Leave The Dishes In The Sink

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1 Growing Up in the 1920s

Corvallis, Oregon, was a pleasant town to grow up in. It was small. Many streets were unpaved roads with wild morning glories along edges and sometimes down the center. Sidewalks were mostly board walks. It was easy to lose a nickel between the cracks, if you were lucky enough to have a nickel. When barefoot, you got slivers in your feet. The vacant lots often had a blooming rose bush, wild blackberries, and what we called marguerites, a white daisy-type flower with a yellow center. Elaine, my sister, and I gathered them by the armful. I had been born in 1914, and she came along two years later. A neighbor once took a picture of the two of us. I was five and Elaine was three, and we were in our Sunday white dresses, standing in the vacant lot holding marguerites. But that wasn’t the first picture. Earlier our neighbor, trying out her camera, snapped a picture of us in our everyday clothes as we stood on the board walk looking like ragamuffins. Mama, much upset, dashed out to ask for another picture after she got us properly cleaned up. We did not own a camera.

Houses in Corvallis were mostly frame. Only rich people had brick homes, or so we thought. Wood was universally burned for fuel, and we used it in the kitchen stove. We had no central heating, but there was a pot bellied stove in the living room. Our father bought cords of green slab wood in four-foot lengths, which were stacked in the yard until dry; whereupon the man who sawed wood came, and the whine of his saw spread throughout the neighborhood. Our father then used a wooden wheelbarrow to deposit the chunks in the woodshed.

My early years were spent in Corvallis because my father, Newel H. Comish, had joined the faculty of Oregon Agricultural College (OAC) in 1915. He taught economics-and-sociology, a phrase I learned to spill out as one word when asked, “What does your father do?”

The lower campus of Oregon Agricultural College was not far from our house. It had winding walks, and at the bottom was the Lady of the Fountain, a Grecian statue in a circular pool among shady trees. In summer, the traveling Chautauqua speakers would come and pitch their big tent in an open area of the lower campus. Our mother bought
tickets and took Elaine and me. It was usually hot and breathless in the
tent, and small children crawled among the legs of audience and
wooden folding chairs. There we got our first experience of lectures
and operetta. I can still remember the Mikado, with slant-eyed maidens
singing about marrying Yum-Yum.

Going west from the lower campus and slightly uphill, one came to
the administration building, beyond which was an open quadrangle
with a white bandstand. The agricultural building was across the west
end of that quadrangle. We used to walk there to buy ice cream.
Beyond the buildings were the college barns, where Papa took us to
learn about cows, sheep, pigs and horses, and about the parts of wag-
ons and harnesses, so that we would not disgrace him when we visited
our many aunts, uncles, and cousins living on farms on the Utah-Idaho
border, where he grew up. Three times in my youth we visited
Snowflake, Arizona, where Louise Larson, our mother, had grown up.
Our last visit as a family was in 1930, and Grandpa and Grandma’s
home looked the same as earlier—they used coal oil lamps, they drew
water from a well, and a path along the garden led to the outhouse.
Grandpa Alof Larson was known as a fine farmer, but his acreage was
so small, it was mostly subsistence farming.

Oregon Agricultural College, like other land grant institutions, had
orderly experimental farm plots, a damp smell of growing plants in
greenhouses and soils labs, and a head house with an inevitably dusty
smell and look. I would one day marry a soil scientist and come to
know such places well. Ice cream could be bought at the college dairy,
and there was free buttermilk from a spigot, a help to poverty stricken
students trying to get through college on a shoestring. It seemed that
most students were poor. Later I would see free buttermilk spigots at
the land grant institutions of Utah, Iowa, and Wisconsin. In the fall,
“ag” students made and sold cider, real cider, which if kept a few days
became hard—we called it apple jack—a transformation impossible
with the insipid pasteurized apple juice that came later.

At Oregon Agricultural College, as at several other agricultural col-
leges, the students were called Aggies. As a small child I regarded the
college students with awe. On Wednesdays the freshmen wore special
attire: the men wore green beanie caps, and the women wore a green
ribbon across the forehead and around the head, just above the round
poof of hair over each ear. “Rats” made of hair combings were inside
the poofs to keep them round. The college students went canoeing on
Mary’s River. For homecoming, they built a giant wooden framework
that became a giant bonfire, to cheer their team on to football victory. College students liked music and played songs such as “Three O’Clock in the Morning” on Victrolas.

