Leave The Dishes In The Sink
Thorne, Alison

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3 Producing Children and Books: The 1940s

Wynne and I left Texas A & M the end of the summer of 1939 to drive to Utah the long way round, via New York, where we saw the World’s Fair and went on to Rutgers University, where Wynne attended the International Microbiological Congress. During this time Hitler invaded Poland and the tension at the meetings became almost unbearable. The German scientists clustered together. In the elevator I heard a Polish scientist say he could not go home and intended to go to Canada and join the Air Force.

We continued on our journey to Logan in Cache Valley where Wynne became associate professor of agronomy at Utah State Agricultural College, affectionately called the “A.C.” because it was founded as the Agricultural College of Utah. This was the favorite song at basketball games:

Show me the Scotsman who doesn’t love a thistle.
Show me the Irishman who doesn’t love a rose.
Show me the true hearted Aggie of Utah,
Who doesn’t love the spot (stamp, stamp)
Where the sagebrush grows!

The stamp, stamp was everyone’s foot pounding onto the floor in unison, which really shook the balcony of the field house, where most of the audience sat. We became ardent basketball fans.

We took an apartment four blocks from the college. The next June, on commencement day, our first child, Kip Stephen, was born, to be followed two years later by a daughter, Barrie. I did not seek a faculty position because of the policy that both husband and wife could not be on the faculty, but also because I knew that babies are a lot of work. But I was determined to pursue my own intellectual interests, including trying to get my dissertation published. I published only one article, which appeared in Social Forces. It was on evaluations of consumption in scale of living studies.
Throughout graduate school I had been interested in values, although Frank Knight, the famous professor of economics at the University of Chicago, reprimanded me and said that economists, as economists, do not deal with values. Some fifty years later feminist economists would point out that it is impossible for economic theory to be value neutral.¹ Knight said that philosophers, and citizens, dealt with values. I personally thought that mothers raising families cared about values. As soon as we reached Logan, I subscribed to *Ethics, The International Journal*, edited at the University of Chicago by Charner Perry under whom I had taken my one course in philosophy. The college library did not subscribe to *Ethics*, and the college offered no courses in philosophy, so I decided to teach myself.

My chief association with the college was through Faculty Women’s League. We had been in Logan only a few days when Allie Peterson Burgoyne called on me and invited me to join League. Allie had known Wynne when he was a student at the college (1931–33) because she was assistant registrar and knew everybody. Many people remembered Wynne because he made himself conspicuous by organizing the independent students (Barbarians, or Barbs) and then snatching the campus elections from the fraternities and sororities (Greeks).

Allie Burgoyne and Blanche Condit Pittman had been among the very few faculty wives who held staff appointments. Blanche was clerk/secretary of the Agricultural Experiment Station, a position she had held for twenty years before she and Allie were summarily dismissed in 1936 because of federal and state anti-nepotism rulings. Neither of them had children. Had they had children, they likely would not have been on the staff to start with. What interested me was that, after losing their positions, these women turned to unpaid community work.

¹ The citation is not provided in the text. It is possible that this is a reference to Knight’s statement, but without further context, it is not clear.
work of various sorts, remained loyal to the college, were especially active in the faculty wives’ organization, and did not openly criticize anti-nepotism rulings. A year after their dismissal, they and others organized the Logan Branch of American Association of University Women (AAUW). Whether Allie and Blanche spoke together quietly about their exclusion from the college staff I do not know, because I did not join AAUW until my children were all in school. However, Luna Brite, wife of historian Duncan Brite, belonged to AAUW and often regretted that I, with a Ph.D., was kept off the faculty.  

It was Faculty Women’s League that I joined at once, because this was one way to help along one’s husband’s career, because being with other women was pleasant, and because there was intellectual challenge and involvement in community good works. League met every two weeks during the school year on Friday at three-thirty, when older children would be home from school, or good-natured husbands would come home early from work, to tend younger children. We dressed for League in heels, best dress, a hat, and gloves, usually white. I was a rebel and didn’t wear white gloves each time. I also dispensed with the hat more often than any other member, but I certainly knew what was proper and how far I could push my idiosyncrasies.
For forty years my identity in the Faculty Women’s League yearbook was Thorne, Mrs. D. Wynne. At the end of the 1970s I became Thorne, Alison (Wynne). In contrast, my identity in the AAUW yearbook has always been Dr. Alison Thorne.

The Second World War

On December 7, 1941 the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and the next day the United States declared war. I was working in the kitchen and listening to President Roosevelt on the radio when, in the adjoining room, Kip, seventeen months old, tried to climb up a chest of drawers, having pulled out the lower drawers to make steps. Of course the whole thing toppled over on top of him, and I was pulling him out, undamaged, just as war was declared.

I took great interest in prices and shortages and began clipping out news items. Faculty Women’s League invited me to do a program on this subject, and I did it wearing a maternity dress because I was expecting my second child. A chief cause of shortages was the need of the armed services for supplies. Bed sheets and toilet paper, for example, were hard to find. In the question and answer period following my talk, I was asked about toilet paper and gravely replied that it was being bought up by the military, but when they had enough, it would reappear on the market. And then, without thinking, I said, “If we just sit tight long enough, the toilet paper will come,” a remark which brought gales of laughter and was soon relayed to husbands.

When price control and rationing became a reality, my neighbor Jo Turner, wife of the dean of forestry, and I, accompanied by my two small children, volunteered for the federal Office of Price Administration, visiting neighborhood grocery stores to check on prices. In Oregon, my mother, still very much a faculty wife, was a volunteer observer of aircraft, watching from a post in a large open area of that campus. She also found time to serve as president of the University of Oregon faculty wives’ organization. No one paid attention to the fact that she was only a high school graduate.

The Agricultural College received funds to teach trainees of the air corps, navy, marines, and army engineers before they were sent overseas. Some of this funding was for math classes, and two faculty wives who could teach math were given temporary positions at the college, positions which they lost when the war ended. Faculty men, besides
their usual teaching, went to Ogden and Salt Lake City on weekends to help load military supplies.

