthy women would almost always have their clothing custom-made by a professional. Those with less to spend might have someone make just their best dresses or pay a dressmaker to cut out a garment – often the most difficult and potentially costly part of the process – which the client would sew together at home. Gabrielle Josephine Crofton, a young woman in Illinois, had her better dresses made by a dressmaker but made her own nightdresses.⁶ For many women, however, the cost of a professional dressmaker was prohibitive and they would have to choose between buying items and making them themselves. Until the ready-wear industry grew to the point where desirable clothes were available at low prices, many middle-class and most working-class women had little choice but to sew the majority of the clothing they and their families needed.

During the early twentieth century, changes in production methods, cheap immigrant labor, and other structural changes made ready-made clothing more affordable. By the 1920s, a competitive and increasingly mechanized garment industry offered a wide range of prices, and looser, less fitted styles fit well off the rack. Ready-to-wear blouses, skirts, and dresses became increasingly popular and fewer women sewed. A survey of department stores from 1911 to 1925 showed that until 1920, fabric sales kept pace with ready-made clothing, but after 1920, the ready-mades overtook fabric.⁷ One businessman surveyed in

the Middletown study recalled that in 1890, a fabric sale would clear ten bolts on the first day, whereas a similar sale in 1924 drew many fewer customers.⁸

During and despite this shift, many women continued to sew.⁹ A series of surveys reveals the tenacity of sewing habits. One small study of families in Pennsylvania in the early 1910s found that at least half made "a few" garments at home.¹⁰ A few years later, in 1919, a more extensive survey of farm homes found that in some regions 95 percent of households did some of their own sewing.¹¹ In 1926, despite the growing popularity of ready-made garments, 98 percent of rural respondents and 92 percent of urban respondents owned a sewing machine.¹² A fourth survey, by the Bureau of Home Economics (then part of the Department of Agriculture) and also reported in 1926, found that at least 80 percent of women surveyed made at least some clothing for themselves and their children. Although the women in the classic Middletown study may have bought an increasingly large proportion of their family's clothing, they continued to sew. About two-thirds of the "working class" women and three-quarters of the "business class" women spent up to six hours a week sewing and mending.¹³

The decision of whether to sew or purchase clothing was part of a complex arithmetic of time, energy, expense, and skills. Working women, the ones most likely to need to sew for economic reasons, often felt the pinch of other demands on their time and a lack of sewing education. Up to a third of the respondents to one survey bought clothing because they were "unable to make clothes at home." Moreover, in the same survey, the largest percentages of those without sewing skills were in the lowest income bracket.¹⁴ Other women may have known how to sew but were too tired to do so. Twenty-five-year-old Lucy Cleaver, interviewed by members of the National Consumers League in 1909, worked long hours in a department store and saved money by walking to work and doing her own washing. However, "as she could not spend any further energy in sewing, she bought cheap

ready-made clothes." Cleaver spent more than she could really afford on these clothes, but was "ill, anaemic [sic], nervous, and broken in health."¹⁵

At times, it simply wasn't worth buying fabric and spending the time to sew. Constance W. Simons, a woman who received numerous hand-me-downs from her sister, justified her purchase of a skirt:

I went down... and bought a black skirt that I actually need... Do you think \$10 much for a black silk skirt... with godets, plaits all, all braid... a little pattern enclosed [she drew a simple sketch]: I *need it so much* and could not begin to get material and have it made for that price.¹⁶ (emphasis in original)

Likewise, Margorie Durand, who grew up in Montana during the 1920s, recalled that while her mother made the bulk of the family's wardrobe, she would order things from mail-order catalogs when the choices were cheaper or better than what her mother might make herself. Like Simons, Durand's mother sewed a great deal but recognized that it was a better use of time and money to buy the occasional item.¹⁷ Still, other women may have had the skills and time but did not *want* to sew. For example, Florence Epstein recalled that her mother just "wasn't inclined to sew."¹⁸

