

## Home Cooking: Betty Crocker and Womanhood in Early Twentieth-Century America

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### INTRODUCTION

In 1932 the milling company General Mills, Inc. printed a recipe booklet entitled *15 Ways to a Man's Heart* "by Betty Crocker." This twenty-four-page booklet introduced "fifteen simplified recipes" as a way to impress one's husband and to reach his heart by cooking what he likes to eat.<sup>1</sup> Since the early twentieth century, cookbooks and food advertisements have frequently exhorted women to associate food with love with phrases such as the "way to man's heart is through his stomach."<sup>2</sup> In her book about food advertisements, Katherine J. Parkin contends that advertisers "consistently used the 'food is love' dictum to sanctify the connection between women and food."<sup>3</sup> In particular, women's magazines, cookbooks, and advertisements articulated that food cooked at home was one of the most important ways to demonstrate one's love. Many food companies presented their products as "homemade" foods to their female customers, even while these were becoming increasingly precooked and packaged from the late nineteenth century onward. By analyzing the romanticizing of homemade foods in the early twentieth-century United States, we can see how home cooking came to be

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connected with a feminine way to express women's affection for their families. I argue that home cooking took on gendered ideology through the historical process. Understanding social and historical contexts reveals how gender norms and ideal womanhood have been portrayed, reiterated, and assumed.<sup>4</sup>

As Parkin found, the food industry and advertisements played a crucial role in forging intimate relations between homemade foods and love.<sup>5</sup> To investigate how home cooking acquired a connotation of love, I focus here on "Betty Crocker," created by General Mills as a marketing figure in 1921. Over the years, this fictitious woman gradually assumed the image of a real person, as she appeared as an author of many cookbooks and as a speaker on a popular radio program. Betty Crocker provided housewives with a wide range of advice about cooking meals and actively promoted certain images of ideal womanhood. Rather than simply being an advertisement or brand logo, Betty Crocker was carefully designed to personalize the company and perform the role of a real adviser, thereby serving as a mediator between the company and its customers. Through cooking advice, General Mills/Betty Crocker emphasized the importance of home cooking, especially the emotional function of food and women's responsibility at home, and in so doing it endorsed woman's role as housewife.

Scholars of consumerism and the food history have studied Betty Crocker mostly as an advertising character or a corporate cooking adviser. Laura Shapiro explores the effect of industrialization on home cooking as well as the relation between cooking, home, and gender by focusing on Betty Crocker, Julia Child, M. F. K. Fisher, and Betty Friedan.<sup>6</sup> But her detailed and wide-ranging analysis of these well-known female figures does not fully consider the historical and social circumstances of the larger society that produced them. Karal A. Marling also argues that Betty Crocker not only promoted General Mills products but also offered housewives a useful narrative for understanding food.<sup>7</sup> Although the author insists on the ideology behind the making of such a fictitious woman as Betty Crocker, she does not analyze in detail how and why food and cooking gained a connotation of female love for the family. In her 2005 book about Betty Crocker, *Finding Betty Crocker: The Secret Life of America's First Lady of Food*, Susan Marks examines the history of Betty Crocker, as well as consumer responses, by utilizing a wide range of primary sources including letters from housewives to Betty Crocker and internal documents from General Mills.<sup>8</sup> Her book

is significant for understanding interrelations between the fictitious woman and consumers. Beyond this book's illuminating the history of Betty Crocker, however, the message this female character presented to women and its related discourse on home and cooking has not yet been investigated. The social circumstances under which Betty Crocker was created and the grounds for her popularity show the politics of dignifying home cooking, which went beyond mere routine housework.

In the early twentieth century dynamic transformations in the American food business and the rise of a new culture of consumption profoundly affected social values related to cooking, family, and gender. Technological development and the introduction of processed foods drastically changed the ways in which women cooked at home. Furthermore, many chain stores and self-service supermarkets, serving as venues for the mass consumption of mass-produced goods, introduced new consumption practices.<sup>9</sup> As more housewives were facing problems of new household tasks, Betty Crocker provided precise advice on everything from cooking and buying foods to personal concerns about family by urging them to use General Mills products. The words of Betty Crocker were not merely advertising statements for the company but dulcet, friendly messages that assured women that the correct product would enable them to "keep pace with their changing society."<sup>10</sup>

While Betty Crocker continued to serve as a cooking adviser and her message always referred to women's love for the family throughout the twentieth century, her primary role has changed over the years. In her early years, this fictitious woman introduced housewives to new concepts and modern ways of cooking, such as "scientific cooking" and new household technology. During the 1940s, utilizing patriotic narratives, Betty Crocker mostly exhorted American women to devote themselves to the war effort. The 1950s through the 1970s were the decades when her messages began aiming at not only housewives but also "today's busy women" who worked outside the home.<sup>11</sup> Since, in this essay, I aim to analyze the social construction of the "food is love dictum" in the early twentieth century, rather than to examine the historical transformation of the fictitious woman, I pay particular attention to Betty Crocker's cooking advice in the 1920s and 1930s, and investigate how she materialized the sanctification of home cooking.