I shall never forget a dark morning at five, when I heard trainees singing as they marched from the college, past our house, and on toward town and the railroad station. These young men had completed their course work and were being shipped to the South Pacific. Later we learned that most of them died there.

The war, I now think, was one reason why feminism was dormant in the 1940s and 1950s. Those of us with young children were deeply grateful to the men who made it possible for us to live safely and rear our young. The men of my generation bore the brunt of the war, and if I had been male instead of female, I might not be alive today. Why should I consider American women oppressed? Furthermore, in the war years women who wanted employment could find it, usually at good pay. From across the state, women came into war-related industries, especially the air force base, ammunition plant, and ordnance depot. A few day care centers for their children were created, but Utah had fewer than other states, and when the war ended they quickly vanished.

At first Wynne was exempted from the war because he taught agriculture, but later he became subject to the draft and was assigned a number which was placed in the national fish bowl, or draft lottery. His number happened not to be drawn, so he did not serve.

Writing Books

In the meantime Wynne and I thought we would like to have more children but ran into bad luck. I had an ectopic pregnancy and other difficulties that resulted in surgery. It looked as though two would have to do. It was then that I decided to write a book about homemakers’ values and gave myself five years to do it. Astonishingly, my aches, pains, and mental depression vanished when I set about this intellectual task, though it was a challenge to find time.

With two young children, I was very busy, but like my mother, I sent the sheets and towels to the laundry to come back ironed, and our cotton underwear, pajamas, and Wynne’s shirts came back wet wash. Like my mother I did the diapers by hand with a hand wringer attached to the laundry tub in the basement. By now we were living in a tall, old fashioned, two story white frame house just off the Boulevard, a street which curved along the edge of the hill between the college and downtown. All
our bedrooms and the only bathroom were upstairs, but the kitchen was large and pleasant, especially when the west sun streamed through the windows. I kept the potty chair hidden under a large cardboard box, next to the refrigerator.

I kept my book writing materials in a cardboard file drawer that sat on the dining room buffet, parallel to and against the mirror. I stashed manila folders of reading notes in it. I depended heavily on the college library and perpetually checked out books, especially some old housekeeping ones placed there in earlier days. It did not occur to me to read suffragist and feminist literature, but I did come across Inez Irwin’s Angels and Amazons and found it powerful stuff.4 I was unaware that the library contained three volumes on the life and work of Susan B. Anthony.5 Occasionally I went to Salt Lake City to use the library at the University of Utah.

Two hours comprised the longest continuous period I could snatch for study and writing. And then suddenly, in 1947, Dean Ethelyn O. Greaves invited me to teach the course on consumer buying problems because the regular teacher was going on leave. This was an opening wedge against the anti-nepotism ruling and I accepted but, after teaching two quarters, discovered that I was successfully pregnant and gave up the class. Routine teaching and grading papers were not as interesting as pursuing ideas for my manuscript.

Wynne had become a full professor and head of the Agronomy Department. He also served for one year as acting dean of the School of Graduate Studies and, in this capacity, began a seminar on science and values for interested graduate students and faculty. There were still no classes taught in philosophy at the college, apparently because philosophy was not assigned to the land grant college, and because the administration feared philosophy would undermine the faith of Mormon students. I attended Wynne’s graduate seminar on science and values and enjoyed it immensely.

Our third child, Sandra, arrived on February 18, 1948, and soon came down with colic which lasted six weeks. There seemed to be no real cure for colic. Is there one today? Wynne was at the college from eight to five every weekday. He spent his early mornings, early evenings, and weekends writing a textbook on irrigated agriculture. I was exhausted after each day of a crying baby, so Wynne, to comfort her in the evenings, held her over his shoulder with his left hand and wrote with his right. A secretary at the college did his typing, so I never typed his manuscripts as my mother had done for my father.
Several months later, when the manuscript was finished, Wynne asked me to read it and smooth out and simplify the language. “If you can understand it,” he said magnanimously, “then the freshmen should be able to understand it.” Not exactly a compliment to my brainpower but I am a competent editor and improved this work, which became *Irrigated Soils: Their Fertility and Management*, published by Blakiston in 1949, with Howard B. Peterson as co-author.

Our house was a mess during the weeks of final editing. I kept Sandra’s formula made up, her diapers washed, and the household fed. On the whole, for me, it was complete intellectual absorption, with a lick and a promise to housekeeping. It was sheer delight to have a sustained intellectual task. I had my own book manuscript, of course, but too readily dropped it when other tasks became overwhelming. With Wynne’s book we had a real deadline to meet, and a real publisher to spur us on.

Sandra was seven months old when I became pregnant with our fourth child, which was fine because I was then thirty-four years old and thought we should finish up our family in a hurry. I completed the final typing of my own manuscript just before Avril was born June 20, 1949. As I lay in the delivery room with this fourth child about to come forth, the birth process was reflected in young Dr. Gordon Harmston’s spectacles. This was long before today’s practice of giving women a mirror to see the birth of their children. Wynne was not present because fathers were banned from delivery rooms although, in that same hospital nine years before, he had been present at the birth of our first child.

The nurse and Dr. Harmston and I were busy bringing this baby into the world. “It has red hair,” said Dr. Harmston, who could see the top of the head. “But it’s facing the wrong direction and it will be a hard birth.” I thought about this for a little while, and suddenly there came a really whopping big labor pain, and Harmston exclaimed, “It has turned itself around 180 degrees! I’ve never seen a baby’s head pivot like that before!” Shortly thereafter, Avril was born.

I believe one’s body has a great deal of wisdom of its own. In those days, and it was 1949, we as women knew remarkably little about how our bodies functioned. *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a collective work of second wave feminism, would not be written for another twenty-three years. My mother always said, “We don’t have any trouble giving birth in our family.” I trusted her judgment and figured my body would manage somehow to bring forth children. Also important was her attitude that a new baby was the most joyous thing that could
happen to one, and waiting for it was a matter of happy anticipation. I literally felt that way.

