8-2-2021

Fashion in Focus: Women and Textiles in Rural America, 1920-1959

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FASHION IN FOCUS: WOMEN AND TEXTILES IN RURAL AMERICA, 1920-1959

A Thesis

Presented to the

Graduate Faculty of the History Department

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Kearney

By

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May 2021

THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History, University of Nebraska at Kearney.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document is not an end but rather the beginning of many future research projects. Having worked on it for almost two years, I can say that it would not have been possible without the help and support of so many people in my life. First, I would like to thank the University of Nebraska at Kearney History Department faculty and staff at large for the support and assistance they have given me since my first semester as an undergraduate student. I want to give a special thanks to Dr. James Rohrer who encouraged me to get my history degree rather than continuing to half-heartedly get a teaching degree and to Dr. Linda Van Ingen whose feedback on my research was invaluable in the later stages of revision. Thank you, Amber Alexander, for helping me navigate the red tape of academia and for offering me invaluable wisdom whenever I needed it. Thank you, April White for your support and for being willing to brainstorm with me so often. I also want to acknowledge the mentorship and support that I received from my thesis committee, Dr. David Vail, Dr. Torsten Homberger, and Laurinda Weisse. Thank you for answering all the random questions I had, falling down research rabbit holes with me, and for the many, many book suggestions that drained my monthly fun-money budget. Thank you, Dr. Sandra Loughrin, Brandon Loughrin, and Dr. Suzanne Maughan for also supporting me personally and finding me random employment on campus so I could keep working on my thesis. Thank you to the anonymous woman at a garage sale who gifted me with the magazines that first showed me the true value of these pieces of material culture as alternative sources, many of which are featured in this work. Thank you to the Buffalo County Historical Society and the Trails and Rails Museum in Kearney. Thank you to the Nebraska Prairie Museum in Holdrege. Thank you to my late grandmother, Joan Langemeier for being the epitome of strong rural womanhood in my childhood, for making me cookies, and for letting me steal your fancy tablecloths to use for dress-up. Thank you to my aunt Judy Regan for instilling in me an interest in needlecraft from a young age and giving me opportunities to develop this appreciation further. Thank you to the many people that I did not list specifically here, as to list all of those who helped me and supported me would require a document even longer than this one. Finally, the biggest thank you to my thesis advisor Dr. Nathan Tye for putting up with my procrastination, supporting my overly ambitious planning attempts that inevitably had to be rethought, and for taking a chance on me and mentoring me through this process. I could not have done it without your encouragement and support.

Abstract

This thesis examines the textile work and related fashion ephemera and attitudes of rural women in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. It considers rural women from the 1920s through the 1950s and examines their lives and their relationship with textiles and, by extension, fashion. Textiles and related ephemera, when properly utilized, provide sources for historical analysis within broader historical research. Through an examination of the developments in early to mid-twentieth century economic, material culture, and domestic spheres, the importance of clothing analysis and the value of textile work as a historical source material proves significant. In many ways, the development of domestic culture and changes in material consumption in consumerism can be tracked through the examination of textile works and related fashion trends. I examine the expectations for American women in the early 20th century as viewed through analysis of unconventional sources and then use textile work and fashion changes to reflect the differences between societal ideals and the reality of life for these women. Through an examination of quilting, paper ephemera such as fashion books, sewing patterns, and magazines, and societal attitudes toward appearance I discuss the nature of rural American womanhood. While a relatively new field of study, fashion and textile history provides a valuable source of information about the changes in society reflected within the structure and shape of the garments being worn.

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Introduction

All the tired women/ Who sewed their lives away/ Speak in my deft fingers/

As I sew to-day.[1]

The first time I remember seeing someone sew, I was 5 years old. I stood in the center of Aunt Judy's sewing room on a small stool while she pinned pieces of fabric together on my body. I remember looking down despite the reprimands to keep my head up. I was so excited. She was making a new outfit just for me. It was a long, floral skirt with a ruffle at the bottom and an overdress of solid pale pink. She had even found some buttons shaped like roses for the front of the overdress! I am sure I saw my grandmother patch my father's pants and my aunts sew buttons back on my brother's shirts. However, I had never seen someone make an entire garment before this one. This was my first experience with a substantial example of rural women and their connection to textile work.

Since that day, I have been fascinated by women's textile work. I learned to sew. I learned to knit. I learned to cross stitch. I learned about crochet and utterly failed at mastering the actual art. I read tales of women who created magic with fabric and thread and yarn. I became enamored with all the ways women had mastered to create clothing and home items from textiles with both functionality and purpose. Later, a fascination

[1] Hazel Hall, "Instruction," in *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, ed. John Witte (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2000), 66.

developed with not only the work the women of the past created but also the lives they lived. I stood amazed at the power textile work had to provide those answers.

The goal of this thesis is to examine the changing lives of rural women in America between 1920 and 1950. This analysis of the changing lives or rural women use the guide of textile work and fashion as mainstays of the rural woman's experience. Because textile work was central to the lives of women in the early 20th century. It reflected changes in social norms and political structures.life in As agricultural historian Debra A. Reid argues in her 2012 article, "Tangible Agricultural History: An Artifact's-Eye View of the Field," just examining the paper documents does not allow for a complete understanding of the lives of people in the past.[2] This is notably true regarding rural populations. I chose to examine this reflection of life onto labor arts for several reasons. First, primary source material is widely available in the rural Great Plains region. Second, my interest in historical textiles resulted in the accumulation of several sets of primary source papers and books from the period that have a focus on fashion and textiles with rural women as the primary readership demographic. Finally, as a rural woman involved in textile arts I have both personal experience and interest in the place of textile work in rural women's history.

Defining rural women is a difficult task. Rural women come in all variety of shapes and sizes, races, ethnicities, socio-economic classes, and religions. They come from all regions of the United States. When considering the appropriate definition of a

[2] Debra A. Reid, "Tanglible Agricultural History: An Artifact's-Eye View of the Field," Agricultural History 86, no. 3 (2012): 60.

rural woman, I first looked to my own understanding of this group. I grew up in a quintessential rural environment. My father, grandmother, and I lived in a small farming town in Nebraska where the closest supermarket was a half hour drive. Most families had been settled there for generations. Time seemed to pass more slowly within our community. My grandmother and aunts were the first examples I had of rural women. They were dutiful in maintaining the family and accomplished in the domestic arts, but they also all worked outside of the home and believed in education for young women. They were of an older generation, held in temporal place by their environment. When I think of rural women, I think of them. I also think of the mothers and grandmothers of my childhood classmates. The issue, however, with basing my definition of rural women on personal experiences is that this is a too narrow understanding of the term. First, my personal perspective is based entirely in Great Plains regional understandings of what is and is not rural. Second, my experiences are primarily with rural communities that are relatively racially, politically, and economically homogenous. While I am mixed race, most of the people I believe exemplify my personal experiences with rural life have been white as well as Christian, heterosexual, and lower-middle class or working-class.

The definition of rural is multifaceted.[3] While the word conjures images of wide-open spaces, small towns, and farms, finding ways to distinguish rural from urban can be a conundrum for researchers. This approach to the definition leaves much to be desired. There are many places in the United States I characterize as rural though they could also

[3] John Cromartie and Shawn Bucholtz, "Defining the "Rural" in Rural America," Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Revised August 2019. https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2008/june/defining-the-rural-in-rural-america/

be considered an urban area as a town or small city. To develop a more comprehensive definition of the rural woman I must first define what will be considered rural. This needs to be grounded in the understanding of rural had by the women discussed here. Defining the idea of rurality is difficult. Scholars, lawmakers, and citizens continually grapple with the concept. The understanding modern Americans have of what is and is not rural is not the same as it was ten or twenty years ago. As society is connected further with the assistance of improved transportation infrastructure and increasingly efficient communications options, the line between urban and rural blurred. However, the line between rural and urban is difficult to pinpoint at the best of times. While societal theories tend to see rural and urban as dichotomous, this approach disregards the changing nature of society as well as the site-specific differences seen in different areas of the country. This approach also ignores the importance of local perspectives on the designation of rurality. For example, Omaha might be considered urban to people who live in small towns around Nebraska and even to some of the people who live in Omaha. However, people in New York City might look at Omaha and see it as rural. Some in Omaha might also identify their city as rural due to differing perspectives on the ideal of rural. Further, these perspectives have shifted over time. While the nature of rural life was its association with agriculture, changes in demographics, economics, and globalization mean that agriculture can no longer be the mark by which rurality is defined.[6]

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[6] Carolyn E. Sachs, *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture, and Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3-4.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define rural women as women who either self-identify as rural or who live in agriculturally focused communities with populations smaller than 300,000 people. I have chosen this number as it was the reported population of Omaha, Nebraska in 1950.[7] Omaha, as discussed earlier, is one of those cities that straddles the line of metropolitan and rural due to the nature of its location. It is located in an area that is generally considered rural by the inhabitants and visitors while being a large city with many Fortune 500 companies and other markers of an urban center. I feel that populations below this number that are closely tied to agriculture can safely be considered rural for the purposes of this thesis.

Hazel Hall, the poet whose work on the theme of sewing is quoted at the beginning of each chapter, was not a rural woman as defined above. She was born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1886 and her family moved to Portland, Oregon when she was young.[8] After an illness at the age of twelve she was confined to a wheelchair. As a result, she spent most of her life in a second-floor room of her family's home. She observed the world outside but was never truly a part of it. She took in needlework in order to earn money for her family and when her eyes became tired of that work, she wrote poems to sell to papers and magazines.[9] Her poems were not just domestic observations. They spoke to the heart of American womanhood and its connection to

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[7] "Omaha Metro Area Population 1950-2021," Macrotrends, Macrotrends LLC, Accessed June 2, 2021. https://www.macrotrends.net/cities/23090/omaha/population

[8] John Witte, introduction to *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, ed. John Witte (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2000), xvi.

[9] John Witte, introduction to *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, ed. John Witte (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2000), xvii.

textiles and textile work. While Hall was able to find some freedom in her textile work, she did not deny the weariness felt by women who spent their lives sewing, knitting, and embroidering for their families. Her work encapsulates the spirit of the rural woman and her connection to textiles and the joy and burden that came with it.

It was remarked by the historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich that well-behaved women do not make history.[10] This sentiment is not entirely correct in its implications. While well-behaved women and women's work have often been an overlooked historical narrative, this is not because women and their activities were not worth exploration. In fact, women's work has long been the backbone of communities and societal structure. Its lack of inclusion in the historical record is more indicative of the systematic devaluation of this work by the patriarchal structures that build up scholarly communities than any lack of value in this information. The women who are discussed in mainstream history, as Ulrich contends, are most often those who have committed infractions against the patriarchal norms and hierarchies of their communities. Examples of such women include Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Madame C.J. Walker, and Amelia Earhart. These gaps are also present in the archival collections on women's history. There is a tendency to collect records and objects that belong to women who sharply deviate from some social norm and to ignore women who remain within their societally assigned wheelhouse. This structural devaluation is not just present in the historical narrative presented by white, male scholars. Historically, many women viewed their work and burdens as unnecessary

[10] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 20.

to record. Because of this those women that did record their daily life and activities would sometimes overlook their textile work. It was such a constant presence in their lives that they did not conceive of a world where they would need to mention it for it to be understood to have been happening. The work of women and their domestic behaviors present information about the culture they helped to form and the society in which they developed. Textiles and related fields are one such area of purported women's work that provide a wide variety of data concerning the social and political environment and its evolution in history. As such, societal standards for women and their domestic behaviors, especially those involving textiles, provide valuable information on the state of the political and cultural landscapes in which people in the United States and other nations have lived. This is especially true of rural women and their domestic affairs and behaviors.

Elizabeth Wayland Barber, expert scholar in the fields of archeology, textiles, linguistics, and folkdance, notes in her book *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years*, "The Industrial Revolution has moved basic textile work out of the home [. . .]It is a rare person in our cities who has ever spun thread or woven cloth [. . .] although [. . .] many women still sew. As a result, most of us are unaware of how time-consuming the task of making the cloth for a family used to be."[11] Though Barber's book focuses on the textile work associated with the making of thread and cloth, her analysis holds true of many needlecrafts and textile arts. While many women still sew, knit, crochet, and cross stitch,

[11] Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), 30.

the understanding of the time and effort necessary to create textile work is lost to the masses. This has impacted the appreciation and consideration historians have for textile work and the resulting fruits of this labor. "Past scholars have generally dismissed the history of easily perishable commodities like cloth as unreconstructable, on the ground that there is no evidence," notes Barber, "Women's work consisted largely of making perishables - especially food and clothing."[12] Important sections of women's history are thus overlooked because the physical objects that record it are lost.

There is a strong body of research on the topic of the history of the American rural woman. John Mack Faragher, in his article "History From the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," asserts that, "until well into the 20th century, the American rural farm woman constituted a majority of the female population [. . .].[13] However, Faragher also argues that this population has also been among the most underrepresented in discussions of American history.[14] Many women during the 19th and early 20th century were illiterate or only had basic literacy skills.[15] This means that traditional primary source documents often do not exist or are extremely limited in the information they can provide. Documents are not the only source of information on the lives of rural women in America. In order to fill the silences left in the historical record where primary source documentation could have guided historians, one must instead

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[12] Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), 286.
[13] John Mack Faragher, "History From the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly 33*, no. 5 (1981): 537.
[14] John Mack Faragher, "History From the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly 33*, no. 5 (1981): 537.
[15] John Mack Faragher, "History From the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly 33*, no. 5 (1981): 537.

consider a wider variety of alternate sources and documents to piece together their world. In this case the context and use of material culture artifacts becomes a more important source of information than an understanding of the general history of the object. For example, an embroidered handkerchief is more important for its embroidered design and apparent use by its owner than for its general representation of the role of handkerchiefs in a historical period. This thesis explores some of the alternative sources related to textiles and fashion for information on the lives and perspectives of rural American women in the first half of the 20th century, discussing not only the history of the objects being used as sources but also how they fit into the lives of rural women and how they can fill in the context of life in the past for researchers of the present.

Following the Revolutionary War in America, the development of industry and strengthening of state power meant that men left the household to assume new roles associated with economic and political spheres. Women became connected with the idea of the moral domestic sphere present within the home. This distinction between public and private spheres began to change the understanding of family in America. The idea of family began to be separated into a refuge from the public spheres of life such as work and politics despite the impossibility of idealized complete separation of public and private life. There is a similar disconnect between the reality of rural life and the public understanding of rural life. Agrarianism is the belief in the superiority, moral and economic, of farming over all other industries. From this philosophy emerged the belief that people associated with farms and rural life are morally superior bedrocks of society. This model of thought is highly ingrained into the American consciousness and heavily

tied to the idea of white, European-American identity as well. Thomas Jefferson believed in the superiority of America over Europe in part because the citizens of America had the opportunity to largely be farmers. He believed that the people of America need never suffer from poverty because they had ample land to cultivate and because the common man would labor on these farms and form the backbone of society. Jefferson supported these beliefs with his own observations and enjoyment of overseeing agricultural activities and studying nature on his personal plantation.[21] Despite these claims, Jefferson himself could not maintain his lifestyle without the ownership of vast landholdings and the use of enslaved peoples as laborers. Those living in rural communities historically experienced the same hardships that faced contemporaneous urban inhabitants, as well as its fair share of unique barriers. Further, the stereotype of what rural life entails is often quite different from the reality of the lives led by farmers and other rural inhabitants. Agrarian families throughout American history have struggled with that same disconnect between the agrarian ideal and their lived realities.

Deborah Fink conducted a study of farming communities in her book *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940,* where she considers the lives and perspectives of rural women.[22] In this study, Fink argues that agrarianism is a highly gendered philosophy.[23] Different ideals are projected onto men and women under this

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[21] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 6-15.
[22] See Also: Jenny Barker Devine's *On Behalf of the Family Farm: Iowa Farm Women's Activism since 1945.*
[23] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 12.

philosophy. European-Americans of all genders have, at different times, appropriated the gendered ideals associated with agrarianism for their own purposes. These ideals include the self-sufficient and hard-working nature of rural communities as well as their moral superiority and general neighborliness.[24] Connecting motherhood, agricultural lifestyles, and moral superiority was not uncommon for rural women.[25] These "pioneers" claimed to have superior farming ability along with their dedication to the belief of agrarian moral superiority. Farming, in actuality, is highly complicated and not an inborn skill that can be exercised without training and hard-won experience.[27] The idea of the "family farm" captured the American imagination and supported the further indoctrination of agrarianism into the public consciousness.[28] It invoked the idea of the hard-working male farmer with his morally upstanding and devoted wife and the family they created that also served as a cheerful means of production for their economic betterment. The embrace of agrarian ideals encouraged the belief that rural women did not face the same evils that urban women did was encouraged.[29] The agrarian ideal asserted that women's greatest fulfillment in life was found in bending to the agrarian model. By this logic, the way to cure rural women of any dissatisfaction with their lives was to encourage them to lean

[24] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 11.
[25] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 12.
[27] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 19.
[28] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 28.
[29] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 29.

further into the agrarian lifestyle rather than have them seek out a different lifestyle or attempt to exert change on the patriarchal hierarchy of rural communities.

Besides its attachment to race and gender projections, agrarianism also lent itself to class idealism. Farm women interviewed by Fink in Boone County, Nebraska in the 1980s and 1990s identified rural communities as classless utopias where all people were willing to help their neighbors and made their way through personal hard work.[30] Prosperity and failure were seen as the fault of the individual and their determination or lack there-of. Fink reported that her interviewees repeated an understanding that everyone was in the same situation and not much better or worse than anyone else. However, they also made it clear that they knew when someone was not "like them" in material means.[31] The hypocrisy of this rural perspective lives on into the present. From personal experience and from observing other rural communities around my own as a child I have received data to support the argument that rural communities are politicized and hierarchal. A family or set of families will maintain power within the community for generations. They will keep outsiders from gaining prominence within the community and sometimes work to actively ostracize "new blood." In my hometown in rural eastern Nebraska, my family is still considered to be apart from the main community as we have only been living there for three or four generations. Outsiders are not just people who are new to town in these insolated communities. The role of outsider is also extended to

[30] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 47.
[31] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 48.

those who deviate from the accepted norms of the community. This may include getting a divorce or not attending religious services, as is also the case with my own family. It could also include those people who have not shown enough enthusiasm in things such as town sporting events or farming culture. Those deemed outsiders may find it increasingly difficult to network for either personal social purposes or for economic reasons. They may also be subjected to increased scrutiny and suspicion by their fellow townsfolk. The idea that rural communities live a life without class consciousness is laughable in its falsity. In fact, it might be said that rural communities live in a state of hyper-awareness of the financial status and social capital of the people within their community. There is almost an expectation that everyone in the community will know the "worth" of everyone else, both socially and economically. Classism in rural communities is subtle but constant, much as these communities would prefer to believe the myth of agrarian classlessness and rural moral superiority.