In the following sections, first, I examine Betty Crocker's main customers and messages and assert that home cooking advice was premised on the ideal of middle-class housewives. Second, I investigate how Betty

Crocker and other cooking advisers encouraged women to cook at home. In an era that espoused science, scientific cooking was a way to achieve ideal motherhood without failure. Third, I focus on why home cooking became a supreme task for women, who were regarded as having a great influence on the family. In the last section I discuss the transformation of housewifery, which strengthened a perceived tie between home cooking and affection. Focusing on Betty Crocker in relation to conceptions of science and technology, gender roles, and family norms elucidates how and why ideal womanhood was defined and connected to housewifery, especially to home cooking. To understand the construction of home cooking ideology in society at large, it is imperative to investigate the history of food and cooking.

### I. IDEAL HOUSEWIVES

In November 1921 General Mills printed a puzzle on the back of the *Saturday Evening Post* as one of its advertising campaigns. In addition to nearly thirty thousand responses with completed puzzles, the company received hundreds of letters from its customers, mainly housewives, asking how to make such things as one-crust cherry pies or apple dumplings. General Mills believed that these women would feel a personal link to the company if they received a reply letter from a female person. The advertising department, headed by Samuel Gale, decided to sign the name Betty Crocker on every letter sent to their customers regarding recipes, cooking, baking, or other domestic advice.<sup>12</sup> Female employees at General Mills, mostly home economists with college degrees, began to write these letters to customers, cookbooks, and radio scripts under the name of Betty Crocker. The “mortalization” of Betty Crocker, as James Gray points out, was “the work of many minds.”<sup>13</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s, in responding to “a vacuum of personal advice” in an industrialized modern society, American advertisers explored new ways to personalize their relationship with the consumer. They increasingly replaced “objective information on products” with “subjective information about the hopes and anxieties of the consumer” in a sympathetic and friendly manner. Accordingly, many food corporations created humanlike characters to offer housewives advice on cooking, while simultaneously promoting their products in a more intimate tone.<sup>14</sup>

For the first three years, Betty Crocker was nothing but a mere signature on letters, recipes, and advertisements. The nationwide popularity came after this fictitious woman went on the air. In October 1924 General Mills started a fifteen-minute radio program, *Gold Medal Home Service Talk*. A female employee of the company, Blanche Ingersoll, appeared as Betty Crocker and began offering a program that featured cooking lessons. Ingersoll's Betty Crocker introduced a variety of recipes that always designated the use of General Mills products.<sup>15</sup> The "students" of the cooking program were supposed to cook the dish they had learned on the radio individually at home and were encouraged to send a report about the result of their cooking to the company. Moreover, the company asked them to send a receipt or signature of a store clerk with their cooking report to prove that they had bought the company's products.<sup>16</sup>

Such an educational program met many women's needs for cooking and other domestic advice: in 1925, 47,000 new listeners registered for the program, and the number of registrants soared to 250,000 by 1933, reflecting the considerable popularity of the Betty Crocker program among women.<sup>17</sup> Since General Mills was a milling company that mainly sold flour, it was crucial for the company not only to publicize the brand name but also to promote cooking in general so as to persuade women to buy their products. Over the radio, by offering listeners concrete advice on how to provide nutritious meals to the family, Betty Crocker encouraged women to cook at home with General Mills products.

Thanks to the popularity of the radio program, Betty Crocker became a famous icon in twentieth-century American society. Her messages, however, did not necessarily reach all American women; especially during the early years, the range of her customers was relatively restricted and her home cooking advice was also quite limited. At the turn of the twentieth century, the ideology of domesticity promoted in the United States was based on limited grounds. It mostly reflected the concerns of white, Anglo, middle-class women in the Northeast, and its exponents usually held a biased view of women of other classes, regions, ethnic origins, and colors.<sup>18</sup> The first portrait of Betty Crocker, drawn in 1936, reflected such attitudes. General Mills commissioned a well-known commercial illustrator, Neysa McMein, to make Betty Crocker's portrait. According to James Gray, McMein's Betty Crocker was "the perfect composite of the twentieth-century American woman" with "a fine Nordic brow and shape of skull, a jaw of slightly Slavic resolution,

and features that might be claimed contentedly by various European groups.”<sup>19</sup> This fictitious woman reflected the norm of ideal womanhood in the early twentieth century based primarily on the features of a typical white woman. In Mary D. McFeely’s words, this kind of whiteness was “an unmarked characteristic” of the 1920s.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, the listenership of Betty Crocker’s radio program and her cooking advice showed that her message of home cooking was based on the white middle-class norm. Since the program was aired from 10:45 to 11:00 every morning, its listeners were mainly those who stayed at home during the day, namely, women who did not need to work outside the home. Even if working-class women were able to listen to a radio and tune in to the Betty Crocker program at their workplaces, it was simply difficult for them to write down the recipes during their work time, let alone send cooking reports to the company afterward.<sup>21</sup> Such women had few, if any, opportunities to participate in the Betty Crocker radio cooking school.<sup>22</sup>

Betty Crocker’s advice also evinced to a great degree the ideal and gender norms of middle-class white women of the period. For example, Betty Crocker frequently praised modern cooking facilities: “The older members of the group will remember the back-breaking effort of keeping the kitchen range filled with wood or coal. [ . . . ] In most homes today we employ magic—we turn the faucet in the white sink for water, light the gas or turn on the electricity.”<sup>23</sup> After the First World War, gas and electric stoves became more popular than old models fueled by coal, wood, gasoline, or kerosene. General Electric and Westinghouse developed the prototype of electric stoves in the early twentieth century, which became increasingly popular despite many defects.<sup>24</sup>