In addition to time pressures, skills, financial calculations, and desire, whether not a woman sewed at home was also a factor of household power relations. In a family where a woman did not earn wages, whether to sew was often a question of a man's money versus a woman's time. Wendy Gamber points out that even though women were largely considered to be responsible for household consumption, they were spending "what their husbands frequently regarded as *'their* money."¹⁹ Sewing was considered part of normal housework and many men could not or would not spend more in order to alleviate their partner's workload.²⁰ The "tipping point" at which women and their families decided to buy instead of make clothing depended on a range of

factors including income level, whether a woman worked for wages, access to shops, amount of spare time, sewing skill, family dynamics, and personal taste.²¹

Judging by the proliferation of agricultural extension services, school sewing curricula, adult classes, pattern companies, and magazine articles and guidebooks, even into the 1920s, a substantial proportion of American women chose to sew. Many did so for practical reasons – a home seamstress could afford a higher quality fabric if she did the work herself or had little access to ready-made clothing – but sewing was also tightly bound to ideas of motherhood, community, domesticity, and femininity. The remainder of this chapter will examine why women sewed, while exploring the cultural resonance of the popularity of a traditional "feminine" skill.

Economy

In 1901, the *New York Times* advertised a ready-made cotton percale dress for \$4.88.²² That style required about seven yards of fabric. With "fancy imported printed percale" costing about ten cents a yard, plus a five-cent pattern and some trimmings (all available from the Sears catalog), a homemade dress required less than a dollar's outlay.²³ A retrospective report by a national retailing organization recalled that "in 1910 the home dressmaker still ruled the average household for even in that period you could not buy a quality dress for less than about \$30 retail while the home dressmaker could make one of equal quality for much less."²⁴ In 1927, a government-sponsored survey found that an overwhelming number of women who sewed did so because it was cheaper than buying ready-made clothing and nearly all of the respondents to another survey agreed that sewing was "an economy."²⁵

If making a dress at home was an outright savings, it could also prove to be a better value over time. Many women argued that by sewing at home, they could afford higher quality fabrics and their garments would last longer than store-bought items. Jane Dunn, who grew up in New Jersey in the 1910s and '20s, recalled that "we all felt it was better to have one thing of high quality rather

than more than one of cheap quality. By purchasing the good quality fabric and making it at home we achieved that goal."²⁶ Margorie Durand recalled wearing silk blouses made by her mother and said it would be a waste of time to sew clothing from inferior fabrics.²⁷

In the early twentieth century, as it had been for long before then, home dressmaking was usually more economical than purchasing clothing. Of course, this discounts the cost of a woman's time, but if you are not paid – or underpaid – for your time in other contexts, your time is cheap and therefore better spent than cash. Sewing to save money supported middle-class values of feminine thrift and provided a way for women to influence the household budget without earning a wage.²⁸ Women's magazines that offered fashion and sewing advice were quick to recognize that their mostly middle-class readers often sewed to stretch household budgets and editors portrayed economy as a virtue and not a sacrifice. If thrift was appreciated in middle-class households, it was a necessity for working-class women. They were the least able to afford dressmakers and the most likely to continue to sew once ready-mades were prevalent. For the average domestic worker earning \$264 a year who read the 1902 Sears catalog, whether to order the dress or the fabric seemed a straightforward decision.²⁹

Progressive-era social workers believed in this logic and often predicated their policies on the assumption that working-class women would sew much of their family's clothing. A survey published in 1920 determined that in order to maintain a "minimum standard of health and decency," a worker's wife would need to sew a significant proportion of clothing for herself and her hypothetical three children, including one apron, ten cotton dresses, one wool dress, and three cotton blouses a year.³⁰ Her husband's clothing would be primarily store-bought.

In fact, many working women did sew some or all of their clothing. A study by the National Consumer's League of working women in New York City, published in 1911 but undertaken two years earlier, sheds light on the difference it made for working women to be able to make at least some of their clothing.