So now I had a new baby, and I also had a book manuscript which I sent to several publishers, all of whom sent back rejection slips. I thought it was a good book. I had tackled something that nobody else had tried, and I considered it a refreshing piece of writing. One publisher’s assistant suggested I break it up into sections and try women’s magazines. But I didn’t have time to do that. I typed the final copy on translucent sheets of paper that could be copied in the School of Engineering by an offset process. This was before the days of Xerox. The double spaced typed manuscript was 162 pages long, and the cost of each copy was eight dollars. I had eight copies made.

I named the manuscript, *Let the Dishes Wait: A Philosophy for Homemakers*. Wynne had provided the title by saying, “Why not call it ‘Let the Dishes Wait,’ since that’s what the dishes have done most of the time you’ve been writing your book.” It was with laughter that he suggested the title, and with laughter that I accepted it.

The Shadow Manuscript

My would-be book is now fifty years old, its paper yellowed. I think of it as a “shadow manuscript” because, being unpublished, it lay in shadow, and because it dealt with domesticity, a shadowy realm involving women’s household work, unpaid and considered less important than paid employment. Occasionally a “shadow price” has been placed on this kind of work.

My book reflected the life of white, middle class wife-mothers of Cache Valley in the 1940s. Very few of us had employment. None of us had hired help. It seemed to me that we all belonged to clubs. There were various kinds including civic, literary, study, bridge, garden, and gourmet cooking. These usually met in homes. For some women there was AAUW, which met monthly on the campus on Saturday afternoons. For a great many there were weekly meetings of the LDS Relief Society, held in the ward church houses.

Natural gas was not yet piped into our valley so most of us had coal-fired furnaces that, after a long winter, left a thin layer of soot on walls and curtains. That’s why spring cleaning was so vital.

Mass consumption was taking over and women’s magazines were in a comfortable relationship with advertising. I was trying to get women to think for themselves. Some pieces of advice I thought better
than others. Nursery school leaders I would listen to. The psychiatrists were speaking up but I was dubious of some of them.

Here I have paraphrased excerpts from the shadow manuscript and added contemporary comment, sometimes because of historical changes and sometimes because of my own changed thinking. The names of chapters are capitalized.

**What Matters Most**

I wrote that we lived in a constant psychological hailstorm. We were continually pelted with cries to buy new clothes, new cars, new refrigerators, new novels, and new furniture. We were told to make an outdoor fireplace, to send our children to camp, and to aid foreign relief. We were urged to do hundreds of different things. Advertisers, neighbors, our families, and the schools sought to tell us what to buy, what to do, and what to be.

Some people had a clear-cut set of ideas of what they wanted out of life, a clear-cut set of values. They walked intelligently amidst the fierce barrage of advertising, and the subtle barrage of neighbors and culture, and the more honest barrage of schools. But other people had a fuzzy picture in their minds of what they sought in life. They fumbled, tried this and that, and fell easy prey to loud advertisers.

I wrote that this urge to conform was being exploited by advertisers, and in various places throughout my manuscript, I criticized advertising. A woman on the staff of the radio station in Cedar City, Utah, asked me if she could read *Let the Dishes Wait* over the radio, and I consented. When she had finished her programs she returned the manuscript with thanks, saying that people liked it, but at the insistence of the radio manager she was forced to eliminate all criticism of advertising.

I now know that advertisers and manufacturers had a great influence over what appeared in print in the 1940s and 1950s. Frances Fitzgerald in a study of public school texts found that, in 1939, the Harold Rugg books on American civilization were attacked by the Advertising Federation of America, the National Association of Manufacturers, the American Legion, and a columnist of the Hearst Press. By 1944 the series had disappeared, and other liberal texts and publications were also being attacked. By 1950 school texts reflected policies of the National Association of Manufacturers, and anyone who wrote boldly against advertisers was suspect.7
My own suggestion in dealing with the psychological hailstorm was this:

1. We should ask ourselves where we got our values.
2. We should know something of how others live, but not necessarily be bound by others’ ways.
3. We must use wisdom in compromising among values.

I quoted from the home management text by Ella Cushman of Cornell, telling about a Mrs. Avery, who when married, had been given Wedgwood china, beautiful table linen, and fine silver and glass. But she liked to go on field trips with her husband and his classes, and when they returned they liked to invite students to stay for supper. Mrs. Avery made some simple, attractive luncheon sets from red and white plaid that required no ironing, and bought pottery seconds in plain ivory. She stocked foods for quick, appetizing meals, and laid away the fine linen and Wedgwood.

In 1949 I liked the practical Mrs. Avery and commended her good sense in putting away those things that took so much time and energy to care for. Today I can make another point: Mrs. Avery became a visible faculty wife. Cushman noted that this couple had a mutual interest in plant science. We now know that Cornell had faculty wives who were trained in botany and unable to get positions on the faculty themselves. I wonder if Mrs. Avery was one of these.

**The Imperfect Housekeeper**

One purpose of my book was to urge home keeping women of the 1940s to give up the pervasive ideal of perfect housekeeping. “There are three kinds of dusting,” said a homemaker. “One where you dust every single thing and every crack and corner; one where you dust only what shows most, as the top of the piano and table-tops; and a third kind where you just draw the shades.”

This unorthodox quote was in a college textbook on home management published in 1932. It went on to say that it is just as important to know when to draw the shades as to know how to dust correctly. Unfortunately, books on home management spent more time telling us how to dust and clean correctly, than in telling us when we were justified in pulling the shades, or in just leaving the shades up and refusing to apologize for the mess the house was in. Indeed, a more recent generation would tell us to write “Welcome” in the dust.
The ideal of perfect housekeeping occurred after the Civil War. Bertha Damon in her book, *Grandma Called It Carnal*, described the worship of good housekeeping in a small Connecticut town of this period, when women had just begun to “show off” by employing many separate rooms.