Rural women, both historically and contemporarily, experience a number of barriers that prevent them from sharing their history and telling stories of their own experiences to the world.[32] Rural women experience hardships that are unique to them and may believe that revisiting these experiences will be humiliating for not only themselves but their families and communities. A 1919 national survey of farm women reported that the conditions many faced on a daily basis would have provoked a walkout

[32] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), xix.

among industrial workers.[33] Deborah Fink notes that her fieldwork in agrarian communities supports the idea that women are less inclined to discuss the past than men. However, people of all genders showed Fink an inclination to remember the past selectively.[34] They would gloss over that which they could not accept as a part of their past and would instead construct a more comfortable history to share with their families and communities. This is important to consider when examining textile work done by rural American women. The work they did in the moment may be able to tell historians more accurately about the mental and emotional conditions experienced while working on that item than the person's own recollections. Historians must examine the connections between the material past and the personal narratives shared by the people of the past in order to flesh out the truth of the past and the experiences that gave it shape for the individual and for the broader community.

In contrast to the sanitized recollections of adults are the youth columns of the *Nebraska Farmer* magazine.[35] This column provided an outlet for rural youth to express their trials and successes with others who might understand. This column, according to research by Kylie Kinley, ran for over 50 years and published reportedly uncensored letters describing their everyday lives in raw detail. Farm children experienced immense pressure to work side by side with their adult counterparts on the farm and to surpass

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[33] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 1.
[34] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), xviii.
[35] Kylie Kinley, "Growing Up on the Farm: Nebraska Farmer Youth Pages 1904-1965," *Nebraska History 90* (2009): 171.

their parents. The farm children were urged to become more educated than their parents while also working just as hard on the farm, shouldering multiple responsibilities full time. Horrible stories of accidental deaths and injury were mixed in with joyful stories of picnics and school days.[36] In some ways it seemed that the ugly parts of everyday farm life were more routine than the bright or neutral instances of their lives.

Fink described the arrival in Nebraska by women homesteaders as an introduction to a bleakness they had never known before. As she recalls, "My mother once described my grandfather's birth in a sod house and his farm child-hood by asking me to imagine living in a place without beauty, without diversion, without light, with only work to fill out each day."[38] Textiles were one way by which rural women were able to bring different emotions and worldly enjoyment into their homes. This grim environment many endured affected the patterns and colors chosen for their textile work as they sought to bring color and hope to their often-bleak circumstances.

Fink also notes that women seemed more reluctant to make broad generalizations about their experiences than the men with whom they were interviewed.[39] They saw their experiences as rural women as exceptions to the lifestyle rather than a common experience felt by other women. This is interesting, it points to a trend of women seeing their stories as unimportant to the historical narrative precisely because they see them as

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[36] Kylie Kinley, "Growing Up on the Farm: Nebraska Farmer Youth Pages 1904-1965," *Nebraska History 90* (2009): 172.
[38] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 33.
[39] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), xx.

distinct from other women in similar situations. They could perceive a disconnect between the lives they live and the lives of the people they share an identity with and thus believe their experiences may confuse the understanding of life in their community. Women living in agrarian communities could support the agrarian value of hard work and the nuclear family while experiencing hardships related to these lifestyles.

Women and their children were the backbone of farm labor prior to World War II. Women in rural agrarian communities had only their immediate family and their work to fill their time. Most women in history married at some point in their life. There were some single women who managed homesteads in the 19th century, but they often worked to prove-up their investment before selling the homestead and using the money to improve their marriage prospects. Women, before the 20th century, generally participated in rural society in terms of their roles within the family.[44] They created networks between families and connected the individual nuclei of the rural families to one another, forming the community proper. While children of a certain age could assist in some of the work, more children also meant more work to be had to keep the family and the farm running on its base level.

The history of fashion and clothing provides data for historical research and analysis, especially in areas of material culture, economic change, and private life as it reflects these areas of life and culture in a way that documents and other sources do not

[44] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 2-6.

allow.[45] This can be seen all around the world from rural America to urban Japan. Dr. Reem El Mutwalli, head of the Zay Initiative, which focuses on the preservation of Arab dress, summarized the importance of clothing in history.

> Fashion is an expression of a society's character and its history. It indicates aspects of its culture and its heritage and many prevailing attitudes. Details of embroidery, color, and line can reflect identity and the narratives of different people. When looking at the traditional costume, one does not only see its beauty, but one can read the area it once belonged to, summarizing geographic, economic, historic, cultural, religious, as well as individual influences.[46]

Clothing and ideology are closely related. Facets of sociopolitical and economic life come together in clothing to reflect the individual as well as the collective in dress. By examining the similarities in the clothing worn by a population, one can better understand the shared values and the community shaping that has been done. Further, any deviations from dress norms within a society can also reflect not only the differences within a community but also the similarities still present despite a lack of adherence to uniformity. Consider the clothing you might associate with a rebellious teenager. There are a few items that come to mind, associated with cinematic representations of American teen rebellion: leather jackets, ripped jeans, boldly printed shirts.

In America, unlike nations with strong systems of clothing uniformity such as Japan, the understanding of the expected form of dress is heavily dependent on location. Fashion may have directed the trends, but personal interests and availability are reflected in how people made fashion, often through use of textile works, their own. Fashions

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[45] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: new England inisterial Literature, 1668-1735," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 20.
[46] Dr. Reem El Mutwalli, "The Art of Arab Dress with Dr. Reem El Mutwalli," Dressed: The History of Fashion (Oct. 27, 2020).

trends reflect cultural ideals.[48] Everyday dress is a tangible symbol of a culture, its needs, and its repetitive experiences. Americans of different areas understand how their own region expects people to dress and they may conform or deviate from that general format as they please for the most part. They likely also maintain an understanding of how other regions dress in comparison with their own dress norms. In the early 20th century, American fashions had more set uniformity. For example, there was the general expectation that women would regularly wear hats when going out. However, the guidelines of American uniformity were still subject to regional adjustments and personal tastes. While the relationship between the internal state of a person and how they dress is not straightforward or easy to understand, there is a relationship between the two concepts.

Victorian culture valued both the ideas of domesticity and gentility as well as the material refinement that was seen as a sign of societal progress. However, the ideas of domesticity and gentility were often at odds in the Victorian home. The members of the developing middle-class had to negotiate this division of ideal and reality in their daily public lives and their private social consumption. Gentility is the idea of an international standard of personal excellence that is shown through symbols, often material in nature.[50] The trappings of gentility in the Victorian home could range from the type of wallpaper chosen to the material of an imported tea set. The power of this idea was immense

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[48] Brian J. McVeigh, *Wearing Ideology: State, Schooling, and Self-Presentation in Japan* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 2-3.

[50] Katherine Grier, *Culture & Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), vii-viii.

because its focus was on the possibilities of life rather than just the current reality. The influence of gentility lingered into the 20th century, observed in the standards for manners and taste that several generations were taught to abide. The focus of gentility was on fashion and self-presentation. Domesticity worked to temper the impulses of gentility. In the domestic ideal, the middle-class family was above making its identity through purchased goods. The divergence of ideal and reality between these two values was confusing to the middle-class but did not stop them from consuming products attached to the idea of gentility nor did it stop them from viewing their identities as detached from their consumption at the same time.[51] This led to debate over what amount of consumption and what products were considered in good taste for a certain class of family to own and display. Textiles and fashion were included in these debates over what was acceptable in the Victorian ideal and what the reality of Victorian life should be, both in public and in private. In many ways this is still a debate in American homes, both rural and urban.

The 1910s were a period of extreme wealth and exuberant displays.[52] Homes, primarily those of the white middle and upper classes, were decorated in the finest materials available to show off the wealth and status of their owners. Wealthy women wore luxurious garments that, while a different silhouette than earlier fashions, verged on the extreme in many of the same ways as the 1880s and 1890s. Sleeves were exaggerated and the body was shaped with a special corset to fit the trendy look of the decade. The

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[51] Katherine Grier, *Culture & Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), ix.
[52] Amy de la Haye & Valerie Mendes, *Fashion Since* 1900 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 10.

way people dressed signified their ages, status in society, and wealth. Often, a keen eye could discern the marital status of a person by their clothing. Fashion was the noose by which the wealthy hung themselves and the poor scrambled to approximate them as best they could. Menswear was not held to the same constant of "decorative fluctuations."[53] Instead, men were encouraged to dress finely but in a way that expressed their belief in tradition and understated style. At this time, those who followed the fashion world saw Paris as the center of fashionable life. Americans wanted to emulate the elegance they saw in European capitals. This meant that Parisian designers had an international audience begging for inspiration. Leisure was beginning to permeate the lives of the middle class as well as some of the poorer people in the United States, allowing for more time to be spent on what might be considered frivolous pastimes. One such pastime was following fashion trends in magazines. Entrepreneurs also worked to bring youth, especially young women, into commercialized recreation by encouraging fancy dress and provocative public behavior.[55] This created new revenue streams as well as promoting a growing consumer base that would continue to broaden through the decades until women became the target audience for major advertising campaigns as the leaders in consumption within their families.

Developments in early to mid-20th century economic, material culture, and domestic life underscore the importance of clothing to historical studies. The end of World War I brought an economic boom to urban America as the nations of Europe

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[53] Amy de la Haye & Valerie Mendes, *Fashion Since* 1900 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 10.
[55] Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1986), 56- 57.

struggled to rebuild while America's production infrastructure remained intact.[56] This influx of wealth created a consumer boom that effected all areas of society, especially how people dressed. In contrast to urban areas, the Midwest experienced an agricultural depression following the end of World War I. The differences between urban and rural experiences during the 1920s can be seen within the textile work of the period. When the Great Depression hit the United States people once again changed their way of life, a fact demonstrated by clothing and consumption patterns. The face of fashion and material consumption changed during World War II from its 1920s and Great Depression forebearers. The American people, particularly women, adjusted their lives and modes of dress to work within the rationing system. Some had already experienced great changes in these areas during the Great Depression. However, a pushback against the style and fashion restrictions and developments of the war years and rationing emerged following World War II.

The field of textile and fashion history is relatively young as a form of historical exploration. On the surface it may seem a straightforward area of study where what is seen is th bulk of the information available. In fact, fashion and textile history provides a valuable source of information about the changes in society reflected within the structure and shape of the garments being worn. Fashion and textile can also be used to understand shifting class structures and markers. While rural communities, like those studied by Fink, tend to view themselves as without strict social classes, there are clear

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[56] David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 340.

markers of hierarchy and socio-economic class differences that go unacknowledged within the community but that direct the interactions of the rural communities as a whole.

While any period of time would well illustrate the uses of textile and fashion examination in historical analysis, the focus of this thesis is the interwar period from the 1920s through the 1940s as well as the beginnings of the 1950s. This period is one of the most conspicuous in its changing social norms and fast developing fashion trends. Further, the examination of post-World War I and World War II largesse as well as the understanding of rationing that occurred during the Great Depression and World War II provides striking comparisons and potential patterns of change in regard to material culture.[57] In order to understand the decadence of the 1920s, it is necessary to first consider the society from which it developed as well as the historical developments that shaped the changes within this society. Rural communities were not cut off from the urban societal norms nor where they sheltered from the impact of the war in Europe either as communities or individuals. Textiles serve as both a form of restraint by society on the individual as well as a form of free expression. Through an examination of textile and textile related items from each decade in the first half of the 20th century, the relationship between rural woman and textiles can be determined and its intrinsic value in historical analysis observed.

[57] See also Lizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* and *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-War America*.

In the early 20th century, urban working-class women carved out spheres of personal amusement for themselves.[58] It stands to reason that their rural counterparts were doing much the same within their own communities and with their own resources for entertainment. Leisure activity reflects life separate from work.[59] The choices made about leisure activity reflect the values and interests of women when allowed autonomous control over a section of their lives. Industrialization led to greater differentiation between men and women's work by reinforcing further the spheres of influence assigned to the different genders.[60] While women were experimenting with the ability to use their limited financial freedom on entertainment, they were still separate from those amusements co-opted by the working-class men within their communities. Rural women had even less access to these leisure activities given the urban nature of many leisure attractions during this time.

Changes in both underwear and outerwear allowed for ease of activity in public life.[61] The corset gave way to newer types of foundational garments that allowed greater flexibility and movement. This was mirrored by a change to outer garments that were less cumbersome and allowed for greater physical activity and ease of dressing, particularly for the young woman without servants or family members to help them dress each day.

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[58] Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1986), 3.
[59] Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1986), 4.
[60] Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1986), 7.
[61] Amy de la Haye & Valerie Mendes, *Fashion Since* 1900 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 55.

French *Vogue* began publication in 1921, an offshoot of the American *Vogue* in publication since December 1892, allowing for the further democratization of fashion as these magazines made it even easier for working class women and rural women to access the fashion standards to which Europe and the urban centers paid homage in their own trends. It was in part due to this democratization of global fashion trends that the so-called "Flapper" movement began in the United States. This look was known as the *jeune fille* or *garçonne* look.[62] This look promoted a boyish, youthful figure and in many ways revolutionized the fashionable body shape. In the past long hair and elaborate curled styles had been the norm. Now, with the jeune fille, the hairstyle to have was short and bobbed with perhaps some finger waves. While I found no information on the number of rural women subscribing to French *Vogue*, many American magazines such as *McCall's* and *Women's World* hosted advertisements promising to bring Parisian and New York fashions to the masses.

Hats also became more minimalistic, which likely allowed for greater fashion-forwardness for rural women. The cloche gained popularity. A simple, tighter hat, the cloche was cheaper to make than the more elaborate hats of the Edwardian period as it was often made of felt fabric with a few embellishments. Fashionable dresses became more accessible in their lines as the waist dropped to below the hip and the hems of everyday dress came up above mid-calf.[64] These chemise dresses were primarily made up of rectangles of fabric and were easily reproduced in a variety of fabrics and qualities.

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[62] Amy de la Haye & Valerie Mendes, *Fashion Since* 1900 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 59.
[64] Amy de la Haye & Valerie Mendes, *Fashion Since* 1900 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 60-62.

In many cases there was an overdress that was worn over a regular chemise which allowed for women to use more expensive fabric for their outer dress as less was needed. Patterns and designs of this period shows influences from Eastern European, Asian, and Ancient Egyptian motifs.

In recent decades the culture of disposable consumer textiles has flourished in America. The 19th and 20th centuries remained attached to the idea of minimum textile consumption. Rarely was a textile used once and then completely discarded. For much of history textiles were recycled over and over again until they became rags and then used as rags until they dissolved or became too stained for use. In this system family consumption was done as a unit.[66] Resources were shared by the family with men leading the decisions on use of the resources. As the 20th century developed, this system of resource management and who led consumption changes until women were often the directors of household consumption. This was true across class lines. A wealthy woman might wear a gown only once or twice before it became unfashionable.[67] She could then have it altered into the new style or give it away. She might pass it to a relative who would have it resized or to a servant who might do the same. The servant might also use the gown's fabric for household items such as quilt pieces, towels, curtains, sheets, or tablecloths. Then the item or items made from this original dress would continue down

[66] Jean Gordan & Jan McArthur, "American Women and Domestic Consumption, 1880-1920: Four Interpretive Themes," in *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women & Domestic Material Culture 1840-1940*, ed. Marilyn Ferris Motz & Pat Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1988), 31.
[67] Karin M. Ekström and Nicklas Salomonson, "Reuse and Recycling of Clothing and Textiles—A Network Approach," *Journal of Macromarketing* 34, no. 3 (September 2014): 11.

the line until the pieces of fabric might be unrecognizable and eventually too worn to be passed down once more. Domestic labor and consumption were integral parts of the rural woman's day in a way that men did not have the frame of reference to necessarily understand in the same way another woman might.

In the 1916 play "Trifles" by Susan Glaspell, several men and women come together to try and solve the mystery of who murdered John Wright while he slept. Mrs. Wright is sent to jail and the other women reconstruct her life through domestic clues while cleaning up the house. In the end they understand her life and its difficulties while the men who accompany them do not understand. This play asserts that there are some aspects of gendered life that cannot be understood by those of a different gender because of the different perspective formed through separate activities. The symbols understood by men and women at the time of this play are not the same. The women in "Trifles" could pick up on the difficulties in Mrs. Wright's life through their understanding of women's work and the struggles of domestic life where the men could not understand at all what these symbols meant. One of these symbols noticed by the women of the play was an unfinished quilt top. They noted that while the work had started out well-stitched and nice, the work had recently become messy and confused as though the maker did not know what she was doing.[70] Quilting is considered precise work. The seam allowance must remain consistent in order to keep the pattern of the blocks even. Any person who

[70] Susan S. Arpad, "Pretty Much to Suit Ourselves": Midwestern Women Naming Experience Through Domestic Arts, in *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women & Domestic Material Culture 1840-1940*, ed. Marilyn Ferris Motz & Pat Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1988), 10-12.

quilts more than occasionally understands that it is a delicate art that requires patience, calm, and focus. By observing the change in Mrs. Wright's quilting technique, the women understood that something was not right in her life and were able to look for more clues to understand her better.