American-born Emily Clement, an unskilled envelope-machine operative earning \$6 a week, made all of her clothes and some of her sister's. She was able to make a "stylishly cut and becoming" three-piece suit for \$5.20, about half of what an inexpensive ready-made suit might cost.³¹ Corset operative Katia Markelov earned \$10 a week in good times but much less when the season was slack. She could afford to buy books and opera tickets by "making her own waists" as well as doing her own laundry.³² A Mrs. Green, a widow who worked in a New York department store as a skilled corset fitter for the high salary of \$12 a week, used her own skills to dress well at little expense. A National Consumer's League writer noted that "Mrs. Green seemed extravagantly dressed; she said, however, that she continued to have effective waists and hats by making and trimming them herself, and by purchasing materials with care at sales."³³

As the example of Mrs. Green demonstrates, working women had to be resourceful in finding affordable material. Women on the Lower East Side bought bargains from peddlers or used remnants. Jewel Jimana Woods, an African American woman supporting a disabled husband and five children in Colorado Springs in the 1920s, often received fabric from her daughter's teacher.³⁴ Many rural families bleached the cotton sacks that had contained animal feed or flour. By the 1940s, feed and flour companies produced the sacks with attractive patterns. Still, finding affordable sewing materials could be a challenge. A large-scale survey published by the Department of Agriculture in 1927 found that the lower the household income, the more trouble women had finding materials and patterns.³⁵



Of course, if a woman's sewing skills were mediocre, all the patterns and materials in the world could still lead to frustration. Barbara Burman writes that "clothing which was known to be home-made was an ambivalent sign. Whilst it spoke of respectable thrift or neighbourly generosity, it was also an unwelcome badge of poverty."³⁶ A photograph from the 1910s demonstrates how observers could often discern whether clothing was home made. Her stripes do not line up; this

is in part due to the folds at the waist, but it attracts attention. With no supporting context, it is not possible to judge this woman's economic status, but the photograph is testimony to the difficulties of producing a successful dress, despite the promises of the fashion pages.³⁷ Clothing that was obviously home made could be a source of embarrassment, as it was a clear sign of a family's economic status.

That said, many women could sew very well and were not at all self conscious about the results. In fact, much home made clothing was more attractive than what was available for sale. Marjorie Durand remembered her disappointment when she found it difficult to find dresses that fit as well as her mother's creations, and Edith Kurtz recalled a cousin who waited eagerly for her homemade hand-me-downs, which were nicer than her own mother could purchase.³⁸ Both women grew up in farm families and their mothers sewed out of necessity, but instead of feeling ashamed, they enjoyed their homemade clothing.



In any case, many families did not have a choice whether or not to sew. In her study of sharecroppers' wives in Texas, Rebecca Sharpless found that "numerous people recalled their mothers making virtually every stitch of the families' clothing, with the possible exception of men's dress shirts and the families' supplies of stiff denim overalls."³⁹ One woman in that study told the U.S. Senate Committee on Industrial Relations in 1914, "I never have got a dress ready-made for myself in my life since I have been a married woman."⁴⁰ Edith Kurtz told me "I never had anything brand new."⁴¹ Because of their economic vulnerability, black women were especially pressured to sew. Jewel Jimana Woods made the family's clothing while working full time.⁴² For many women, therefore, the "choice" of whether to sew or buy was nonexistent. Clothing their families was an ongoing challenge that required significant time and effort.

Meeting Standards

For many, sewing primarily served as a way to save money. Homemakers contributed to the family economy by substituting their time, effort, and skills for cash expenditures. Women who worked for wages could supplement their earnings by making their own clothing. But home seamstresses' motivations often went beyond the purely economic. Women who sewed for themselves and their families were also engaging in a process of performance, of self-representation. Home dressmaking was an important way to literally keep up appearances in the eyes of friends, neighbors, strangers and employers. As one historian put it, "Fashion was not simply about looking good. Fashion was about being good as well."⁴³ By making their clothing, women could try to meet community standards of fashionable and respectable appearances.