‘Perfect housekeeping’ became a fetish, a cruel god that demanded and received human sacrifices. Whatever gifts of mind or body a North Stonefield woman had, if she were not a ‘perfect housekeeper’ she had no claim to consideration. That was that. Anybody who was anybody kept her house in a state of hard, intolerable neatness. There is a neatness that is warm and lovely; it is one of the fine arts. Its origin is love for possessions that are intimate, that serve. There is a neatness that is cold; it comes out of bitter energy, lack of worthy occupation, and sometimes, not always, the desire to lay down laws for one’s family, to make them miserable, and to be a martyr oneself. The love-neatness knows its place, knows it is but a means to an end, the end being a fine happiness in family life. But the hate-neatness is an end in itself. In almost every North Stonefield house some rooms were shut up and never used; some rooms had the sun entirely excluded by shades; some of even the most inhabited rooms had newspapers laid cheerlessly along the trails frequented by the menfolks.

There seemed to be no limit to the pains which women were willing to take in order to conform to that severe standard of ‘perfect housekeeping.’ ‘She keeps her kitchen floor so clean yer could eat yer bread ‘n’ milk off of it’: emulation of that appetizing achievement led to endless damp drudgery on hands and knees.10

An early housekeeping book, written by Mrs. Christine Herrick in 1888, set up in all seriousness unusually high standards for clean woodwork. She wrote that the doors need daily attention even in homes where there are no children, while in the chambers from which little ones run back and forth constantly the task must sometimes be repeated every few hours.11 Imagine wiping the woodwork of doors every few hours!

George Norris, United States Senator from Nebraska, wrote in his autobiography how as a boy back in those days, he once proposed a debate in school on the topic: “Resolved: there is more pleasure in living with a neat, cross woman than with a good-natured slouchy woman.” Since no one wished to defend the slouchy woman, Norris did and won the debate.12 Such a defense was rare.
In my experience of the 1940s, fear of being known as a sloppy housekeeper made many women clean the corners of basement and attic, even though visitors never penetrated there. But we did expect people with new houses to throw open their closets with a flourish to show off their spaciousness. Those of us who resided in old houses felt lucky that our friends were not interested in our closets.

I saw women, sensible in other ways, rush around to get the spring cleaning done in half the usual time because club was meeting there. It was a rare woman who said, “I’ll be glad to have club any time. I don’t go to a lot of fuss about cleaning. You’ll just have to take the house as you find it.” And certainly the guests did not peer into corners, rub a finger on the chair rungs, and study the wallpaper at close range.

Were there any worthwhile reasons for good housekeeping? Yes, I wrote. Perhaps we kept our houses clean to further physical and mental health, or because we achieved aesthetic and craft satisfaction out of it.

I noted that, as homemakers, we did dozens of tasks every day, most of them in a hurried manner so we could get through everything. Each of us yearned for a chance to do one thing thoroughly for a change, to make just a bit of perfection. How many women had said, wistfully, “I wish I could have all my house looking the way I want it, just once!” I wrote that it was unfortunate to wish to make the whole house perfect. The danger of the too perfect housekeeper was that she visited her ideals of cleanliness on her family with constant admonitions of “Wipe your feet! See the marks you left on the towel! Don’t cut out paper dolls now; they make too much mess!”

I wrote that young children cannot play without making disorder. They regard furniture as potential trains, houses, and tents. They make a boat upon the stairs, patterned after Robert Louis Stevenson’s poem. They turn chairs upside down on the stairs to make the boat, and then ask for a pail of water and a piece of cake so their boat will be like the one in the poem. At our house we usually lacked the cake, so the children resorted to slices of bread. Result: crumbs all over the stairs and a pail of water that kept tipping over.

Nursery school leaders were spreading their ideas that children needed messy play. They needed not only a sand pile but sand with water in it. They needed not only paints but finger paints that were actually smeared onto paper with fingers, thumbs, and even elbows.

I wrote that, above all, a sense of humor was needed to bridge the gap between the perfect housekeeping ideal and the inevitable clutter of living. Humor was concerned with the immediate incongruities of
life, those which do not affect us essentially. But if a woman’s house-
keeping affected her deeply, if it was an important ideal to her, then she
could not laugh when she got caught in a messy house.

They That Wash on Monday

Washing and ironing in the 1800s took a great toll on women’s time and
energy. I began this chapter with a quotation from Marion Harland,
written at the turn of the century. Marion Harland was the pen name of
Virginia Payson Terhune, the wife of a minister and a prolific author of
household advice books and newspaper columns before and after the
turn of the century. She was so fond of her early description of washing
by hand that she repeated it in a book written after washing machines
came into use. It is such a long sentence that I laid it out as found poetry.

It is—
and it has been from time immemorial
and it will be
until the end
of this rolling old globe of ours—
the law of thrifty housewives
that eyes,
anointed by the blessed sleep of Sunday night,
shall be unsealed by cock-crow
to smart and water in the smoke of boiling suds;
that hands,
lately folded in prayer and crossed
in sacred decency through the hallowed hours,
shall rub and redden and roughen
over the bleached ridges
of wooden washboards,
or the luckless laborer
lose temper and cuticle
against the treacherous grooves of metal ‘patents’;
that what with lifting boilers and tubs
and wringing and starching and hanging out
and folding down,
the priestess of that unblessed day in the calendar
shall be, by Monday night,
separated from Sunday quiet and Sunday thoughts
by an abyss of unsavory odors and sweltering heats;
by such backaches,
and headaches,
and armaches,

that the recollection of the holy season
is a dream of doubtful distinctness.¹⁴

Although washing was not that difficult for middle class housewives in the 1940s, many of my friends were still getting up at five on Monday morning to get the wash out early. I didn’t rise that early but I had a washboard and used it for the diapers.

I described the efficiency movement, which began with engineers streamlining movements in factories and then spread to households. Lillian Gilbreth was an enthusiastic advocate. She invented a pin and string method of measuring the distance a homemaker traveled in doing work in her kitchen, and she emphasized the one best way in the kitchen, in ironing men’s shirts, and in making beds.

