Abstract

Purpose – To write a visually documented brand history of Winchester Repeating Arms through a cultural analysis of iconic images featuring its lever action rifles.

Design/methodology/approach – This study applies visual culture perspectives and methods to the research and writing of brand history. Iconic images featuring Winchester rifles have been selected, examined, and used as points of departure for gathering and interpreting additional data. The primary sources consist of sample photographs from the 19th century and films and television shows from the 20th century. Most visual source materials were obtained from the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, and the Internet Movie Firearms Database. These have been augmented by written sources.

Findings – Within a few years of the launch of the Winchester brand in 1866, visual images outside company control associated its repeating rifles with the settlement of the American West and with the colorful people involved. Some of these images were reproduced and sold to consumers in the form of cartes-de-visite, cabinet cards, and stereographs made from albumen prints. Starting in the 1880s, the live “Wild West” shows of William F. Cody and his stars entertained audiences with a heroic narrative of the period that included numerous Winchesters. During the 20th century and into the present, Winchesters have been featured in motion pictures and television series with western themes.

Research limitations/implications – The historical research is in its early stages. Further interpretation of the selected images is necessary and additional primary data sources need to be discovered and analyzed.

Originality/value – Based largely on images as primary data sources, this study approaches brand history from the perspective of visual culture theory and data. The research shows how brands acquire meaning not just from the companies that own them, but also from consumers, the media, and other producers of popular culture.

Keywords – Winchester, brand history, visual culture theory, iconic images, Internet Movie Firearms Database

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Over time, a brand and its semiotic markers – brand names, emblems, and other identifiers – acquire multiple meanings, some of which may hold deep cultural relevance when they express mythological dimensions of national identities (Holt, 2004, 2006). These mythic stories frequently originate and are repeated through company sponsored advertising, promotional ephemera, personal selling, and public relations. Yet, brand myth and meaning are also produced by various popular culture media including newspapers, magazines, novels, motion pictures, television, radio, and music. Customers comprise a third force curating brand meaning. They share brand experiences with one another in person, through letters, by telephone, and electronically, and sometimes form enthusiastic brand communities that create rituals and traditions to further transmit meaning (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). These three sources or authors of meaning – company, popular media, and customers – borrow from and influence each other over time. Brand myths can be conveyed verbally and in writing, but also can be developed visually through associations with iconic images, especially those of national heroes, historical figures, and celebrities (McCracken 1989).

This paper explores the visual history, meaning, and larger myths associated with one of America’s most venerable brands: Winchester. In 2016 Winchester Repeating Arms celebrated 150 years as a company. Named after industrialist Oliver F. Winchester, his eponymous lever action rifles and other firearms acquired associations with great events in American history, especially the settlement
of the West. Company controlled messaging played an important role in this transfer of meaning (McCracken 1986), but as far back as the 1870s popular literature, live shows, and photography – later followed by motion pictures and television programs – were appropriating Winchesters for their own purposes and, in so doing, influencing the ideas and symbols embodied in company communications. This mediated heritage has had a powerful effect on the meaning of the brand. Winchester has inspired visual consumers who have come to associate its rifles with favorite characters and their star players in movies and on television. In addition, for many years the brand has aroused acquisitive impulses among individual collectors, who have formed a dedicated brand community, the Winchester Arms Collectors Association (WACA, 2017). Winchester firearms and brand ephemera have received a place in the permanent collections and the temporary exhibitions of public museums (Rattenbury, 2004). The brand and its followers also have motivated research and writing on Winchester firearms and related products as collectors’ artifacts (Webster, 2000), and on the company’s business history (Houze, 1994; Williamson, 1952; Wilson, 1991).

This paper provides an account of Winchester’s visual brand history based on an analysis of iconic images that appeared popular media. It will begin with a brief overview of Winchester’s company led product, marketing, and promotional history. Next, the paper will describe the visual theory foundation of the primary research, and how the data was selected and analyzed. Subsequent sections will then cover five groups of images: Roosevelt’s rifles, brand tribes, western women with Winchesters, celebrity sharpshooters, and Winchesters in film and on television. The final section discusses some implications and limitations of the research.

**Winchester product, marketing, and promotional history**

Born in Boston, Oliver Fisher Winchester (1810-1880) began his business career in Baltimore in 1830, first as a building contractor and then, three years later, as a retailer of men’s furnishings. In 1847, now married with three children, he sold his store and moved the family to New Haven, Connecticut, where he started manufacturing men’s dress shirts in partnership with John M. Davies, a leading importer and jobber of men’s furnishing in New York City. Increasingly successful, in 1855 Winchester invested in the Volcanic Arms Company, also in New Haven, which was developing repeating pistols and carbines firing cartridge ammunition. These new types of weapons made a major technological advance over the single-shot, percussion (cap and ball) firearms then in use. In 1857, Winchester took over all the assets and reorganized the concern as the New Haven Arms Company. During the Civil War, the company achieved renown selling the Henry Rifle, named after gunsmith Benjamin Tyler Henry (1821-1898) who improved upon the earlier lever action models. In 1866 the company was renamed the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, which now under the owner’s brand name, manufactured a long line of distinctive and well-made lever-action rifles that became instrumental in the so called “winning” of the West (Houze, 1994; Williamson, 1952; Wilson, 1991).

Oliver Winchester’s biography has importance because telling stories about brand founders is one of the hallmarks of an iconic brand (Holt, 2004; Witkowski 2016). Unlike Eli Whitney, Eliphalet Remington, Samuel Colt, and Horace Smith and Daniel B. Wesson, who were also prominent brand patriarchs in the 19th century U.S. firearms industry, Winchester was neither an inventor nor a skilled machinist. He was an entrepreneur who “knew rather little about the mechanics of firearms and ammunition. His ability lay in his skill as a salesman, his grasp of financial matters, and his choice of subordinates who could advise him on technical matters” (Williamson, 1952, p. 21). The undated photograph of Winchester in Figure 1 depicts a good-looking, well-dressed, even dapper man in his middle age. He is clean-shaven at a time when many men sported copious amounts of facial hair. The Winchester Repeating Arms website (2017) claims this photo came from the Olin Corporation.

Winchester lever actions sold very well, but the company also made many different types of rifles, shotguns, and other arms, including great numbers of bolt action and semi-automatic rifles used in the two World Wars. Winchester fulfilled orders for over one million military small arms during World War I (Wilson, 1991), but this created a long-term problem, for the extra plant capacity built to manufacture the rifles could not later be carried by civilian sales alone. Thus, after the Great War, the company adopted a strategy of utilizing its factory space, metal working equipment, and industrial skills to make new product lines and thus generate added revenue streams. Winchester in the 1920s manufactured and lent its name to a wide variety of non-firearm consumer goods including cutlery, shop and garden tools, paints and brushes, radio and flashlight batteries, lawn mowers, refrigerators, fishing equipment, sporting goods, and ice and roller skates (Gole and Gole, 2014; Williamson, 1952).
The slogan – “As Good as the Gun” – was adopted for these goods in 1927. Along with the new product lines, the company opened Winchester branded retail stores to sell this merchandise. This manufacturing, brand extension, and retail strategy was costly from the start and few lines made money. With the onset of the Great Depression the company failed and went into receivership in 1931. In December of that year, the Olin family’s Western Cartridge Company purchased the Winchester assets and brand at auction (Williamson, 1952).
Restructured, the company survived and even prospered from the large contracts with the U.S. government for M1 rifles and carbines during World War II. By 1964, however, production costs of the classic designs were becoming unsustainable in the face of price competition from foreign made firearms. New lines were introduced, but consumers did not receive them favorably and Winchester damaged its reputation for quality (Wilson, 1991). After a prolonged strike in 1979-1980, Olin sold the New Haven plant to the employees who incorporated as the U.S. Repeating Arms Company and made Winchester branded products under license. This venture failed in 1989 and Belgium’s Herstal Group acquired the company. In 2006, the New Haven factory was closed and Winchesters were no longer made in the U.S. (Mulligan, 2006).

Winchester brand promotion started with its sales organization, which consisted of salesmen, who called on jobbers (wholesalers), and missionaries, who called on dealers and retailers (Williamson, 1952). The latter group distributed advertising matter and a variety of sales promotion ephemera including calendars, posters, and counter displays to its distributers. One Winchester specialty was the cartridge board, a picture-framed display of different caliber ammunition that its rifles could accommodate. The missionaries also worked club shoots, tournaments, and county fairs where they set up tents and booths to display products, distribute information, and sell ammunition. Many of the missionaries, who were dubbed “missionary salesmen” after 1900, were crack shots themselves.

Winchester further spread its fame by employing expert marksmen and women to garner publicity for its guns. In 1901, for example, Winchester hired Adolph “Ad” Topperwein (1869-1962) of San Antonio as an exhibition shooter. Two years later, Topperwein married Elizabeth “Plinky” Servaty (1882-1945), who had been working in the ammunition-loading room in the Winchester plant. She turned out to be an even better shot than her husband and set a trap shooting record at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. The couple set a variety of shooting records and performed fancy position shots, such as riding a bicycle while throwing up glass balls and shooting them with a rifle bullet. A 1917 brochure for a Topperwein shooting exhibition promised “A Thrill With Every Shot” (Houze, 1994, p. 190). They continued to work for the company until 1940 (Williamson, 1952).