The thousands of female operatives who worked in clothing factories and sweatshops could rarely afford the garments they made. Instead, they used their skills, and often fabric remnants from the industry, to make their own clothing at night or during slow periods at work. A newspaper article described a woman's purchase of a piece of normally expensive lace for 50 cents, explaining that, "pieces of fine cloth, in sizes from half a yard to several yards, are often sold at low rates."⁴⁴ A different journalist described a young woman whose family was "in genuine poverty" but to his surprise dressed so stylishly that "one who did not know East Side girls would have said, uncharitably, that the heartless young woman was spending on clothes the money needed to buy bread for her old mother and small sisters," but the mystery was soon explained:

The waist, thin and charmingly cool looking, she had made herself, buying the material from a Hester Street pushcart for 20 cents. Its "style" came from the really handsome neck arrangement, which she had made herself: she worked at neckwear, and the "boss" had allowed her to take the odds and ends from which she had fashioned the pretty thing. The skirt her brother-in-law, who "works at skirts," had made for her at odd times, and it cost, getting the material at wholesale, \$2.50. Her hat her "chum"

made at an expense of 60 cents. To the uninitiated the costume represented an outlay of \$20, at least, although she had achieved it at an expense of \$3.30, and was able to go abroad without proclaiming to the world the dire poverty at home. Her cleverness and the kindness of others had saved the proud old mother a severe humiliation.⁴⁵



A working-class woman who could make high-quality garments (or who had the good fortune to be related to a skirt-maker) could pass, at least superficially, for middle-class, sparing herself and her family the embarrassment of being poorly dressed. Another example of the skills of working women is a photograph taken in New York around 1907, showing a group of women outside the building where they worked as milliners. As would be expected of professional hatmakers, their headwear is fantastic, and their clothing – matching skirts and jackets, worn with shirtwaists – is stylish as well. Dina Goldberg Gelowitz, who worked as a milliner in Boston in the early twentieth century, cared about fashion and made much of her clothing.⁴⁶ It is very likely that the women in the photograph also created their own outfits, especially because they were trained in the clothing trade.

The same art of self-presentation was important for the many women entering the growing "pink-collar" workforce at the turn of the century, but looking presentable could be expensive. In her study of department store saleswomen, Susan Porter Benson notes the "hidden cost" of being "impeccably dressed on the job."⁴⁷ She gives the example of the same Lucy Cleaver mentioned earlier who bought twenty-four poorly made shirtwaists at less than a dollar apiece for her job as a saleswoman. These would soon fall apart, but she could not pull together the additional 50 cents for better quality blouses. While a 1909 *New York Times* article urged the new "business girl" to go to "as good a tailor or dressmaker as she can afford," the reality was that women's office jobs paid only marginally more than skilled factory labor; for example, a female typist might earn \$12 a week in 1911.⁴⁸ This gap had to be filled somehow and many women sewed in order to dress according to white-collar standards. Pattern makers and magazines advertised suit

patterns from the turn of the century through the 1930s as appropriate for "business girls."⁴⁹ A *Ladies Home Journal* reader won a prize for her essay "How I Dressed on \$100 a Year." The winner, who worked in New York City, made most of her clothes. She explained how she did the preliminary work at home and sewed the seams during visits to her parents, who owned a sewing machine.⁵⁰

This struggle to dress appropriately was experienced acutely by African Americans. The sewing skills used on the job by women who worked as domestic servants and laundresses were employed at home not only for everyday use but also to counteract criticism and abuse.⁵¹ Stephanie Shaw argues that African American families stressed the importance of decent dress, as they "hoped that extremely upright behavior would ward off dangerous attention and counteract the negative stereotypes of African Americans that were common throughout white America."⁵² E. Azalia Hackley, an African American singer and activist, wrote *The Colored Girl Beautiful*, a booklet aimed at African American women desiring professional work. In it, she admonished readers that dress was part of "race pride," noting:

On the streets and as the street cars pass our homes, colored people should give the best pictures possible of themselves, if they can not of the houses in which they live. We are a poor people but we can be quiet, clean, becomingly and fittingly dressed. We must stifle the desire to be conspicuous unless it is to be conspicuous by quietness.⁵³

Hackley suggested that her readers stick to classic designs and not follow the latest fashions, in part because "few colored women can afford to keep the pace of styles."⁵⁴ She did not write specifically of sewing, but her acknowledgement of practical as well as political decisions in dress was accurate; many African American women had to sew to make ends meet. Those who could not sew literally paid the consequences. Alice Owens Caufield and her sister, who lost their mother in 1912, strained their financial resources to buy inexpensive dresses until they had sewing classes in high school and were able to make their own clothes.⁵⁵ Jewel Jimana Woods made nearly all of her family's clothing in the 1910s and '20s, especially after her ailing husband

could no longer work.⁵⁶ Woods, who was trained as a teacher but worked as a custodian, re-used tissue paper patterns (at 35 cents, they were considered expensive) and re-made second-hand clothing. In the eyes of her daughter, Winifred Byrd, Woods succeeded in dressing her family well. Byrd remembered the matching dresses her mother made for her and her sister and claimed that she never minded wearing home-made clothing as a child.⁵⁷ Byrd's memories may be shaped by time and affection, but they may also demonstrate how some children understood the financial realities their parents faced.