In response I wrote that some women were not interested in making beds in record time and were content to amble back and forth from one side of the bed to the other, while throwing on sheets and blankets and tucking them in. Perhaps their minds were occupied with something else. Personally, I was of this school.

I said it remained the province of each homemaker to decide whether beds should be taken apart and made anew once a week or once a day. Most of us felt once a week was sufficient, especially if there were other uses we and our families wanted to make of our time. This was where our sense of values came in. It was also our sense of values that made us rule that beds were not to be sat upon in the daytime for fear of ruining the bedspread, or else made us buy ordinary, darker colored spreads so we could be nonchalant when people sat on them.

Advice to homemakers on how to do household tasks prevailed in abundance. Not all of this advice was expert advice. When World War II broke out, the women’s pages in newspapers bristled with suggestions on how to be thrifty.

“Never throw away your orange peels,” urged one writer. “This is wasteful. You should save them and make marmalade.”

“And where, dear madam,” thought I, “are we to get the sugar for marmalade, now that sugar is rationed?”

Many women felt it was easier to get through their work when laid out by certain days: one day to wash, the next to iron, and somewhere along Friday or Saturday, a thorough house cleaning. But I had a
neighbor who, on occasion, did her washing in the evening, hanging it out as late as midnight. She liked to do the weekly house cleaning in the evening too, finishing up by going into the garden by moonlight to gather flowers for the living room.

Traditional housewives considered her to be a poor manager. In my eyes she was a good manager. It all depended on one’s goals. To her, housework was a very minor aspect of living. She was active in community affairs and her home was wide open at all hours to friends and especially to children. She did not let housework interfere with her enjoyment of the daytime hours, and she was eternally grateful to an early friend of hers who taught her “how to do housework at night.” This neighbor was Jo Turner, with whom my two offspring and I walked on certain days to check grocery prices for the Office of Price Administration during World War II.

My manuscript then turned to an early home economist, Caroline Hunt, who in 1908 had written:

It is indeed good to be alive on the west shore of Lake Michigan of a bright winter’s morning, and yet, although I have spent hours walking on the shore on Saturday mornings, I have never seen a person besides those who were with me. Where are the mothers? Why don’t they bring their children down there? Don’t they know the fun of tramping up the shore and building fires and having little camp lunches, and of watching the winter landscape?\(^{15}\)

I wrote, “Where were the mothers indeed? They were home, of course, preparing for Sunday by vigorously cleaning house, or vigorously baking, or vigorously buying supplies in the stores. But there is no law except custom that says the face and feel of Saturday must be one of cleaning, baking, and shopping.”

**Making Ends Meet**

I wrote that we all need money to live. There was scarcely a family to be found that thought it had enough to live on, whether it had two thousand or fifteen thousand dollars a year. The typical American family had an annual income of three thousand dollars in 1947.

I wrote that as we looked over our list of essentials, we knew we wanted food, medical care, sanitation for physical health, clothing, housing, insurance, and savings. I hoped families would have a feeling of surplus with their income, a sense of being free to choose. This meant thoughtful discarding of things that gave shallow satisfaction.
There were desires to express our own individual talents, desires for things which we enjoyed for themselves because they enriched our lives. For example, our neighbors the Browns liked music. They decided to sell their car and use that money for a really good record player and some records. The money they had spent on gas and oil and straightening fenders now went for music. Mrs. Brown played records as she did her housework. She was not bothered with neuroses because her free half-a-mind was on the music. Their children were growing up with remarkable music appreciation. Today I admit that, after a time, the Browns had to get a car again.

Instead of buying a new spring dress one year, I bought Thomas Craven’s book of art reproductions to teach myself and ended up teaching my offspring as well. We postponed re-upholstering some furniture and bought a tent and sleeping bags instead so we could go camping. Today I admit that I finally had to buy a new dress, and we did re-upholster.

In a subsection titled “Where Is the Money Coming From” I suggested alternatives such as the father working overtime or the mother possibly getting a job. There were ways women could earn at home. Children, too, sometimes earned. It was a sketchy treatment. While I recognized the double burden of earning mothers, I failed to mention that women’s wages were much lower than men’s.

In a subsection titled “Make Instead of Buy,” many of the examples showed the influence of the agricultural era and the Great Depression. In the 1940s there were extension service bulletins that gave instructions on how to do these things.

Homemakers could make money go further by sewing for the family. Outgrown clothes could be cut down for the younger children. Coats and dresses could be made, although making underwear did not pay out. We could cut worn sheets down the middle and sew them up with the outer edges together. We could turn shirt collars and mend more. We could do our own clothes cleaning and pressing.

We might bottle and can food and make our own jam and pickles, but we did not save money that way unless we had a garden or other access to low-cost food. Even with our own gardens, canning peas and greens rarely paid out.

We could cook cereal every morning and not use dry cereals, which cost more per dish. We could make our own bread, cake, and pie, never buying the commercial product or the ready mixes. We could reduce waste by care in cooking, urging the family to slick up their plates, and learning to use leftovers.
We could cut hair at home, do our own furniture re-finishing and upholstering. We could make our own soap, furniture polish, and floor wax. In smaller towns, families could keep a cow, rabbits, and chickens. In all these ways we could save money. However, few household tasks had been systematically studied to show how much money was saved. Above all, we had to remember that while making over clothes and baking bread did not cost much money, they did cost the mother’s time and energy. Was that her idea of a joyful life? Perhaps it was a pleasure for women who liked handicrafts but, for those women with a dislike for sewing and cooking, the resentments more than outweighed the money saved.

I wrote that one of my peculiar joys in life was to throw away socks when the hole in the heel was as large as a fifty cent piece. Sometimes I was inclined to do it when the hole was only the size of a quarter. Yet my friends methodically darned such sad specimens. This was in the days before nylon reinforcement of toes and heels. Nylon would prove to be a godsend.