In many ways the world of fashion and textiles is the same as the trifles decried by the men in the play as silly and unimportant to the grander scheme of life. The creation and use of textiles by rural women are a world of symbols that other rural women can decode. Perhaps an urban woman could decode it in part, as well. However, rural women have their own perception of the world and way that they understand their interactions with it and with other rural women both in and out of their immediate communities. It is these symbols that can be decoded to provide a more nuanced image of history and material culture in relation to women's work and its role in the development of the rural American landscape. This difference in perspectives is one of the reasons that Hazel Hall's poetry was almost forgotten for a time before renewed interest.[71] Though she had been quite popular in the 1920s, after her death many did not understand the symbolism in her poems related to needlecraft. They saw the poems as sentimental women's poetry without depth or generalizability. This incorrect classification of her work did not account for the difference in symbolic worlds. Hall experienced the world from a forced domestic perspective, one that resonated with many other people but most especially with other domestically tethered women. Hall did not

[71] John Witte, introduction to *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, ed. John Witte (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2000), xxvi-xxvii.

necessarily sew or embroider for fun. While she might have enjoyed some aspect of the work, it was primarily done for practical reasons. Hall sewed and embroidered for other people in order to earn money for her family. While she practiced these arts, as did most other women in history, by necessity, she also created beauty through her needlework. This is not an uncommon practice in textile history or the history of fashion. Women have decorated textiles in painstaking detail with impressive skill for centuries.[72] Petticoats and pockets and stays have been found with beautiful embroidery and stitchwork. While these items were all necessary for the completion of a socially appropriate outfit, the added decoration was most often purely for the enjoyment of the wearer both as art and as a hidden demonstration of their own skill in the domestic arts. Most often the people who were in the best position to admire this secret work were other women. Some decorative work could serve both a practical and an aesthetic purpose. A decorative stitch around the hem of a petticoat could serve to both reinforce the stitches on the hem while also allowing a small bit of decoration to peek out below the skirts for aesthetic appreciation. Susan S. Arpad may have said it best. "Needlework is, perhaps, the primary women's art. Women have been defined by the needlework they do and, in turn, they use the major metaphors of their lives to shape their needlework."[73] The needlework a woman did throughout her life reflected her place within her family and the community as well as the greater culture in which she resided. Needlework was also a

[72] Amy de la Haye & Valerie Mendes, *Fashion Since* 1900 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 12.
[73] Susan S. Arpad, "Pretty Much to Suit Ourselves": Midwestern Women Naming Experience Through Domestic Arts, in *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women & Domestic Material Culture 1840-1940*, ed. Marilyn Ferris Motz & Pat Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1988), 13.

lifeline for many rural women.[74] The practical necessity meant they must do it consistently and the familiarity of the task could act as a grounding agent for those who felt lost or alone such as Mrs. Wright or many homestead wives. It is likely that they could recall doing textile work throughout all the best and worst times of their lives and could call the pleasant memories forward when they needed comfort. Susan S. Arpad, in "Pretty Much to Suit Ourselves": Midwestern Women Naming Experience Through Domestic Arts in *Making the American Home: Middle-Class Women & Domestic Material Culture, 1840-1940* asserts the following:

> Far from being the mindless work that quilts are often thought to be, women carefully chose their patterns, piecing small and varied bits of fabric in a way that created order out of chaos, giving meaning to lives that, for many women must have been experienced as fragmented and chaotic.[75]

Group textile work allowed women to share their crafted understanding of their worlds with other women while also allowing for discussions of community events and news.[76] Arpad believed that the shared patterns and materials and techniques of quilting kept it and other textile arts from being considered high art by scholars of art and history. Textile arts are meant to be reproduced and taught to others and tweaked for personal fit from shared designs. High art is considered such because it is finite in its quantity and difficult to accurately replicate in most cases. Women of a similar class standing might

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[74] Susan S. Arpad, "Pretty Much to Suit Ourselves": Midwestern Women Naming Experience Through Domestic Arts, in *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women & Domestic Material Culture 1840-1940*, ed. Marilyn Ferris Motz & Pat Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1988), 15.
[75] Susan S. Arpad, "Pretty Much to Suit Ourselves": Midwestern Women Naming Experience Through Domestic Arts, in *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women & Domestic Material Culture 1840-1940*, ed. Marilyn Ferris Motz & Pat Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1988), 15.
[76] Susan S. Arpad, "Pretty Much to Suit Ourselves": Midwestern Women Naming Experience Through Domestic Arts, in *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women & Domestic Material Culture 1840-1940*, ed. Marilyn Ferris Motz & Pat Browne (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1988), 20.

have formed a sewing circle and set up meetings where they discuss their families and the latest local activities. They would share their art while strengthening community bonds and personal relationships.

In the past, historians have found the domestic sphere to be irrelevant to their study of history.[77] In this same vein, they also snub the story of women's lives and work within this domestic sphere. For much of history the stories of women were played out within the domestic sphere. Their lives were the domestic arts they practiced. Their stories, and their family's stories, were in the textiles they produced and shared with their families. Women were shaped by textiles and in turn shape the production and use of textiles in their own lives and broader communities. This is true for rural women across the United States. Their lives are written in the stitches and weaves of textiles from fashion pieces to towels. This connection holds untold amounts of information to develop the historical narrative for women and for rural America.

In the first chapter, For Home and Hearth, I examine rural women's textile work as both independent and cooperative through quilts. I discuss the role of quilting as both work and a social opportunity. Then I examine the development of cooperative quilting during the Great Depression and World War II. Finally, I will look at the development of the consumer economy after the war and how this affected women's quilting activities. I

[77] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 20.

will end by briefly touching on modern quilting culture and its development from the mid-20th century.

Chapter Two, Ephemera, examines the development of rural women's public roles through paper materials related to textiles and fashion in women's lives. These materials will include magazines, paper sewing patterns, homemaking manuals, and guides for dressing well. First, I look at the development of these materials in the early 1900s. Then I discuss the home economics movement and its influence on these materials. Next, I examine the role of advertisements in rural women's lives and their changing consumer status. Finally, I consider who these materials were actually written for and discuss their ultimate goal in publication.

The third chapter, On the Body, discusses clothing as it was worn on the body. I first make note of American attitudes toward clothing and dressing well. I then discuss how rural women experienced fashion and why they cared. I also examine the role of sewing in staying fashionable in rural America. The home economics movement is discussed once more in regard to garment sewing and the technological changes available in this field. Finally, I consider the ways in which women's fashion changed throughout the early 20th century and what this can tell researchers about societal changes and their impact on rural women. Extant garments and their use in historical analysis will feature in this chapter. Extant garments, those garments of a particular time period that remain intact enough for examination by historians, provide some of the most interesting information on the lives of rural women and their experiences within their homes and communities. From the chosen fabric to the inclusion or lack there-of of trims and the

means by which the garment is sewn, extant garments provide a snapshot of a community, if not the particular person who owned it. However, extant garments also reinforce a survival bias when examined without context. Extant garments are often smaller sized and more formal than those that typified an era. This is because those garments are less likely to have been worn frequently or reused and refashioned as many larger sized garments of a more casual nature would have been. Older garments are also more likely to have been constructed with organic materials such as linens or silks that are particularly vulnerable to pest and light damage. Further, garments belonging to rural women would more likely be used again and again until not even the fabric scraps of the item were usable. This means that the extant garments seen in museums and in the referenced *Threads* photographs typically belonged to wealthy, urban women who could afford to hold onto garments they no longer wore or were designer or store samples that were never sold to anyone.

The final chapter discusses the conclusions of my research. I summarize the importance of textile work and attitudes toward fashion in understanding women in the rural United States. I also restate the importance of using nontraditional source material and material culture as a resource for historical analysis.

Chapter 1: For Hearth and Home

I am sewing out my sorrow, / Like a thread, wearing it thin;/

It will be old and frayed to-morrow.[1]

My first and fondest memory of a quilt is full of impatient excitement. My aunt was making a new quilt for my bedroom at my grandmother's house. She cut up the identical squares of pink and floral fabrics quickly, her rotary cutter gliding along the top of the table as I watched in amazement. It seemed to me that magic was being performed as the tiny squares came together to form a new shape and eventually the full topper for the quilt. My aunt had been quilting for many years and before her my grandmother also made quilts. The quilts she made decorated her home and acted as gifts for loved ones. I always marveled at how she created what I thought were the most beautiful works of art that reflected not only her current mood but also her understanding of other people in the case of gifted quilts.

The quilt, in all its fractured beauty, reflects women and their culture as well as being a historical artifact in its own right. For centuries quilts have maintained a role as storytellers and family record keepers. While these inanimate objects may seem like simple coverings made of fabric scraps, they document the lives of the people who made them and act as messengers to the present and future.[2] They record births, deaths, and

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[1] Hazel Hall, "The Long Day," in *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, ed. John Witte (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2000), 70.
[2] J. Federico, "American Quilts: 1770-1880, in *The Artist and the Quilt*, ed. C. Robinson (New York: Knopf, 1983), 16.

weddings. They represent historical events and family histories. They present local lore and religious ideology in their fabric faces. Quilts, in this way, act as both subversive messengers as well as conformist recordkeepers depending on the creator and reader. Common patterns and symbols used in the imagery of quilts form their own language. A quilt's message can be understood with the right context and willingness to look beyond the innocuous fabric form in which it is presented. Quilts have maintained a place of prominence in rural American women's work from the colonial period to the present. They show not only the development of women and their families, but also the general status of their communities. In rural communities, quilts were commonly made from the leftovers of a family's life. They were the sum of the scraps of a woman's textile work within her home. Patterns and motifs for the quilt might be similar from one decade to another or within a region. The materials used and the quantity of each fabric spoke volumes about the lives of the women making the quilts. Quilts are a visual text for the casual observer and for the curious academic. The appearance of the quilt provides insight into not only the mental state of the creator but also into the physical and financial circumstances of the family and to an extent the community.

What is a Quilt?

The definition of a quilt is a blanket made with three layers that are all stitched together in some way to connect the layers. The layer in between can be as thin as a piece of linen or as thick as a heavy batting. The stitches that hold together a quilt's layers are referred to as the quilting and can be as simple as tufted threads or as intricate as a full-blanket floral design. Blankets in the style of quilts that have only two layers are

considered coverlets.[3] Quilting has its own jargon as well as special terms shared with other sewing arts. One example of this is the term piecing. Piecing refers to either sewing pieces of scraps together to make a piece large enough to cut a desired pattern piece from or sewing together pieces of a quilt block pattern. A quilt block is a section of a quilt design, often square in shape and including a frame around a central design. Blocks are pieced together and then sewn into one topper, the top layer of the quilt.

Quilts are often examined by two camps of historian or historical enthusiast, those examining them for material culture and personal interest in quilting or those studying the feminist and art cultural history of the quilts.[4] The two camps have different interests in the examination of quilts and quilting in history, but quilts are valuable as both material culture artifacts *and* as objects of feminist historical scrutiny. Quilts of all qualities and skill levels have histories of their own, but it is not just the quilt that is considered in this context.

George Finch, His Quilt, and Gender Roles in Quilting

While quilts can show deviations from the societal gender roles and standards, they also show dedication to these standards and how this adherence shaped the physical and mental world for rural women and their textile work. The quilt is not just an item that was created by women. Though we primarily see examples of quilts made by women, there are also examples of men quilting. One rural example of this is the Gilbert 'George' Fitch quilt (circa 1910) (Figure 1) held at the Buffalo County Historical Society

[3] Nebraska Prairie Museum, tour for author, March 17, 2021.
[4] Marcia Inzer Bost, "Quilts as Visual Text" (master's thesis, Kennesaw State University, 2010), 11.

in Kearney, Nebraska. This particular quilt is not only a fine example of the crazy quilting style but shows that some men sought to record their lives and feelings within textile records.[5] This quilt contains naval images such as anchors and knots. Crazy quilts are a style of quilt that has remained popular across the centuries. Crazy quilts are made up of irregular piece of fabric that have been sewn together to form the topper of the quilt. Crazy quilts usually have a variety of fabrics involved and few pieces are the same size or shape within the design. Some crazy quilts are made organically and have little meaning in their composition. Others incorporate symbolism.

Quilts As Visual Text

Whether the woman in question was interested in breaking the mold of society or was content to maintain what she felt was her place within the system, quilts offer an alternative medium from which these perspectives can be examined. Elaine Hedges was a pioneer in the field of Women's Studies and a long-term quilting researcher.[6] She commented that post-Victorian quilts could be seen as icons of conspicuous waste as they become more decorative rather than functional in their design.[7] Hedges saw this movement toward the decorative over the functional as the result of the loss of productive roles for women in the increasingly urban economy of the early 20th century. In this way the modern quilt could be seen as both a badge of oppression and the change in status from producer to consumer for women. While quilting might be seen as a representation

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[5] Carol Bosshardt, *Gilbert "George" Fich: Soldier, Carpenter, Quilter* (Kearney: Buffalo County Historical Society, 2004), 1.
[6] "Elaine Ryan Hedges Quilting Collection," Brown University Library, Accessed June 2, 2021. https://library.brown.edu/collatoz/info.php?id=398
[7] Elaine Hedges, "Quilts and Women's Culture," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 4 (1977): 10.

of the oppression of women by some, I argue that it also represents a rare free space rural women were allowed in their lives. While they may have been subject to the rule of their male family members and societal pressures in other areas of life, women's textile work, and quilting specifically, offered an opportunity for free creative expression and a way to reflect upon their understanding of the world and their place within it.

Mary-Anne and the Quilt as Heirloom

Mary-Anne Henry née Haschke was born in Cedar Rapids, Nebraska on February 4, 1929. She attended school through the eighth grade and was always proud to show off her certificate of completion. In 1948 she married Marcel Henry. The two would go on to maintain their own dairy farm for almost 40 years, raise six children together, and pass away in their 80s after more than 60 years of marriage. My mother was one of the six children raised by Marcel and Mary-Anne, having been adopted into their family in her preteen years. Mary-Anne had filled their home with heirlooms and family treasures, which she passed on to her children and grandchildren in her final days. Among the treasures I received was a quilt made by Mary-Anne's mother, Anna Haschke.

While it may be more technically accurate to call Mary-Anne Henry's blanket a coverlet, she considered it to be a quilt (Figure 2). Regardless, it was passed down as a family heirloom of sentimental, if not, historical value. Mary-Anne Henry might not have seen her mother's quilt as a part of the history of her family but she felt it was important to preserve it. However, this came from her mother having made the quilt and it being a reminder of her rather than from a heritage perspective.

The quilt can tell one a number of things about its creator.[8] Her family had a large amount of scrap fabric that was colorful and heavily patterned. It was fairly thin fabric that was sturdy but not especially durable. From this one can presume that the family had a comfortable if not particularly affluent life. They were able to use patterned fabrics with some commonality rather than staying with solid fabric that might be more frequently laundered. This can also be seen in the fact that the fabric seems to have been scraps from fabric chosen for its pleasing appearance rather than just for its durability and practicality. The stitches are all relatively small and even. There is a border on the quilt made up of smaller fabric triangles that are evenly cut and spaced. This quilt was not made in a rush. The creator had time to sew precisely and give attention to all the little details involved in the pattern. She even had time and enthusiasm to add a decorative stitch to the top of the quilt.

Despite the difficulties that would have been involved in daily life in rural Nebraska in the early 1900s, her work shows relative calm and stability in her life. The array of pastels and floral prints on the quilt suggests that this might have been constructed when Mary-Anne was a young child, the small clothing of youth easily outgrown and relegated to the scrap bin or the cut off bits of fabric from the new pinafore replacing the last that a growing toddler had already gotten too big to wear.

Some of the scraps used in Mary-Anne's quilt likely originated from feedsacks that were a popular fabric source in the 1930s and 1940s.[9] The wide use of the fabric

[8] From the Personal Collection of Autumn Langemeier.
[9] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 56.

from these sacks prompted the creation of pamphlets and booklets of instructions and tutorials on the care, cleaning, and reuse of the materials from the bags. This also led to the creation of various feedsack fabric sewing contests across America. By 1942, the National Needlecraft Bureau had 30,000 entries in their sewing contest. The year before they had only 14,000 entries. The New Deal pushed the American people to reconnect to their domestic skills even more. Women were encouraged to gather in groups to sew blankets for the needy and, later during World War II, soldiers in Europe. Being thrifty was a necessity during the Depression and it was elevated to act of patriotism during World War II.[12]

The Hierarchy of Textile Arts

Quilting has at different times in American history been considered both "high" and "low" as both an art and a craft.[13] Indeed, there must also be a consideration of the difference between textiles as an artform and textiles as a product of labor. While modern considerations might deem quilting to be an artform, and it may have been considered the same to some extent in the historical context, quilts were historically a textile produced for personal, practical use in most cases. It might have provided aesthetic comfort and release to women of the past, but the primary purpose of the quilt was to provide warmth within a domestic sphere. Rural women are often associated with low crafts and artforms. This would have included quilts for much of the past. Quilts were something made from scraps that were pieced together to form a new whole. They

[12] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 55-61.
[13] Elaine Hedges, "Quilts and Women's Culture," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 4 (1977): 7.

expressed a need to use all that one had to the best of their abilities in order to get the most use of resources. Quilt design was often based on what supplies were available to the rural women who were making them. In contrast, embroidery is often considered a "high" craft or artform. Embroidery is associated with special supplies and excess in both time and wealth. Someone who quilts is likely imagined doing it by the light of a candle next to a woodstove. Someone who embroiders is imagined in a room with a fireplace and a gas or electric light. Regardless of misconceptions, rural women participated in many of the needlecrafts that are now considered to be high in addition to those considered low. Newspapers were one of the ways women shared both quilting and embroidery designs. Newspapers such as the *Kansas City Star* published small articles and quilting patterns regularly and sometimes included embroidery patterns as well.[14] One example of quilt patterns being published by newspapers is the fan pattern or elbow pattern that is seen several times in the *Kansas City Star* across the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One such example can be seen in the January 30, 1935 edition of the newspaper (Figure 3).[15]

Quilts in rural America provide historians with the ability to compare aspects of race and class that can be seen in the designs and materials used in these quilts. The classification of certain textile work as either high or low is also linked to both race and class. African Americans have an especially rich quilt culture and have historically been

[14] Jeanne Poore, *Fan Quilt Memories: A Selection of Fan Quilts from the Kansas City Star* (Kansas City: Kansas City Star Books, 2001), 3.
[15] Jeanne Poore, *Fan Quilt Memories: A Selection of Fan Quilts from the Kansas City Star* (Kansas City: Kansas City Star Books, 2001), 20.

a large portion of many rural populations both during and after the abolition of slavery in the United States. A search for quilts from African American populations in rural states showed a reluctance by the families holding those quilts to come forward.[16] Many of the people who held these quilts felt that theirs were not made well-enough or were not fancy enough for the Louisville Celebrates the American Quilt exhibit that was being designed around these quilts by the Museum of History and Science in Louisville, Kentucky in 1992. Further, many were unable to provide a history of the quilt within their families. This was believed to be related to the historical displacement that many African American families experienced and continue to experience.

In an article from the *Ladies' Home Journal*, circa 1920, a woman known only as "A Farmer's Wife" described the life she and her husband lived on their farm and the importance of her role on the farm.[17] She made additional money for the farm through her home business of selling eggs and other animal by products. She firmly stated that the farm was a joint effort and possession and that she was a necessary part of the labor that kept the farm going and, she claimed, prospering. The 1920s were a time of emerging independence for women. After World War I, women seemed to have changed to embody the new spirit of the country.[18] Women had gained the right to vote in America, though many were not yet interested in utilizing this ability to the extent that suffragists

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[16] Shelly Zegart, Forward to *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 10.
[17] *Journal of the Century*, ed. Bryan Holme (New York: Viking, 1976), 90.
[18] Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 327.

had envisioned.[19] With the growing youth culture and potential for work outside the home, women had more control over and freedom in their lives than ever. The newfound confidence and autonomy were not just for the social sphere. They also applied to the home and led to the development of a sense of ownership over the physical manifestations of the lives they helped to nurture with their families. The 1920s was a dynamic period, with the previous decade's thinking and new ideas both grasping for control of the nation's minds.