Winchester advertised its rifles and shotguns in a variety of ways. Rattenbury (2004, p. 20) illustrated a black and white printed broadside 18 x 11½ inches (46 x 29 cm) from 1868. Heavy on text, and with the tagline boasting “two shots a second,” the rifle illustrations are rudimentary woodcuts. By the mid-1870s, woodcut images of the rifle had become more prominent, while the text was reduced to just a few exclamatory statements, such as “The Strength of all its Parts, The Simplicity of its Construction, The Rapidity of its Fire” (Rattenbury, 2004, p. 20). Winchester placed ads in national magazines, mostly targeted at shooters, hunters, and gun enthusiasts, and also in trade publications aimed at dealers. Consumer titles included Forest and Stream, The Companion, National Sportsman, and Outdoor Life (Webster, 2005).

The company soon introduced more sophisticated illustrations and Winchester became the most prolific distributor of chromolithographed artwork in the firearms industry (Rattenbury, 2004). The technology of chromo or color lithography became quite sophisticated by the 1870s and led to a tremendous explosion of promotional ephemera across industries in the U.S. (Jay, 1987; Last, 2005). Among these, illustrated Winchester calendars appear to have been quite popular. Webster (2005) illustrates all 53 corporate calendars printed between 1887 and 1934 and a selection of 17 Winchester Store calendars printed between 1921 and 1930. The pages for the months took up about a third to a half of the calendar area, the remainder consisting of visually striking illustrations, predominantly of western hunting scenes, all in bright colors. Up to 1901, illustrations on corporate calendars consisted of two or more separate vignettes. Starting in 1912 only one scene was used, which gave the visual even more impact.

Winchester commissioned original artwork for these calendars including, in 1892, 1893, and 1894, works by renowned western painter and sculptor Frederic Remington (1861-1909). The 1894 calendar in Figure 2 dramatically portrayed three ranchmen protecting their cattle from wolves (top) and two hunters in a canoe being surprised by a moose (bottom). Remington and other artists indelibly associated Winchester rifles with the theme of man’s ultimate domination of the natural West (Rattenbury, 2004). In a larger sense, Remington and his work helped to hook the public on such mythic images of the West (Murdoch, 2001). Today, original Winchester calendars are in such high demand from collectors that their prices have soared, which has led to the printing and sale of inexpensive reproductions for those who just want the look.
Additional chromolithographed promotional ephemera included wall posters and banners; signs, case inserts and die-cuts; five-panel window displays; two-sided counter signs; booklets, brochures and

Figure 2. Winchester calendar with art by Frederic Remington, 1894. Buffalo Bill Center of the West
archives flyers; envelopes; and counter pads (Webster, 2005). Winchester further supported its dealers through sales conventions and visual merchandising support for the design of window displays and store arrangements (Williamson, 1952). The introduction of plate glass in the latter part of the 19th century greatly enhanced the promotional and myth-making powers of storefront visualizations. Firearms have visual power and, along with stacks of ammunition boxes and other accouterments, promote themselves nicely in store window settings. The full color, five-panel window displays were extraordinary promotional tools. Constructed of color illustrations on paperboard set in a wood frame, each panel in a set was a poster-sized 40 x 19 in. (102 x 48 cm) and required eight feet (244 cm) of display area (Webster, 2005). Winchester distributed them to its dealers over the years 1920 to 1928. Webster (2005) reproduces 29 one-sided and 47 two-sided sets, which he believes accounts for about 80 percent of the total made. Of the ones shown, 20 are for firearms and shooting and the remainder for various Winchester branded consumer goods. As shown in Figure 3, these window displays were and still are very striking works of commercial art.

Starting in 1964, Winchester began manufacturing commemorative versions of its original models and, through 1991, had marketed over 50 commemorative issues selling over one million guns (Wilson, 1991). Commemoratives created a new market of arms collectors and this sales success is a testament to the power of the Winchester brand and its associations in the minds of consumers. History and heritage were central themes: “The basic categories in commemorative Winchesters are statehood, territory, or country anniversaries; historic events, people, organizations, businesses, or law enforcement groups; American Indians: and Winchester factory anniversaries” (Wilson 1991, p. 279). Commemorative Winchesters are frequently bought and sold on today’s market. Made for collecting rather than for shooting, condition is an important determinant of value. It is difficult to say whether they have been appreciating assets, but certainly they are a store of value and are quite liquid, albeit with high transaction costs when sold through dealers or at public auction.

Visual culture, data, and analysis

Visual theories bring a deeply cultural perspective to the understanding of images and their relevance to the symbolic dimensions of brand history. Drawing from postmodern thought, visual studies have emphasized a multiplicity of interpretations – by artists and audiences; by race, gender, and social class; by viewers in the past and in the present – and have considered the processes through which image producers and consumers negotiate and generate meaning (Barnard, 2001; Mirzoeff, 1999; Rose, 2012; Schroeder, 2002; Sturken and Cartwright, 2002). Giving this burgeoning field a thorough review is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the visual culture orientation herein should provide a distinctive flavor to research and writing on brand history, and should yield original insights.

The photographic visual data for this study were assembled via searches of Google Web and Google Images based on a number of different keywords (e.g. “Winchester”, “Theodore Roosevelt”) suggested by the secondary literature. The search process was largely opportunistic and definitely not random sampling from a particular universe of visual data, such as issues of a magazine. Most visual source materials from the 19th century were obtained from the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Pinterest boards provided some information, but this site has limited usefulness for historians since users only occasionally identify their image pins in terms of time and source of publication. The Internet Movie Firearms Database (IMFD, 2017) was searched for images of Winchesters in movies and on television. The IMFD relies upon some 300 volunteers who have catalogued models of firearms, brands, actors, movies, television series, and video games. Many of its articles have uploaded ample visual evidence of Winchester firearms. The IMFDB is searchable and has become a resource for Hollywood prop masters, gun collectors, and fans (Keegan, 2012).

Following Rose’s (2012) outline of visual methodology, analysis of the selected images entailed asking questions about their 1) production, 2) content, and 3) intended audience. The circumstances of production refer to the creators of the visual representations and what may have been their intended purpose. Inquiry about the content of the images involves careful consideration of their composition and their historically and theoretically relevant features. Audience questions include how potential viewers in the past may have understood visual representations and related them to other texts, images, and ideologies, an analytical concept Sturken and Cartwright (2002) label as “intertextuality.”

For the historian, a questioning attitude is important because, like other primary sources, visual data too can be misleading. When image-makers created works, their renderings were influenced by
Figure 3. Five-panel window displays. (Top) Winchester directed dealers to display the Christmas gifts side for the weeks of December 7-25, 1925. (Middle) Junior Rifle Corps side was to be displayed December 26-January 4, 1926. Cowan’s Auctions sale May 2, 2007. (Bottom) How a display looked in a Winchester Store window (Williamson, 1952, p. 352).
Roosevelt’s rifles

Perhaps the most famous and enthusiastic Winchester customer in history was Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), who served as the 26th President of the United States from 1901 to 1909. He purchased his first Winchesters in 1881 soon after graduating from Harvard. They were special order Model 1876 rifles engraved and stocked to his specification and probably costing twice that of plain Winchesters (Schreier 2016). He purchased two more in 1883, one of which he praised in Hunting Trips of a Ranchman (1885), a book (his second) he wrote that recapitulated his incessant hunting while ranching in North Dakota. Roosevelt wrote about his Model 76 .45-75 half-magazine Winchester.

The Winchester, which is stocked and sighted to suit myself, is by all odds the best weapon I ever had, and I now use it almost exclusively, having killed every kind of game with it, from a grizzly bear to a big-horn. It is as handy to carry, whether on foot or on horseback, and comes up to the shoulder as readily as a shot-gun; it is absolutely sure, and there is no recoil to jar and disturb the aim, while it carries accurately quite as far as a man can aim with any degree of certainty; and the bullet, weighing three quarters of an ounce, is plenty large enough for any thing on this continent (Roosevelt 1885, pp. 34-35).

Winchester picked up on this endorsement and a vignette in the lower left of its 1888 promotional calendar showed Roosevelt killing his first grizzly in the Wyoming Territory’s Big Horn Mountains (Rattenbury, 2004). Later, Roosevelt took a Winchester Model 1895 U.S. Army carbine to Cuba during the Spanish-American War where his fame soared as the hard-charging (and reckless) Colonel of the Rough Riders. Once he became President in 1901, however, he forbade the company from mentioning his name in its promotional material (Houze, 1994). After his presidency, Roosevelt brought a number of Winchesters along on his eleven month African hunting expedition in 1909-1910. He wrote accounts of this trip for Scribner’s Magazine, which were later incorporated into another book, African Game Trails (Williamson, 1952). In the October Scribner’s Roosevelt mentioned the Winchesters he and his son, Kermit, had carried. The company straightaway quoted this passage in one of its own advertisements (Houze, 1994, p. 170). Numerous photographs depict Roosevelt with his Winchesters (see, e.g., Wilson, 1991). The Teddy Roosevelt wax model (played by Robin Williams) that comes to life in a Night at the Museum (2006) carries a Winchester Model 1894 (IMFDB, 2017).