Also, I noted that we needed a good sense of values to give us the courage to abandon purely conventional ways of living, and to develop our personal capacities to appreciate. The wise homemaker knew how to buy sheets, but more important, she knew her family’s latent talents, whether for sports, music, flowers, or science, and she encouraged their development.

**Come to Dinner**

This chapter was no great shakes, unless you were interested in what one faculty wife, namely me, went through in preparing to have departmental couples in for dinner. Underneath it was a confession that my physical energy did not stretch and we could not afford hired help. I decided informality worked best, and wistfully hoped for good conversation because I really didn’t like the usual bridge playing. I tackled the matter of children’s birthday parties, and ended with a few good-hearted remarks on the importance of hospitality.

**Time Off**

The overworked mothers of the nineteenth century hardly knew the meaning of the word “leisure.” Their days were so full that it was common to say: “Man works from sun to sun but women’s work is never
done.” In Mrs. Herrick’s housekeeping book, written in 1888, there is one lone reference to relaxation. At the very end of the book she said:

Even the busiest woman, by a little plotting, can snatch five or ten minutes during the day in which to glance at the daily paper, and learn enough of the progress of events to be able to converse knowingly with her husband upon current topics. If she learns only sufficient to render it possible for her to make intelligent inquiries, and stimulate her husband into giving her a fuller version of the news she has only caught an inkling of, so much the better. The average man is never more happy than when in the position of enlightening some one who receives gladly the words of wisdom that fall from his lips.

When the tea-table is cleared, and the husband and wife settle down for the evening, the pleasantest part of the day should be just begun . . . Most men like the pretty domestic picture a woman makes when she is at work making or repairing little garments, or indulging in a rare bit of fancy-work.¹⁶

Today my comment would be that housekeeping books at the turn of the century reflected woman’s sphere. I discern manipulation whereby the wife enlarged her own learning in order to please her husband. It seems unjust that Herrick parcels out learning to men and keeps women in their proper sphere.

In the 1940s women with children were still putting long hours into household tasks, amounting to fifty-six hours a week, which averaged eight hours every day according to time studies. There didn’t seem to be much leisure because we got it in scraps, perhaps half an hour in the morning, an hour in the afternoon, and a couple of hours after the dishes were done at night.

Studies showed the two biggest leisure time activities were reading and informal social life, such as talking to the family, friends, or neighbors. I suggested other sorts of activities such as just sitting, a chance to catch the mood of a day, to contemplate the ways of a child at play, to meditate on one’s whole way of living. Today television dominates, but it did not spread across the country until the 1950s.

In the late 1940s occasional articles warned women they should use their spare time to keep up with whatever occupation they had before marriage because they might become suddenly widowed or divorced, and, besides, what would they do when their children were grown and gone?

The most thought provoking article on this matter was Ann Leighton’s “The American Matron and the Lilies,” which appeared in
She said that keeping up with former interests was like “holding a small dry bundle aloft while tides rise around.” I said that the tired mother should not be saddled with a guilty conscience because she used her leisure time in just sitting, or in going out to club. For those mothers who did want to keep up with former interests, life would be complicated, but they should certainly keep trying.

However it was very important to recognize that most mothers who worked for pay did so because they had to. Their paycheck was badly needed to support their families, and they should not be criticized for taking employment.

Yet a new kind of advice had begun to appear, this time from psychiatrists. One of them, Marynia Farnham, said it was harmful for a mother to pursue a career because being a mother meant being protective and passive, while a career called for aggressive and self-assertive traits. She predicted that women would become psychologically ill trying to harmonize motherhood and a career.

In 1949 I sensed there was something wrong with Marynia Farnham and wrote that we should not believe anyone blindly. I went on to quote Elsa Denison Voorhees, a psychologist, whom I considered more sensible:

Life itself . . . will probably remain, for most women, unorganized, bewildering, and inexplicable; but that is no reason why the thinking of any woman about herself and her own process of living cannot be clear and purposeful . . . How can she arrange her life as a whole in order that she may—with luck—get the greatest possible satisfaction from it throughout its probable length, with a sense of well-being for as much of the time as possible, and with an unwaivering certainty of her right to grow and to live intelligently.

The italics are mine, today, because this was a feminist statement.

**Mirror, Mirror, Tell Me True**

It was considered a feminine privilege to care about clothes and appearance. Women were indulgently believed born with a looking glass in the hand. But I wrote that actually there were as many attitudes toward personal appearance as there were people. After some discussion of these attitudes, I tackled the motives of clothing textbooks for high school girls, and criticized women’s magazines.

Bear in mind that the women’s magazines of the 1940s were dignified and in many ways helpful to women in their daily lives, in spite of
their comfortable relationship with advertising. In the 1940s I regretted the enormous emphasis of women’s magazines on glamor.

My friends and I weren’t thinking of beauty as we went about our housework. I wrote that we didn’t pretend to be glamor girls. Most of us wore cotton dresses, or worn out afternoon dresses, and they weren’t always crisply fresh.Nobody could afford the money or the time to have a clean house dress every day. Nor did we prance around at our housework wearing high heels, even though advertisers thought so. We tried to wear sensible shoes, or else we were getting the last ounce of wear out of some shoes lying around. We wore bobby socks or old stockings with runs in them, getting the last ounce of wear. Mothers finished wearing out the hose that their school and business daughters had discarded.

On days when I cleaned the basement or planted the garden, I did not have time to give thought to my appearance. If I got my hair combed and face hastily damped and wiped, I was doing well. I enjoyed wearing slacks or levis for really big household jobs, and so did many of my friends, even though the glamor magazines and charm books assured us that we were incorrectly built to look good in pants.

**Home Is Where Mother Is**

I wrote that the fuss made in this country over Mother’s Day would lead one to believe that the American people worshiped mothers. Much of this behavior, however, was only sentimentality, which made real mothers squirm uncomfortably when songs were sung that quavered with tears, and readings were read that dripped with feeling, and greetings were sent heavy with roses and adjectives.

There was a man who happened to see an old grandmother rocking on her porch and knitting. He thought, “Oh, what a gentle grandmother! How she toils for others! How she deserves our kindest consideration!” And he built in his mind his picture of her. His tears started as he gazed on her gnarled, work worn hands.