Quilts as Individual and Collective Creations

The quilt is both an individual and group creation.[20] Prior to the outsourcing of the quilt as a ready-made product, quilt toppers were generally made by an individual or perhaps a mother and a child she was teaching to sew. They would design the quilt topper or pick a design they knew from local or family favorites and work on that at home. Then the actual quilting of the blanket would be done in a group setting with other members of the community or perhaps extended family. This is the "quilting bee."[21] For community bees, the best sewists of the community were invited to participate. These events were treated as a festival of sorts where women could renew their social bonds and separate themselves from the isolation that was so often associated with rural living. These events were in many ways the rural woman's answer to the bar or saloon where men similarly conducted their socializing and community bonding. There was also the option of creating a cooperative quilt within a friend group or within the community.

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[19] Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 338.
[20] Elaine Hedges, "Quilts and Women's Culture," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 4 (1977): 8.
[21] Elaine Hedges, "Quilts and Women's Culture," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 4 (1977): 8.

These quilts had toppers consisting of individually made blocks by different members of the group that were then pieced together to form the full topper of the quilt. The quilt was then finished as a group and usually presented to a specific individual or recipient. Men could also participate in these cooperative quilt projects. These quilts were an opportunity for friendly competition as well. Of course, each person would want to do their best work on their block so as to match the rest of the topper. However, the act of working together also allowed friendly competition among makers on details such as stitch visibility and the evenness of the pattern on each block. An example of this type of quilt can be seen in the accompanying photograph from the International Quilt Museum (Figure 4).

Comparing Quilts

While there are thousands of names for different quilt designs, research has shown that there are only about 300 distinct variations of quilt patterns.[22] There are several motifs that can be found across the decades of the early 20th century. These motifs reflect the changing nature of women's worlds and the current events of their lives and communities. Piecing, a common historical method seen in a variety of textile works where the sewist will splice together smaller pieces of fabric to make larger pieces to use within a project, was necessary to make the most of one's resources. Piecing is a technique that can be found in many quilts with rural origins and can denote a lower economic status. However, it might also denote a more practical and thriftier mindset when examined within the context of the Great Depression and World War II. Postage

[22] Elaine Hedges, "Quilts and Women's Culture," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 4 (1977): 9.

stamp quilts were another way to be thrifty with one's fabric resources.[23] Postage stamp quilts were historically those that used tiny squares and rectangles of fabric to form the quilt topper. These tiny blocks varied in size and were an excellent way to stretch the use of one's fabric resources by allowing even some of the smallest scraps to find a use. The modern iterations of this quilt require a strict one-inch square for each block, but historical postage stamp quilts were not as strict in their sizing requirements for the blocks. The use of colors also evolved following World War I with an increase in bold and bright designs as opposed to the more reserved color palettes prior to the 1920s. In examples of quilts from the 1920s, there are a number of shared features. Two of the quilts share floral-printed designs as a main characteristic and all of the quilts show a geometric fascination.

The Cobweb quilt (Figure 5) has geometric patterns that are reminiscent of the art deco and art nouveau styles that were popular in the 1920s. It is possible that women, especially those in rural areas where the art deco architecture of the cities was hard to see and far from the norm, but where its influence could be felt in magazines and advertising, used these geometric patterns more commonly during this time as an homage to the popular style and to bring some modernity to their décor. Two of the four quilts from the 1920s are machine stitched and the other two are hand stitched. The common motifs of the 1930s share many similarities with those of the 1920s. They maintain the prevalent

[23] Nebraska Prairie Museum, tour for author, March 17, 2021.

geometric designs. Arbor Window (Figure 6), Diamond Field (Figure 7), and Album (Figure 8) all have colorful designs.

That could imply that these quilts were made from fabric and supplies that were collected before the Great Depression or that they were made from scraps made from items that had to be repurposed during the economic disaster as rural families struggled for resources. All of the quilt examples from the 1930s that are discussed have been handsewn and many use embroidery techniques in their design. The greater prevalence of hand stitching in this sample of quilts may show that women were hand stitching as a way to use less electricity and lower their family's bills. With Colonial Ladies (Figure 9) and Birds (Figure 10) there are embroidered elements that would have allowed for the use of small scraps of thread and embroidery floss to limit waste. Quilts from the 1940s and 1950s use bright, bold colors and patterns that use many tiny scraps in their designs. There is a mix of both hand and machine quilting in these pieces once again. The designs for these quilts are primarily single, matching blocks interlocking into a larger design. This mirrors the idea of unity and nationalism in the war effort as well as the future suburban conformity that becomes synonymous with the American Dream in the 1950s. While these quilts are not listed as specifically made in rural settings, their patterns reflect quilting trends of the time that would have been popular across the urban-rural divide.

While these broad characteristics can tell historians about the cultural and community context of the quilt's creation, an examination of the details of individual quilts can provide insight into the individuals who made them. This is also applicable to

items made for other people. When making a textile gift for someone, often the person who is making the item is reflected in its construction and thus the perceptions of the maker on the person it is being gifted to can also be seen within the completed gift. The "Miller Quilt" is an example of the hidden depths a quilt can hold (Figure 11).[24] This quilt is nicknamed after its place of origin, Miller, Nebraska. Miller was founded in 1890 and incorporated as a village that same year.[25] It is small community that has maintained less than 200 citizens over the last two census counts.

The Miller Quilt and Signature Quilts

Upon first look, the Miller Quilt is a bird's eye view of rural life. The colorful patchwork of blocks divided by bands of dark grey appear to reflect the rural landscape of land plots and highways, reminiscent of the homesteading sections that once divided down the Great Plains. Each block is a full of color and variety, the many small sections coming together to form something complete. This quilt is a combination crazy quilt and signature quilt. While the general design is closer to a crazy quilt, the names of the women involved in the making of the quilt are embroidered across the topper. Further, this quilt was a collaborative effort, in the spirit of the signature quilt, by women from around Miller, Nebraska for Melva Mowrey Baker in 1950.[26] According to Buffalo County Historical Society staff, all of the women involved in the making of the quilt were

[24] "Miller Quilt," Textile Tails, Box 3001, Buffalo County Historical Society Archives, Kearney, Nebraska.
[25] "Miller, Nebraska," City-Data, Accessed May 30, 2021. http://www.city-data.com/city/Miller-Nebraska.html
[26] Temporary Custody Receipt, 2018, Textile Tails, Buffalo County Historical Society Archives, Kearney, Nebraska.

in Melva's wedding.[27] The collaborate nature of this quilt is seen in the variety of techniques and materials used in its construction. The types of fabric used in the quilt range from velvet to what appears to be a lower quality sack material. This would imply that everyone chipped in fabric where they could and that there was a variety of socio-economic statuses present within even the small community of Miller. The decorative finishing stitches on the top of the quilt also show a significant variety of styles and preferences. The quilt is made with a thick wool backing, making it a practical gift for a new bride in Nebraska, but the quilt is also a reminder of the friends and community ties that Melva maintained before and after her marriage. The use of highly decorative finishing stitches tells observers that the creators of the quilt were likely being a little competitive with one another, given the detail some of them went into with their decorations. As these women were all reported to be members of Melva's wedding, it is likely that this was a sort of informal, friendly competition more than anything else. The decorations also tell researchers that these women expected Melva to enjoy the decorative stitching, giving the impression that Melva was someone who enjoyed detail work and appreciated the chaotic beauty of the crazy quilt. While it cannot be proven without further research into Melva, this quilt gives the impression of her as a fun and adventurous person with an eye for detail. Not only can researchers understand the makers of the quilt, but they can also analyze how the maker's saw Melva.

[27] Buffalo County Historical Society, conversation with Broc Anderson of Trails & Rails Museum, March, 2021.

Signature quilts have maintained popularity since the mid-1800s in America.[28] They were made by clubs, organizations, friend groups, and families. In many cases signature quilts were made for fundraising purposes. People would pay for their name or their business to be represented on a quilt block or several blocks. At the end of the fundraiser, the quilts would be raffled off as an added source of fundraising. While this type of quilt is not as specifically informative about the individual who won it, it does have that same reflective quality as the Miller Quilt in its ability to relay perceptions of those constructing it. These signature quilts were often made by specific organizations such as clubs or religious organizations. They knew that there was a certain type of person that gave money to their cause and that was likely to purchase raffle tickets for the quilt drawing. This means that their understanding of what type of person they are expecting to win the quilt can still be seen within the quilt. For example, a religious organization will use religious motifs in its signature quilt for two reasons. First, they are representing their organization within the quilt. Second, they are appealing to the religious members of their community, whom they expect will be the most receptive to their fundraising efforts. There is the expectation that the more religious motifs will also appeal to this group of people and make them more receptive to investing further in raffle tickets beyond the initial fundraising activities.

While the motivations for making quilts and the designs used in them remained largely the same over time, the construction of quilts was changing with

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[28]Diana Bell-Kite, *QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women's Voices Through Quilts* (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of History, 2019) 73.

technological advancements. By the middle of the 1920s the number of homes with sewing machines had grown. More than half of surveyed rural families had at least one.[29] This meant that more women could use machines for crafting the quilts blocks and constructing the quilt, as well as for the actual process of quilting. This mechanization continued through the 1950s. It should be noted, however, that after the initial drop in hand piecing for quilts, the familiarity of the machines made handwork novel once more.[30] This resulted in a new interest in hand piecing quilts. The creation of rayon and other synthetic fabrics lead to the debut and use of synthetic threads as well.[31] These threads were able to be used with a variety of fabrics and could be cheaper than their silk or cotton counterparts, making them even more popular alternatives as they fit with the idea of womanly thriftiness that was expected of American women of all regions. The creation of several fabric finishes such as a glaze for quilt batting sheets allowed for more ease of quilting and a more consistent amount of lining across the length of the quilt.[32]

Modern Quilting as a Status Symbol

Modern quilting has become quite a different industry from its historical counterpart. Historically, quilting was a task performed by women of all ages and financial situations. As the consumer economy turned away from home production of textile goods, supplies for quilting and many other needlecraft and textile arts became too expensive for the average American. This was especially true as the need for other

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[29] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 37.
[30] Holdrege Museum Tour
[31] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 74.
[32] *Searchlight Homemaking Guide*, ed. Ida Migliario, Zorada Z. Titus, et. al. (Topeka: Copper, 1950), 260-61.

homemade textiles dwindled and they were left with fewer scraps to use and there was greater need to buy new fabric specifically for quilts. Modern quilting is considered an expensive hobby. A yard of quilting cotton can run anywhere from $9 to $25 and quilts often take 3 or more yards for even small, uncomplicated designs. Modern quilting has gentrified. Men, people of color, and those with less financial windfall report feeling left out of the modern quilting community, even reporting hostility in some quilting spaces.[33] Most people who are able to quilt are older, more affluent, and often white women. The need for wealth in order to quilt can also be tied to the loss of ability to perform the finishing quilting of the actually blanket once the piecing has been finished. Many of the quilters I have met do not have the time, skill, or desire to quilt their creation themselves. This means the unfinished quilts are often sent out to professional quilters to be finished rather than finished by their creator.

Modern quilting does maintain some of the trappings of its historical purpose especially in rural communities. Historically, quilts have been a form of record keeping for a family. Modern quilting pays homage to this in many ways. The modern t-shirt quilt is an amalgamation of different t-shirts a person has collected that either fit a theme or maintain sentimental value. Many quilters will make baby quilts for the new infants in their families. In this way they are keeping the traditional of quilts as a form of familial connection to the past alive. Further, quilting is still a way to promote social interaction within a community. Local quilt shops often have tight communities that bring especially

[33] "Quilting Space is Not a Pleasant Space: An Interview with Stephanie Forsyth," Eric the Quilter: Quality Quilts from a Quilty Guy, June 15, 2017, https://ericthequilter.com/2017/06/15/quilting-space-is-not-a-pleasant-space-an-interview-with-stephanie-forsyth/

older women together where they might otherwise be isolated as their families and friends age and die. There are often quilting clubs attached to these shops or that meet in public libraries to discuss their projects and share patterns and techniques in a way that recalls the historical quilting bee or home training. While my examination of quilting in the lives of rural women focuses on the first half of the 20th century, these domestic arts are still highly relevant to the lives of rural women and rural communities, and they deserve further study.

Chapter 2: Ephemera

They are gathering imagery/ Out of time and space, /

That a needle's artistry/ May embrace [. . .][1]

When I consider ephemera and the paper trails of women's lives, I often think of home sewing patterns and women's magazines. I remember the glossy pages of *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* on the tables of beauty salons as my grandmother had her hair permed. I remember trailing after my aunt as she perused paper patterns to find the perfect one to use for my Halloween costume. I wanted to be a witch princess, so it had to be perfect! I remember the Avon lady who came to visit my grandmother every month or so and brought with her the newest catalog. These catalogs were our guide to fashionable items of the day.

While these events all happened decades after the period I am examining here, the women involved would all be considered rural women. They lived their lives in rural areas, respected a code of values that was inherently centered on their understanding of what rural life had told them was important (through community norms, religious imperatives, and cultural expectations), and they cherished the skills that their rural upbringings had invested in them. Their actions would be recognizable to the rural women of the early 20th century. Their daily activities and skill sets were similar. Their

[1] Hazel Hall, "Summer Sewing," In *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, ed. by John Witte (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2000), 61.

understanding of the broader landscape of fashionableness and style was formulated in much the same way as the women discussed below.

Ephemera as Sources

The importance of clothing and other fashionable textiles in the lives of women was not just the aesthetic value that dressing and decorating granted. In the first half of the 20th century, appearance played a large part of how people viewed women. A woman should be well dressed and fashionable, but not overly fashionable lest she be considered flighty and impractical by other rural women. Women were meant to keep their children and husbands dressed neatly and cleanly to demonstrate their homemaking abilities and their commitment to their domestic duties. Women relied on ephemeral patterns, catalogs, and magazines to guide their understanding of fashion within the domestic sphere.

Ephemeral sources such as magazines, catalogs, and sewing patterns guided and were guided by the relationship between women and fashion. Rural women utilized resources printed for a variety of people and lifestyles as well as rural-centric resources. The examination of these resources and their differences provides an opportunity for comparison between the urban-focused ideal for women and its rural counterpart. In this chapter I discuss notable forms of printed resources that rural women in the early 20th century relied upon in their quest to remain smart and fashionable. I examine the development of rural women's public roles through paper materials related to textiles and fashion. First, I analyze sewing manuals and catalogs that were popular during this period. I will also touch on homemaking guides and the role of the Home Economics

movement in the publication of these manuals. Then, I consider the paper sewing pattern as a source of information on the changing fashions of American women. Finally, I review the role of women's magazines and their influence on fashion as well as their role in the blurring of lines between idealized and realistic expectations of women. This includes a discussion of advertisements and their influence on the changing shape of consumerism for women. I also analyze a selection of advertisements to explore the real targets of their marketing.

Community Circulation of Materials

Rural women were no less fashionable than their urban counterparts, although they expressed their understanding of fashion in distinct ways. Fashion resources came in a variety of forms including patterns, fabrics, and magazines. These resources conveyed information on what was fashionable and how to maintain a level of fashion forwardness with one's style and mannerisms. These resources circulated within families and between friends within the community. Sometimes the resource would come through the mail, as in the case of mail-order sewing patterns (Figure 12). While the pictured mail-order pattern is likely from the 1960s rather than the first half of the century, its basic characteristics did not change significantly from decades previous. The envelope contains the tissue paper pattern pieces for the dress, all roughly cut out so that all sizes are still able to be used. There is also a single sheet of instructions and an embroidery pattern for the floral motif shown on the pattern image taped to the envelope. The image affixed to the envelope is clipped from a newspaper, likely from the advertisement used to order the pattern. Needlecraft Service, the company listed as the return address on the

envelope, provided a number of sewing pattern types. I have observed several varieties of sewing pattern in envelopes with the same brand markings while examining vintage sewing patterns in thrift shops as well as in online resale shops. These patterns have included stuffed toys, baby clothing, accessories such as hats, and additional garments for people of all ages. Other resources could be purchased at or through local shops or borrowed from libraries. Phyllis G. Tortora described the importance of print materials to the dissemination of fashion information in her book *Dress, Fashion, and Technology: From Prehistory to the Present.* While Tortora's discussion of technology and fashion is centered on changes in the United Kingdom, her arguments on the importance of printed materials is in keeping with similar trends in the United States. Tortora asserts the following:

> In order for fashion in dress to flourish, those ready to adopt new styles must have some way to learn about what is new. When most of the population spent their lives in the same town or village and had little contact with the world beyond their communities, fashion information would have been communicated by personal contact and visual observation of and interaction with others. But once individuals were able to read and see printed descriptions and visual representations of what was being worn, printing technology became an important driver of and influence on fashion trends.[2]

Rural women in the first half of the 20th century read for both enjoyment and practicality, consuming information on a variety of subjects including fashion and textile work.[3] This information could serve as both practical reading as well as entertainment. In a letter to *Farmer's Wife* reprinted in *The Farmer's Wife Sampler Quilt: Letters from*

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[2] Phyllis G. Tortora, *Dress, Fashion and Technology: From Prehistory to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 189.
[3] Laurie Aaron Hird, *The Farmer's Wife Sampler Quilt: Letters from 1920s Farm Wives and the 111 Blocks They Inspired* (Cincinatti: Krause, 2009), 80.

1920s Farm Wives and the 111 Blocks They Inspired by Laurie Aaron Hird, Mrs. C.M.B. of Cheshire County, New Hampshire remarks that she takes time out of each day to read and to keep up on current events.[4] She notes a variety of topics such as child-welfare, farming practices, and plays as her favored reading materials. All of this reading she does between sewing for her entire family, doing other housework, and making cottage cheese and butter to sell. In another letter from *Farmer's Wife*, Mrs. J.A.R. requests help in finding information on establishing a travelling library for her Minnesota community. Mrs. J.A.R. notes that magazines in her community are worn ragged from the amount of reading they experience as they pass down the long line of hungry readers. [5]

The Home Economics Movement as a Resource

Home economics was gaining momentum as a movement in the early half of the 20th century. Home economists of the period wrote passionately about the importance of fashion and grooming practices as a moral and societal virtue. Laura Baldt, assistant professor of the Household Arts Teacher's College at Columbia University, notes the following in her 1929 book *Clothing for Women*:

> The subject of clothing from one or another point of view, claims the attention and interest of all women. Some view it as a means of self-gratification; some as a means of artistic expression; others from the viewpoint of economic pressure; while others try to give it the true place in their thinking, for if "we express our thinking in our clothing," whether it be disorder, beauty or ugliness, or harmony, depends really upon the thought we expend upon it.[6]

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[4] Laurie Aaron Hird, *The Farmer's Wife Sampler Quilt: Letters from 1920s Farm Wives and the 111 Blocks They Inspired* (Cincinatti: Krause, 2009), 80-81.
[5] *Farmer's Wife*, March 1925, 147.
[6] Laura I. Baldt, *Clothing for Women* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1929), v.