In the summer of 1884, following the death of both his mother and his first wife on the very same day, Roosevelt had left New York filled with melancholy to spend time at his ranch in the Dakota Territory. He returned to New York in July 1885 to find Hunting Trips of a Ranchman receiving excellent reviews. He stayed two months, went back west, but then returned again in November (Goodwin, 2013). Figures 4 and 5 show two photographs of Roosevelt taken in New York City in 1885 by George Grantham Bain (1865-1944). Roosevelt was portrayed wearing a deerskin hunting ensemble and holding what appears to be the custom Winchester Model 1876 described in his book. Tiffany’s made the silver-hilted hunting knife in 1884. Roosevelt had received some kidding for wearing fancy duds on his ranch, but he worked so long and hard that he gained much respect and the men overlooked his attire. In the photos he did not wear his spectacles. Because of near-sightedness he was a mediocre marksman, which made having a repeating rifle all the more important (Schreier 2016). The digital copy of Hunting Trips of a Ranchman inspected for this research included still another pose from this photography session and suggests that the sitting was for publicity purposes. The public imagination now associated Roosevelt with the West. An 1889 cartoon by Thomas Nast shows Roosevelt, then serving on the U.S. Civil Service Commission, as a cowboy riding a bucking bronco representing the spoils system Roosevelt tried to reform (Goodwin, 2013).

visual conventions that structured how they interpreted the world around them. The expectations of potential audiences and interests of consumers further shaped visual content. Moreover, the nature of the research process may introduce interpretive bias. Determining the creators of the images is not always possible. Visual data have aesthetic qualities and polemical content that can elicit powerful, possibly emotional responses from the research analyst (Witkowski, 2004). On the plus side, when visual data are included in research reports, both authors and readers have the opportunity to examine the evidence together (Burke, 2001). Finally, and just for the record, the author does not own any Winchester rifles, branded products, or ephemera, nor does he collect antique photographs or vintage movie memorabilia.
Figure 4. Theodore Roosevelt sitting, 1885. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009633128/
Figure 5. Theodore Roosevelt posing, 1885. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009633164/
The Roosevelt association was certainly good for the Winchester brand. He was and remains a very popular figure in American history and the vigorous manliness he symbolized and espoused resonated strongly in his day. Around 1900, some commentators were decrying the feminization of a national culture where women managed the household and wielded a major influence in the raising of their sons. Historians have contended that many men felt oppressed by industrialization, loss of work independence, hierarchical companies, dull office and grueling factory routines, and job threats from immigrants, freed blacks, and women entering the workforce (Kimmel, 1996; Rotundo, 1993; Swidenski, 1998). Hunting adventures could compensate for these threats to manhood, but of course at a cost to wildlife.

**Brand tribes**

The consumer culture theory literature identifies different types of consumption communities. “Brand communities,” for example, focus on a specific branded good or service. They are based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand who share “consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412).

“Consumption subcultures” (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), in common with brand communities, exhibit structure (e.g. hierarchies of commitment and authenticity), ethos (e.g. spirituality and core values), and socialization and transformation of self. However, subcultures of consumption are more activity than brand focused and often have associations with outsider status (Canniford, 2011; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). “Consumer tribes” also involve socially connected use of products and services, but lack the moral component, social hierarchies, and long-term existence of brand communities. Tribes are more transient and hedonic (Canniford, 2011). Regarding Winchesters, Native Americans arguably formed a consumer community or brand tribe, as this section heading puns.

Indigenous peoples in North America had shown a special fascination with firearms since they first encountered armed Europeans in the 17th century (Axtell, 1999; Bellesiles, 2000) and needed all the firepower they could obtain in the bloody conflicts in the West that escalated after the Civil War. “By the 1870s, Indians were among the repeater’s most zealous fans, and were widely (but falsely) believed to be better armed than the soldiers sent to fight them” (Rose, 2008, p. 7). Surviving rifles and original period photographs provide both tangible and visual documentation of a Winchester brand community among Native Americans. For example, Indians decorated the stocks of some Winchester rifles they owned with brass-headed tacks arrayed in rows and patterns. The Smithsonian Institution has several Winchesters that belonged to war chiefs including the Model 1866 carbine surrendered by Sitting Bull in 1881 (Peterson, 1967).

The Smithsonian’s National Anthropological Archives also contain several photographs of Indians with Winchesters, two of which are shown in Figure 6. On May 10, 1875, John K Hillers (1843-1925) took the top, 4 x 3 in. photograph near Okmulgee, Oklahoma Territory. Hillers, known for his images of the American West and its native peoples, spent much of his career working for the U.S. government (Getty Museum 2017). This photo shows a Cheyenne brave, possibly named Hu-Ni-Wa-Ta-Nist or Feathered Wolf, sitting on a blanket draped over a rock, wearing only his breechcloth, and holding a Winchester Model 1866 carbine in his lap. The Smithsonian copy was mounted on a 14 x 18 in. page containing photographic images of 15 other Indians, part of a large scrapbook of the American West assembled between 1863 and 1900 by the artist James E. Taylor (1839-1901).

The bottom image, taken by Alexander Martin (1841-1929) in 1885, shows a group of five sitting Utes visiting “Denver of Little Crow.” The man on the left cradles a Winchester. This second photo is a studio portrait in the form of a stereograph card, 4 x 17 in., consisting of two offset images that, when viewed through a hand-held device called a stereoscope, gave the perception of depth in three dimensions (Smithsonian Institution, 2017). Stereographs – also called stereograms, stereopticans, or stereo views – were a popular medium for education and entertainment in the late 19th century and a significant body of work survives. Although the guns in these pictures may have been props supplied by the photographer, their deliberate inclusion would still speak of a widely held public imagination that connected Native Americans to Winchesters. A search for biographical information on Alexander Martin has thus far not been successful, but his name is attached to numerous photographs in public collections.

While researching this paper, more than dozen different photos of Indians with Winchesters were located. Figure 7 illustrates two additional ones included in public auctions in 2016. Cowan’s Online Auction sold the top photograph (7 x 9 1/2 in.) on October 17, 2016 for $1800 including buyer’s premium. Cowan’s description of this lot said the man was likely Aatsista-Mahkan (ca 1833-1911).
Figure 6. Winchester brand tribes. (Top) Cheyenne Indian, 1875; (Bottom) Stereograph of Ute Indians visiting “Denver of Little Crow,” 1885. Source: National Anthropological Archives (Smithsonian Institution, 2017).
Figure 7. Winchester Brand tribes. (Top) Running Rabbit and Wife, ND. Cowan’s Online Auction October 17, 2016, Lot 375. (Bottom) Geronimo, Son, and Two Picked Braves, 1886. Bonhams, April 11, 2016, Lot 282.
chief of the Bites band of Blackfoot Indians from southern Alberta, Canada. “Running Rabbit” is written in the lower margin and the nicely dressed woman wrapped with a blanket is apparently his wife. The image setting must have been a photographer’s studio since the background appears to be a painting of an outdoor scene. Note the tack-decorated 1866 Winchester carbine, the tack-decorated knife sheath, and other such adorned items.

Bonham’s in New York sold the lower albumen print photograph (4 ¾ x 8 1/8 in.) on April 11, 2016 for $3750 including buyer’s premium. The Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog also contains a copy. Taken south of Tombstone, Arizona in 1886 by Camillus S. Fly (1849-1901), it shows Geronimo on the right and from left to right his brother-in-law Yanozha, his son Chappo, and Yanozha’s half-brother, named Fun. Yanozha and Chappo hold Winchester carbines, while Fun and Geronimo cradle single-shot cartridge rifles. Geronimo (1829-1909) was an Apache leader who became famous for his long resistance to the U.S. military. Fly took numerous photos of Geronimo and his men on March 20 in Cañon de Los Embudos just south of the Arizona Territory in Mexico. Though still hostile, they were parleying with General George Crook to end the war. The April 24, 1886 issue of Harper’s Weekly published two photos on its cover (Van Orden, 1989; Vaughn, 1989). Both of the images illustrated in Figure 7 are examples of cabinet cards, another popular medium in the latter 19th century. Stereographs, cabinet cards, and the smaller format cartes-de-visite attest to the consuming public’s hunger for visual images including those of Native Americans. By 1900, however, their popularity was in sharp decline due to competition from increasingly well-illustrated magazines.

Since the late 1700s, American shops, brands, advertising, promotional materials, and sports team mascots have frequently appropriated the names and images of Native Americans. Winchester does not appear to have done so all that often, but Figure 8 presents a notable exception from 1967. This foldable cardboard sign, about 5½ feet high, promised extra Winchester barrels as a premium with the purchase of any Model 1200 or 1400 shotgun. It reproduced the image of a cigar store Indian, a long-standing caricature that played upon the association of Indians with tobacco. The sign’s copy stated “Heap Big Savings! Ugh, hunt'em all: Waterfowl, upland game, deer. Shoot'em trap and skeet.” The highly stylized Native American dialect, which emerged from films and other popular culture references, was common in the mid 20th century until objections to its implicit racism drove the usage off the market. This item was listed on eBay for $529 in January 2017.