A little boy, not old enough to be sentimental but old enough to seek conversation, sat swinging his feet off the edge of the porch. Presently he asked, “Grandma, why do you knit?” Grandma returned his look and answered, “Oh, just for the hell of it.”

In great contrast to sentimentality over mothers are the brickbats which a psychiatrist named Strecker hurled at moms. In his book, *Their Mother’s Sons*, Strecker said a very great many mothers of this country
ruined their children by binding them so close, psychologically, that the children failed to grow into mature adults able to stand on their own feet. One-fifth of the men eligible for draft in World War II were so neurotic or mentally unbalanced as to be failures. “Mom” was to blame. Strecker got right heated in his accusations of mom. It didn’t matter whether Mom waited on her offspring hand and foot, or whether she was a beautiful addle-pate, or be-spectacled intellectual leaving said offspring to fend for themselves.

Brickbats had been hurled at mothers before. I wrote that the wise mother walks down the middle of the road, not along the edge where the bouquets were thrown, or the other edge where brickbats were hurled. I struggled with what should be the characteristics of a good wife and mother, with statements about cheerfulness, sense of humor, and serenity.

I wrote that she helped her family to develop their personalities. (To develop personality was a common phrase in the 1940s.) At the same time she did not neglect her own personal growth. There were ideals in the home. She and her husband had a good set of values, which they pretty well agreed on, and their children absorbed these, though the parents didn’t expect their offspring to grow up exactly like them.

I said it was almost impossible to put into words the home-like feeling which good mothers created. Not only the children, but their father admitted that when they come home after school and work to find mother gone, the whole place seemed awfully empty. It wasn’t warm, no matter what the thermostat registered.

I admitted everything was not perfect, although some women apparently thought so, according to Ann Leighton, in her article “The American Matron and the Lilies”:

The standards she sets herself she could ask of no one else . . . The perfect wife. The perfect mother. Her husband’s great love and attractive to other men. A healthy family of at least three and the figure of a teen-age girl. A permanent position in her community through which she streaks like a comet. A mind posted beyond domestic drudgery on a world she has scarcely time to observe. All she asks is the most from life, from love, from friendship, city, country, the world of art and music and literature . . . She works like a slave to live like a queen . . .

She believes that it is better to do nothing than to do anything badly; so she tries to do everything well. If she cooks, it must be good cooking, French, exciting, and for the children, the work of an expert dietitian. If she cleans, her house will look sleek and loved,
better than one cleaned by strangers for pay. Her children have care beyond any a nurse can give. Her garden, her animals, her canning, and even her flower arrangements look ready for expert appraisal.\textsuperscript{21}

I wrote that this was all too strenuous to make a good homemaker. The wise wife and mother was more leisurely. A perfect matron like the one above would leave her family a nervous wreck.

In this chapter I also said that the process of managing people was not the same as just living with them and enjoying them. Managing involved bossing, only in a nice way of course. To enjoy people one talked on the same level with them, and treated them as something important in and of themselves.

I wondered how much of my own talk with our offspring was management—instructions and urgings and commands. I found myself saying in the mornings: “Hurry and get dressed. Get your work done. Eat your breakfast before the mush gets cold. (I knew the modern word was “cereal,” but it was still mush at our house.) Your face isn’t clean; go wash again. Did you brush your teeth? Get me another spoon so I can feed the baby. Go down and bring up a bottle of tomato juice. Take care of the baby while I run upstairs. Don’t leave chewing gum there! Turn the radio lower. Remember to wear your boots. Shut the door tight.”

Some days after school when they came home brimful of the latest happenings and anxious to tell them, then we really conversed. As we played Flinch or Authors we paused to talk. Sunday walks were a good talking time, but here again the radio competed, and maybe they did not want to go walking. At dinner at noon, and supper at night, there was time to talk, though never at breakfast at our house. When I sat down to dinner and supper, I pretended I was not a cook and cleaner of the house, but just one person talking to other persons. I refused to think about who was doing the dishes after the meal was over, and what else I should add to my shopping list.

\textbf{Just a Housewife}

“And what is your occupation?”

“Oh, I’m just a housewife.”

How many women gave this answer!—whether in applying for a library card or a driver’s license or in appraising themselves.

I wrote that when my first two children were babies, and I was tied hand and foot to feeding schedules and diaper washing, an older career woman sniffed when she heard I had apparently buried my
Ph.D. and had gone domestic. Her sniff set me to wondering what’s wrong with going domestic. Why did this woman, as well as so many of my own homemaking friends, speak of this occupation as being just a housewife? Perhaps, thought I, if we dig up all the possible reasons for this attitude and studied them carefully, we might improve our morale. At least hauling the problem into the light would straighten out my own emotions about my occupation. I worked my way through answers to arguments that housewifery was menial, monotonous, and isolated; that one must be a jack-of-all-trades to do it and it was unpaid.

Marion Harland, writing housekeeping books at the turn of the century, prefaced many chapters with bits of interesting information designed to lift the morale of housewives. For example, in the chapter on bread making to be found in her book, The Housekeeper’s Week, she introduced her bread recipes with two incidents:

Jane Carlyle with good blood in her veins, and common sense in her pretty head was a worthy companion in intellect to her husband the great Carlyle. Although well born and delicately reared she had to cook for her dyspeptic husband, especially mixing, raising, and baking the bread which with oatmeal porridge made up the staple of his diet. At first she railed at it as degradation, but one dreary night while waiting for the dough to rise she had a revelation. ‘After all, in the sight of the higher Powers, what is the mighty difference between a statue of Perseus and a loaf of bread, so that each be the thing that one’s hand has found to do?’

The other incident dealt with Emily Bronte, who in the corner of her kitchen on baking day would knead the dough, her eyes fixed in the intervals of the task upon the German book propped against the wall “out of reach of flour-dust or spatter of yeast.” Her father was also dyspeptic. Her neighbors knew her as “the Parson’s daughter who made the best bread in Haworth.” Marion Harland wrote, “I have talked with them and heard their commendation of her housewifery, particularly of her beautiful darning and her ‘main good luck in baking . . .’”