This line of thinking is further reflected in a story shared with *Farmer's Wife* (March 1925).[7] Mrs. E.B. of Minnesota wrote to share the story of a friend in her community. This friend, Margaret, was well groomed and well-dressed all her school days. After Margaret married, she and her husband fell on hard times. They became so downtrodden that they stopped wearing clothing that fit well, brushing their hair, or cleaning their home and clothing. One day Margaret saw her reflection in a mirror and was appalled at how she looked. She began to take more care with her appearance, and this brought her family out of its gloom, encouraging her husband and children to also clean themselves up and work hard once more. Mrs. E.B. noted that Margaret's family now dressed as well as any of their friends and that her story should act as an example for other young wives.

The Farmer's Wife

Women's magazines provided the connection to urban and coastal life that rural and midwestern women were denied by virtue of distance or similar limiting circumstances. Culture, including textile culture, was thought of as happening on the coasts where the largest cities were and from which the most international activity stemmed. These publications included songs, morality stories, advertisements for products and services, and in many cases information on the latest styles of clothing to show a dressmaker or even instructions for making one's own fashionable clothing in keeping with the latest styles. The craze of women's magazines truly took hold in the 19th century. Many of the most popular magazines of the era were created as a popular

[7] *Farmer's Wife*, March 1925, 117.

source of advertising for dressmaking pattern companies. These magazines included recognizable names such as *McCall's Magazine, Cosmopolitan, Vogue,* and *Ladies' Home Journal.*

Farmer's Wife was the women's magazine designed to appeal to the rural woman. Running from 1905 through 1939, this magazine was distinguished from its glossier counterparts such as *McCall's* or *Ladies' Home Journal* by its distinctly rural tone and focus. This magazine allowed rural women a new tool for expressing their opinions about rural life as well as the dissemination of practical domestic advice to those in similar situations. At the height of its popularity*, Farmer's Wife* was estimated to have five readers per subscription during its peak circulation with over one million subscribers. Part of the unique nature of this publication, besides its target audience being women, can be attributed to its national scope where many other rural publications were regional in their focus.[10]

Janet Galligani Casey, an independent scholar, conducted a comprehensive examination of the entire run of *Farmer's Wife* and further examined the role of this publication in domestic history as well as agrarian scholarship in the article "This is YOUR Magazine": Domesticity, Agrarianism, and *The Farmer's Wife*". Casey notes that despite the rural focus of *Farmer's Wife*, it shared with its more urban counterparts the ability to reassure its readers that "they, too, were worthy aspirants to a bourgeois

[10] Janet Galligani Casey, "This is YOUR Magazine: Domesticity, Agrarianism, and *The Farmer's Wife*" *American Periodicals 14,* no. 2 (2004): 180-181.

respectability." These publications allowed for the real or imagined acquisition of middle-class respectability through the consumption or idealizing of consumer goods.[12]

Like its counterparts, *Farmer's Wife* tended to view housewives as consumers. However, the connection between rural women and production made their connection to consumption in *Farmer's Wife* appear different than that seen in other women's magazines, such as *Ladies' Home Journal* where limited production by the readers is assumed. While more urban focused magazines might tout consumer goods as a way for housewives to free up time for leisure activities, rural women often utilized any time saved by modern innovative consumer goods to make a greater contribution to the general farm work.[13] Many of the advertisements seen on the pages of *Farmer's Wife* offered new ways for rural women to make extra money from home with little to no training.[14]

Another article entitled "Our Girls Pull Dollars" described the many ways readers were making money for themselves and their families.[15] One girl described her cleaning job and boasts that she purchased all her own clothing with the money she made. Another woman in this same article opened a mending business that was so successful with her neighbors that she had to hire an assistant to keep up with the work. The numerous advertisements for business opportunities and the consistent inclusion of home

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[12] Janet Galligani Casey, "This is YOUR Magazine: Domesticity, Agrarianism, and *The Farmer's Wife*" *American Periodicals 14*, no. 2 (2004): 180-181.
[13] Janet Galligani Casey, "This is YOUR Magazine: Domesticity, Agrarianism, and *The Farmer's Wife*" *American Periodicals 14*, no. 2 (2004): 182.
[14] *Farmer's Wife,* March 1925, 140.
[15] *Farmer's Wife,* March 1925, 118.

business discussions within the articles and letters in *Farmer's Wife* suggest that most rural women were involved in some form of entrepreneurship or production beyond that directly associated with their family's livelihood.

Some advertisements appear to have been directed toward the presumably male head of household. One example of this is found in the March 1925 issue of *Farmer's Wife.* This advertisement (Figure 13) proudly declares, "More profit per bushel for farmers in Canada!" and "Bigger crops, lower cost!"[16] The advertisement text goes on to detail the advantages of taking one's farming to Canada and even includes a coupon to redeem for a free book on either Eastern or Western Canada and immigration information. The presence of this advertisement shows that not only were women reading this magazine among themselves, but they were also sharing it with their male relatives. Further, I assert that these advertisements were specifically targeted at men rather than at the women subscribed to *Farmer's Wife* as there was some expectation of limited literacy among the subscriber base.

Not all the advertisements in *Farmer's Wife* were focused on the production aspect of rural life. Like other ladies' magazines of the time there were cosmetic advertisements as well. One such advertisement is for Hinds Honey and Almond Cream (Figure 14).[17] This cream promises fresh and youthful skin with its use. Like many of the advertisements in Farmer's Wife, this one focuses on the mail-order possibilities for the reader. However, this also mentions options to purchase the cream in person through

[16] *Farmer's Wife,* March 1925, 123.
[17] *Farmer's Wife,* March 1925, 123.

a pharmacy or department store if available. Rural women, like their urban counterparts, were expected to want to look well. The mix of cosmetic and style advertisements among the farming and other home-related advertisements supports this understanding.

While the rural woman was a consumer, she was often using the act of material consumption to improve her production as well. The question of how much a farmer's wife was a farmer herself and how much she was separated from farm labor created a discourse that threaded itself through all aspects of this publication throughout its period of circulation. The attachment of exceptionalism to the idealization of agrarian living further complicated discussions about the role of rural women among both women and men. Fink noted in her previously mentioned study that both urban and rural interviewees tended to view rural life as superior to urban life.[18] Rural women might long for the idea of the urban housewife while also being influenced by national discourse proclaiming the superiority of country life to urban living.

Selling American Womanhood: Advertising in Ladies Magazines

At face value, women's magazines from the first half of the 20th century were aimed at the adult women of a household. They advertised services and products and trends that were meant to improve her life and allow her to improve the lives of her family with her resulting increase in available time. In reality, many of these products and services meant that women were now expected to do more work and do this work in a shorter amount of time. The tone and tactics of these advertisements changed with the

[18] Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 12.

economic landscape and the political and social mood of the nation. These advertisements also appealed to the husband in a family. The husband was expected to be in charge of large purchases and the magazines played to the idea of the American family by offering husbands a product that would assist their wife in meeting that ideal. These advertisements also tend to focus on the young, white married or seriously dating couple in their images and appeals. An example of this can be seen in the *Ladies' Home Journal* (December 1945). This advertisement displays the post-World War II shift from thrift to extravagance.[19] The article, which is mostly images with some guiding text, is centered on the idea of dressing up for the evening at home. The incentive for dressing up is given as the return of men to the home (referring to the end of World War II and the return of soldiers from Europe and the Pacific). This article encourages the use of "exotic" fabrics and styles as well as looser and more flowing (fabric heavy) designs to brighten up both the reader's life as well as her returned man's life. The styles portrayed in this issue reflect the ending of rationing and the beginnings of the conspicuous consumption and idealized family life of the post-war 1950s. This article assures men that they are the motivation for women to dress well and that the key to female happiness is the purchasing of material goods to make her partner's life more pleasant. This theme is seen in many household appliance advertisements as well.

Advertising and Race: Examining *The Lincoln Voice* and *The Omaha Monitor*

Very few of the advertisement or stories featured within the magazines used for this thesis have had people of color represented within them. This is because the

[19] *Ladies' Home Journal*, December 1945, 32-33.

idealized face of the American family, both urban and rural, was expected to be white. Illustrations of white, heterosexual women filled the pages of these magazines and the minds of the readers. Entrepreneurial opportunities and consumer advertisements were aimed toward the white, heterosexual, Christian women and men of America in magazines such as *Farmer's Wife* and *McCall's.*

In order to find representation for their themselves, some rural African American communities began their own newspapers and other periodicals to disseminate information, news, and advertise their businesses and products geared toward the needs of people of color. One example of this is the newspaper *The Voice* (Figure 15). *The Voice* was a weekly newspaper by and for the African American community of Lincoln, Nebraska which began publication in October 1946 and ran through May 1953.[20] This newspaper also covered stories from other Nebraska towns related to the African American community at large as well as including columns on parental education, teen interests and activities, book recommendations, and religious community updates. It had a little bit of everything to fill the needs of the community. *The Omaha Monitor* was a similar paper to *The Voice*. *The Monitor* ran from July 1915 through November 1928, predating the publication of *The Voice* by several decades. Both were weekly newspapers. In contrast to *The Voice*, *The Monitor* had a less city-focused perspective with more discussion of surrounding towns and other farming communities. Further, while *The Monitor* began as a church paper and eventually developed into a general

[20] "About *The Voice*. (Lincoln, NE) 1946-195?," Chronicling America, Accessed June 2, 2021. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2019270505/

newspaper to discuss concerns and events of the African American community, *The Voice* began as a more general newspaper but also maintained a strong church presence in each issue.[21]

Newspapers are primarily text-based forms of media. While the written representation of people of color was prominent in this newspaper, and biographical photos for the writers and images for lead stories showed the faces of black icons and community members well, the pictorial representation of people of color in the advertisements was still lacking in many cases. While advertisements such as that for Magee's Department Store (Figure 16) from *The Voice* show women of color in the illustrations, many others did not.[22] The illustrations of many articles and clothing advertisements still sported white bodies.[23] Columns on childcare in both black-centered newspaper often showed beaming illustration of white babies.[24] *The Monitor*, in at least one January 1920 issue, did feature a photo of two black children at the top of their "Kiddies' Korner" (Figure 17) section of the paper above one such illustration.[25]

The lack of representation for people of color did not end with the whitewashing

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[21] "About *The Monitor*. (Omaha, NE) 1915-1928," Chronicling America, Accessed July 9, 2021. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/00225879/

[22] "MAGEE'S," *The Voice* (Lincoln, NE), Nov. 8, 1946, 7. Accessed June 2, 2021. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2019270505/1946-11-08/ed-1/seq-7/

[23] "Barker's Lovely Gift Hosiery," *The Voice* (Lincoln, NE), Nov. 8, 1946, 2. Accessed June 2, 2021. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2019270505/1946-11-22/ed-1/seq-2/

[24] "Our Children," *The Voice* (Lincoln, NE), Nov. 8, 1946, 4. Accessed June 2, 2021. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2019270505/1946-11-29/ed-1/seq-4/ ; "Kiddies' Korner," The Monitor (Omaha, NE), Jan. 1, 1920, 6. Accessed July 9, 2021. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/00225879/1920-01-01/ed-1/seq-6/

[25] "Kiddies' Korner," The Monitor (Omaha, NE), Jan. 1, 1920, 6. Accessed July 9, 2021. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/00225879/1920-01-01/ed-1/seq-6/

of advertisements and illustrations in print media during the early 20th century. It can also be seen in the lack of inclusion in research both during and regarding this time period. For example, research studies such as the Kelly Longitudinal Study which ran from the late 1930s through the 1950s was made up of entirely white participants despite its goal being to see the long-term effects of marriage on personality. In fact, all 600 participants of this study were all white, middle-class, heterosexual Protestants. Many were also well-educated and affluent, some of the most likely to enjoy the prosperity and American dream of the post-war era following World War II.[28] Lack of inclusion in contemporaneous research as well as exclusion from primary source documents and ephemeral material culture only increases the silences in the historical record regarding the lives of rural people of color.

Examining Individual Advertisements

Advertisements provide insight into the thought process of a culture. By examining the marketing strategies used and the types of goods being pushed within these advertisements, researchers can better understand the trends in material culture. We can see what people see as a luxury and what they see as commonplace. An advertisement for Ivory Flakes in *Women's World* (June 1927) (Figure 18) tells the story of a shop selling silk stockings of such high quality that they are $500 per pair.[29] Ivory claims that the shop recommends their soap flakes for the care and cleaning of these luxurious stockings. Ivory also claims that doctors recommend their soap flakes for the

[28] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Revised and Updated Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xxii-xxiii.
[29] *Women's World*, June 1927, 6.

washing of newborn babies. The implication in this advertisement is that women who use Ivory Flakes are intelligent and efficient because of the quality and versatility of soap they are using and can adopt some of the luxury associated with the expensive stockings through the use of this cleaning solution. The luxury stockings can also be seen to reflect the hedonistic nature of the 1920s.

This same issue of *Women's World* also contains a column entitled "New Kitchen Conveniences: Practical Tested Devices to Lighten Work in the Home." It presents items such as the clothesline brush for cleaning dirt out of one's clothesline, the potato baker which has spiked crossbars allowing 8 potatoes to be baked at a time, and the eggbeater which promises to be made in such a way that it will not strain the wrist to use. The implication of this advertisement is that if one possesses these new devices then they will run a more efficient household and be a better homemaker in general. Advertisements such as this subtly imply that women who do not purchase these items are being purposefully inefficient and are completing their work in an inferior manner to those that do have these devices.

The Household Magazine (September 1931) contains an advertisement for a free copy of *Style Book* from National Bellas Hess Co. (Figure 19).[30] The advertisement claims that this book gives the first looks at New York styles from 5th Avenue. It further claims to be the "shopping guide for millions".[31] Thisre book is in fact more of a ready-to-wear clothing catalog than a sewing pattern catalog of a style guidebook. The

[30] *The Household Magazine*, September 1931, 15.
[31] *The Household Magazine*, September 1931, 15.

advertisement appeals to the thrifty and the fashionable by promising them access to the designs and looks of New York with a much lower price tag. It further says that the book may be free but that the reader will save "many dollars" once they receive it.[32] In the first years of the Great Depression this promise of thrift was not uncommon. This is also similar to the appeals of the Ivory Flakes advertisement which promised convenience and a feeling of luxury and fashion.

Another advertisement from the same issue of *The Household Magazine* again offered a free publication.[33] This advertisement is for the Fifth Avenue Modes company's *Fall Magazine of Fashion* (Figure 20). This magazine promised to cut the reader's dress expenses in half while also providing New York and Parisian styles at a discount. This advertisement is different from the earlier advertisement in that the clothing is mostly ready-to-wear but the discount is based on the idea that finishing touches to the garment will be sewn by the purchasing party once it has arrived at their home. Being fashionable and/or efficient but thrifty at the same time is a running theme in the advertisements of women's magazines in the first half of the 20th century.

In the July 1935 issue of *McCall's* magazine, Ivory Flakes make another appearance in the advertisements (Figure 21).[34] Once again, they use luxury stockings as a lure for readers. The advertisement asserts that Ivory Flakes are recommended for use on babies and that they are the recommended soap for luxury stockings. This time,

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[32] *The Household Magazine*, September 1931, 15.
[33] *The Household Magazine*, September 1931, 29.
[34] *McCall's*, July 1935, 6.

however, the stockings are silk chiffon with an adjustable top. The advertisement offers the reader a pair of these stockings, which are proclaimed to never sell below $1.15, for $0.50. However, in order to get the discounted price on the stockings the reader must send in 3 box-tops from Ivory Flakes boxes along with the money. This would mean that they either need to have saved previous Ivory Flake boxes or would need to buy Ivory Flakes in order to meet this requirement. Ivory Flakes again conflates their soap with luxury and the ability to achieve a facsimile of upper class living with the use of their product. At this time stockings were still a necessary part of the daily wardrobe of women. This meant that they were worn hard and washed often. Promises of longer lasting stockings that maintained their quality through many washes were appealing. The appeal would also have been heightened at this time as the Great Depression was in full swing. Not only were women seeing the opportunity for a luxury item at a discount, but the added context of the Great Depression also means that this advertisement was appealing to even those women that were on especially hard times. The offering of luxury stockings for similar pricing to everyday stockings as well as the promise that Ivory Flakes will keep them serviceable and beautiful for longer had no small appeal. Fashion and economy dictate the consumer trends of women with consumer marketing affecting those areas in kind.

Demonstrating Domestic Arts

Demonstration trains, and other agricultural extension services that incorporated elements of home economics, were their own resource for rural women while also encouraging the use of home economics resources to which they might already have

access. Demonstration trains, trains carrying displays and educators to instruct in various areas related to agriculture and research in improving rural life, began in the early 1900s as a way to bring agricultural science directly to the farmers of America. These demonstration trains were the product of cooperative initiatives between land grant colleges, local railroads, and agricultural extension personnel. This became a popular tool for outreach to rural and agricultural areas in the first half of the 20th century. States such as Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado had various demonstration trains running through them. Farmers had initially been skeptical of outsiders telling them how to do their jobs but were eventually won over by the assistance in meeting "new industrial farming challenges" that they face in the new century. This was done through a mix of shared experiments and extension services providing visible evidence of the scientific research to farmers. Part of the goal of demonstration trains was to bring knowledge of different sciences to the parts of the country that were far from colleges and the educational opportunities and research developments that could be found there. Illustrated materials were used to disseminate information to the communities.[39] Demonstration trains began with a focus on farming practices and tools but expanded as time went on to include home economics demonstrations and displays. These home economics displays provided not only an opportunity for rural women to examine in person the technology and practices being promoted to them in magazines and catalogs

[39] David D. Vail, "Farming by Rail: Demonstration Trains and the rise of Mobile Agricultural Science in the Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly 38*, no. 2 (2018): 151-59.

but also a chance to travel into town and lay aside their domestic duties where they otherwise were rarely able to do so with the same freedom as farm men.[40]

Sewing Manuals

Another opportunity that women had for finding out what was fashionable were sewing manuals. With the popularity of dressmaking tips in periodicals, manuals for the home sewist appeared beginning in the 1840s. Manuals of this time period encouraged young girls to improve their textile art skills as soon as possible by sewing clothing and accessories for dolls. Further, young women were encouraged to work on their dressmaking skills in the event that they became attached to a "noble minded adventurer in the new country," by which they meant places such as California or Minnesota. *Godey's Ladies Book,* a popular monthly women's book from the latter half of the 19th century, warned that these places lacked professional dressmakers and that the unprepared woman who decried dressmaking skills would leave herself helpless to maintain or update the wardrobes of herself and her family. By the 1920s, manuals such as these were established resources for women.[43]

In 1927 Butterick, a prominent sewing pattern and publishing company, published *Art of Dressmaking*. This manual instructed women on how to buy patterns and materials for their dressmaking, as well as the best and most fashionable techniques to use in constructing and finishing the garments. This book included sections on the cleaning of

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[40] John Mack Faragher, "History From the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly 33,* no. 5 (1981): 548.