Western women with Winchesters

A couple of dozen good photos have been found of characters from the old West brandishing Winchester rifles. For example, an iconic tintype (ferrograph) from about 1879-1880 shows William H. Bonney — better known as the outlaw Billy the Kid — with a Model 1873 Winchester. Other extant photos include some striking images of intrepid hunters, Texas Rangers, and assorted lawmen all armed with Winchesters (see Wilson, 1991). For purposes of this paper, just two photographs will be considered. They depict two very different women, Mary Fields and Pearl Hart, holding Winchesters.

Despite the lily-white image of settlers portrayed in popular media, African Americans had a rich history in the west. Some had gone there before the Civil War, in some cases as slaves, and many more followed later. They supported themselves as ranchers, cowboys, cavalry troopers (the “Buffalo Soldiers”), black lawmen, and black outlaws. All were armed and many owned Winchesters. In the 1890s, blacks wanting to settle in the newly opened Oklahoma Territory encountered severe hostility from whites and needed guns for self-defense. A journalist wrote: “the colored men in Oklahoma mean business . . . They have an exalted idea of their own rights and liberties and they dare to maintain them . . . I found in nearly every cabin visited a modern Winchester oiled and ready for use” (cited in Johnson, 2014, p. 132). In Montana Territory, one Mary Fields (ca. 1832-1914), a six-foot tall former slave, acquired an outsized reputation for her drinking, card playing, and gun fighting skills. Also known as “Stagecoach Mary” after becoming the first African-American to be employed as a mail carrier by the U.S. Postal Service, a photo from circa1895 shows this imposing woman with a Model 1876 Winchester carbine (Figure 9).

Unlike Mary, who earned money serving the public, the petite Pearl Hart (1871-1956?) became famous for robbing a stagecoach. Born Pearl Taylor to an affluent family in Lindsay, Ontario, she ditched boarding school and eloped at age 16. Her husband soon became abusive and Pearl left and reconciled with him several times. She bore him two children who were sent off to live with her mother then residing in Ohio. Pearl’s husband worked at the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. Some reports say Pearl became enamored with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, then
Figure 8. Winchester foldable cardboard sign, 1967. Listed on eBay January 2017.
Figure 9. Mary Fields and her Winchester Model 1876 carbine, circa 1895. Source: http://www.blackcowboys.com/maryfields.htm

performing daily on 15 leased acres adjacent to the fairgrounds (Braun 2014). She left her husband again, lit out for Colorado and other western towns where she supported herself as a cook and probably as a prostitute. She eventually found her way to the mining town of Globe, Arizona where on May 30, 1899 she and a male friend, Joe Boot, robbed a stagecoach. Captured by a posse on June 5, Pearl was
taken into custody and sent to Tucson. While awaiting trial in October, she gave an account of her life to The Cosmopolitan: A Monthly Illustrated Magazine, which published the story, “An Arizona Episode,” in the October 1899 issue. At her trial, the jury voted for acquittal, allegedly after hearing her explain she needed money to visit her dying mother. The judge would have none of this. Pearl was retried, convicted, and sentenced to five years in Yuma Territorial Prison. In December 1902 the governor pardoned her provided she leave Arizona. It has been rumored that Pearl claimed to be pregnant. Her whereabouts after 1928 are unclear, but she is reported to have died in 1956.

The photograph of Hart in Figure 10 appears frequently via Google searches, but exactly how, where, and by whom it was taken remains uncertain. Wilson (1991) believed it taken after her release from prison. However, the 1899 Cosmopolitan article reproduced this and five other photographs of her, strongly suggesting that a professional photographer took them for the publication while she was still incarcerated. One picture, captioned “as she appears in the jail yard,” showed her seated in front of the same block wall shown in Figure 10. Thus, the Winchester rifle she held, along with the pearl handled revolver in her belt, were borrowed props deemed appropriate for a western character. The Cosmopolitan article captioned this image “guarding camp.” Female bandits were rare at the time and the media attention she attracted from the New York Times and other newspapers earned Hart a larger cell and other amenities. In this and three other photos she dressed as a man, while in two others she wore long skirts, shirtwaist blouses, and bonnets typical of the period. Some of her outfits also may have been loaned. Women’s attire was contested in the 1890s. Clothing reformers challenged the impositions (tight corsets, ridiculous bustles) of Victorian dress codes and the bicycle-riding craze spurred demand for less restrictive female attire (Aronson, 1952). Adding still another exotic touch, two photos show her holding her pet wildcat. Hart’s exploits were later referenced in western pulp fiction, an early film, a play, a musical, a song, and a historical fiction I, Pearl Hart written by Jane Candia Coleman (1999).

Celebrity sharpshooters
William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody (1846-1917) served in the Union Army for two years, scouted for the U.S. cavalry during the Indian Wars, and killed thousands of bison for the Army and for the Kansas Pacific Railroad. In 1872, he received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his gallantry in scouting. That year the handsome and gregarious Cody also began stage acting in a touring Wild West show. The 1875 Winchester catalog featured a photo of him with a rifle. After he began his own Wild West show in 1883, Cody spread the brand’s fame by staging exciting shooting exhibitions. Cody and star performer Annie Oakley fired Winchester lever action rifles with great skill and so made appealing ambassadors for the brand. Soon an international celebrity, Cody frequently visited the Winchester plant in New Haven to procure rifles and ammunition for his shows. These events were sensations in their heyday and Cody took his performers to Europe eight times, thus introducing the Winchester brand to foreign audiences. With increasing competition from motion pictures, audiences eventually declined and Cody’s last show was staged in 1913.

Cody may have been one of the most photographed men in the world in his day and numerous portraits show him with Winchesters. Most of these were publicity stills and many appear to have been reproduced as cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards and sold to fans. The top photo in Figure 11 of Cody seated with a Model 1873 Winchester was taken in 1903. Then about 57 years old, Cody and his troupe were performing at Olympia Stadium in London, England. Given the union jack flag and Cody’s similar appearance, the bottom photo also appears to have been taken about the same time. In it, Cody assumed the persona of an alert western scout, a theatrical pose he must surely have performed hundreds of times. Original albumen print photos like these appear frequently on the collectors’ market, usually costing a few hundred to a thousand dollars or more at auction. These were popular images when first created and remain so today. Many reproductions starting at about ten dollars can be purchased from eBay sellers.

Cody and his Winchesters became legendary characters in popular fiction. From 1860 to 1920, inexpensive “dime novels” (some cost just a nickel) and weekly pulp magazines published a great number of Western stories. This highly popular genre shared stock characters (plainsmen, cowboys, outlaws) and stock discourses (progress of civilization, national destiny) (Jones, 1978). Buffalo Bill and his Winchester rifles figured prominently in these fictionalized versions of frontier life for many years (Williamson, 1952). The typically lurid cover art of one such tale, “Buffalo Bill’s Mascot, or, The Mystery of Death Valley” (no date) shows the hero firing a Winchester at savage Indians, and another cover, “Buffalo Bill’s Desperate Mission, or, The Round-Up in Hidden Valley” (September
15, 1906), has Cody using his Winchester to free a girl captured by Indians. “These predecessors of later-day ‘comic books’ were read eagerly by a large audience of youngsters, who were undoubtedly impressed by the effectiveness of a Winchester in the hands of their hero, and determined some day to own such a gun themselves” (Williamson, 1952, p. 186). Popular culture references to Cody have been quite copious. Today, Cody, Wyoming is the location of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, a complex of five museums – Buffalo Bill Museum, Plains Indians Museum, Whitney Western Art Museum, Cody Firearms Museum, and Draper Natural History Museum – and a research library. The heart of the Cody Museum is the Winchester corporate collection, which came west from the New Haven headquarters in 1976.

Despite the accomplished manliness implicit in shooting, the most famous deadeye in late 19th century American life was the unassuming yet very athletic, five foot tall Annie Oakley (1860-1926) who became the star attraction at Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows from 1885 to 1901. Her husband, Irish immigrant Francis E. Butler (1847-1926), was also a sharpshooter and the two performed together, but recognizing her celebrity power, Butler wisely accepted playing second fiddle to his wife and became her manager and publicist. Their marriage lasted 50 years. For the portrait in Figure 12, she stood in front of a painted backdrop of Indian teepees holding a Model 1892 Winchester. She wore a western style skirt and hat and on her blouse were pinned what were probably shooting medals. Oakley made her own clothes and though she did not bare any skin, some of her outfits were quite form fitting (unlike the looser garment shown in Figure 12) and shorter than typical women’s street clothes of the period (PBS.org 2005). Born Phoebe Ann Mosey in Ohio, Oakley was a stage name. One of her fellow performers, the Indian Chief Sitting Bull (c. 1831-1890), nicknamed her “Watanya Cicilla” or “Little Sure Shot.” Oakley suffered from serious injuries she sustained in a 1901 train accident and in a 1922 auto mishap. Today, this accomplished woman has become something of a feminist icon even though she did not support woman’s suffrage and presented herself as a proper Victorian lady.