In 1949 I wrote that thriving schools of home economics sought to breathe an aura of respect around the business of being a housewife, even though in the beginning home economics carried a negative connotation. Isabel Bevier, an early founder, wrote that home economics was associated in the West with agricultural colleges, whose standards of scholarship in earlier days were not as high as those of the classical schools, and in the East home economics was associated with schools of cookery and sewing. I never dreamed that, by 1985, home economics as a field would
disappear, belittled I now believe by the fact that it was a women’s field. Human ecology, and family and consumer sciences have replaced it.

During the Second World War Elizabeth Hawes published her book, *Why Women Cry*, in which she wrote “I have never met a contented housewife. But as there are such a vociferous bunch of people constantly preaching that women’s place is in the home—and as these are so many of them prominent and upstanding members of the community, I must force myself to assume that somewhere there is a female who is perfectly contented with the lot of housewife.”

Hawes argued that some women are better off having something to do away from home, and she organized child care centers and cafeterias for employed women during the war. This was reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s book *Women and Economics* (1898) which urged professional cleaners to go through the houses, nursery schools to care for young children, and the creation of a common eating center. After all, Gilman wrote, if the only bond that holds a family together is the tablecloth, it is not much of a bond. Gilman was the leading intellectual of the first feminist movement at the turn of the century.

I wrote that there must be opportunity for those women who needed outside employment to supplement earnings or to fulfill their talents. Good nursery schools and a better system of child care were badly needed. Homemakers must not feel completely tied. They needed a feeling of choice, a feeling that they chose homemaking because they honestly preferred it, but if they wished to branch out into a specialty they should have that choice.

It is obvious that my shadow manuscript dealt primarily with non-employed, white, middle class homemakers, whose husbands could support them, and who therefore could have a feeling of choice. I failed to consider families in real economic distress, especially families headed by women.

**Are You Happy?**

Happiness was an American ideal. It was generally believed that everyone had a right to happiness, and we thought it could be handed to us on a platter. Most movies, novels, and stories had happy endings. Advertising assured us we would be happy if we bought its perfume, sterling silver, kitchen cleanser, and hand lotion. I wrote that this placid state of eternal happiness was impossible. We would get mighty bored in a continual placid, happy state.
I said that human beings needed action. The human spirit deteriorated if it didn’t bump against obstacles to overcome. I described how when my husband left on a trip, I would pop around and get the work done, and outline my days. We ate regularly. Nobody got sick. Shopping was uneventful. And I got three books read, but there was no zest.

Suddenly the head of the house was home. He trailed in with luggage, a bushel of ripe peaches, and unexpected relatives to stay the weekend. Life was a pandemonium. We concocted supper for everybody and washed two dozen fruit jars for the peaches, which must be bottled tomorrow. The offspring were deliriously happy. I was having a good time, too, talking to the relatives and figuring out how to stretch three slices of halibut to feed eight people. A stormy life has more chances for happiness than a quiet life with never a ripple. Happiness seems to be a byproduct of activity.

Then I discussed the moods of women, including before menstruation, and morning sickness in pregnancy. It was a common sense approach since I didn’t have any real expertise in these matters, just my own experience and that of friends and relatives. I quoted others saying that women are more neurotic than men. I wondered if this was an inborn tendency or something acquired as we grew up. I did not think to ask who had the right to judge women as more neurotic than men. This whole problem would be faced head on by second wave feminism, years later.

I wrestled with matters of drudgery. I wrote about fatigue, with graphs showing the rise and decline of energy during the day. I didn’t know, then, about individual biological rhythms and that there are night persons who do not start the day with a burst of energy. The very title of this chapter gives one pause today when the stresses of life are paramount. The idea of happiness would dominate the 1950s, and of course it has long remained a motivation used in advertising.

**Educating Our Daughters**

I summarized, historically, the opening of men’s higher education to women, the struggle of home economics for academic respect, and then, in the 1940s, how certain psychiatrists and other writers urged that women be educated only in fields “related to motherliness.” I observed that they sounded like the Wisconsin Supreme Court decision of 1875. It refused to admit Lavinia Goodell to the bar because the law of nature destines and qualifies the female sex for the bearing and
nurture of the children of our race and for the custody of the homes, which are surely not qualifications for forensic strife.\textsuperscript{26}

Of course women needed a broad education, and I wrote that both men and women must be able to earn a living and both needed personal-social abilities, but women needed more of the personal-social abilities. Today I am not so sure women should be assigned more.

Soon after I completed my manuscript, Lynne White, Jr., president of Mills College, published his book, \textit{Educating Our Daughters} (1950), emphasizing sex differences in biological makeup and social roles. He wrote that women’s curricula would enable women “to foster the intellectual and emotional life of her family and community” and infuse the home with beauty, culture, and gourmet cooking. He created a furore when he put these ideas before the national convention of AAUW in 1947.

In contrast, Harold Taylor, president of Sarah Lawrence College, insisted such an education would promote rigid, subservient behavior, fashioning women in terms of men’s needs instead of their own fulfillment. Courses in family living, child rearing, and responsible citizenship were as important for men as women. A distinct female curriculum would reduce common ground for intellectual companionship, and handicap those women seeking advanced study in the professions. Mildred McAfee Horton, president of Wellesley College, who had directed women of the United States Navy during the recent war, was alarmed that women who expected to marry refused to compete for high status job because they regarded such positions as unfeminine.\textsuperscript{27}

It was a great disappointment to me that I could not get my manuscript published. It didn’t occur to me that one reason was because men controlled the publishing world, but it occurred to Dale Spender who published a book in 1982 entitled, \textit{Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them: From Aphra Behn to Adrienne Rich}. In her section on the 1950s, Spender mentions my unpublished manuscript as a casualty.\textsuperscript{28}