In 1920 I entered first grade in North School in Corvallis, a school later renamed Franklin School. It was a two-story, square, frame building, that somehow had been cut in half vertically and then moved in two parts from some earlier location and put back together again. It had very high ceilings. At the start of each morning, an eighth grade girl pounded out “Stars and Stripes Forever” on the piano in the lower hall, as girls and boys in separate lines marched in orderly manner into the building, past a framed portrait of Miss Willard on the wall. We knew she was a famous person and had done good deeds connected somehow with education.

When I was in the fifth grade, my mother became president of the Parent-Teacher Association, and when she sent me with a written message about official matters, I was allowed into the building ahead of the rest of the children. Such honor! Later she was president of the Corvallis PTA Council, when it was very new. My mother was also involved in carrying petitions to set aside a piece of land near the school for a small park. And she supported the public library when it was newly opened in a white frame house a few blocks from us. I was always checking out books, including all of the volumes of the Book of Knowledge. My mother also served as a judge of elections at voting time, on behalf of Democrats. All these activities were considered suitable for wives and mothers, but were not deemed anywhere near as important as what my father did. It took the feminist movement of the 1970s to make me realize the extent of my mother’s civic activities and their influence on me.

My mother’s membership in the College Folk Club and in the Women’s Club were also considered appropriate for a woman in her position. The Folk Club included all women in any way connected with the college—women faculty, wives of faculty, secretaries, and even women relatives living in faculty homes. Actually, the college president’s wife, Leonora Hamilton Kerr (Mrs. William Jasper Kerr) created the Folk Club. The Women’s Club, on the other hand, was primarily for town women, but interested faculty wives could belong. Members dressed up for meetings, and spoke of each other as Mrs. or Miss, rarely using first names.

Home economics was an important part of Oregon Agricultural College. As a child I knew which was Snell Hall, and I heard the name
Dr. Margaret Snell. Years later I learned that OAC was the fourth oldest land grant institution continuously offering work in home economics, earlier called household economy or domestic science. In 1889 Dr. Margaret Snell, who held a degree in medicine from Boston University, was hired to teach household economy and hygiene to women students at OAC. The board of regents had hesitated over appointing her because she did not have a certificate from a school of cookery, but finally decided that her physician’s qualifications (relevant for teaching hygiene and sanitation) outweighed this lack. Snell returned to Boston for quick training in cookery. At OAC, her laboratory included “a small wood-burning stove, a few saucepans, and a sewing machine or two.”¹ Snell, by the way, wore loose dresses and flat heeled shoes rather than the fashionable wasp waist and corsets of the time.

When I was a high school student, I took a foods class from Lura Keiser who had trained under Snell at OAC. She told us that in the early days of the college, the shape of each saucepan was painted on the wall of the cooking laboratory to show where the pan was to be hung. We also learned from Miss Keiser that most women students were so poor they owned only two dresses; they wore one all week to class, and each evening they changed to the second dress for dinner because it was proper to change. The following week they reversed the order of the two dresses.

There were not many women faculty in the 1920s, and I think my mother knew most of them socially. She saw them at Folk Club and visited with them at all-faculty functions. I recall as a child standing beside Mama on the sidewalk near the campus, shifting my weight from one foot to another, silently, while she passed the time of day with Dean Ava B. Milam or with A. Grace Johnson, both in home economics. Something I noticed about home economists was that none of them had husbands. Only one had children, and she was a widow, Sara Prentiss, whose son Donald went through grade school with me. It seemed strange to me that most home economists were teaching about homemaking but did not themselves have husbands, and rarely had children.²

I was aware that my mother valued the information she received from home economists, much of it through the extension service. On warm afternoons in the early summer of 1923, when Mama was expecting her third child, Elaine and I would walk with her over to the college where she attended lectures given by a visiting doctor, Caroline O. Hedger. Elaine and I played in the shade of a large hedge outside the building, waiting for Mama to emerge, whereupon we walked sedately
home, one on each side of her as she had taught us, because in this way we helped “conceal her condition from the eyes of the gazing public.” Her dark cape was also concealing.

During the First World War, Dr. Hedger had gone to Belgium as representative of Chicago women’s clubs, which had special concern for children and sought to help control a typhoid epidemic. Ava Milam arranged for Hedger to spend six different summers at the Oregon campus to discuss health habits of children. Early on, my mother had been terribly underweight and tense, and when she met Hedger for the first time, asked her advice. Hedger surmised that Mama needed eyeglasses and told her to go to Portland to get a really good medical eye examination. So Mama and Papa had gone to Portland on the train, and she secured eyeglasses that solved the problem. No wonder she attended Hedger’s lectures every chance she got.