However, the ownership of gas and electric ovens depended on a family’s financial ability and residential location. At the time, gas lines and electric power were being made available to an increasing number of homes in urban areas. By the 1930s, 85 percent of nonfarm dwellings had electric service. Although gas and electricity became increasingly available in urban working-class homes by the 1920s, only about 10 percent of rural homes had the service in 1930.<sup>25</sup> Such imbalance of service between rural and urban areas influenced the ownership of electric stoves. In large cities households were more likely to have gas and electric stoves; 95 percent of homes in Cleveland, for instance, cooked with gas or electricity in 1935.<sup>26</sup> Among tenant farmers in Tennessee, in contrast, only eight out of two hundred households could afford electric service in the mid-1930s, and not a single one had running water, although

the area was considered “progressive” in rural electrification.<sup>27</sup> The ideal of modern cooking that Betty Crocker admired as “magic” was largely based on the expectations of urban middle-class households, which had better access to utilities and commercial goods. Working-class mothers and wives were not only deprived of opportunities to receive lessons and domestic advice through cooking schools, women’s magazines, and radio programs, but they also lacked access to the technology that would enable the realization of “ideal” lives.

## II. MODERN COOKING

At the turn of the twentieth century, cooking advisers exhorted women to use up-to-date domestic technologies and to incorporate new values and behaviors into their household tasks.<sup>28</sup> Home economists and other cooking experts believed that science would make domestic work professional, and they introduced scientific methods as a modern way of cooking. It was not the first time that professionalism was introduced into housewifery. In the mid-nineteenth century, Catharine Beecher advocated the need for efficient housework, as well as for the education of women, in her popular books, including *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (1841) and *The American Women’s Home, or, Principles of Domestic Science* (1869). Under the influence of Beecher’s philosophy, social reformers and home economists such as Ellen Richards promoted the home economics movement beginning in the late 1890s. The movement aimed to establish domestic work as worthy and professional by applying business techniques, such as efficiency and rationality, to household tasks.<sup>29</sup> As professionals of domesticity, college-educated home economists began teaching biology, chemistry, bacteriology, and child psychology at women’s colleges and land-grant universities. Economics was also included in their curricula to teach female students management of the household budget and economical consumption. Some home economists also hosted cooking lessons for housewives on a local community basis.<sup>30</sup> Their strong belief in science and professionalism as well as faith in the capacities of experts reflected the characteristics of the Progressive movement at the turn of the twentieth century. The home economics movement showed that women’s zeal for social reform in the Progressive Era was not limited to the arena of politics and the education system but also included the private sphere of the home.

Some home economists were employed in schools and government institutions such as the Bureau of Home Economics, and others began to work for food companies and home appliance businesses by the 1920s. The primary mission of home economists in the industry was to develop products and recipes that explained how customers should use a company's certain branded goods. Moreover, companies like General Mills not only hired female personnel but also created fictitious home economists such as Aunt Jenny (Lever Brothers) to provide their customers with advice on cooking and to promote their products. Such links between home economists and the food industry symbolized the new link between home and business.<sup>31</sup>

As the representative of home economists who worked for General Mills, Betty Crocker gave housewives specific advice on their concerns about cooking and shopping by promoting the company's products such as Gold Medal flour. As already noted, her advice was initially created by home economists who wrote the letters and cookbooks. Thus the home economics movement had a significant impact on the invention and ensuing popularity of Betty Crocker. Her advice often referred to the principles of the movement, especially the importance of science, in order to convince housewives to buy General Mills products and to become ideal mothers and wives who could cook nutritious meals for their families. Efficiency in housework became increasingly important when the supply of domestic servants diminished and middle-class women began to undertake housekeeping tasks.<sup>32</sup> Betty Crocker also emphasized rationality and accuracy, and it was essential to "use a recipe and measure everything carefully" to make "perfect" dishes.<sup>33</sup> In order to measure precise temperature for baking, oven thermometers were given to customers as a prize in one Betty Crocker campaign.<sup>34</sup>

As more and more household appliances were invented and packaged foods became popular in the early twentieth century, Betty Crocker embraced the modernity of such new products.<sup>35</sup> It was essential for "modern homemakers" to eradicate guesswork and uncertainty from their cooking. The solution was, Betty Crocker suggested, the company's "unvaryingly uniform" product, Gold Medal flour, which worked out "to a degree of scientific exactness" that made results unvarying. She pronounced that the company's scientific product testing "eliminate[d] chance" of failure and "the old-fashioned guess-work has now been removed from baking," so that women did not have to attribute their cooking results to luck.<sup>36</sup> Customers were warned that without Gold



Medal flour, they would end up with dry, hard cookies, “as if they were made of dust and ashes.” In order to appease customers’ fear of failure and to urge them to use the company’s products, which made cookies “wonderfully rich tasting, tender and keep their moisture,” Betty Crocker presented General Mills products as foolproof ingredients and modern cooking as the way to accomplish women’s “supreme” task of domesticity.<sup>37</sup>