Like that of Buffalo Bill, the life of Annie Oakley has received many references in popular media including the 1946 smash Broadway production Annie Get Your Gun starring Ethel Merman (1908-1984) with music by Irving Berlin (1888-1989). The hit 1950 movie version starred blonde Betty Hutton (1921-2007). Winchester advertising does not appear to have deployed Oakley’s image during her lifetime, but in 1983 the company produced 6000 Annie Oakley Model 1894 Commemorative Rifles in .22 caliber. Oakley’s name and image did appear on posters for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and a search of Pinterest revealed a cigarette trade card that featured her name and likeness. Photos of her frequently appeared in period cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards that today are desirable collectibles.

Winchesters in motion pictures and television

The “closing” of the western frontier in the 1890s coincided with the invention and rapid commercialization of motion pictures. In one of the very earliest, 20-second shorts, filmed November 1, 1894 at the Black Maria studio of the Thomas Edison Company in West Orange, New Jersey, Annie Oakley demonstrated her formidable shooting prowess with two Winchesters. Other acts from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West were also recorded (see videos in the Cody Archive, 2017). Edison (1847-1931) and his team intended these short films to be seen via a kinetoscope, a device where one person at a time could peer at the moving picture through a viewer on its top. The first kinetoscope parlor had two rows of machines and opened in New York City in 1894. Similar establishments quickly materialized from Chicago to San Francisco. The first public screening of a film via projection did not occur until late 1895 in Paris when the Lumière Brothers presented a program 20 minutes in length. The commercial success and technical and narrative innovations of The Great Train Robbery (1903), produced for the Edison Company, launched the movie Western genre (Slotkin, 1992), which continued highly popular throughout most of the 20th century and has been revisited regularly in the 21st. Shooting off firearms became an exciting cinematic staple and Winchesters have been used as props in many films (see extensive lists in IMFDB, 2017).

Winchester models have appeared in dozens and dozens of films and often became linked to famous actors. For example, in eleven different films from Stagecoach (1939) to The Shootist (1976), leading actor John Wayne (1907-1979) brandished a Model 1892 carbine (see Figure 13) (IMFDB, 2017). Wayne himself became something of a western icon. After years of small parts in low-budget westerns, playing the “Ringo Kid” in the highly influential Stagecoach, by the renowned film director John Ford (1894-1973), was his breakthrough role. The carbine in Stagecoach was the shorter
Trapper” model and was fitted with a large lever loop that enabled the shooter to cock and reload with just one hand, an exciting trick for audiences to see. Wayne also used the same large lever model in Circus World (1964), El Dorado (1967), and Rio Lobo (1972) (IMFDB, 2017).

In the classic Winchester ’73 (1950), the namesake rifle, a highly engraved “one of a thousand” specimen, was itself a main character (Figure 14). Set in 1876, the story tells of several men who coveted the prized rifle, above all an obsessed Lin McAdam, played by much beloved actor James
Figure 13. John Wayne as the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* (1939). IMFDB (2017)
Figure 14. James Steward shooting the custom rifle in *Winchester ’73* (1950). IMFDB (2017).
“Jimmy” Stewart (1908-1997). McAdam won the rifle at a Fourth of July target competition, but it was soon stolen and then passed through different hands, usually with disastrous consequences for the recipient, until Lin finally recaptured it. This film with its emphasis on the psychology of the characters helped to reinvigorate the western as a cinematic staple. In the process, Slotkin (1992) argued, it fetishized the weapon. According to the IMDb (2017), Model 1873 Winchesters appeared in 56 films, mostly but not exclusively westerns, from 1937 to 2015. Perhaps the most famous placement was in High Noon (1952) where Marshal Will Kane, played by Gary Cooper (1901-1961), can be seen checking out some of them in the Sheriff’s office. John Wayne, James Stewart, and Gary Cooper were all staunch Republicans and some of this partisan meaning may have been transferred to the Winchester brand through the celebrity-product association (McClelland 1989).

Figure 15 shows Winchesters in two early 21st century films highly recommended by this author. In Brokeback Mountain (2005), young and handsome shepherders Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) shot a .30-30 caliber Winchester Model 1894 rifle while attending to their eventful summer job (IMDb, 2017). Outside the Western genre, a Winchester Model 1866 played a prominent part in the climactic scene of the zombie comedy Shaun of the Dead (2004) when a desperate Shaun (Simon Pegg) took it from a rack above the bar in “The Winchester” London pub. Accidentally discovering it was loaded and operable, he valiantly used it to fend off approaching zombies until running out of ammunition (IMDb, 2017).

Numerous vintage Winchester lever actions have appeared on dozens of television Westerns in the U.S. ranging from Lawman (1958-1962) to Deadwood (2004-2006) (IMDb, 2017). Arguably the most noteworthy Winchester performance as a supporting actor was on The Rifleman (1958-1963). In this series widowed Civil War veteran and New Mexico Territory rancher Lucas McCain (Chuck Connors) wielded a Model 1892 Winchester saddle ring carbine with a modified large lever loop that enabled one handed reloading (Figure 16). The unforgettable opening credits showed the lanky star walking forward, the rifle butt almost in his crotch, firing off 12 rounds in five seconds (click Rifleman Clip or visit IMDb, 2017). The Freudian implications of this image are beyond the scope of this paper. Connors (1921-1992) was an imposing man nearly six and a half feet tall who had played both professional basketball and baseball and became a well-regarded television actor. He too was a Republican. Ironically, The Rifleman story was set in the early 1880s, about ten years before this model originally came to market.

**Implications and limitations**

During the last quarter of the 19th century, the Winchester brand received much free publicity via photographs associating its rifles with Theodore Roosevelt, Native American warriors, and other western characters including female celebrities and jailbirds. These images appeared on a great many different cartes-de-visite, cabinet cards, stereographs, and other photographic formats. At the same time popular novels and live performances reenacted the stories and myths of the “winning of the West” and frequently invented new ones (Slotkin 1992). Portrait photos of star performers like Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley also were avidly consumed. Early motion pictures retold the western saga and later movies and television again visualized the Winchester heritage for mass audiences. In the process their creators added new elements (male love, one hand cocking via a modified large lever) previously outside the mythical narrative. These cultural references in popular media were often intertwined with the company-sponsored communications and together did much to transfer meaning and heritage to the brand over time.

Consumer perceptions of the Winchester brand have depended upon cultural context. Some cultural elements have been relatively unchanged over time. Centuries of broadly favorable public sentiments toward the right to keep and bear arms, which are enshrined in the 2nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and protected by minimal firearm regulation, have clearly encouraged gun ownership in America. This cultural constant has enabled Americans to experience closer, more tangible connection with firearms than could people in other societies where individual gun ownership has been frowned upon. Yet, other cultural contexts have changed over time with consequences for the meanings and associations attributed to Winchester. Hunting big game, for example, does not appear to have the broad social support in the new millennium that it once accrued in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and so pictures of grinning nimrods cradling their Winchesters and other guns next to dead trophy animals probably appeal to fewer and fewer Americans. The role of Winchesters in the Indian Wars also has taken on different meanings as the larger culture has re-considered its treatment of Native Americans.
Study of Winchester brand history through iconic images contributes to understanding the foundations and evolution of contemporary U.S. gun culture. For many of the collectors who form Winchester’s brand communities, connecting to the past is very important. Indeed, the term “heritage” is frequently deployed in, for example, the WACA mission statement (WACA, 2017) or in titles, such as Arms Heritage Magazine. Note, however, that heritage and history are very different in that the former seeks to inquire into the past, whereas the latter celebrates it and uses it to serve present purposes (Lowenthal, 1998). The cultural values that generally male and conservative arms collectors have cherished, say, manly competence and rhetorical independence from government, can be displaced onto firearms from the past (Belk, 1995; McCracken, 1986). The dramatic illustrations of
Winchesters in popular culture media helped build the brand and its communities and suggest the highly visual nature of contemporary U.S. gun culture (Witkowski, 2013).

The research conducted so far does not purport to be an exhaustive account of all visual cultural references relevant to Winchester’s brand history. Winchester firearms have long had associations with target shooting, exotic safaris, and military weapons. Still, embodying in tangible form the romance and mythology of the West clearly has been their most significant meaning transfer activity. Indeed, in 1919 artist Phillip R. Goodwin created an image of a rugged cowboy in buckskins astride a galloping horse, cradling a Winchester rifle that soon became the brand trademark (Winchester Repeating Arms 2017). Further examination of vintage iconic images featuring Winchesters needs to be undertaken. Although much evidence has been found online, supplemental visits to the archives of museums and research libraries should prove fruitful.

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“The Greatest Leaders in Extension Work”: The Role of Extension Work in Developing Rural Female Consumers in Early 20th Century New York

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper looks at the role extension services carried out by home economics departments, specifically the department at Cornell University under the direction of Martha Van Rensselaer, played in raising consumer awareness among rural farm women.