In her autobiography Milam wrote that Hedger reminded her a good deal of Margaret Snell—“Tall, large, but not overweight. An advocate of hygienic living, she wore men’s shoes and decried the shoes decreed by fashion for women’s wear.” Were Hedger and Snell part of first wave of feminism? It seems to me they were, though I doubt they used the term. Fifty years later I read early extension records of Utah Agricultural College to find out the nature of early programs of farmers’ institutes and homemakers’ conferences. Caroline Hedger was a visiting speaker at these Utah conferences in the 1920s, just as she was at OAC. There was a circuit of agricultural colleges that she and other professionals visited.

The Utah Agricultural College records also mention a health score card for children. I know that Elaine and I were scored on a health card. And there is a suggestion that a home-constructed trapeze is good exercise for children. I still remember when Mama hung a trapeze made of two ropes and a section of broom handle on the back porch for us. We became quite adept on it. Faculty families had as much access to extension service information as farm families of the state.

After our baby brother, Newel William, was born in 1923 (having surprised an unsuspecting public), he was raised according to government bulletins put out by the United States Children’s Bureau. The bulletin Infant Care emphasized establishing good habits in the baby. Keep him on a rigid schedule, it said. Feed him every four hours and pick him up to soothe his crying only if there is a physical cause, such as wet diapers or a pin sticking in him. Mama was unaware of the behavioral assumptions of this bulletin and the history behind it. She followed the four hour
schedule, but defied the bulletin by rocking and cuddling her baby whenever she wanted. She took Newel to the well baby clinic, one of thousands established across the country by the Sheppard-Towner Act.  

At this time intelligence quotient tests were being used in the schools, and our parents were pleased when we did well on them. In fact, when she was in second grade, Elaine was placed on the school stage at an evening PTA meeting and given an IQ test as a demonstration. The audience laughed when, replying to the question of where pork came from, she said “cows.” As I watched I suspected that Elaine was being exploited, but this incident shows the enthusiasm of Oregon schools for “advanced” educational ideas. The idea that IQ tests support social mobility and justify inequities would come later.

My parents were “upwardly mobile,” to use a term from sociology, but they never used such a term. They both had grown up on small subsistence farms, and now they were in the academic world. In his autobiography my father tells how he acquired the habit of correct speech. In 1905, at age seventeen, he drove by horse and wagon the twenty miles from the family farm in Cove, Utah, to Logan, where he found lodgings and entered a high school level class of 115 students. On that day he began six years of education, first at Brigham Young College in town and then at Utah Agricultural College on the hill. The 1911 Utah Agricultural College yearbook, The Buzzer, shows Newel Comish as a senior, a debater, and president of the Ethical Society (ten male members), which he organized because there was no course on ethics at the college, and he wanted to know about ideas of right and wrong. The society had speakers and did reading.

Newel Comish was the youngest in the family and the only one to complete college. Many years later he wrote of that experience:

I grew up in an environment in which anything but the King’s English was spoken. Everyone said, among other provincialisms: “It ain’t so.” “They was comin’ home.” “I have went to town.” “We had saw him in the morning.” “They was theirselves to blame” . . . My English habits were atrocious. I didn’t know what was grammatically right and wrong. To me, a good course in grammar was a God-send . . . Yet it consumed considerable time to overcome bad English habits. I broke them largely by correcting an incorrect sentence by immediately repeating a correct one; and by thinking carefully before speaking. This latter device slowed my speech, but the results in time paid dividends. Indeed, by the time I received my Bachelor’s degree, I could speak and
write effectively and usually correctly. In fact, I even headed the English department in the Snowflake Stake Academy for two years after graduating from college.5

While teaching at the Snowflake Stake Academy, a Mormon high school, he fell in love with Louise Larson, his brightest student, and they married in 1913, soon after her graduation. Louise had always spoken good English because her mother, May Hunt Larson, had been trained to teach and came of a line of women school teachers. Louise’s great-grandparents, Louisa Barnes Pratt and Addison Pratt, firm in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, kept journals that were published by a later generation.6

Newel and Louise Comish lived in Chicago and then in Madison while he pursued graduate work in economics, first at the University of Chicago and then at the University of Wisconsin, where he completed his master’s degree. Many of his professors were Progressives, and when he took the position at Oregon Agricultural College in 1915, Oregon was known politically as a Progressive state because of its legislation.