To modernize cooking practices, Betty Crocker also directed housewives to closely follow her recipes. Regardless of the product quality, if women cooked in their own way, imprecise measurement and guesswork would cause a disastrous result. It was crucial for the company to ensure that the flour “always act[ed] the same” in every oven at every home and that any women could cook without failure in order to market their products.<sup>38</sup> Betty Crocker’s recipes were carefully tested by home economists at the company’s product-development laboratory, called the “Betty Crocker Kitchen,” before being introduced to customers.<sup>39</sup> Betty Crocker affirmed that her recipes were reliable since they were tested with “the latest scientific methods” by professional home economists “who have had considerable experience.”<sup>40</sup> Every recipe included a list of ingredients (one of them was always Gold Medal flour), the quantity needed, the order of cooking, and the cooking time. These directions, given in minute detail, enabled housewives, both inexperienced and experienced, to cook meals at home. At the same time, home cooking became a replication of foods that had been tested in a corporate kitchen. In the 1920s not only processed foods but also recipes presented to private households were “precooked” and “packaged” before reaching consumers.

Betty Crocker’s advice on home baking suggested that modern and scientific cooking was not incompatible with old-fashioned taste. She extolled the cooking of the good old days, especially the taste of “Grandma’s cooking.” In her radio program, Betty Crocker introduced raisin-filled cookies as “the true, old-fashioned kind, the kind grandmother used to keep in her cooky [*sic*] jar.”<sup>41</sup> The recipe for fresh cherry cobbler was “another one of the modernized speed recipes for dishes with old-fashioned charm.”<sup>42</sup> Old-style cooking techniques, such as using guesswork, had to be eliminated, but not the taste. The term “old-fashioned” signified homey and memorable foods. Such sentimental quality of cooking and tastes was increasingly stressed by women’s magazines and cookbooks in the early twentieth century.

### III. INFLUENCE FOR HAPPINESS

Popular magazines and cookbooks repeatedly emphasized the sacred dignity and importance of domesticity, and presented home cooking as an honorable duty, particularly for middle-class housewives. They claimed that cooking was not a simple chore that anyone could do, but a critical task that demanded knowledge, skills, and womanly devotion. In her very first radio program, broadcast in October 1924, Betty Crocker emphasized this significance of cooking: "If then, cooking, the preparation of food, so affects not only our own dispositions and our work, but also the happiness and efficiency of those with whom we come in contact, surely it is a most important subject and worthy of our serious consideration."<sup>43</sup> Betty Crocker insisted that housewives should contribute to a healthy and happy home life because cooking was a valuable task.

This heightened importance of housework partly derived from the decline in the number of domestic servants. Since the late nineteenth century, the servant problem had become a serious concern for many middle-class households. By the early 1920s, domestic servants became still less available to private families. The number of those employed in domestic occupations declined by 49 percent between 1870 and 1920. Only a few American homes employed full-time servants, and even fewer had live-in servants.<sup>44</sup>

After the enactment of immigration laws in the 1920s, including the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the National Origins Act of 1924, the influx of foreign-born young women diminished. Since a large proportion of those immigrant women had worked as domestic servants in American homes, the immigration restrictions impacted the already declining number of servants.<sup>45</sup> Several historians also attribute the decrease of domestics to the socioeconomic situation in early twentieth century America. The expanding economy of the 1920s increased the opportunities in factories for women with limited skills, and better work opportunities and higher wages in these other sectors meant that only relatively wealthy families could afford to hire domestic help.<sup>46</sup>

The servant problem was accompanied by other problems related to domesticity and middle-class housewives. First, without domestic help, middle-class housewives needed to carry out all the work at home by themselves. But even as they had to cope with a variety of new types of housework, many women living in cities were far from their mothers and other relatives who could teach them such tasks. In an urbanized and industrialized society, the number of nuclear families had increased by

1920, when urban residents outnumbered people living on farms and in rural areas.<sup>47</sup> Besides, the new tasks of cooking with processed foods and buying packaged products were unfamiliar to these women's mothers and grandmothers.<sup>48</sup>

Urbanization, the increase in the number of nuclear families, and new consumption practices forced many housewives to seek help other than from their mothers. Already in the late nineteenth century, cooking schools for middle-class women began appearing in big cities.<sup>49</sup> As women's literacy rate increased, these urban, educated women created a market for many advice books, novels, and cookbooks.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, through offering cooking skills and knowledge to middle-class housewives, cooking schools as well as the printing industry promoted the importance of home cooking as a women's domestic duty.

The increased domestic responsibility of middle-class housewives and the decrease in numbers of servants posed another problem due to the difference in social and economic status between these two groups. The majority of domestics were uneducated and unskilled immigrants or non-white women who earned low wages and had a lower social position. In order to distinguish between servants and middle-class housewives, women's magazines and cookbooks assigned a new meaning to the domestic work that had been conducted by the former group. According to Maxine L. Margolis, "the women's magazines of the 1920s waxed long and eloquent on the differences in emotional quality between the loving wife and mother and the 'uneducated' (black or immigrant) maid." Their message was that "no maid could ever perform housework with the same degree of emotional attachment as the woman of the house could."<sup>51</sup>

In order to persuade women that housework was not an onerous burden, Betty Crocker reiterated the dignity of housewifery and the enjoyment of cooking. She declared that one of her aims was to "make women's familiar job of housekeeping less a monotonous routine" and to "brighten the daily routine of the busy housewife through [her] recipes and suggestions." "The art of cooking," emphasized Betty Crocker, was "one of the most enjoyable and satisfying pastimes."<sup>52</sup> For this fictitious woman, cooking was not a mere routine but a creative, enjoyable art.