[43] Joy Spanabel Emery, *A History of the Paper Pattern Industry: The Home Dressmaking Fashion Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 27-29.

clothes constructed at home and how to best remodel the clothing for future use. The cleaning section informed the reader on spot removal for various stain types as well as on different fabrics. This information was especially important to rural women who did most if not all of their own cleaning and housework. The author made a distinction between cleaning and laundering. Laundering happened less frequently because it required much more time and effort whereas cleaning was often to prevent the need for laundering. The section on remodeling clothing for the new season provided not only ideas for how to refashion clothing that was still good quality but also for how to reuse materials that were no longer useful for outer garments. It suggested using worn wool to line other garments for warmth. There was also the option to resew a garment using the other side of the fabric if it was in good shape and "nice looking". Butterick also suggests the use of small scraps of material in hat making. In this section they recommend the reader consult *Delineator* and *Butterick Fashions*, the women's magazines published by Butterick which also acted as a catalog for their sewing patterns.[48]

The year after Butterick published *Art of Dressmaking*, its competitor the McCall Company published *Dressmaking Made Easy* by Laura I. Baldt. In many ways home economics was creating a backdoor to higher education for women and these programs then extended educational opportunities to rural communities.[49] The study of home economics gave women another opportunity to go to college or continue to study at a

[48] *Art of Dressmaking*, ed. Butterick (New York: Butterick, 1927), 243-254.
[49] Laura I. Baldt, *Dressmaking Made Easy* (New York: McCall, 1928), viii.

higher level while also bowing to societal pressures to conform to gender roles. Home economics work, like teaching, fell in line with the cultural expectations for women and their presumed interests and abilities. This meant that information on homemaking skills and other domestic arts were being more widely circulated and therefore becoming more easily accessible, especially to rural women. This information was distributed through pamphlets, mail-in courses, local agricultural extension office lessons and clubs, and demonstration trains which gave travelling lectures.[50] This manual began with a list, several bulleted pages long, of equipment that the home sewist should have to best complete the myriad of sewing projects that a family required.[51] Some of the items that it included were a variety of irons, a mannequin for dressmaking, silk thread, at least 100 sewing pins, and a tailor's ham for pressing curved seams.

Catalogs and Paper Patterns

Another common source of fashion knowledge for the rural woman was the *Sears* catalog. These catalogs provided mail-order listings for the latest trends in everything from home décor to appliances to fashion. These catalogs were more easily accessible to women in rural communities than many other sources of information on trends and fashionable textile creations and techniques because they were often either free or very cheap and came through the mail. These catalogs also followed the trends quickly and economically as their goal was to sell the most product to the widest audience possible. To do that they needed to stay on top of what was most fashionable and most desirable to

[50] David D. Vail, "Farming by Rail: Demonstration Trains and the rise of Mobile Agricultural Science in the Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly 38*, no. 2 (2018): 151.
[51] Laura I. Baldt, Dressmaking Made Easy (New York: McCall, 1928), 2-4.

the American people. In the 1930s, as more women entered colleges, these catalogs also provided wardrobe ideas aimed at women on campus.[52] Illustrations of chic women in wool suits and lambskin coats directed these young women toward a certain aesthetic. They were sleek silhouettes and very reminiscent of the 1920s jeune fille in the early years of the 1930s. As the decade moved forward and the Great Depression and Dust Bowl continued to strangle all sectors of the American populous, styles became less exaggerated and more utilitarian.[53] Dropped waists climbed back to the natural waist and chemise dresses were set aside in favor of more sturdy and fashionably minimalistic fabrics, cuts, and designs.[54] Thought the Great Depression had restricted the spending money of many families, the styles sported by Sears catalog illustrations still included flowing coats and floor-sweeping gowns. These styles would have required four or more yards of fabric for even a small person. Those constructing clothing at home were limited by what supplies they either had on hand or could afford. Rural women used these catalogs as inspiration for their own sewing projects. The thriftiness of rural women was reflected in the numerous advertisements for discount fabrics or remnants on sale within the pages of *Farmer's Wife*. Children's clothing could be refashioned to fit the newest styles from the catalog illustrations with either tweaks to old outfits or the deconstruction of an adult outfit and the use of that material. A creative sewist could use flour sacks for much of a suit of clothing by taking inspiration from one of these catalogs

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[52] *Everyday Fashions of the Thirties as Pictured in Sears Catalog*, ed. Stella Blum (New York: Dover, 1986), 1.
[53] *Everyday Fashions of the Thirties as Pictured in Sears Catalog*, ed. Stella Blum (New York: Dover, 1986), 62-63.
[54] *Everyday Fashions of the Thirties as Pictured in Sears Catalog*, ed. Stella Blum (New York: Dover, 1986), 84-85.

and then adjusting a pattern they already owned or drafting their own to fit the pieces onto the smaller widths of fabric provided by these sacks.

Paper sewing patterns were another resource for rural women wanting to keep abreast of the fashion trends. There is a long history of shared textile art patterns and techniques between rural women in the United States. This sharing of methods was more prevalent outside of professional circles and predates the origins of standardized patterns for home use as well as the publication of manuals for those in the homemaking field. Beginning in the 19th century, tailoring guides were increasingly published for professionals in the textile arts.[55] These tailoring publications did not include entire patterns or complete instructions for the construction of the garment. Often these guides provided cutting information for different pattern drafting systems and techniques. Later publications offered full-sized patterns for children or accessories and drafting diagrams for adult clothing.[56] Publishers and writers did this with the understanding that women readers already had the skills and experience to create items for themselves and their families with minimal instructions. Women, especially poor and rural women, were expected to know how to make clothing and other textile necessities for their families from childhood training. Even wealthy women or urban women with easy access to a dressmaking professional were expected to have an understanding of the work as well as of embellishing techniques such as embroidery or cross stitching.

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[55] Joy Spanabel Emery, *A History of the Paper Pattern Industry: The Home Dressmaking Fashion Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 8.
[56] Joy Spanabel Emery, *A History of the Paper Pattern Industry: The Home Dressmaking Fashion Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 19.

Sewing patterns for fashion garments changed over the decades. Early paper sewing patterns were sparsely labeled and had brief instructions that assumed a base level of understanding of the garment sewing process. The tissue paper pieces were marked with perforations rather than the numerous, detailed line markings used today. Further, the instructions often had few illustrations as opposed to the modern detailed illustrations and written instructions which became prevalent in the 1940s. Written instructions have also become more detailed and simplistic since mid-century. These changes reflect a perceived change in the textile arts skill levels of the average woman. Pattern companies have expanded their instructions and markings because they assume less skill in and understanding of the garment construction process. Glossaries have also been added to the instructions as sewing terms are less common vernacular than they were in the early-to-mid-1900s.

Organizations Guiding Appearance

Besides these corporate publications and sources there were also sources of information by educational institutions for women in rural areas looking to maintain a fashionable image for themselves and their families. In 1938 the Clothing Economics class, sponsored by the Clothing and Textiles Division of the Home Economics Department at Nebraska State Teachers College at Kearney, put out a short, typed pamphlet entitled “Looking Smart on Campus” (Figure 22). The cover page of the document proudly displays the motto “Gold is where you find it. The dress is how you

wear it."[58] This turn of phrase has many possible meanings. The Nebraska States Teachers College, now known as the University of Nebraska at Kearney, has always been a rural school. From its inception, the vast majority of its student body has hailed from the surrounding rural communities. The document warns against buying too many new items of clothing before coming to campus as campus style can be fickle and it will be easier to see what styles are being maintained and which are moving in and out quickly once one has arrived and settled into campus life. It also notes that the new dressing staple on campus is casual clothing and that women should avoid being too dressy or "provincial" with their wardrobe. Hats and gloves are listed as a requirement for church services, displaying not only the expectation that girl students will attend church but also that they will dress well for the services in keeping with a general understanding of regional religious etiquette. Many university events also had religious services attached. Commencement ceremonies would include a mass at the Nebraska State Teachers College. This ties back to the agrarian philosophy and the idealized pillar of morality that is the rural woman. The majority of this document is a chart of items suggested for women on campus to own, how much the writers expect they should pay for these items and in what quantity they should be purchased, and the colors that are recommended for each item. The colors listed include a majority of earth tones such as brown, green, rust red, and black. This is once again in keeping with the rural standards of the school and its understanding of the background of its students in agrarian communities.

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[58] "Looking Smart on Campus," 1938, Folder Women Students, University of Nebraska at Kearney Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Kearney Archives, Kearney, Nebraska.

Chapter 3: On the Body

One by one, one by one/ Stiches of the hours run/ Through the fine seams of the day/ Till like a garment it is done/ And laid away.[60]

My grandmother and aunt always instilled in me the understanding that to look less than one's best was to present oneself as lesser. My father believed that the way a person dressed would control their ability to maintain social connections for future careers as well as encourage or discourage social interaction with one's peers. Looking one's best was the only way to maintain social standing within the community. This is not a new concept in America, rural or otherwise.

Attitudes on Appearance

Understanding the attitudes that rural women of the 20th century had about clothes and fashion will provide additional understanding of the motivations behind textile work and the meaning of this work to the creators. Americans have long attached status and virtue to clothing. Many believed that the right outfit could transcend class and foster social and employment mobility. Dressing in a certain manner was the ticket by which everyday Americans could enter the higher echelons of society and business. Clothing was not just a personal statement in the first half of the 20th century. It was a matter of national concern. A moral value was assigned to the ability to dress well and look one's best. This moral value was connected to civic virtue and nationalism as well.[63] True

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[60] Hazel Hall, "Three Songs for Sewing," in *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, ed. John Witte (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2000), 72-73.
[63] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *A Perfect Fit: Clothing, Character, and the Promise of America* (New York: Metropolitan/Owl, 2001), 1-2.

Americans dressed well every day and fit in with the rest of American society rather than holding on to immigrant customs of dress or dressing lackadaisically. Women policed one another's appearance and encouraged clean and smart appearances from all members of their community.[64] Dress followed a strict formula for correctness during these decades. This formula was endorsed by women's magazines and etiquette manuals the nation over. The collective identity of the nation was tied to the appearance of its citizens, for better or worse. Jenna Weissman Joselit, in her book *A Perfect Fit: Clothes, Character, and the Promise of America*, describes the difference between modern perceptions of fashion and appearance and that prevalent in the first five decades of the 1900s as follows:

> Today, when fashion is associated with the avant-garde and the cutting edge, with the flouting of convention and the primacy of self-expression, it is hard to imagine a time when fashion had more to do with virtue than with license, with the commonweal rather than the individual. But only half a century ago Americans held fashion to a different standard. [. . .] Fashion was not simply about looking good. Fashion was about being good as well.[67]

Even in the case of giving or accepting charitable goods it was important to maintain a certain level of appearance for both one's personal pride and the pride of the community. Some of the most highly praised clothing made in Works Progress Administration (WPA) sewing rooms during New Deal initiatives in the rural South were those that were said to look as though they had been purchased from a store rather than made by hand.[68] It was

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[64] *Farmer's Wife,* March 1925, 117.
[67] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *A Perfect Fit: Clothing, Character, and the Promise of America* (New York: Metropolitan/Owl, 2001), 4-5.
[68] Walker, Susannah Walker, "WPA Sewing Projects: A Case Study in Southern Encounters with the New Deal Welfare State," in *Clothing and Fashion in Southern History*, ed. Ted Ownby & Becca Walton, 54-83 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 56.

important to the administrators of the program that those receiving relief not look as though they were receiving relief aid, even above efficiency in production of relief supplies.[69] State sponsored attitudes on appearance were also affecting the production of relief supplies in the form of clothing and influencing personal attitudes on the subject.

Religious Influences and Appearance

In the early 20th century, religious identity also played a role in the construction of one's public appearance for many rural Americans. However, it is almost impossible to fully understand a person and the role religious influences play on their appearance.[70] Lynn Hume, author of *The Religious Life of Dress: Global Fashion and Faith* remarks, "Dress is a communicator of many things (identity, beliefs, the social and political order, individuality, group allegiance) as well as a fashion statement [. . .]."[71]

While religion may influence the mode of dress, other factors such as fashion trends, location, and affluence also played a part in the overall appearance. It was a common understanding that one's best clothing was saved for special occasions and church services on Sundays. Even among women of the same religion and living within the same regions of rural America there were a variety of styles worn. For example, the variety of cross necklaces that can be worn provide clues to the religious life and personality of the wearer.

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[69] Walker, Susannah Walker, "WPA Sewing Projects: A Case Study in Southern Encounters with the New Deal Welfare State," in *Clothing and Fashion in Southern History*, ed. Ted Ownby & Becca Walton, 54-83 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 57.
[70] Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, Introduction to *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America,* 1-30, ed. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2.
[71] Lynn Hume, *The Religious Life of Dress: Global Fashion and Faith* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2.

World War I, The 1920s, and the Flapper

In 1925 *Ladies' Home Journal* remarked, "No woman, however hard pressed for time, has a right to look dowdy nowadays."[72] Appearance was the metaphorical capital of the day. The 1920s through the 1950s was a period of great change for American women, both in urban and rural communities. World War I created a wealth boom in the United States and many urban dwelling citizens felt its direct effects. Rural communities also felt the effects of this economic and social change. Soldiers coming back to their rural communities after experiencing the war in Europe had changed.[73] They had seen not only the horrors of war but also experienced the culture and luxuries of European cities such as Paris.

Young women were also influenced by the experiences brought back by soldiers and, for some, their own experiences as war nurses. The ideal woman of the 1920s was out on the town as much as her husband.[74] Young women also convinced their mothers to adopt the new Flapper look. With its emphasis on bobbed hair, unshaped dresses, and visible stockings this new look embodied freedom, rebelliousness, and youth. But the pressure to conform to the societal norm was not gone. It had merely made this new youth culture the norm for urban women. Rural communities react to changes in fashion in a similar manner to which they reacted to new scientific ideas brought by

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[72] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *A Perfect Fit: Clothing, Character, and the Promise of America* (New York: Metropolitan/Owl, 2001), 7.
[73] David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 216-217.
[74] Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 330.

demonstration trains. They were slow to accept it but willing to make it their own once they had some personal experience with the changes.

What is most interesting to consider about Flapper style is that it infantilizes while sexualizing the wearer. Flapper clothing promoted a prepubescent and boyish look that mimicked extreme youth. However, it was also sexually provocative because it promoted the showing of bare or partially bare legs and arms. Bobbed haircuts drew attention to the neck. This contrasts with the preceding Edwardian period. Edwardians remained fairly constrained in their outward displays of sexuality through fashion. In comparison with the clothing favored in the 1930s through the 1950s, there is a stark difference in aesthetic tone from the 1920s. The 1920s was about the boxy, sharp, and provocative. In many ways designers sought the feeling of youth while also pushing an extremely mature feeling in its wearers.

The Changing Shape of Femininity

1930s through 1950s clothing had a more rounded and softer and innocent aesthetic. Even styles considered sexually provocative from this later period, such as the pin-up, maintain this feeling of softness. While the pin-up aesthetic wants its wearers to look and feel more mature and respectable, it also promotes feelings of youthful innocence. This could be perhaps due to the social indoctrination of ideas about masculinity as something sharp and angular and sexual whereas femininity was seen as being soft and rounded and pure and also connected to a childlike nature.

In 1928 Dr. Paul H. Nystrom, professor of Marketing in the Columbia University School of Business, published *Economics of Fashion*. In the opening line of this book, he remarks,

> "Fashion is one of the greatest forces in present-day life. It pervades every field and reaches every class. [. . .] Fashion makes men shave every day [. . .] It makes women wear less clothing than ever before in modern times. [. . .] Fashion is a stronger factor than wear and tear in displacing automobiles, furniture, kitchen utensils, pianos, phonographs, radio instruments and bath tubs. Fashion causes all of this and at the same time makes people like it. To be out of fashion is, indeed, to be out of the world."[75]

While Dr. Nystrom was discussing fashion in general rather than specifically clothing fashion, his words remain relevant. By the later part of the 19th century, clothing fashion had become somewhat universal in the Western world.[76] Many economies relied on the production and export of fashionable goods to the citizens of the West. As one fashion moved in and another faded out these industries had to restructure themselves to fit the newest trend or risk being left behind. The same could be said for those who wanted to remain fashionable in their everyday lives. Innovation and flexibility were key for those producing fashion as well as those consuming it.

Technology and Textile Work

New inventions of the decade helped to create greater freedom of dress for women, even as fashion maintained its relative homogeneity. Sanitary napkins went on sale in 1921 to unheralded success.[77] The development of this disposable product

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[75] Paul H. Nystrom, *Economics of Fashion* (New York: Ronald Press, 1928), iii.
[76] Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007), 58.
[77] Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 336.

allowed women to free up time they would have spent cleaning washable pads and also made the transition to fewer and lighter layers of clothing more accessible. The disposable nature of the napkins also improved hygiene for women as it encouraged the more frequent replacement of the napkin throughout the day.[78] A 1926 survey reported that of the 1,450 rural families surveyed, 98 percent had sewing machines in their homes.[79] By 1927, more than half of all homes in America had electricity.[80] Irons and vacuum cleaners powered by electricity allowed for easier care and cleaning for textiles in and around the home. American women became the target consumers for a world of products and services. Sewing machines, especially electric machines, expanded their presence in the home, cutting down on the amount of hand sewing and offering a slight reprieve in time spent stitching.

Ready-made clothing was increasingly a staple in the wardrobes of working-class people of all regions. This transition to ready-made clothing began with industrialization in the 19th century. By the 1920s more and more Americans, especially those in urban areas, were buying a majority of their wardrobe ready-made.[82] While the Flapper style required less fabric and arguably less technical skill than styles of the past, some women of the 1920s were sewing less than their predecessors. Working-class women, however, still spent up to six hours a week sewing and mending according to a 1926 survey by the

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[78] Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 337.
[79] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 37.
[80] Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 335.
[82] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 37.