The Progressive Movement

The Progressive movement, at its height from 1900 to 1915, tackled problems such as tariffs, unjust taxes, monopolies, and graft. Its most durable aspect was social legislation, much of which was passed from the late nineteenth century through the 1920s. Progressives asserted that government has a wide and pervasive responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, and for the poor and powerless among them. In the presidential election of 1912, Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, both running on Progressive platforms, garnered almost 70 percent of the popular vote.7

As an undergraduate in Utah, Newel Comish had already indicated interest in the Progressive movement by his comments on the proposed federal income tax, which was a debate question, and in organizing the Ethical Society. At the University of Chicago, he took a course in ethics from the famous James H. Tufts, and a course in trade unionism from Robert Hoxie. In moving to the University of Wisconsin, he became a student of Richard T. Ely, economist, and E. A. Ross, sociologist, both known as Progressives. The state of Wisconsin had a Progressive reputation, thanks in large part to the LaFollettes and the famed economist, John R. Commons.
Oregon was also a Progressive state with legislation such as the initiative and referendum, and recall. The Oregon law limiting the working day for women to ten hours was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in 1908, and Oregon’s law for a ten hour day for both men and women was upheld in 1917.

My mother, too, was part of the Progressive movement as a member of women’s clubs that supported the United States Children’s Bureau and various social programs. The bureau, women’s clubs, parent-teacher associations, civic groups, and trade unions provided impetus for the Sheppard-Towner Act, which existed from 1922 to 1929, and made possible prenatal and well baby clinics across the nation. The bureau focused especially on rural areas where women were isolated and lacked medical care, and here the extension service of the land grant colleges played an important part. The Children’s Bureau sent out thousands of copies of Infant Care and although it was based on John Watson’s behaviorist ideas, the bureau did a great deal of good.8

I inherited my sense of social justice from my parents, whose beliefs were influenced by the Progressive movement.

Our Pattern of Living

The president of Oregon Agricultural College, William Jasper Kerr, was a former president of Utah Agricultural College. In Utah, Kerr practiced polygamy, as did most Mormon men who held church leadership positions, but upon accepting the appointment in Oregon, he left the LDS church and brought only one wife to Corvallis. His polygamist past was a well kept secret. Kerr promptly joined the Presbyterian church and many of the OAC faculty did likewise, for reasons of status. When my father arrived in Corvallis to take up his new position, Kerr said to him, “I expect you to keep the Mormon missionaries off my doorstep,” and Papa did.

Prejudice against Mormons was unbelievably strong, and our folks carefully told us, “If anyone asks what church you belong to, never say Mormon. Instead, say the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and they won’t know what church it is. If people find out we are Mormons, Papa will lose his job at the college.” Our parents were fourth-generation Mormons, descended from forebears who had crossed the plains under grueling conditions. Snowflake and Cove, the towns where they grew up, were almost entirely Mormon.

In Corvallis, if there were enough families, the tiny LDS branch held Sunday school. For a time we met in the upstairs of the city fire hall, and
I remember mothers clutching their young, afraid they would fall down the hole around the fire pole and break their necks. I recall that the water of the sacrament was passed in one drinking glass, with each member turning the glass a bit, trying to stay clear of other people’s germs. In my earliest years there were not enough LDS members to hold Sunday school, and our mother took Elaine and me to the Evangelical church because it was near. Later we changed to the Congregational Church because it was “more thriving.” Mama wrote in the family record book that I took part in children’s programs “seeming not to have any sense of stage fright.”

Mama taught me to read in the Wheeler Primer when I was three-and-a-half years old, and she taught me to write cursive when I was five. In Oregon schools each grade was divided into low and high sections. I entered first low when I was six, and was skipped to first high. In third low I came down with whooping cough, and Mama taught me so well while I was home that I was skipped to third high. I also skipped fourth low. Fortunately, I was tall for my age, and most people didn’t know how young I was.

As for upward mobility, the first year my parents lived in Corvallis, Papa hired a boy to put the firewood into the woodshed, believing that a professor should not do such menial work. However, after a time this seemed absurd, so he did it himself.

I suppose ours was the isolated nuclear family of which sociologists write. By becoming an academic, my father had left numerous relatives—all farmers—and my mother had left hers. There were letters and occasional visits, but mostly we led our own life miles away from relatives. My mother told us that she had been homesick in Corvallis until she made her first trip back to Snowflake, taking me (age three) and Elaine (age one) on the train. On our return she decided life in Corvallis was pretty good after all, and was not homesick again.

We were self-sufficient in the sense that, when our values clashed with those of other people, my folks would say, “We don’t believe in keeping up with the Joneses. We decide for ourselves what is important,” words which I found myself repeating years later to my own offspring.