The pleasure of cooking, however, was not solely for women's amusement. Housewives were expected to take care of the physical as well as mental health of their families through everyday cooking. It was important for women to realize that "a good cook has a real influence for happiness as great as a woman could have in any occupation."<sup>53</sup> Betty Crocker averred:

[I]t is not enough that we be merely fed, but we must be well fed to be happy. The big problem the mother of a family faces is not merely to keep her family alive but to keep them in radiant health and brimming with life and happiness. In order to do this she must know the value of different foods in the body and how to prepare these foods. In other words, she must be a good cook.<sup>54</sup>

Responding to Betty Crocker's advice, her customers agreed that a good wife/mother meant being a good cook and that "all girls should know how to cook, before they get married." Some even thought that if women did not try to be "good wives," they were likely to lose their husbands.<sup>55</sup>

As middle-class housewives became responsible for more domestic work in the 1920s, women's magazines, cookbooks, newspaper columns, and radio programs found new business opportunities, and offered them domestic advice and cooking lessons. At the same time, the food business and advertisement industry presented housework as indispensable to the family physically and emotionally. The sanctification of housewifery was closely associated with the transformation of demographic and industrial structures as well as with the increasing level of commercialization in American society.

#### IV. MOTHER AS A HOSTESS

In the 1920s popular magazines began referring to the American woman as "housewife" rather than as "housekeeper." This reflected changing attitudes about women's role in the home, particularly the wife's role as a "mate."<sup>56</sup> Such new notions of relations between husband and wife produced a new concept of marriage—"companionate marriage." Its ideal of companionship was mutual and equal relationships between a man and a woman united not by economic needs or religious faith but by both partners' sexual, emotional, and personal needs.<sup>57</sup> The middle-class housewife came to be regarded as a marriage partner, while domestic work still remained central to the married woman's role; thus, the housewife's job during the 1920s was transformed into what Matthews has called a "post-industrial one." The spread of the automobile, the declining number of servants, and the new types of commercial products, such as processed foods, "put middle-class housewives squarely into service mode, whether chauffeuring children, running errands, or shopping in a self-service market."<sup>58</sup> The

service that women provided the family was making sure that the home remained a happy and pleasurable place for its members.

Despite the help of newly introduced processed foods and domestic appliances, which were advertised as “labor-saving,” the total amount of time housewives spent on domestic work changed little. In addition, these new household appliances raised the standard of good housework, and thus domestic tasks became more demanding—for instance, the introduction of the washing machine meant that housewives were expected to attain a higher standard of cleanliness. While middle-class women were able to finish some chores in shorter time, they allocated more time to other work such as child rearing and cleaning.<sup>59</sup> Child care in particular was regarded as an essential task for housewives. Baby clinics as well as women’s magazines insisted that primary responsibility for children’s physical and mental health lay with their mothers. As domestic advisers underscored the importance of child rearing, especially the responsibilities of mothers to care for and discipline children, housewives were expected to fulfill the emotional needs of their families.<sup>60</sup>

As the maternal role of women attained greater importance in American society, making “perfect” dishes and choosing a “better” product were not the only areas women needed to excel in. Many women’s magazines increasingly suggested that housework was an expression of the housewife’s personality, and she was supposed to provide love and a feeling of security to her family through the meals she cooked. “Every home with children *should* have a full cookie jar,” insisted Betty Crocker, and “every home-loving man, the kind who wants to dedicate his life to bringing up a family . . . should have good appetizing meals, and there should be a full cookie jar in his home,” and encouraged women to bake cookies for their family using Gold Medal flour.<sup>61</sup> Cookies were presented as a symbol of love, and they needed to be home baked. Betty Crocker asserted that baking and cooking was closely associated with love for the family, and exhorted women that only General Mills products enabled them to achieve their goal of cooking nutritious meals for the family in an easy and desirable way. By closely uniting scientific cooking with the concept of the family, Betty Crocker not only provided women with knowledge about “science” and cooking, but also offered them a way to become ideal mothers and wives.

Many of Betty Crocker’s customers shared such gender norms. One woman wrote to Betty Crocker, “Isn’t there something I could do to make

my husband more comfortable around his own fireside?"<sup>62</sup> Another woman said that "I think if women were as eager to learn new ways of fixing new dishes or remodeling the old ones, as they are in new beauty aids and how to make themselves more lovely [*sic*], they wouldn't have so much trouble in keeping their husbands in good humor. Not that they shouldn't keep themselves lovely."<sup>63</sup> Replying to such letters from her customers, Betty Crocker offered to send one woman "a few special recipes which [are] known to have worked many charms" to "help keep happiness supreme in the household."<sup>64</sup> Since family members were busy with separate activities during the day, dinnertime was the only opportunity for them to get together at home.<sup>65</sup> Another housewife was concerned about whether her homemade dishes could satisfy her husband's palate and asked Betty Crocker for a "good Bread recipe," hoping to "try the nearest way to his heart." Betty Crocker confidently recommended her recipes: "I am delighted to come to the rescue in the domestic problem now confronting you . . . and firmly believe that our *Gold Medal* Recipes are going to accomplish the same miracle in your home that they have in thousands of other homes throughout the country."<sup>66</sup> Betty Crocker's recipes and General Mills products served as the apparatus by which customers constructed part of their identity and reassured their roles as "good" mothers and wives; and homemade foods symbolized women's love for the family.