Methodology/Approach – This paper uses primary source material from the papers of Martha Van Rensselaer at Cornell University as well as secondary sources focused on the development of agricultural extensions services, the field of home economics and the history of Cornell.

Findings – This paper finds evidence that the extension services offered by Cornell’s home economics department reached thousands of rural farm women in New York State and exposed them to new products and processes for homemaking. This raised awareness in their minds of the emerging goods being marketed nationally.

Implications for future research – More research could fruitfully be undertaken to document the activities of home economics extension services provided at other universities across the nation to paint a fuller picture of the information being provided to thousands of rural women in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Keywords – Extension Services, History of Home Economics, Consumer history, Martha Van Rensselaer, Cornell University, Farm Institutes

Paper Type – Research paper

Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States, farm families, often living in isolated locations, had limited knowledge about the new products and conveniences starting to appear in national markets. While commercial sources sought to reach these rural customers, a more pervasive and trusted source of information came from agricultural and home experts from state universities. Schools of Agriculture, many created under the provisions of the 1862 federal Morrill Act, identified ways they could reach farmers with information to aid them in increasing output, improving quality and more reliably producing food for the nation. Agricultural Schools ran winter courses, created informational bulletins, sent representatives out to talk with farmers’ groups, and held Farmers’ Institutes at their Colleges. All these activities ultimately fell under the title of “extension services”. These extension services played an important role in developing the rural consumer market.

Initiatives to improve farm methods eventually broadened to include a focus on farm families and farm life. Agriculture Schools began communicating with farm wives about ways to improve housework efficiency and quality of home life. These outreach efforts coincided with the establishment of home economics courses and departments in Agricultural Schools. Paralleling the work focused on the mostly male farmers, activities targeted at the home exposed farm wives to new equipment, products, and ways of conducting housework and other farm chores. Unintentionally, experts developed the farmwife consumer market through informational activities such as educational bulletins, short winter courses, women’s meetings at Farmers’ Weeks and Institutes, and demonstration agents and lecturers fanning out from the Colleges. These efforts expanded the farm wives’ horizons, creating in them a willingness to seek out new products and processes. Extension activities occurred in states across the country, developing a farmers’ wives market more ready to accept advertisers’ advice about new products. The abundant information
cultivated a fertile field for advertisers who began reaching rural housewives through women’s and farm journals (Prawl, et al., 1984).

The work done by Martha Van Rensselaer (1864-1932) through the Home Economics department at the Agricultural School at Cornell University provides a window into the manner in which these preparatory activities developed, into how these seeds were planted. The programs run by Van Rensselaer communicated about and demonstrated the latest methods and equipment for rural housekeeping. She educated women about changing their household routines and prepared them for the next step of purchasing new products.

Van Rensselaer’s professional experiences as a County School Commissioner in western New York and as Director of the Farmer’s Wife Reading program and home extension work at Cornell gave her rich insight into the needs and desires of farm women. She penned bulletins and circulars that came out from Cornell’s Home Economics department, reaching thousands of women across the state. She started reading clubs (eventually numbering over 300 throughout New York State), lectured at regional institutes and visited women in their homes to determine topics of interest. She strongly considered consumer opinions and preferences, modifying and adding subjects as needed. She established a short Winter Course at Cornell for women. She regularly encouraged farm wives to respond to her with problems they wished to see discussed in her bulletins and courses.

A program targeted at farm wives, created by Van Rensselaer and her colleagues in the Home Economics department, initially called the Homemakers’ Conference (later Farm and Home Week), held during Cornell’s Farmers’ Week, offers a particularly interesting example of creating awareness in the rural women’s market. A well-organized Farmer’s Week took place at Cornell University in 1908. The first Homemakers’ Conference, aimed at women, was added the following year. This combined event proved successful and lasted at least through the 1940s. In its early years this week of demonstrations, lectures, questioning and socializing showed farmer and farmers’ wives the most up-to-date ways to perform farm work. Farm families saw in action new products, services and the latest conveniences. Being shown and provided information about these new pieces of equipment by the credible experts from the School of Agriculture, including the home economists, undoubtedly caused the farm families to think more favorably about possibly investing in these unfamiliar products. The demonstrations and lectures prepared this market of consumers, providing them with data in the initial, information gathering stage.

Marketers have written about the role of home economists in educating consumers about rational decision making. However, scholars have focused less on the background work done by home economics experts in developing an awareness about new products and a thirst for information about them. Instead scholars have emphasized the role those experts played in helping homemakers (the chief consumers) sort through information to make appropriate choices, more directly supporting consumption. While many home economists’ role eventually changed and sharpened, taking on the task of mediating between housewives and the marketplace, much of the field’s early work focused on scientific homemaking with emphasis on sanitation (bacteriology), nutrition (chemistry) and home management skills (drawing on scientific management work) to lessen physical effort expended by farm wives. However, as could be seen during Cornell’s Farm and Home Week, scientific housekeeping on the farm would indeed include the use of new equipment and products to achieve optimal results (Nystrom, 1929, pp. 15, 69-70; Zuckerman and Carksy, 1990; Craig, 1944; Tomes, 1998).

For Van Rensselaer and her colleagues at the Cornell School of Agriculture, their educational focus on improving the quality of life for farm families through the introduction of better agricultural and domestic science principles included showing products and goods that might help. However, the School’s public funding by the New York State legislature precluded staff from identifying or indicating preferences for any particular brands of goods. Understandably, this caused tensions. Manufacturers would have much preferred that the Home Economics department test and recommend their products. And consumers would undoubtedly have welcomed some guidance from trained experts on which brand to buy. But Van Rensselaer and others in the School adhered to the “no recommendations” policy. In the end, it meant that the Cornell department (then School, finally College) of Home Economics maintained its focus on educating homemakers as producers and conservers of home and family, albeit with a consumer role, and spent less time on emphasizing homemakers’ role as consumers actually making purchases. But outreach work in
extension services, done by Van Rensselaer and her staff, with the Homemaker’s Conference as a particularly good example, primed the farm wives market for consumption.

**Agricultural Schools, Extension Work and the Efforts to Inform Farm Households**

The impetus to reach rural families with helpful information stemmed from several factors. By the late nineteenth century agricultural experts at universities advocated the application of science and technology to farm problems. The advent of electricity, although not widely available on farms, showed the possibilities of a future farm with work made more efficient and less burdensome. Telephone, radio, Rural Free Delivery and better roads all promised an end to the isolation on farms as well as providing access to more information and products. Railroads and special postal services such as Star Routes allowed mail and goods to be conveyed more easily to outlying farm homes (Holt, 1995).

Universities and the federal government paid attention to the need for improving quality of agricultural production and life on the farm. The growth of Agricultural Schools provided a cadre of experts to assist in educating farm families. The development of the new field of home economics provided a growing group of educators focusing on improving the home, with a number looking specifically at the plight of rural women. While manufacturers attempted to advertise to consumers, much information farm families gained about new products and methods came from the experts at university Agricultural Schools. These trained staff, committed to education and often imbued with the era’s Progressive beliefs in the key role played by experts and faith in scientific information for progress, sought to reach farm families in whatever way they could to spread news about the latest agricultural improvements (Holt, 1995, pp. 22-24).

Farm work and life had also attracted the attention of the federal government. Federal legislation provided funding which promoted agricultural and home economics research, education and demonstrations of best practices. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 promised that each state could receive land to support an existing or newly created institution of higher learning focused on mechanical and industrial arts (practical subjects). The Hatch Act of 1887 expanded on this legislation, creating agricultural experiment stations in connection with the Morrill Act institutions. This attention to agriculture and farm life, with the money to back it up, bolstered the establishment of Agricultural Schools.

Home economists, as experts on home affairs came to be called, were hired by colleges as early as the 1870s, in Midwest land grant institutions such as those in Kansas, Illinois and Iowa (East, 1980, p.45; Goldstein, 1994, p.29). Home economics departments, often started in Schools of Agriculture, benefitted from the funding given to those Schools, as well as the synergy of the united focus on farm life. The need to train boys and men in the newest agricultural methods was paralleled by the need to educate farm girls and women about the most scientific, efficient and sanitary ways to run the farm home; women played a partnering role in the farm operation, perhaps more so than in urban homes. By 1914, with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, Congress explicitly recognized the field of home economics, making an annual appropriation for extension work carried out for agricultural and home economics education. Demonstration agents could be hired to take best practices out to homes and farms, showing farm women how to live and produce more efficiently. Three years later the Smith–Hughes Act provided federal funds to support agricultural, home economics and vocational education. By 1920 every state or territory except Alaska had an agricultural school, and all ran extension services (Holt, 1995, p.25). Extension work at these Agricultural Schools included writing and disseminating informational bulletins, offering short winter courses for farmers, sending out staff to lecture and demonstrate new techniques, running demonstration trains complete with equipment across states, and holding Farmers’ Institutes. After 1914 extension work also included the county agent systems funded by Smith-Lever. These pieces of federal legislation allowed home economics education, research and knowledge to progress, guaranteeing that farm women would continue to receive the most updated homemaking knowledge possible from Home Economics departments and schools, as well as from commercial sources.