In 1920 Mama took a college course in typing, at my father’s suggestion. She typed at home on a portable which she held on her lap. She also took a course in economics from my father because he was writing a book and needed her help. In our upstairs bedroom, Elaine and I often fell asleep to the sound of Mama typing downstairs as she
worked away on the manuscript, *The Standard of Living*, published in April 1923. It was a landmark book in the new field of consumption economics. Other important books were Hazel Kyrk’s *A Theory of Consumption* and Elizabeth E. Hoyt’s *The Consumption of Wealth.*

Mama also took swimming classes at the college. The arid climate of Snowflake was not conducive to female swimming although boys all over the West swam naked in irrigation canals. Mama’s ambition was to swim in every river of Oregon, clad in a swimming suit, and over the years we children swam with her in the Willamette, the Rogue, and the McKenzie rivers. When she chose spots in the mountains, the waters were terribly cold. Papa hated cold water, so he regularly swam in the college swimming pool.

My mother would have liked to take more college classes but there was little encouragement for wives to attend regular classes, and there was just too much housework and rearing of children to be done. Mama did a lot of housework in our home, even though Elaine and I helped. Laundry was hard work. Mama washed on a washboard and used a hand wringer, and then hung the clothes outdoors except when it rained (which was often in Corvallis), in which case she hung them on the back porch and across the kitchen. She heated water on the kitchen stove in the large, oval boiler and punched the clothes with a stick worn smooth from lots of punching to keep the clothes under the boiling water. Once when the side of the boiler sprang a tiny leak, she filled the hole with a bit of rag, and it held. She made starch but bought bottled bluing. She ironed with sad irons on the kitchen table on top of sheets folded square, which became satisfactorily smooth from the pressure.

When Mama got her first electric iron—it cost five dollars; what a wonderful thing it was!—the heavy sad irons were used only on cold nights when she heated them, wrapped them in newspaper, and put them at the foot of our bed in the chilly upstairs room where Elaine and I slept. How heavenly those warm sheets felt! If Mama forgot to heat the sad irons, she simply lifted up a stove lid and wrapped it in newspaper. I sometimes wondered why the stove lid didn’t come unwrapped and leave soot in the sheets, but it never did.

After Newel was born, Mama decided that the sheets, towels, dish-towels, shirts, and cotton underwear would go to the local laundry, to come back as wet wash which we then hung and dried at home. We did the baby’s diapers every day by hand, using the hand wringer. My father, as an economist, did not feel that investing in a washing
machine was economical, but Mama said her back could not stand the washboard anymore.

As for cooking, for years we used a wood stove whose oven lacked a thermometer. Mama would wave her hand through the oven and know whether it was hot enough for bread, pie, or cake. Later we got an electric stove, but its oven was never satisfactory from the children’s point of view. We liked the old wood stove because on cold winter mornings when we came downstairs to dress, we sat on a mail order catalog laid on the warm ledge, from which we could see the coals.

For years Papa refused to buy a refrigerator because the mark-up was so high that he was not going to let any retailer make that much profit off him. This suspicion of undue profit led him to organize the Cooperative Managers’ Association at Oregon Agricultural College, through which fraternities and sororities bought wholesale all the items they needed, including groceries, fuel, and furniture. Naturally the local merchants were incensed at this wholesale buying out of town and tried to break the contract. Papa was always very careful never to buy anything outside of the association, not so much as a loaf of bread, and we children were warned not to do so either. The director of the association sometimes came to our house to confer with Papa, and if the weather was good they would go for a long walk to discuss strategy to counteract local attempts to break up the association. If it rained, they secluded themselves in the front room behind closed doors.

Mama did a lot of canning, especially peaches and pears. Elaine’s hand was small enough to put peach and pear halves into the Mason quart jars, a job Newel later inherited. We did tomatoes and pickled beets but never had a pressure cooker, so we didn’t do other vegetables or meat. What Mama really enjoyed was sewing, and the fact that it saved money was also a big incentive. And yet her treadle sewing machine was not off-limits for play. It was a sturdy machine, with a wooden cover, rounded on the corners. As small children we were allowed to take off the cover and turn it upside down to make a boat. Sometimes we tried putting a roller skate under each end, hoping to paddle ourselves around the dining room table on the linoleum. As we grew up, Elaine and I learned to sew, and by ages eight and ten had each pieced a quilt top.

For her sewing, Mama brought home tiny samples of material from the stores to help decide what she wanted to buy. Some of these she tested. By burning a piece that was supposed to be wool, she noticed carefully whether it swelled and oozed; if so, she was satisfied it was
really wool. She also burned silk; if it left a residue, it was “weighted” and therefore suspect. When she wrote her once-a-month letter home to her own mother in Snowflake, she would include a small sample of the material she was sewing.