Farm Culture



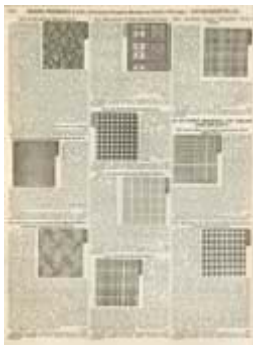
While many middle-class women made a calculated decision whether to sew or not, and urban working women could buy cheap clothing if they could not manage to sew, women who lived in isolated areas, regardless of their economic status, had fewer options. Women and girls who lived on farms consistently sewed more than urban women. Rural women's sewing was based in part on traditional gender roles, which may have run deeper in less urban areas. Many rural women worked full-time on the farm itself and rarely went to work for wages. Perhaps their household labor was more immediately visible as work, but they also had less access to ready-made clothing, making their home dressmaking that much more vital to the family economy.



Rural women often had to plan ahead and buy material on rare visits to town. Mabel Price of Oliver County, North Dakota recalled:

When you went to town you planned for a week and went for two days. We stayed overnight because Mom's cousins were there. We went with a horse and buggy. If Papa was along, we took the wagon, otherwise we took the horse and buggy. We would walk the streets, and my folks got groceries and some clothes, stuff we needed, always had to have clothes.⁵⁸

Price was a child in the 1900s and the situation was the same more than twenty years later. Edna Zimmerman, born around 1922, recalled that when her mother took a load of wheat into town after the harvest, "she'd buy herself material to sew dresses over the winter, and the groceries, like sugar and flour."⁵⁹ Margorie Durand recalled that there were few dresses available in Warden, Montana during the 1920s, and said that instead of buying clothing, all the local women sewed. Her mother made dresses, aprons, children's things, and household items such as towels.



Rural women were eager patrons of the mail-order houses. Montgomery Ward started its catalog in the 1870s and Sears, Roebuck debuted in 1893, but catalog shopping boomed after the implementation of Rural Free Delivery in 1896, when package delivery became financially sustainable.⁶⁰ Montgomery Ward, Sears, Roebuck and smaller companies sold fabric and other sewing supplies, including sewing machines, through the mail. Of course, shoppers missed the tactile quality of shopping for fabrics, but the catalogs accommodated customers by offering samples. For a penny, Sears, Roebuck shoppers could order as many swatches as they wanted – an especially helpful service given that the catalog images were black and white.⁶¹ The major catalogs also carried ready-made clothing, the selection of which increased over the decades in proportion to its prevalence in stores. For women in isolated rural areas, these catalogs were one of the few ways they could obtain ready-made dresses or sewing materials.

Women who were raised in rural areas remember shopping from catalogs. Marion Goodman grew up during the late 1910s and early 1920s on a forest station where her father was the ranger. With the nearest town fifty miles away, Mrs. Goodman's mother had little choice but to sew. She would order all of her supplies from Montgomery Ward and her husband would travel to the post office in town once a week. Margaret Durand's mother was not

nearly as isolated, but when she wanted something ready-made, such as men's overalls, she might order it from Sears, Roebuck and other catalogs when on sale.⁶²