The field of Home Economics had been gaining momentum as a coherent discipline in the last decade of the nineteen century, culminating in the Lake Placid (NY) meetings. In 1899 Melvil Dewey, a politically connected New York State librarian, and his wife Anna brought together the most prominent individuals in the home economics field. The group moved to shape and define the new field, ultimately giving it a name (Home Economics) and, after meeting for several years,
birthing a new, national association, the American Home Economics Association (AHEA, in 1909). The home economists at the early Lake Placid meetings emphasized educating women in their role as housewives. They focused on sanitation, nutrition, health, efficiency and creating a home that would foster citizenship. These leaders also recognized that informed consumption was becoming a part of the homemaker’s job (Craig, 1944, p.20; Goldstein, 1994, pp. 32, 39).

**Developments at Cornell University**

Cornell University had been at the forefront of efforts to bring information to farmers. Cornell’s outreach programs were flexible, non-technical and did not lead to a certificate, allowing students to choose the topics and mode of instruction they desired (True, 1928, p.44; Rose, 1969, p.12). Extension activities taken on by Cornell included both reaching across the state to educate farm families where they lived, and centralized information offered at the Cornell site. Initiatives included a popular Reading Course for Farmers with a correspondence component, a Home Nature-Study course, Junior Naturalist clubs for boys and girls and lectures and demonstrations provided by Agriculture School staff across the state at local institutes and meetings. The School had maintained a state funded experimental demonstration station since 1894.

Liberty Hyde Bailey, a horticulture professor who came to Cornell in 1888 and served as Dean of the School of Agriculture from 1903 to 1913, actively supported extension work at the School. He took charge of its Home Nature-Study course in 1897. Bailey believed strongly in bringing technology and scientific method to farming so that the farmer and his family could prosper. He saw rural life as critical to preserving American values, something he espoused as a leader in the Country Life movement. Bailey’s focus on the family unit as well as the feedback he received from readers of the tens of thousands of Farmer’s Reading and Home Nature Study course bulletins, showed him the necessity of providing farm wives as well as farmers with scientific information (Rodgers, 1965, pp.236, 237). This movement to educate farm *wives* by providing scientific data from knowledgeable sources fit in with the Progressive reform ethos of the time. And as the federal funding and Bailey’s own Country Life movement ideology attested, experts believed that the success of the farm *home* contributed directly to the success of the farm. This recognition of the key role played by farm women made them a consumer market eventually to be tapped.

Anna Botsford Comstock, employed by the Extension division for the Youth Nature Study project, knew Van Rensselaer from the Southern Tier in New York where they had both grown up, and recommended her to Bailey for the proposed Farmers’ Wives Reading project. A thirty-six year old former Commissioner of Schools for six years in Cattaraugus County, New York, Van Rensselaer had demonstrated familiarity with rural households and experience in administration. She joined the Extension Service as an educator in 1900.

Clearly Cornell School of Agriculture had deep roots in extension work prior to the passage in 1914 of the Smith-Lever Act. Van Rensselaer was stepping into an existing organization of educational outreach to farmers when she joined Cornell. She could draw on the experience the Cornell faculty had with farm men. She also had the guidance and support of Liberty Hyde Bailey, a person whose philosophy about educating for quality of life on the farm she resonated with.

**Farmers’ Wives Reading Club**

When joining the Cornell School of Agriculture Extension Service Martha Van Rensselaer held no college degree but had taught for ten years prior to her election as School’s Commissioner, so she understood how to communicate and educate. She herself had little skill as a housekeeper, but she knew how to listen and to identify problems. As County School Commissioner Van Rensselaer had become familiar with the leaflets put out by Cornell’s Home Nature-Study program (Percival, 1957, p.5).

Van Rensselaer’s initial step in this extension program specifically aimed at women began with sending out a letter to 5,000 women, under Bailey’s name, asking them about possible areas where they needed help, suggesting “Saving Steps”, the topic ultimately chosen for the first bulletin. In his cover letter Bailey specifically stated: “…We want each of you to talk back, even though you feel called upon to tell us we are wrong” (Scholl, 2008, p. 151).

They received 2,000 responses, data Van Rensselaer carefully studied. Using letters such as these as a basis, and not hampered by preconceptions from having academic training in home economics, Van Rensselaer built the correspondence courses from the ground up, in response to
her constituency. While respondents paid nothing for the actual bulletins (state monies covered this cost), they did pay postage if they wrote back. This initiative embodied true two way communication, with bulletin recipients asked their opinions of the published material and thoughts on other potential topics. Women responded eagerly, pouring out their concerns and questions, revealing isolation, drudgery, a passionate desire to improve the lives of their families as well as themselves and desirous of contact with the outside world. This correspondence built trust. As one writer poignantly stated, “Although you have not heard from me, I have not lost my interest in your work. Please don’t forget me and I’ll try to write oftener. If you have any new lessons, please send them as I do do enjoy them” (Rose, 1969, p.26). The bulletins, with their information and questions focused on farm women’s interests, as well as highlighting the importance of the farm wives’ opinions, tapped into a strong need. Welcoming the attention, one rural reader expressed her feelings: “I cannot tell you what it means to me to think that someone cares. My life is made up of men, men and mud, mud. Send me the bulletins and remember me in your prayers” (Percival, 1957, p.7). Eventually, there would be over 300 Cornell study clubs, each averaging 25 members, largely comprised of rural housewives. These activities planted the seeds of information for farm families about ways, with new products and without, to improve their endeavors.

When asking for additional funds to print extra bulletins needed for the Farmer’s Wives Reading Course, Van Rensselaer noted this strong desire for information: “I wish the whole Woman’s work could be developed as the demand calls for it. I could provide pages of correspondence from farmers’ wives, showing that they are eager for the work. I wish we had an appropriation which would allow of this correspondence course among the women of the state, and having Home Institutes through the winter, and a Short Course in Domestic Science for girls…Farmers’ wives and daughters are good material to work upon” (MVR to Mrs. Dewey, 1/30/1904, Box 12, MVRP). Clearly a market existed for the information, a pent up need, which marketers could capitalize on.

Van Rensselaer understood the difficulties faced by rural women from her time as School Commissioner and her work visiting the study clubs across the state. But to gain more formal knowledge about the nascent home economics field she also started attending the Lake Placid conferences, putting herself in touch with experts and learning from them. She took classes at Cornell in areas related to home economics, eventually earning her undergraduate degree. Like her supervisor Bailey, Van Rensselaer fit the Progressive model. She was optimistic about the role of expertise, education and information in bringing about positive change. Some improvements could come without expenditure of dollars. As Van Rensselaer knew from her home visits, the simple area of energy expenditure by the housewife was critical. Her bulletin on housewives’ steps is in line with the focus taken by others involved in the scientific management side of home economics, including another non-academic home economist, Christine Frederick. This focus on scientific management by home economics began before the influence of consumer culture layered onto housework the importance of consumption.

Eventually Van Rensselaer issued about five bulletins per year, on topics such as sanitation, food, home furnishings, children on farms and cleaning; mundane perhaps, but the stuff of these women’s lives. The bulletins contained reading assignments and questions, as well as advice about forming study clubs. Van Rensselaer herself traveled across New York state visiting farm women and their clubs, both providing information and seeking guidance on topics of interest, “trying to satisfy through talks the growing demands of an awakening public for information on the subjects related home and family life…. ” (Rose, 1969, p.27).

**Short Winter Course**

Another extension outreach that Van Rensselaer modified for farm women was the short winter course. Cornell had begun offering short winter instruction for farmers as early 1892-1893. By the time Van Rensselaer came to Cornell this three month, non-credit winter course enrolled over 100 farm men yearly, providing practical training and information on farming techniques (Rodgers, 1965, p.211; Rose, 1969, p. 30).

In 1905, Dean Bailey suggested that similar winter courses should be offered for women on the subject of home management. Van Rensselaer created a curriculum centered on topics of interest to farm women, and launched it in 1906, creating another venue for women to receive scientific home making information. Van Rensselaer called upon contacts developed at the Lake Placid Conferences she had been attending to select the august speakers (MVR to Mary Abel,
The first year luminaries of the home economics world including Anna Barrows, Isabel Bevier, Maria Elliott, Ellen Richards, Marion Talbot and Mary Schenck Woolman lectured the farm women, who eagerly put aside their daily round of work to learn new and improved ways of keeping their homes clean and attractive, of feeding their families and raising their children. These instructors traveled from MIT, Chicago University (University of Chicago), and Teachers College (Columbia), a testament to the dedication of the professions’ leaders, Cornell’s reputation and the determination of Van Rensselaer. She herself gave a lecture on household equipment.

A great deal of publicity heralded the Winter Course, with letters sent out, as well as notices to newspapers across the state. Forty people signed up the first year, and additional individuals came to various lectures, attracted by the distinguished experts and topics. Following her usual course of soliciting feedback, Van Rensselaer sent Winter Course participants a survey asking what they liked, what improvements they wanted to see, and for additional topics and day/time preferences.