These housewives were expected to offer their hospitality to their own families as well as their neighbors and friends by hosting luncheons, tea parties, and birthday parties.<sup>67</sup> A woman living in Amsterdam, New York, sent Betty Crocker a letter asking for economical recipes and menus for a luncheon that she was asked to host.<sup>68</sup> In order to answer this sort of question, Betty Crocker offered, every Thursday, "regular little radio party planning" that introduced refreshments, table decorations, and "stunts for all sorts of festive occasions."<sup>69</sup> Betty Crocker's menu for luncheons included checkerboard sandwiches, medallion sandwiches, cheese and corn soufflé with creamed mushrooms, and biscuits cut in heart shapes.<sup>70</sup> She also suggested that fancy shapes of cookies would look more "partified,"<sup>71</sup> and she even introduced ideas for decoration of rooms, games to play at a party, and souvenirs for guests.<sup>72</sup> Hosting home parties became one of the important roles of middle-class housewives, and it was also an opportunity for them to display their cooking skills and hospitality.

Urbanization and industrialization, combined with the decline of the family's role in production, transformed the traditional family ideal of patriarchal authority and hierarchical organization into a new ideal based on mutual relations between husband and wife. Nonetheless, women remained responsible for most of the housework, or even gained more responsibilities at home such as providing emotional fulfillment to the family. Middle-class housewives, in particular, were expected to provide their families with nutritious meals and emotional satisfaction.

### CONCLUSION

The 1920s was a paradoxical decade for American women in many ways.<sup>73</sup> While women acquired voting rights, they did not form any powerful voting block nor did they gain as many significant political offices as feminists had expected. This was the era of the New Woman, who was said to seek new social roles, femaleness, and sexual self-expression. But the basic sex roles remained unchanged, and women still had limited career choices and were expected to fulfill their roles as mothers and wives. Although working mothers and wives were considered to have a negative effect on the national economy and on the family, many working-class women had no other choice but to work for a living. Home cooking during this period was equally paradoxical. Home cooking advice was mainly aimed at middle-class housewives and reflected middle-class ideals. Many working-class women had few opportunities to learn cooking skills through women's magazines and cookbooks. They also had only limited access to modern cooking appliances and utilities. Even when working-class nonwhite women had a chance to take cooking lessons offered by social reformers in settlement houses, such "home" cooking was not necessarily a taste of their own home for these immigrant or nonwhite women. Furthermore, cooking advisers encouraged women to be "creative" cooks for the family by carefully following instructions and using processed foods.<sup>74</sup> "Labor-saving" devices did not dramatically lessen household burdens. Rather, middle-class housewives came to assume more responsibility for housework, which acquired an emotional significance.

As many middle-class housewives came to confront new domestic tasks, General Mills created Betty Crocker to provide them with all sorts of cooking advice. This fictitious woman not only taught cooking skills

and knowledge but also actively presented a model of the ideal woman and home. At the same time, letters from customers to Betty Crocker enabled the company to understand consumer needs and to develop new products as well as marketing strategy. In this manner, this fictitious woman played a role as a mediator between the company and its customers.

Deriving her vision largely from the home economics movement, Betty Crocker insisted on the importance of scientific cooking, such as making accurate measurements and using precise baking temperatures, which would enable women to always make “perfect” dishes. Science was utilized to promote the reliability of General Mills products and recipes, whose use was, according to Betty Crocker, the only correct way to become an ideal mother/wife without failure. This fictitious female figure endorsed the company’s products and her own recipes, while encouraging women to cook at home in order to offer their love to the family. She indicated that these baked products were not merely edible objects but essential means for housewives to become ideal women. Betty Crocker’s cooking advice and its relation to social conditions explain how a food company advocated an ideal womanhood and gender norms by connecting home cooking and love.

The decrease in availability of domestic servants and the increase in numbers of nuclear families contributed to sanctifying domestic work for middle-class housewives, and women’s magazines and cookbooks depicted housewifery as a dignified task. With the changes in family structures and relations, middle-class women were expected to fulfill their families’ emotional needs through cooking meals. As kitchen appliances and processed foods became increasingly available, women’s productive work acquired more, not less, significance. Social construction of this “home cooking and love” discourse was closely associated with the dynamic changes in American society in the early twentieth century. The history of food/cooking and domesticity shows that ideal gender norms became firmly embedded in people’s everyday lives.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Susan Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker: The Secret Life of America’s First Lady of Food* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 42, 58.

<sup>2</sup> Jessamyn Neuhaus, “The Way to a Man’s Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s,” *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (Spring, 1999): 538.



<sup>3</sup> Katherine J. Parkin, *Food Is Love: Advertising and Gender Roles in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>4</sup> See Neuhaus, "The Way to a Man's Heart," 546–47.

