

Reflections From the Past: Early Extension Family and Consumer Science Work

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Extension work in home economics started well before the Smith Lever Act of 1914 and these are just a few of the many who blazed a trail for our profession. Note the many experiences that they brought to their work.

MARTHA VAN RENSSELAER

After fulfilling her childhood dream as preceptress (dean of women) at a female academy and elected twice for public office, Martha Van Rensselaer (1864-1932) started her Extension work in 1900 and produced her first reading (correspondence course) for farm women in 1901. While other universities were establishing courses in home economics, Cornell was involved early in Extension home economics work as Liberty Hyde Bailey and Melvil Dewey (of Dewey Decimal fame) saw it as an alternative when the university president announced, "Cooks on the university campus . . . never!" From a basement room filled with pipes and a kitchen table, Martha had over 5,000 women on her mailing list six months after she started her series. Her work led to one of the first pedometric studies of homemaker's steps. She worked until 1932, during which time she was the first New York state 4-H leader, fourth president of AHEA and served under Hoover and Roosevelt on several U.S. government committees. She was sent to Belgium to conduct programs for homemakers for a short time after World War I. She edited a children's magazine and was a columnist of a national women's magazine. As Extension supervisor, she was one of the first to allow an extension educator to retain her job after she was married. She received a Rockefeller grant for one of the first children's play laboratories, became a director of home economics (later Human Ecology) and one of the first women faculty at Cornell. She received an honorary doctorate and was sited one of 12 Greatest Women in the U.S. in 1923. A building was named in her honor in 1932.

ELLA AGNEW

Many of the first home demonstration agents were in the South. Ella Agnew (1871-1958), was noted as the first woman employed by the USDA for field service in home demonstration work. She developed the first handbook for county home demonstration agents and organized the "tomato clubs" which evolved into 4-H and Extension homemakers organizations. In 1926, she became the first woman awarded the VPI (Virginia Polytechnic Institute) Certificate of Merit. Before the turn of the century and her work in Extension, she spent five years in South Africa as secretary-treasurer for the Huguenot Seminary at Paarl and later as principal of the Amajuba Seminary in the Transvaal. After she returned to the U.S., she was involved with the YWCA in North Carolina, Kentucky, Ohio, Oklahoma and New York. Later in life, she was the editor of the "Southern Planter" a farm magazine published in Richmond and from 1931 to 1943 was in charge of women's activities under the WPA in Virginia. Agnew received a doctorate of law degree from the College of William and Mary. A building was named in her honor.

MARIE SAMUELLE CROMER

Marie Samuella Cromer (1882-1964) a teacher in Aiken County, South Carolina, started tomato clubs for the girls (women were included in many canning efforts), with the assistance of Seaman Knapp and O.B. Martin. She received an appointment as a collaborator at an annual salary of one dollar on August 15, 1910. In 1911 in an arrangement with Winthrop College and USDA, her salary was \$1200 for two months (summer) work. She resigned a year and a half later, deciding to marry the superintendent of schools, who was in charge of the corn clubs for boys. Her legacy includes records of her philosophies of education and initiating college scholarships to those who achieved excellence. She also found time for professional improvement in New England and travel to USDA in Washington, D.C. A thesis was written about her life by Margaret Anne Dickert, University of South Carolina in 1988.

MIGNON QUAW

In 1917, Mignon Quaw, a graduate of Columbia University, was hired as a recreation specialist and served as an assistant state home demonstration leader in Montana until the early 1920s. She was noted as one who put on many skits and pageants and wrote many Extension publications. She is credited with developing award winning exhibits, writing the first Extension play and produced two silent films with USDA in the early 1920s (pointing out the need for water and kitchen equipment in the home and illustrating the woman's voice in making community decisions.) She was noted for her work writing rhymes and songs expressing educational concepts so that people in rural communities could remember them. More of her accomplishments [are available online](#).

MARY ETHEL CRESWELL

Mary Ethel Creswell (1879-1960) was a field agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture moving from Georgia to Washington D.C. and credited with coining the term, "home demonstration." She was the first woman to receive a bachelor's degree from the University of Georgia and attended the University of Chicago during the summer months, teaching in public schools the rest of the year. In 1949, she received the first alumni service award given to women and served as president of the University of Georgia chapter of Phi Kappa Phi. A dormitory was named in her honor and a special collection of her letters, photographs and printed material may be found in the Hargrett Library.

These are just a few of the many early Extension family and consumer science agents. If you know of one of the early pioneers, please [e-mail Jan Scholl](#) and we will include it with our history.