Although I have sewed very little in my life, I still carry in my memory information I never learned in college: the names of all kinds of fabrics and patterns, such as muslin, percale, calico, gingham, nainsook, dimity, marquisette, organdy, taffeta, silk, satin, pongee silk, shantung, chiffon, crepe de chine, velvet, broadcloth, pique, sateen, cretonne, seersucker, challis, serge, cashmere, gabardine, damask, corduroy, poplin, sateen, dotted Swiss, cheese cloth, flannel, worsted, and monks cloth. There were paisley pattern, herring bone weave, and twill. And all of this before artificial fibers. I remember our excitement when rayon was invented, and Mama made a rayon dress for each of us. Mine was deep red-orange in color.

Mama made all our dresses, some of our underwear, and all our coats. I did not have a “boughten” coat until I reached high school. Used garments got taken apart to be re-used. How often I sat with a piece of an old coat being taken apart, pinned to my dress at the knee of my brown cotton stocking while I pulled on one edge of a sewed seam and cut the stitching with a razor blade, being careful not to cut the material.

When we were quite young, Mama made summer coats for Elaine and me out of an old graduation robe of Papa’s—wonderful black, thin wool. We wore those coats on pleasant evenings when the family walked downtown to the movies, taking the diagonal walk past the white courthouse of Benton County. Walking home afterwards, arm-in-arm in the dark, Elaine and I were tired, and took turns closing our eyes for a block while the other kept awake and guided the legs. I am happy to report that the Benton County Courthouse still stands today, in regal splendor.

My parents were frugal. Papa was determined to save enough for their old age so they would not have to live with their children. Elaine and I used to wish for a larger wardrobe. We got tired of having just two school dresses, one for a week and a change for the next week, and then repeat. We felt we were no better off than Lura Keiser at the turn of the century. In winter we had heavier and darker dresses. Mama would say, when we complained of just two dresses at a time, that it was better to have two well-made dresses than a closet full of “cheap, boughten stuff.” Still, we envied our friends whose mothers did not sew and who had cheap, boughten stuff.
Mrs. McHugh lived near us. She sewed for a living, and I still remember how her rough hands rasped on silk. Mama took her sewing problems to her. What I did not realize was that sewing for a living did not earn much money, yet it was the only way that widowed Mrs. McHugh could support herself and her daughter. My father knew it was a poorly paid occupation, and that most women who held jobs received poor pay. This is why he was adamant that Elaine and I secure good educations and be able to earn a decent living before we married, because one never knew what the future held by way of divorce or widowhood. The neighbors thought this was a cynical attitude toward marriage, but Papa didn’t care about their opinions on the subject.

When I was in the third or fourth grade, the children from the county orphanage attended our school, but when a measles epidemic broke out they stopped coming, and apparently went back to their own school rooms. In my brief acquaintance with them, I learned that at least two of the girls were not really orphans. They had no fathers, but had mothers whose employment did not pay enough to support them, or else took them away from home, leaving nobody to care for the children.

Our own mother never held an outside job. The only money she earned was as judge of elections. She was a Democrat, and apparently Democrats were in short supply in our community so she usually helped out at the polls, for which she earned the munificent sum of five dollars. Sixty years later I relearned what surely we must have been taught in grade school: that Oregon gave women the vote in 1912, and that Abigail Scott Duniway, the Oregon pioneer and suffrage leader, was a key figure in bringing it about. Actually woman suffrage lost by nineteen votes in Benton County in 1912 but other counties gave a majority. Women had held the vote for only three years when we moved to Corvallis in 1915.

When I was young, I wondered if Mama wished she had a job outside the home. I think she sometimes wished she had her own money. Actually she was realistic enough to know there was plenty of work to do at home, and that women who held outside jobs received low pay. Papa would never have allowed her to work outside the home anyway. Today I ask myself about this patriarchy. Mama did sometimes refer to Papa as “the lord and master” but usually in a joking manner.

We had a family friend, a single woman who seemed middle-aged to me but was probably in her thirties, who clerked at Penney’s. I think Mama envied her because she was not weighed down with children and housework. Mama rarely called unmarried women “old maids,”
though everyone else did. She thoughtfully referred to them as “women of superior judgment.” I used to feel sorry for this friend because she had no children. Our parents, bless their hearts, were always saying how glad they were to have us, and we children knew in our very bones that we were an important part of our parents’ world.

Our mother was an interesting person to live with. She could whistle through a blade of grass held between her thumbs. She could make a whistle out of a piece of green willow. She could carve a stalk of corn into a tiny violin. She could play jacks with marbles. As a child in Snowflake, she didn’t have “boughten” jacks or even a small ball to bounce, so adobe marbles had to serve as both. This meant she had to scoop up the adobe jacks while the adobe ball was in the air. With no bounce, she moved her hands swiftly.¹³

Our father was great on taking daily walks as a good form of exercise. We sometimes went with him, but what we really liked were the Sunday hikes in good weather. We hiked to the hills as a family, or down to the Willamette River with its clusters of rounded rocks along the shore. And every summer we went to Newport for two weeks. We
were enchanted by the ocean and the hard sand beaches, the soft sand
dunes, and the dense brush which sometimes held huckleberries.
Mama had learned a lot about plants, trees, and birds through reading
books, and we learned from her during these outings.