Bureau of Home Economics. Rural women still sewed more than urban women and the Bureau of Home Economics found that the larger a community a woman lived in the less likely she was to sew.[83] Urban women were less likely to have the time available to sew the majority of their wardrobe. Ready-made clothing was also more accessible in urban areas and in greater quantities and varieties than in rural locations. In rural areas, as noted in the previous chapter, materials for making one's own clothing were often more readily available than pre-made clothing. This contributed to the more prominent amount of sewing done by rural women, as their in-home production of clothing and other textile goods could be their sole source of these items. Home economics programs in universities also promoted sewing skills and encouraged young women to always dress their best. The 1931 book *Girls and Their Problems: A Manual for Home Economics Classes* by Millicent M. Coss of the Department of Home Economics at the State Normal School in Framingham, Massachusetts offers chapters on color theory, the proper methods for purchasing textiles, and how one's clothing can affect one's health.[84]

This generation of women was the first to have the real choice of whether or not to learn to sew and make one's own clothing. Prior to this almost all clothing was made within the home or purchased made-to-order from a seamstress or tailor. Mary Brooks Picken, of the International Correspondence School (later the Women's Institute of Domestic Arts & Sciences) in Scranton, Pennsylvania, led mail-in dressmaking courses. She wanted to change the way people viewed sewing. To her, it was not an old-fashioned

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[83] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 38.
[84] Millicent M. Coss, *Girls and Their Problems: A Manual for Home Economics Classes* (Boston: Ginn and Co, 1931), xi.

or outdated skill. She sold it as a way to achieve the American dream through its potential for control over personal appearance and entrepreneurial opportunities for women. The Institute as a whole pushed for sewing to be seen as revolutionary and a way for women to express their personality through style and as a thrifty choice for women who had less money but wanted to remain fashionable.

Textile Work and Fashion During the Great Depression

Fashion did not cease to exist during the Great Depression and the ensuing war years of the 1940s. It changed to fit the economic difficulties being experienced the world over. Women spent less on buying new items and instead tried to mend and preserve what they and their families already owned. Perhaps because of the harsh nature of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, styles became softer and more in line with modern ideas of feminine style once more during the 1930s. The waistline of fashion moved back toward the natural waist and colorful prints and bold trimmings became the style of the day. This style held over into the 1940s as World War II and rationing maintained restrictions on fabric usage and other factors of style and design. More utilitarian styles gained popularity throughout these two decades. In the 1930s overalls for women were pictured for the first time in the Sears catalog.[87] The idea of what is feminine and what is masculine is not static. The meaning of these concepts shifts throughout history, allowing for clashing ideas of each from one generation to the next or even one decade to the next. The understanding of these concepts is also affected by factors such as

[87] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 55.

nationalism and xenophobia within a society.[88] Xenophobia and nationalism may be used to justify narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity in dress and actions, resulting in dynamic shifts to the understanding of these concepts within the greater society.

Women had to be creative in their use of materials. Feedsack companies printed colorful patterns on their fabric bags as a marketing tactic once they realized how many women were using the sacks to sew items for their families and homes. Following the United States' entry into World War II, the military needed many resources diverted toward the war effort. The War Production Board (WPB) issued General Limitation Order L-85 which restricted the fabric available to make ready-to-wear clothing. The final goal was to save 100 million yards of fabric for wartime use. The WPB ordered designers to maintain the styles of the previous year in order to discourage fabric waste. Sewing pattern companies were given similar edicts on their creation of new designs, in conjunction with the fabric restrictions. Where the 1930s had maintained simple, tailored styles the 1940s saw these styles become even more tailored and minimalistic in order to prevent extra fabric use and waste of trim materials. Zippers became more popular as a closure since they could replace multiple buttons, allowing for cheaper garments and preservation of more materials for the war.[91]

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[88] Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007), 57.
[91] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 56-61.

Fashion Shows and Television Specials: Do's and Don'ts of Fashion

Public demonstrations have always been a favorite form of sharing ideas of fashion correctness in the United States. Even in the past, people used garments to teach about history and dress norms. As seen earlier with the demonstration trains, when fashion shows became the trend of the day in the 1920s and 30s, there were a variety of shows. Some had the women wear the season's new styles from a particular brand. Others had the models wear a new outfit of their own that they had purchased for the upcoming season. A 1937 fashion show put on by the "Castaway Cavalcade" council of Denver had women dressed in different eras of fashion from their grandmothers' time to the current fashion. They saw this as a wonderful way to present the flow of history. In fact, museums and fashion exhibitions still use this technique to display the flow of time or the development of fashion over the decades. Rural fashions shows might not have had the spectacle that urban events did, but they were extremely inventive and dramatic in their presentations to make up for it. One fashion show in rural Alabama created a skit where they compared outfits for travelling by train and by car in order to see who was dressed the best. Others in similar rural settings created a story with their fashion shows that was set far away to give the audience the feeling of traveling somewhere new.[95] Their audience of farm families loved the chance to see performances in "Paris" or other parts of the world. While these shows provided entertainment to the community, they also provided instruction to the women specifically.

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[95] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *A Perfect Fit: Clothing, Character, and the Promise of America* (New York: Metropolitan/Owl, 2001), 27-29.

Some of these shows would have "Do's and Don'ts" segments where they would instruct women on the correct fashions for their body type or coloring. In a surviving film from 1944, Mary Stuyvesant, a beauty consultant from the brand Pond's instructs girls on the correct way to get ready in the mornings and look well for the best impression on the public. Stuyvesant, being a representative of Pond's, specifically recommends the use of Pond's Cold Cream as part of the daily facial cleansing routine. There are also several videos from similar assemblies where Stuyvesant instructs women in the proper hairstyles and makeup for their facial shape. In the 1930s and 1940s these films were created to encourage women to maintain a certain beauty standard as it was believed that maintaining feminine beauty was important to the war morale. Stuyvesant's films were originally aired on the television network WRGB, based out of New York City.[96] Later they were screened by high schools, colleges, and church groups across America. We see the effects of these campaigns in photography from the period. Women, even in war industry jobs, are expected to start out their day looking smart and do their best to maintain this public standard of femininity throughout their workday.

Womanhood as a Career

An article from *Seventeen* magazine, circa 1950, told young women "being a woman is your career and you can't escape it."[97] Womanhood and what it meant was at the center of life for women of all ages in the 1950s. With the return of soldiers following the end of World War II, many believed that the best way to return to a feeling of

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[96] "How to be Pretty – Mary Stuyvesant 1940's Beauty Guru." *Glamourdaze* online. May 17, 2019. https://glamourdaze.com/2019/05/mary-stuyvesant-1940s-television-beauty-guru.html.

[97] Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (San Jose: ASJA, 2002), 73.

normalcy and get the country back on track was to focus on the home and family as the center of life. This need for conformity and strict social structure bled into the reemerging fashion industry of the post-war period. While rural women might not have had the same perspective on the suburban conformity and American Dream that their urban counterparts did, they were still expected to maintain the national status quo in both their home life and public appearance.

Colleges encouraged women to think of their appearance and learn domestic arts skills even as they studied for other careers. The 1941 *Blue and Gold* yearbook from the Kearney State Teachers College mentions the home economics club several times in relation to campus events and prominent organizations to which students should pay attention. The yearbook also takes special care to include images of women maintaining their wardrobes through mindful laundering practices (Figure 23).[99]

Style in the 1950s was, for women, about being joyously feminine and basking in the release from rationing restrictions and the end of the Great Depression. The aesthetic of this decade was the exaggeratedly feminine. Consumer culture encouraged this attachment to wildly feminine and distinctly domestic interests. Synthetic fibers and fabric finishes were developed during World War II and afterward became popular among the general public.[101] These new fabrics wrinkled less, were more easily washed in many cases, and often had more stretch than those already on the market. Polyester

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[99] *The Blue and Gold: 1941*, ed. George Mitchell, University of Nebraska at Kearney Archives, Kearney, Nebraska, 7, 52.
[101] Judi Ketteler, *Sew Retro: A Stylish History of the Sewing Revolution* (Minneapolis: Voyageur, 2010), 73-74.

emerged in 1953 as a wonder fabric and has maintained a hold on the American clothing industry ever since.

The clothing worn by rural women in American in the first half of the 20th century may not have been exactly the same as that worn by their urban counterparts, even within the same class. However, the influences and cultural context in which they developed their own understanding of current styles and then implemented those understandings in their own wardrobes are the same. The broader changed in American history are visible within the lines of the clothing women wore. By examining not only what women were doing with their lives but also what they were wearing, a better understanding of the lives of women can be formed. Clothing can represent not only class and status indicators. It can also present a reflection of the mental state of a person and how they fit into the broader community being examined.

Conclusion

Whether acknowledged or not, fashion and textiles have been at the forefront of the American mind for decades. The American propensity for conformity lends itself to this assertion, as to be fashionable has always been tied to fitting into the national image. "Well-behaved women seldom make history."[1] What does that mean to modern women and what does that mean to historians? Well-behaved women have worked with textiles most of their lives. They have grown up with baby blankets and towels and dresses in their arms as they learned the ways of womanhood from their communities. From the end of World War I to the decade following World War II, women changed. Their lives and their reliance on textiles changed. Women maintained a close relationship to textiles, whether they lived in rural communities or urban centers, but the shape of the relationship was altered by the war and the global events in between.

Life in rural communities in the first half of the 20th century was not uniform by any means. But there was a certain level of difficulty that many rural women shared in regardless of regional and class differences. The lives or rural women were often such that they echoed Tillie Olsen's character Anna in the novella *Yonnondio*, "You know if you set down you'll never make yourself get up again."[2] They were constantly on the move, working toward something for their families and themselves.

By understanding the textile work of rural women, we can better understand their daily lives in comparison to the ideal presented in many primary sources of the past.

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[1] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1976): 20.
[2] Tillie Olsen, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (New York: Delacorte, 1974), 169.

Using material culture such as textile work and fashion magazines, the discrepancies between the life idealized within the books and magazines of the time and the reality of material culture artifacts can be compared. Women's textile work is often unacknowledged in its impact by historians and even by women themselves in the past. They saw these forms of work as inherent to life as women and therefore unnecessary to document or further explore. In reality, understanding the textile work women, especially rural women, performed is integral to discerning not only the lives of women in the past but also creating a well-rounded image of life for the entire community.

Scientist Christopher Kemp, in his book *The Lost Species: Great Expeditions in the Collections of Natural History Museums*, remarks that it is still important to name new species even if they are already extinct when they are classified. He argues that identification and classification create new channels of research that would not be possible without the links provided by this form of data collection and research. That which goes unnamed is lost is lost to time and closes off roads to greater discoveries. Debra Reid's use of material culture artifacts tells a similar story.[3] Different materials related to textile work and fashion can be used to understand the history of rural women in greater detail. Quilts have a long history of recording the history and experiences of rural women. Women who quilt have developed symbols to tell their stories within the textiles. Quilts are also valuable for discussing class differences and the importance of looking at both the object and the history as well as the skills needed to create them. The

[3] Christopher Kemp, *The Lost Species: Great Expeditions in the Collections of Natural History Museums* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), xiv.

techniques used in the creation of a quilt can tell a researcher just as much as the pattern being created on the topper. Ephemera such as sewing books, women's magazines, and sewing patterns track the changing nature of female consumerism as well as the disconnect between popularized ideals of American life and the realities of rural American womanhood. The Home Economics movement influenced the availability of domestic arts education as well as encouraged the adoption of new technology and methods for homemaking and domestic work. These sources guided the relationship between rural women and fashion as well as the relationships between rural women and their understanding of the place within the community. Finally, the attitudes and cultural norms surrounding the use and dissemination of fashion knowledge and textile work is integral to understanding rural American women and their history with textile work. The societal attitudes surrounding fashion and domestic arts play a large role in the shaping of perspectives for the women discussed in this thesis. Contemporary Americans undervalue the role of textile arts in the lives of historical women. This has led to the museum bias which distills textile history down to the fanciest garments made for the wealthy and the slim and ignores those larger or cheaper textiles and uses them as background props rather than showing the vibrant and important place these unassuming items held in everyday life.[4]

The 1920s began a change in the way women viewed their future. Flapper style and the social changes that came with it created a feeling of autonomy and freedom for

[4] *Busting Myths: Size Inclusion with Extant Garments Ft. Abby Cox and Kenna Libes*, *YouTube* (YouTube, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22veOzwNJLs&t=19s.

women that they had never felt before. The idea of enjoying life just a little longer and engaging in social activities that had before been solely the realm of men appealed to many young women. Marriage and homemaking were still inevitable in the minds of most women, but it didn't have to be right away, and it didn't have to be the boring future they had previously imagined. Fashion was the way women could express this understanding. While rural communities might not have had a direct line to the fashions of the day, they had their delayed exposure through print media and the occasional secondhand account of the most recent visitors to urban centers.[5]

The lives of rural women can still be traced through their interactions with textiles, textiles work, and fashion. While the means through which they interact with these things may have changed drastically, the ability to have their understanding of their lives and current events reflected in these connections to textiles has remained the same. Whereas textile work in the early 20th century was in the forefront of rural women's lives, it has now become something on the periphery. It is no longer necessary to create a quilt for one's family in order to make sure they will have a warm cover for the winter. In fact, quilting has become something of a luxury hobby that is most often reserved for the upper middle-class or the older and retired women who have little else to occupy their time. Schools seldom teach the techniques used for this act of creation and anyone wanting to learn must have the time and money to spare as well as an accessible source for information. The elitist nature of the modern quilting shop can hinder the sharing of

[5] William R. Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 93.

the craft with younger generations as the previously inducted push out new practitioners. Similarly, the sewing of garments for one's self and family has fallen into the territory of a niche hobby for most.

Similar to quilting, garment sewing is now more expensive than purchasing ready-to-wear fashion and is out of fashion for most of the population. However, there is a growing resurgence in interest in textile work and arts among young people. With this in mind, it is the perfect time to reexamine the work of rural women and their connections to textiles if only to compare their experiences with those of modern men and women in rural areas who have reentered the cycle of textile work in their own interpretation of the tradition. The modern textile art resurgence can be connected to a growing desire by feminists to "take back" traditional women's work and make it something overtly empowering for modern women and men. This movement has embraced a variety of traditional women's arts such as cross stitch, knitting and crocheting, yarn spinning, garment sewing, embroidery, and quilting. The emergence of Covid-19 has further created the opportunity for women, both rural and urban, to reclaim these arts during isolation.[6] The sewing of fabric face masks created a huge boom in the home sewing and crafting industry.[7] Further, an increased interest in historical and vintage styles has prompted many women to take up various textile arts in order to revamp their wardrobes and embody the idea that one should look their best at all times,

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[6]Siraad Dirshe, "Black Women are Knitting Their Way into History," *New York Times*, Mar. 5, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/style/knitting-hobby-black-women.html

[7] Laura Malt Schneiderman, "In the Age of COVID, Sewing Sees a Resurgence," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Aug. 17, 2020. https://www.post-gazette.com/life/lifestyle/2020/08/17/Sewing-in-the-time-of-COVID-resurgence-clothing-masks/stories/202008070117

even when at home during a pandemic. The uptick in interest in vintage and historical fashion may be in part attributed to the new social environment created by the pandemic, creating a feeling of nostalgia for what is seen as the simpler life of the early 20th century. The environmental movement and the desire to reduce waste has also bolstered interest in these skills once more. By examining the relationship between the women of the past and textile work, modern researchers can better understand the differences and similarities in current relationships with textile work and fashion for rural American women. This allows for a greater understanding of the people of the past as well as the people of the present. It also provides opportunity to speculate on the developing relationship with textile work and fashion that women in the future will experience.

The historical narrative surrounding women from rural areas as well as the material culture attached to them needs to be expanded upon. In order to better understand these women and their lives, researchers must examine the trapping of their lives and how this fit int the broader cultural context as well as how it might be shaped by unique personal experiences. As in Susan Glaspell's play "Trifles," examining the items in one's world and the hidden meaning that can be found in them can provide a more well-rounded understanding of the experiences of rural women. Textile work and fashion are the perfect areas for examination because they have been such a constant presence in the lives of women. The fact that much of the textile work done by rural women and the regard to fashion they held was taken for granted and given little special treatment by the women themselves in many cases allows for the development of an understanding of textile work and changes in fashion as a reflection of the self and the environment.

The history of needlecraft, other textile work, and fashion history have been considered a niche area of research for too long. By examining these areas and material culture items related to them we can better understand the lives of the everyday American woman. Further, by examining these items and areas within the context of rural life we can better understand the less considered struggles of rural life and the way women in rural communities interacted with their environment and community. By examining the differences between the ideals presented by agrarianism and the reality that was lived by rural Americans we can better understand the flaws in historical interpretation of rural life as well as urban life by extension. This will enrich the broader historical narrative and allow for the more accurate depiction of the lives of rural Americans in the 20th century and in other periods of time. It will also allow for more understanding of the everyday lives of women in different living conditions and how regional differences, class, and environment play a part in the production of textile items and how women reflect their understanding of "looking smart" and being in fashion based on their proximity to sources of information on these topics.

Textiles and textile work have long been associated with rural women. Rural women have lived and died in the cycle of their textile work. The people of the present look at women and think to understand the textiles they have made, but perhaps they should be looking to understand the woman through her textile work instead. The work cycle of textiles may be thousands of years in the making but the voice of each rural woman who has interacted with these fibers and fashions remains singular in its nature. This means that while each item related to textile work and fashion may be connected to

the broader industry and textile tradition of America, the understanding that can be gleaned from its very materials and creation is a unique look into the history of rural womanhood and its joys and sorrows. Hazel Hall inadvertently describes the continued place of textiles in rural women's lives in her poem "Late Sewing".

There is nothing new in what is said
By either a needle or a thread:
Stitch, says a needle, Stitch says the thread;
Stitch for the living; stitch for the dead;
All seams measure the same.

Garb for the living is light and gay.
While that for the dead is a shrouding grey,
But all things match on a later day
When little worm-stitches in the clay
Finish all seams the same.[8]

[8] Hazel Hall, "Late Sewing," in *The Collected Poems of Hazel Hall*, ed. John Witte (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2000), 74.

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Appendix of Images

Figure 1. Gilbert “George” Finch Quilt, Buffalo County Historical Society Archives, Kearney, Nebraska.

Figure 2. Mary-Anne Henry Quilt, Personal Collection of the Author.