<sup>5</sup> Parkin, *Food Is Love*.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 169–248; and "'I Guarantee': Betty Crocker and the Woman in the Kitchen," in *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*, ed. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 29–61.

<sup>7</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 202–40. Harvey Levenstein also examines the impact of Betty Crocker in American food history and the food business in *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 30, 36, 85–86, 102, 115–16; and in *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (1988; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 155–56. See also Mary D. McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie? American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 90–95.

<sup>8</sup> Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 32. Piggly Wiggly, which opened in 1916 in Memphis, Tennessee, was the first self-service grocery store in the United States. By 1918 the Piggly Wiggly chain had stores in forty cities across the country. See Lisa C. Tolbert, "The Aristocracy of the Market Basket: Self-Service Food Shipping in the New South," in *Food Chains: From Farmyard to Shopping Cart*, ed. Warren Belasco and Roger Horowitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 179–95.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 14–22, 347–59.

<sup>11</sup> Betty Crocker, *Betty Crocker's Family Dinners in a Hurry: Home-Tested Menus That Make the Most of Minutes* (New York: Golden Press, 1973). The consumer research by Ernest Dichter in the 1950s concludes that "women tend to see Betty Crocker in terms of their own self-image, characteristics, desires, wants and needs." The research categorized women into three different types: the pure homemaker, the career type, and the balanced woman. The finding shows that these different types of women had different perceptions of Betty Crocker. Institute for Research in Mass Motivations, Inc., *A Psychological Research Study on the Effectiveness of Betty Crocker in Promoting General Mills Products*, 1953, box 2407/8, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware.

<sup>12</sup> James Gray, *Business without Boundary: The Story of General Mills* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), 172; and Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 9–14. See also Susan Marks, "Betty Crocker: Marketing the Modern Woman," *Hennepin History* 58, no. 2 (1999): 4–19.

<sup>13</sup> Gray, *Business*, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Marchand, *Advertising*, 9–16, 115. See also Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 89–123. For "personification" of advertisements, see Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 174.

<sup>15</sup> Gray, *Business*, 176. See also Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 29–38.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth G Anderson, "Betty Crocker Notes, the 1930s," Leslie L. Anderson and Family Papers, 1883–1981, box 144/C/19/1B, Minnesota History Center, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

<sup>17</sup> Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 37, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Glenna Matthews, *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 33.

<sup>19</sup> Gray, *Business*, 174. See also Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 211–45; and Ai Hisano, "Betty Crocker no hyōshō to amerika shakai no hensen [Representation of Betty Crocker and the transformation of American society]," *Pacific and American Studies* 9 (March 2009): 128–41.

<sup>20</sup> McFeely, *Can She Bake*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> According to Lizabeth Cohen, by 1930 there was one radio for every two or three households in workers' neighborhoods in Chicago. In such an urban area, having a radio was not a primary factor that affected the listenership of the Betty Crocker program, since the working-class could afford the radio set. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 129–37.

<sup>22</sup> Although American society then was hostile to the idea of working mothers/wives, the reality was that many nonwhite women continued to stay in the labor force after marriage because of economic necessity. In 1920, 58.8% of single and 32.5% of married nonwhite women were in the workforce. On the other hand, among white women, labor force participation rates of single and married women were 45.0% and 6.5% respectively. Maxine L. Margolis, *Mothers and Such: Views of American Women and Why They Changed* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 206. See also S. J. Kleinberg, *Women in the United States, 1830–1945* (London: MacMillan, 1999), 112, 133, 207–17.

<sup>23</sup> *The Gold Medal Flour Home Service Talk*, WCCO, 21 September 1925, radio script, General Mills Archives, Minneapolis.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen M. Plante, *The American Kitchen 1700 to the Present: From Hearth to Highrise* (New York: Facts on File, 1995), 168, 229, 252–53; and Priscilla J. Brewer, *From Fireplace to Cookstove: Technology and the Domestic Ideal in America* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 232, 234. See also Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 40, 67–84; James C. Williams, "Getting Housewives the Electric Message: Gender and Energy Marketing in the Early Twentieth Century," in *His and Hers: Gender, Consumption, and Technology*, ed. Roger Horowitz and Arwen Mohun (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 95–113.

<sup>25</sup> Strasser, *Never Done*, 81. In the United States as a whole, 16% of dwelling units had electric service in 1912, 35% had it in 1920, and 68% in 1930. As electric service spread to more households, the price of electricity dropped: from nine cents a kilowatt hour in 1912 to seven and a half cents in 1920, and to six cents in 1930. However, people spent more money on electricity because they installed more lights, bought more appliances, and used more current. The average annual use per customer doubled between 1912 and 1930. See also Katherine Leonard Turner, "Tools and Spaces: Food and Cooking in Working-Class Neighborhoods, 1880–1930," in Belasco and Horowitz, *Food Chains*, 217–32.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books), 185.

<sup>28</sup> Kleinberg, *Women*, 34, 170–71.

<sup>29</sup> Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 145–46, 157. See also Levenstein, *Revolution*, 72–78; and Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, 2nd ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 32–43.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 125; Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 148; and Strasser, *Never Done*, 207.

<sup>31</sup> Strasser, *Never Done*, 212. See also Levenstein, *Revolution*, 156, 198.