Another source of fabric for rural women was sacks in which flour and animal feed were packaged. Lu Ann Jones addresses the history of using sack material in her study of Southern farm women. She writes that women used sacks for clothing by the late nineteenth century, but it was during the 1920s that sack material became "an emblem of poverty, a testament to ingenuity, and a badge of pride."⁶³ Before companies started to make their bags with attractive prints, in approximately 1940, women worked hard to remove company logos. A woman from North Dakota recalled that her mother was good at bleaching the bags but thought "some people had Pillsbury, probably, on their seat."⁶⁴ Marion Goodman's mother bleached flour sacks, which Goodman used to make towels for her grandmother's Christmas gifts.⁶⁵ As Jones points out, however, "For a woman to have access to a lot of 'free' bags required a certain degree of affluence" since having many sacks meant you could afford a lot of flour or had a large flock of chickens.⁶⁶ Other women used bags that were directly linked to their hard work in the fields. Alice Caufield recalled how African American sharecroppers

bleached the cotton sacks, what you put cotton in. They would bleach them and sleep on them. You know it comes about this wide [three feet] and they'd sew it up each side, so if you're going to make a sheet, you just unrip one side and hem the ends. And I know they have made sheets out of it and they have used it for tickings to fill pillows.⁶⁷

There was an extensive infrastructure aimed at teaching rural women to sew. A series of federal acts, including the Hatch Act of 1887, organized federal funds for land-grant institutions. The original intent of creating land-grant colleges was to offer practical as well as more academic studies to the working class. The fact that home economics was regularly part of their curricula demonstrates how rural culture recognized the value of women's domestic labor.⁶⁸ The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 made these programs more accessible by creating cooperative extension services to provide education to rural populations. The text of the

act stated that the federal government and the states would organize and fund "useful and practical information on subjects related to agriculture and home economics." Such initiatives suited Progressive ideas of professionalizing home work and improving family welfare through rationality and science. Women were included from the start. For example, one of the bill's namesakes, Senator Asbury Francis Lever of South Carolina, specified that lawmakers had not hitherto appreciated rural women's contributions and that this bill was a way to rectify that neglect.⁶⁹

Course offerings at rural educational institutions reflected these pragmatic ideas. The Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts recommended that "if the student expects to live in the country, she may fit herself more fully for her life there by taking some agricultural subjects or by enrolling as a student for a combination course in home economics and agriculture."⁷⁰ Students could take a college-level course that required them to spend a third of their time studying "technical" subjects such as sewing and laundry. If they did not qualify for the college course, women could also take a two-year program in which

...much time is given to sewing and its related subjects. Students learn to draft patterns, to make garments and to dress appropriately at moderate cost. In the two years, each student makes a complete set of underwear, two cooking dresses, a shirt waist, a wool skirt, a lingerie waist, an unlined silk and a tailored linen dress. She also renovates and alters an old dress.⁷¹

The Alabama Polytechnic Institute, later renamed Auburn University, offered similar courses. The dressmaking classes were held in the agricultural building, a sign of how sewing was ingrained in rural culture. Photographs from the 1920s show students sewing at machines and modeling dresses they had made. Their dresses are stylish and fit well for the straight shapes of the 1920s.



Some of the students in these courses likely expected to use their skills to run a household, but many went on to become state-employed home demonstration agents. One photograph of Auburn students is in fact labeled "Students at API preparing for Home Demonstration Work by studying methods in teaching clothing and millinery." To provide the "useful and practical information" specified in the Smith-Lever Act, college-educated male and female extension agents worked with communities and families, providing instruction as well as social activities such as clubs and picnics. The agents sought to increase farm productivity and improve home life by teaching a range of skills, including how to remove stumps from fields, fight pests, raise chickens, pickle vegetables, improve nutrition, and make clothing. In Alabama, female agents were designated as "foods and nutrition" or "clothing" experts and designed their curricula at subject-matter conferences. Judging from their annual reports, the sewing goals were quite sophisticated, including creating fabric "permanent patterns" fitted to an individual that could be used again and again "to cut other dresses which can then be made up without fitting."⁷²

The agents who taught sewing ran meetings at which women and girls helped each other make dresses. One agent described a whirlwind of a day:

At one meeting I had 25 girls and they all wanted a pattern, all of them except two wanted the dress cut. Fortunately 4 ladies came to help me. By taking the older girls and giving them the directions for cutting the dress pattern from the individual measurements, then cutting the dress, I was able to cut 25 patterns and 22 dresses in 3 hours.⁷³

Another agent described a "rally" featuring a fashion show exhibiting dresses and hats made by members of different clubs, and exhibits of extension service work included dressmaking.

