Leave The Dishes In The Sink

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Introduction

I came to Logan, Utah, in 1939, with my husband Wynne Thorne, when he joined the agronomy faculty at Utah State Agricultural College, now Utah State University. Although I had recently earned my own Ph.D. in consumption economics, the administration did not want both husband and wife on the faculty; so I was a housewife, or full time homemaker as the home economists put it, and I added volunteer community work.

The culture of Cache Valley at that time encouraged homemakers to be perfect housekeepers and, in canning season, to bottle over three hundred quarts of peaches, pears, and tomatoes, not to mention jams, jellies, and pickles. Frankly I didn’t go for perfect housekeeping, and I didn’t always meet the quota of three hundred quarts, but I bottled, although I thought other things were more important.

I was seeking to make wise choices on how best to use my time, energy, and Wynne’s income to create the level of living that we wanted. That’s one aspect of consumption economics. Some aspects of the consumption of goods and services are outside the market system, including unpaid household production and governmental services such as safe water, schools, libraries, and good roads. Much of the giving and receiving of community services is outside the market system. Consumption economics is also concerned with the distribution of wealth and income, including the gap between rich and poor. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the War on Poverty of the 1960s, consumption economics was especially important, but it has remained significant no matter how the general economy performs. By the end of the twentieth century, consumption economics had become interdisciplinary and was known as family and consumer economics (or sciences).

Parallel to the growth of consumption economics were changes in the lives of women. Women entered the labor force in increasing numbers. Even mothers of young children were wage earners because families needed more than the male provider. The proportion of single parent families rose, and women began to ask questions about why men’s wages were higher than women’s for the same work, and why men dominated in economic and political affairs. In the late 1960s second
wave feminism was born, and the women’s movement would broaden throughout the rest of the century.

I grew up in Oregon with a father who helped found consumption economics. My academic experience as daughter, graduate student, and then wife of an academic took place at the land grant colleges and universities of Oregon, Iowa, Wisconsin, Texas, and Utah, with most of my years being spent in Utah.

In these pages I describe daily life in land grant universities, including free buttermilk spigots during the Great Depression, graduate work in the 1930s, and how careers were built, often with women’s help. I seek also to make visible the work that women do at home and for the broader community, work that has rarely been recognized. Four major themes emerge:

- A local perspective on larger history. For example, I trace the grassroots activities of women’s clubs in Oregon and Utah, and the ways in which some of them mobilized as the second wave of feminism emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I also show how national movements—the 1960s war on poverty, the movement against the war in Vietnam, the ecology or environmental movement—took shape in northern Utah.
- Mobilization for social change on behalf of liberal causes, from efforts to get a sewage disposal system and adequate libraries in the 1950s, to funding migrant programs in the 1960s, and the introduction of women’s studies into Utah State University’s curriculum in the 1970s. Some of these activities were primarily local; at other times they linked with national initiatives and resources, as in the war on poverty.
- My ambivalent and changing relationship with the Mormon Church, from early years in Oregon as part of a Mormon minority facing prejudice, to the warmth of the LDS branch when I was a graduate student at Iowa State, to my subsequent decades living in Utah where the LDS Church dominates. My husband and I are fifth generation Mormons, descended from pioneers who crossed the plains to settle Utah, Arizona, and Idaho. I describe our ultimate disillusionment with the authoritarianism of the church. By now my children and I think of ourselves as ethnic Mormons although we are no longer church members.
- Finally this book portrays our family’s cross-generational mobility out of subsistence farming and into urban, professional lives. My mother grew up on a small farm in Snowflake, Arizona, and at age nineteen married out of that rural life. My father grew up on a farm in Cove, on the Utah-Idaho border. My husband Wynne Thorne grew up on a farm in Perry, near Brigham City. Both my father and my husband graduated from Utah Agricultural College in Logan, Utah, and then went on to graduate work and academic careers.
Over the decades I balanced aspects of my life, which many people at the time regarded as contradictory. I was wife of an academic administrator, mother of five children, and yet, in spite of a late start, achieved an academic career of my own. I was a wife-mother and a feminist too, in spite of a strand of contemporary feminism that said family and feminism are incompatible. I was among the individuals who made feminism respectable on our university campus. Throughout my adult life I did community work, believing it vital to social justice. Most remarkable of all—in spite of living in conservative Cache Valley, Utah, for over sixty years—I remained a liberal.

My definition of a liberal is one who cares about social justice and who believes in equal opportunity and that the protections of the United States Constitution should apply to everyone on an equal basis. I had the good fortune of working with Calvin Rampton when he was governor of Utah (1964–1976). He once said, “I’m a liberal, and I ran the state rather well for twelve years.” He also observed that our former United States senator, Frank Moss, was a liberal who served Utah well for eighteen years.

At a crucial moment in 1971, Senator Moss and Governor Rampton helped me keep a Northern Utah community program from going down the drain.

My narration is not an exact historical chronicle, and these are not merely memoirs. I reach backward and forward in time, seeking to understand what happened. So I have chosen to call these accounts adventures, but they represent my perspective on—and experience of—historical American social change in the twentieth century, especially as it affected women.

Lewis Mumford once wrote that we should try to live life twice “as we encounter it day by day . . . Lacking this second life, we neither carry over consciously what is valuable from the past, nor successfully dominate the future; we fail to bring to it the energy and insight we have potentially acquired in the act of living: rather, we let ourselves be carried along by the tide, bobbing helplessly up and down like a corked bottle, with a message inside that may never come to shore.”

In a way I have lived my life twice, because after leaving home at age eighteen, I wrote regularly to my family. These letters, weekly as a student, later every three weeks, written over more than seven decades are one source of this book. I may be many things but I’m certainly not a corked bottle.