<sup>32</sup> Kleinberg, *Women*, 172.

<sup>33</sup> *The Gold Medal Flour Home Service Talk*, WCCO, 21 September 1925.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, “Betty Crocker Notes.”

<sup>35</sup> For instance, Clarence Birdseye, the pioneer of the frozen-food industry, received a patent in 1925 for the new technique. By 1934, 39 million pounds of frozen food were being processed annually. Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 179. For processed foods and food companies, see Sherrie A. Inness, ed., *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2001), esp., Christopher Holmes Smith, “Freeze Frames: Frozen Foods and Memories of the Postwar American Family,” 175–209; and Erika Endrijonas, “Processed Foods from Scratch: Cooking for a Family in the 1950s,” 157–73.

<sup>36</sup> Anderson, “Betty Crocker Notes.”

<sup>37</sup> *Betty Crocker’s Radio Program*, NBC, 1 April 1932, radio script, General Mills Archives, Minneapolis.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> For the Betty Crocker Kitchen, see Karen Leonard, “The Betty Crocker Kitchens: Temptations for Every Taste,” *Family* 2, no. 2 (1978): 6–13; and Nancy A. Miller, “Kitchen Confidential,” *Architecture Minnesota* 30, no. 5 (2004): 44–47.

<sup>40</sup> *The Gold Medal Flour Home Service Talk*, WCCO, 21 September 1925.

<sup>41</sup> *Betty Crocker Service Program*, NBC, 5 June 1936, radio script, General Mills Archives, Minneapolis.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson, “Betty Crocker Notes.”

<sup>43</sup> *The Gold Medal Flour Home Service Talk*, WCCO, 2 October 1924, radio script, General Mills Archives, Minneapolis.

<sup>44</sup> Margolis, *Mothers*, 135; and Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 51, 153. The total number of women employed in domestic labor decreased in the first decade of the twentieth century, although the actual number of household servants increased from 1,509,000 in 1900 to 2,025,000 in 1930. Since there was a supply of African American women who worked as domestics in the South, there was a regional difference in the degree of declining numbers of servants. Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 179.

<sup>45</sup> Cowan, *More Work*, 175; Neuhaus, *Manly Meals*, 51; and Levenstein, *Revolution*, 157.

<sup>46</sup> Cowan, *More Work*, 175; Kleinberg, *Women*, 237; and Margolis, *Mothers*, 153. See also Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 95–100.

<sup>47</sup> Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 177. Between 1910 and 1920, while the urban population increased from 42,064,001 to 54,253,282, the rural population increased from 50,164,495 to 51,768,255. U.S. Census Bureau, “Urban and Rural Populations, 1790 to 1990,” Census of Population and Housing Table 4, 1990, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/files/table-4.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> Levenstein, *Revolution*, 161–64; and Neuhaus, *Manly Meals*, 12–16, 49–52.

<sup>49</sup> Levenstein, *Revolution*, 19, 62. See also Shapiro, *Perfection Salad*, 44–66. There were also cooking schools for domestic servants and working-class women.

<sup>50</sup> Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 21; and Levenstein, *Revolution*, 62. By the end of the nineteenth century, there was little discernible difference in the literacy rates of the two sexes.

<sup>51</sup> Margolis, *Mothers*, 154–55.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, “Betty Crocker Notes.”

<sup>53</sup> *The Gold Medal Flour Home Service Talk*, WCCO, 2 October 1924.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 66.

<sup>56</sup> Plante, *American Kitchen*, 241.

<sup>57</sup> Kleinberg, *Women*, 243; and Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 115. The term “companionate marriage” was first introduced to the public by Denver juvenile court judge Ben B. Lindsay and Wainright Evans in their 1925 book, *Revolt of Modern Youth*. See also Shapiro, *Perfection Salad*, 209–14.

<sup>58</sup> Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 192.

<sup>59</sup> Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 125. See also Margolis, *Mothers*, 135–36; Strasser, *Never Done*, 104–24; and Cowan, *More Work*.

<sup>60</sup> Matthews, *Just a Housewife*, 181–84; Strasser, *Never Done*, 224–41; Kleinberg, *Women*, 234–37; and Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 115–17.

<sup>61</sup> *Betty Crocker’s Radio Program*, NBC, 1 April 1932.

<sup>62</sup> Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker*, 68.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>64</sup> Anderson, “Betty Crocker Notes.”

<sup>65</sup> Kleinberg, *Women*, 238. See also Cowan, *More Work*, 177.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, “Betty Crocker Notes.”

<sup>67</sup> For a home party and dainty meals, see Sherrie A. Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), esp. chap. 3.

<sup>68</sup> “Mrs. James Lindsay to Betty Crocker, 15 August 1936,” Leslie L. Anderson and Family Papers, 1883–1981.

<sup>69</sup> *The Gold Medal Flour Home Service Talk*, WCCO, 2 October 1924.

<sup>70</sup> Anderson, “Betty Crocker Notes.”

<sup>71</sup> *Betty Crocker Service Program*, NBC, 5 June 1936.

<sup>72</sup> Anderson, “Betty Crocker Notes.”

<sup>73</sup> Margolis, *Mothers*, 208–9. See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 245–96; Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women’s Movement in America, 1875–1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003).

<sup>74</sup> See Endrijonas, “Processed Foods from Scratch.”