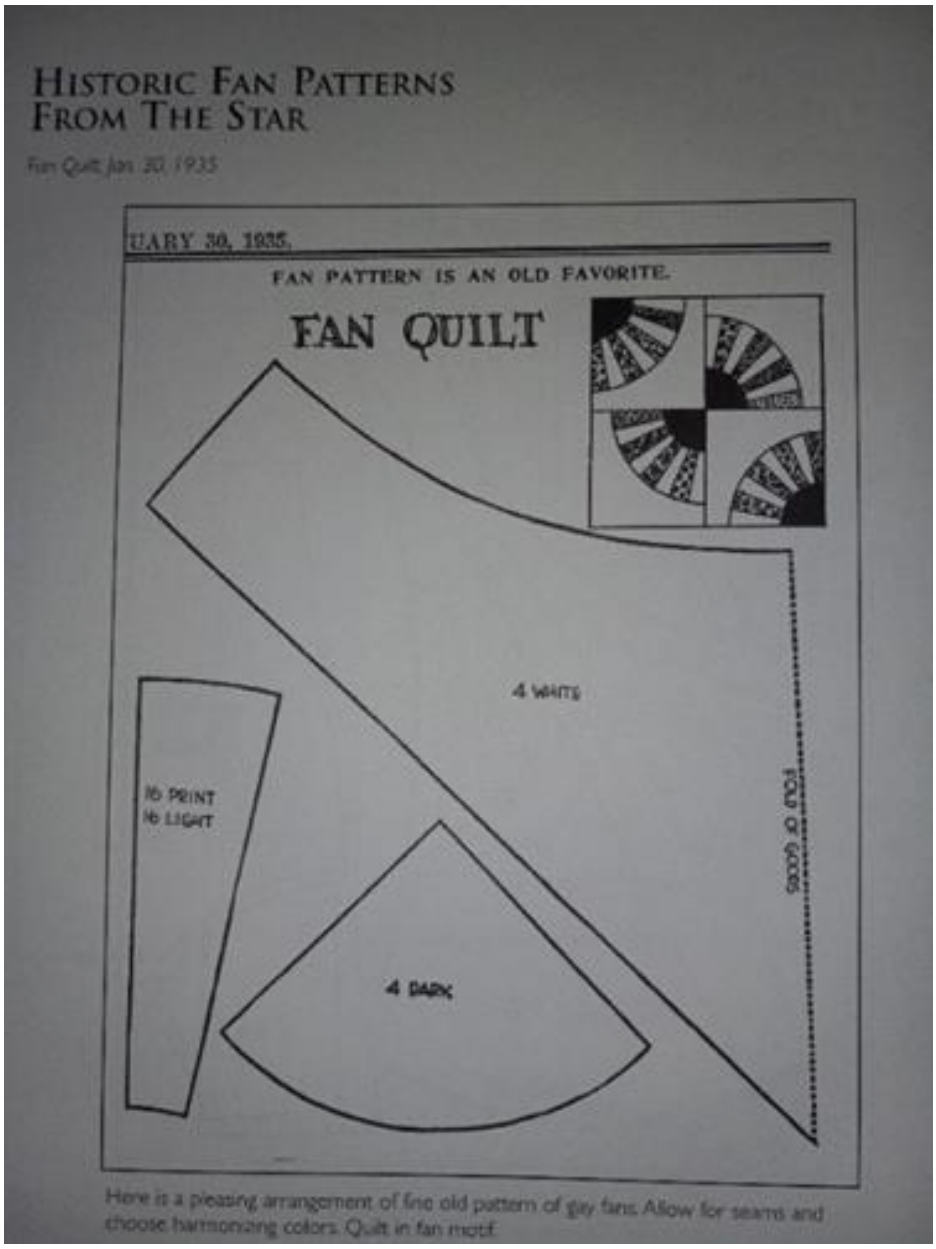

Figure 3. Fan Quilt Pattern. Reprinted from Kansas City Star Newspaper.

Figure 4. Album Quilt. Made by Royal Neighbors Organization in Alliance, Nebraska. Image from International Quilting Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Figure 5. Cobweb Quilt. Image from International Quilt Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Figure 6. Arbor Window Quilt. Image from International Quilting Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

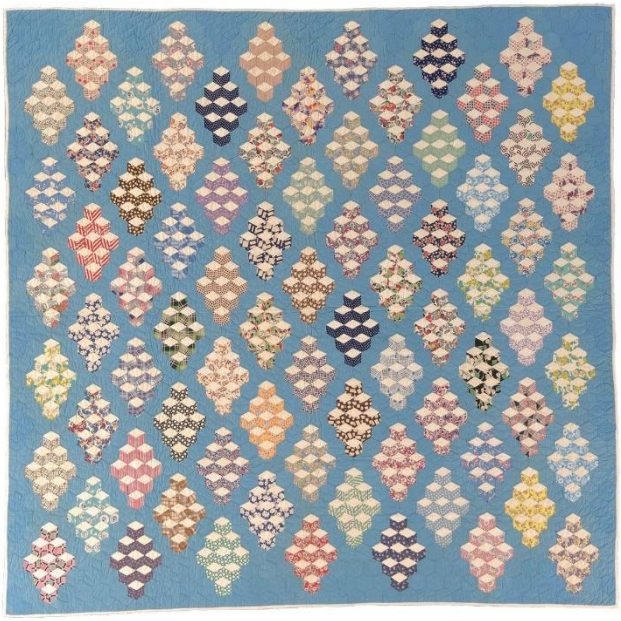

Figure 7. Diamond Fields Quilt. Image from International Quilting Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Figure 8. Album Quilt. Image from International Quilting Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Figure 9. Colonial Ladies Quilt. Image from International Quilting Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Figure 10. Birds Quilt. Image from International Quilting Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Figure 11. Miller Quilt. Buffalo County Historical Society Archives. Kearney, Nebraska.

Figure 12. Mail Order Pattern, circa 1960. From Personal Collection of the Author.

MORE PROFIT per bushel for farmers in CANADA

Cheaper Land 15c.
Better Yield - 10c.
Lower Freight 19c
Better Price - 4c.
Total 48c.

CANADA'S advantages as a wheat-growing country are set out in a report to the President of the United States made in 1923 by the Secretary of Agriculture, the late Mr. Henry C. Wallace. Taking the figures in the report and working them out on the per bushel basis, the total advantages for the Canadian wheat grower come to approximately 48 cents per bushel in increased profit. These advantages are as follows:—

First *Cheaper Land*

The report (page 26) averages the value of farm lands for Canada as a whole in 1922 at $40 per acre, and in the prairie provinces at from $24 to $32. These prices are for improved farms; prairie lands in Western Canada close to railways can be bought at $15 to $20 an acre. But take $24 an acre as the basis for Canada's wheat lands. In eleven of the Western Wheat States, land values range from $46 to $110. Take $46 for sake of more than fair comparison. The interest charge at 7% would be $1.68 per acre in Canada as against $1.22 in the Western States. When divided out on the basis of produced bushels per acre, the interest charge is 25.8 cents per bushel against 10.8 cents, which figures out to **an advantage of 15 cents a bushel for Canada, on the basis of cheaper land.**

Second *Extra Yield*

Again (page 26) the report gives the average yield of wheat on the Canadian prairies during 1913-22 at 15 to 16 bushels per acre, and in the American North West at 10.6 to 14.3. This increased yield, due to richer land, reduces the cost per bushel from approximately 98 cents in the U.S.A. to 79 cents in Canada (the estimate for 1923), **a clear saving of 19 cents a bushel.**

Third *Lower Freight Rates*

On page 21 of the report is printed a table showing comparative freight rates between points of like distance in Western United States and Western Canada. For example, the rate for carrying a bushel of wheat from Teton, Montana, to Duluth, a distance of 1,004 miles, is 25.2 cents per bushel, while from Conquest, Saskatchewan, in the centre of the Canadian prairies, to Port Arthur, at the head of the Great Lakes, a distance of 1,002 miles, it comes to 15 cents per bushel, **a difference in rates of 10.2 cents in favor of Canada.**

Fourth *Better Price*

On page 27 of the report to President Coolidge the superior quality of the hard Canadian wheat is attested by the fact that American millers import it for mixing purposes and pay the duty, while it sells at a premium in Liverpool. Prices for wheat in Canada during the farmers' marketing season, 1924, were steadily higher than in the United States. For example, on December 4th, 1924, according to the daily press despatches, the price of Number One Canadian Northern in store at Port Arthur or Fort William was $1.58¾; American Number One Hard Spring stood at $1.54¾ at Chicago; **a difference favoring Canada by 4 cents a bushel.** (Sometimes this difference is considerably more.)

Costs Less, Sells for More

On these four items alone, as quoted above, the extra profit to the Canadian farmer comes to 48 cents a bushel. **These are the conditions which have made Canada the greatest exporter of wheat in the world.**

Wheat is not the only crop in Canada. At the recent International Show at Chicago, Canada took prizes for her corn, oats, barley, timothy, clover, peas, flax, rye and alfalfa, as well as the championship and sweepstakes in wheat. She also took championships and first prizes for horses and cattle, and carried off more than three-quarters of the prizes for sheep. Canada's dairy products have increased by $164,000,000 since 1900. Canada's apples are world famous.

Write your name and address on the margin below and we will send you a free illustrated book on Canada, giving you details about stock-raising, grain growing and fruit farming. Canada wants more good farmers and will be glad to give you information and official advice. Write today.

Come to Canada

Bigger Crops Lower Cost

Department of Immigration and Colonization
Room 178 Ottawa, Canada
Please send me Book I have checked below:
Eastern Canada ( ) Western Canada ( )
Name.....
Address.....R.F.D.....
Town.....State.....
(Write name and address plainly)

Figure 13. *The Farmer's Wife*, March 1925. Personal Collection of the Author.

Figure 14. *The Farmer's Wife*, March 1925. Personal Collection of the Author.


THE VOICE

Clyde Malone Attends National Urban League Conference

Voice to Award Scholarship

Dramatic Club And Community Chorus

The Voice

Housing and Employment Major Interest

PEOPLE YOU SHOULD KNOW

Minister Returns

First Polio Case

Figure 15. *The Lincoln Voice* (Lincoln, Nebraska). First Issue Cover. Image from Chronicling America.

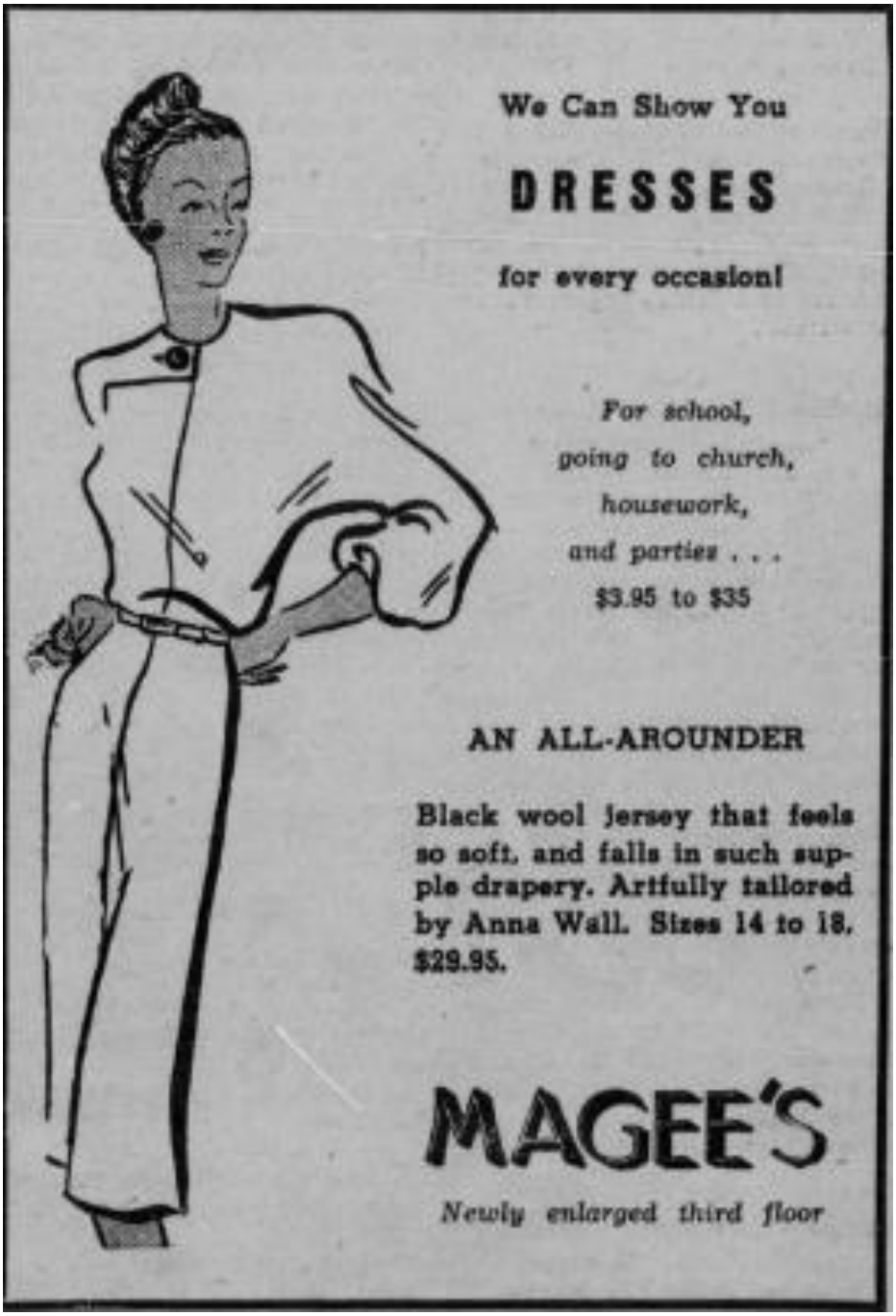

Figure 16. *The Lincoln Voice* (Lincoln, Nebraska). Image from Chronicling America.

Kiddies' Korner

By
MADREE PENN

DADDY'S EVENING FAIRY TALE

by MARY GRAHAM BONNER

THE OPERA GLASSES.

"Hello, other end," said one end of the opera glasses.

"Hello, other end," answered the end that had been spoken to.

"I can make things look so far, far away," said the end which had spoken first, which we will call Tiny View.

"Children Like to Look."

Figure 17. *The Monitor* (Omaha, NE). Image from Chronicling America.

Figure 18. Ivory Flakes. *Women's World* magazine (June, 1927). Personal Collection of the Author.

Figures 19 & 20. *The Household Magazine* (September, 1931). From Personal Collection of the Author.

Figure 21. McCall's Magazine (July, 1935). From Personal Collection of the Author.

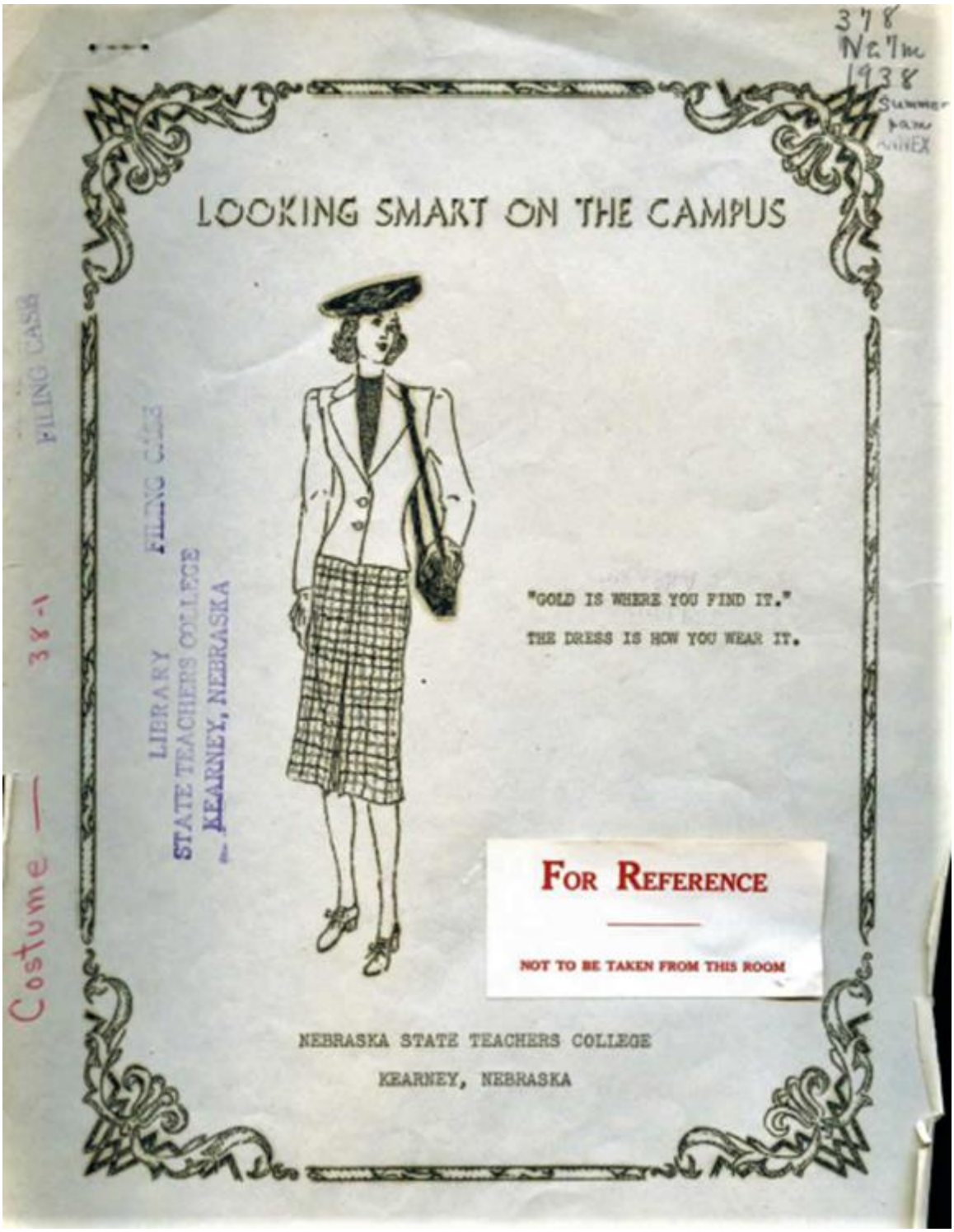

Figure 22. “Looking Smart on Campus” from the University of Nebraska at Kearney Archives.

MORE CLOTHES, MORE FRIENDS—"That's not really the case here," says Thelma McCoy as she shows a new dress to preceptress Mrs. Nelson, and Anna Hanson, "because, before I bought this I just didn't have a thing to wear!"

IT'S "BLUE SATURDAY" AT CASE HALL—Nadine Nyffeler and Elizabeth Sharrah find that Saturday morning is a good time to indulge in some laundry work.

Figure 23. Images included in *Blue & Gold* Yearbook, 1941 from the University of Nebraska at Kearney Archives.