No one else in our neighborhood went on family hikes or to
Newport for two weeks. On the other hand, some children took music
lessons but we did not. We were not really a musical family. Mama and
Elaine could sing quite well and even whistle, but the rest of us could not carry a tune in a basket. We never had a piano but the people next door did, and their only daughter, who was in her teens, played it. On pleasant evenings Elaine and I would dance barefoot in the grass outside the open window as she played. One of the wonderful things Mama did for Elaine and me was to make us ballet slippers for dancing on the lawn. Mama took an old pair of her own high topped black shoes and used the soft leather of the uppers to make soles for our slippers. She made the tops out of an old gray serge suit of Papa’s. We laced our slippers with long black shoe strings. They were elegant, and we danced to the tune of “The Firefly,” which the girl next door played over and over again.

Something else I remember about the girl next door was that, when her beau came to visit, she sat on his lap in the living room. Elaine and I used to peek through the window to watch them. Most people at the time did not have sofas. Chairs were what they had in the living room, and so instead of sitting close to each other on a sofa, a young man held his girl on his lap. When Papa got tired at home in the daytime, he would lie down on the living room carpet and take a snooze. We did not have a davenport to snooze on until much later. In fact we acquired a davenport at about the same time we acquired a phonograph, which was a long flat cabinet, whereas the old-fashioned Victrola our neighbors had was tall and narrow. The real reason we got that phonograph was because I was failing music appreciation at school. Mama promptly bought records of the music that I was unable to recognize at school, and we played those records until I knew them.
I realized later that our furniture was sparse when we were young because Papa was saving for old age, and a large chunk of his salary went into house payments and into savings each month. When we became older, our folks did not want us to feel disgraced, and so they flossied up the living room with a new Wilton rug, the phonograph, a blue davenport, and two Windsor chairs. The pot-bellied stove gave way to a real fireplace, and the living room and dining room became one room, heated by the fireplace. We never had central heating in our Corvallis home. Elaine and I bought some jazz records, and we practiced the Charleston on the linoleum by the kitchen stove, with the phonograph sending its music in from the front room. Elaine even got a ukulele; her best piece was “Little Brown Jug How I Love Thee.” We also talked Mama into cutting our hair short. And we went to a beauty shop and got permanents.

In 1927 we went to live for a year in Madison, Wisconsin, where Papa completed course work for his doctorate. We went on the train and slept in a Pullman berth. What an adventure! In Madison we lived in a third floor flat, experienced real snow and ice in winter, and in summer learned to swim in Lake Mendota. On Sundays, in good weather, we often walked as a family to Lake Wingra. I attended the high school attached to the University of Wisconsin, a tremendous experience because all the teachers were excellent, and whole new vistas opened to me. High school students had access to the university library, and I had a favorite spot under the circular staircase where I studied for hours. My father boasted that while he was getting A’s his daughter was getting A+’s, and he assured me that, of course I could get a Ph.D. someday. There was nothing to hold me back. My mother agreed with him. And so at the age of thirteen, while living in Madison, I decided that some day I would.

When we came home again to Corvallis, we arrived in our first car, which Papa, accompanied by a fellow student, had purchased in Detroit. Papa learned to drive as he piloted it from factory to Madison. I think he had an accident on the way, broke the windshield and had it replaced, but he would never talk about it. Mama learned to drive the car in Madison. Because she had learned to handle a team of horses when very young, she saw no reason why she could not drive a car too. She took me with her when she practiced, driving slowly around blocks in a quiet residential area. When we returned to Corvallis, the woodshed had to make room for the car as well as the wood supply. And the next year I learned to drive because my father decided that fourteen was a good age, and so he taught me.
How Faculty Earn and Spend

Jessica Peixotto’s 1922–23 study of faculty earning and spending at the University of California, Berkeley, might throw light on my parents’ way of life in the 1920s because both Oregon Agricultural College and Berkeley were in Pacific coast states. Nine faculty wives encouraged Peixotto’s study. They reviewed their own experience and talked with a number of “the most intelligent, capable and level headed” faculty wives. (Note Peixotto’s careful adjectives.) Looking back, I am astounded at the action of these faculty wives because, in succeeding decades, wives were expected to be silent on salaries. Perhaps in the early 1920s at Berkeley, the New Woman was in evidence and overtones of the Progressive Era lingered. Dorothy Hart Bruce, faculty wife, concluded:

Thus it appears that the professor’s wife, if illness, or children or other dependents have any part in her life, cannot expect her husband to have leisure for research either during or between semesters, cannot expect freedom from debt, cannot expect her husband’s income to increase in proportion to the increase in the size of their family and the needs of his growth and of her own, cannot expect sabbatical years, cannot expect any material expression in her home of her love of comfort and beauty, or any intellectual or artistic quality in her daily occupations; in fact can expect little but housework.\(^\text{15}\)

Peixotto had already studied living standards of San Francisco workers. She now undertook to study ninety-six faculty families with assistance of graduate students and the nine faculty wives. Her study summarized the household work these ninety-six women did, and indicated how little domestic help most of them had. To help out financially, one-third of the wives of full professors were employed. Half the wives of associate professors were employed, as were around 40 percent of wives of men in lower faculty ranks. To earn extra money, male faculty taught for extension, taught summer school, and wrote textbooks.\(^\text{16}\)

Peixotto concluded there was an academic standard of living with emphasis on acquiring and giving knowledge. The average academic man had a rational doctrine of spending, a theory that deprecated personal display, scorned quantity consumption, and, above all, competitive consumption. In this sense my father was an average academic man, not given to personal display, quantity consumption, or keeping up with the Joneses. My mother upheld his views.
My father regarded academic salaries as far too low, and although he praised President Kerr’s ability to get the state legislature to fund new buildings at OAC, he regretted that Kerr did not raise faculty salaries. My mother, like two-thirds of full professors’ wives in the California study, did not earn money but she stretched her husband’s salary with careful spending, much sewing and canning, and by doing his typing. Peixotto wrote, “Only $60 a year as an average for professional expenses means that in most cases the faculty member, or his wife for him, has spent many hours at clerical drudgery.”17

The term “role model” did not exist in those days, but I suppose that’s what Peixotto became for me because my father would point out that she held a Ph.D. in economics and was a full professor. He always referred to her, and to all professional women, by the last name, just as he referred to men by the last name.

Peixotto graduated from the Girls’ High School of San Francisco in 1880, but her father disapproved of women going to college, so she remained at home for over ten years, learning foreign languages, music, household management, and interior design. In 1891 she enrolled at the University of California to study political science and economics, and after a year’s research at the Sorbonne, returned to UC where she received a Ph.D. in 1900.

One reason President Benjamin Wheeler hired Peixotto, in 1904, was to encourage increased enrollment of women at the university. Before long she was teaching and researching in social economics in collaboration with male colleagues. By 1912 they were joined by Lucy Stebbins, and later by Barbara Armstrong and Emily Huntington, all highly regarded.18

Because of Peixotto’s expertise in household budget studies, the California State Civil Service Commission appointed her, in 1921, to investigate adequacy of state wages and salaries. She then obtained funding for the university to continue annual pricing of family budgets for three groups of workers—laborers, clerks, and executives. This was done through the Heller Committee for Research in Social Economics, which she headed.

The state government used these annually priced family budgets to set wages and salaries, and for purposes of arbitration. In keeping with the Progressive tradition, Peixotto and the other social economists at Berkeley studied causes, consequences, and potential solutions to social economic problems such as poverty, illness, crime, and unemployment. Old age, health, and unemployment insurance now exist in
the United States partly due to efforts of the social economists at Berkeley.

I never met Peixotto, but my father might have, because he taught a six weeks’ summer session at the University of California in 1924. That was an interesting summer. I was ten, Elaine was eight, and Newel was not yet a year old. We went by train to California, leaving our father to teach at Berkeley while the rest of us went on to Arizona to visit in Snowflake. I remember how hot it was in the middle of the night, when the train stopped at Needles to take on water for the engine. We woke up sweating in our berths. Although Mama often said with a smile that horses sweat, men perspire, and women glow, she admitted we were sweating that night.

In Snowflake, Elaine and I played with our cousins, tromped hay on the hay wagon, gathered eggs in the barn, and walked the path to the outhouse. After the Berkeley summer session ended, Papa came on to Snowflake for a quick visit, and then we all took an auto trip with relatives to the Grand Canyon before returning to Corvallis by train.

At the end of the 1920s, I was fifteen years old and knew that Peixotto had a Ph.D. in economics and was an exceptional professor at Berkeley, but I didn’t know the details. And I had no inkling of my future as a faculty wife with my own Ph.D. in economics, and no inkling of how my own concern for social justice would play itself out.