The next year, when Dean Bailey forgot to include the winter course in the annual budgeting process, Van Rensselaer was forced to cut back her expenditures. She remembered that Flora Rose, a chemist studying nutrition at Teachers College in New York City, had written inquiring about work. Rose could come teach at the Winter course for a small travel budget. She traveled to Ithaca and after successfully lecturing was offered the position of Director of the Home Economics department by Dean Bailey. Rose demurred, pointing to the energetic and successful Van Rensselaer. Bailey protested Van Rensselaer’s lack of academic credentials, but ultimately supported the two women in being co-directors, roles they held until Van Rensselaer’s death in 1932. They also became life partners.

New York state residents took these winter classes at no cost. Expert instructors would “provide instruction in cooking, furnishing, general housekeeping, home sanitation, reading, the relation of the home to the school and church and other social forces” (Rose, 1969, p.32). While the titles of the lectures appear dry and purely informational, not massaged by advertising expertise, they clearly spoke to the intended audience of those trying to productively and positively raise a family on a farm. Here women saw equipment demonstrations, even though particular brands could not be named. But if they learned new techniques and ways to improve housekeeping, these women would turn to purchasing items.

The extension efforts educated women and men about possibilities beyond their own farm, communities and knowledge, preparing them for their stepping into the world of consumption. As Van Rensselaer said in her 1909 report to Dean Bailey, “Both men and women in the state seem equally interested in instruction which places the home upon a better business basis and provides more helpful surroundings” (MVR to LHB, 1909, Box 16, MVRP). Van Rensselaer also advocated for better practical facilities at Cornell for educating these women, for example noting that the home economics department needed a real house to appropriately teach women: “We look forward to having a kitchen and dining room which will present the difficulties and advantages which a woman will meet in her own home, such as difficulties of plumbing, lighting, heating and the problems of decorating and furnishing rooms” (MVR to LHB, 1909, Box 16, MVRP). Through such an appropriately equipped facility they could provide some guidance on how to be educated consumers.

Home-Maker’s Conference/Farm and Home Week

In 1909 Cornell held its first week-long Home-Makers Conference (eventually titled Farm and Home Week in 1928). The previous year the Extension Division had put on a weeklong Farmer’s Institute. This initiative had arisen out of farmers’ desire for more education and the chance to discuss the latest methods of farming, new equipment, wisdom about crops and livestock and conditions in the market (Colman, 1963, p.210). While regional farmer’s institutes had been held across the state for decades, running such an assembly at the university allowed easy utilization of the full faculty and equipment of the Agriculture School. About three hundred individuals registered that first year, although more attended specific sessions.

Such farmer’s institutes had gained popularity across the nation in the 1880s and 90s, reaching the height of their success in the early 1900s. The Institutes were set up either by state Departments of Agriculture or Agriculture Schools as a way to communicate the latest research findings, equipment and innovations in agriculture. By 1914, one source notes that over 8,000 such
institutes ran annually and estimated that more than 3 million people attended (Prawl et al., 1984, p.15). Mailings, programs and notices in local papers advertised the meetings. By 1896 a national organization, the American Association of Farmer’s Institute Workers, had been established. Recognizing the importance of these institutes, in 1901 the United States Department of Agriculture’s Office of Experimental Stations appointed a Farmer’s Institute specialist.

Railroads supported these institutes, offering special rates to attending farmers and their families. Railroad companies believed that bringing farmers to Institutes, as well as sending out demonstration trains, would increase agricultural production, which then had to be shipped over the rails (Holt, 1995, pp.27, 28). Trains used in extension demonstration work became so popular that by 1906 they had run in 21 states. These fully equipped demonstration units showing farming and housekeeping techniques and equipment attracted widespread attention, developing and whetting farm families’ consumer appetites, even as they brought them information. In New York State Cornell equipped such trains as part of the extension service, sending out five in 1909-1910, reaching about 30,000 people over four railroad lines. Informational bulletins were stocked, including some of Van Rensselaer’s publications aimed at farm women (Colman, 1963, pp.207-208). Some trains specifically targeted housewives, including one in 1910, called “The Victory Special” where Van Rensselaer noted the demonstration agent would talk upon such topics as “milk in the diet, labor saving devices, care and cooking of fruits and vegetables…” (MVR to Daniel Witter, 10/22/1910, Folder 30, Box11, MVRP). However, the trains could not provide the range of information that a centralized institute could.

Institutes sessions and speakers devoted to women had appeared by the 1890s. Sometimes the women’s portions were called “cooking schools, and food preparation.” In Wisconsin women’s sessions on “butter making, the dairy, fastening ends and binding edges, and education of farmers’ daughters” appeared. Other topics covered for these proto-consumers included “labor-saving devices, better sanitary conditions, better methods of preparing and preserving foods, care of the sick, and beautification of the home.” Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Colorado, Wisconsin, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland and Nebraska all engaged in activities to bring information about better homemaking techniques to rural housewives in the years immediately after the turn of the century (Craig, 1944, pp.17-18, 23-24, 37). In 1910, the first year of Cornell’s Homemaker’s Institute, of the reported 5,651 Farmers Institutes held nationwide, 444 created programs targeted at women.

New York State began experimenting with holding separate Women’s Institutes across the state in 1906, under the guidance of Mrs. Helen Wells, who had been deeply involved with the Women’s Institutes funded by the Canadian government. As an employee of the State Agriculture institution and author of the Farmers’ Wives Reading bulletins, Van Rensselaer participated regularly as a member of this five person program fanning out across the state to bring informational messages to farm women about cooking, sanitation, efficiency and beautification of the home. In fact, Van Rensselaer had been invited to lecture at an Institute in Guelph, Canada as early as 1903, an assembly the local newspaper christened a meeting of “The Goddesses of the Household” (Clipping dated 12/9/1903, Folder 32, Box 11, MVRP). These gatherings, often affiliated with the local Grange, were extremely well received; the five run across NY State saw an average of 146 participants, and one welcomed almost 500 attendees. Several assemblies ended with resolutions to formally petition the state legislature to allocate separate funding for these Women’s Institutes. However, most regional institutes, at the behest of the NY state director for Farmer Institutes, shifted to the model that Cornell employed, holding the women’s conference at the same time as that directed to men (The Sun, 4/7/1907, n.p.; MVR to Rachel Colwell, 12/22/1908, MVRP). And these regional Institutes, where experts traveled out to participants, faced limitations in their ability to demonstrate equipment; a centralized conference allowed for showing items more effectively.

At Cornell’s 1908 Farmer’s Week, targeted at farm men across the state, the Home Economics department participated minimally, with Van Rensselaer and Rose preparing steak for the attendees and giving an occasional lecture. Dean Bailey, Van Rensselaer and Rose all agreed on the desperate need that farmer’s wives had for a centralized informational gathering of this kind. The next year, Van Rensselaer and Rose successfully organized the Cornell Homemaker’s Conference which became a well-known and well-attended annual program, running simultaneously with Farmers’ Week. Students and faculty prepared well in advance for the lectures, demonstrations, and exhibits. Special train rates were offered and affordable housing arranged in Ithaca for the visitors. This second Cornell Institute, with the women included, ran
during the last week in February, a quiet time for farm work. The joint meeting proved popular, with 1,200 people registered and an estimated additional five hundred actually attending. Specialized groups and associations also met during this week, including pastors, poultry farmers, plant breeders and drainage associations (Colman, 1963, pp. 210-211).

Van Rensselaer was well positioned to organize and promote the institute, drawing on her contacts from the Lake Placid Conference and other state organizations, as well as the subject and organizational skills she’d been using so effectively at Cornell (MVR to Annie Dewey, 12/2/1910. Box 12; MVR to Miss Crawford, 6/17/1912, Box 20, MVRP). At the December 1909 meeting of the AHEA, she presented a paper on “Instruction by means of Printed bulletins and Institutes” (Program, 1909, in Folder 31, Box 12, MVRP). She promoted Farmer’s Week to those she communicated with on other matters, writing in 1911 to the Chairwoman of the Household Economics committee of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, “I wish you might be with us during Farmer’s Week. We expect to have a good program” (MVR to Mrs. Olaf Guldlin, 2/16/1911, Box 12, MVRP). On 1914 Van Rensselaer pointed to Farmers’ Week and the Home-Maker’s Conference as a shining example of what could be accomplished in the extension service, inviting a potential extension worker to the conference to get a clear picture of the job (MVR to Miss Margaret O’Leary, 12/23/1913, Box 12, MVRP).

Van Rensselaer and Rose called on students from the Winter course, past and present, for help in organizing the Week: “The Homemakers’ Conference has been organized for two or three years and officered by women of the state. At a business meeting held at the end of the last Conference during Farmers’ Week it was decided that the Winter Course students in Home Economics would have a keener interest and would be in closer touch with plans for the program and the exhibition, etc. than any other women in the state.” This reflects the ongoing assessment and evolution of the Week as well as Van Rensselaer’s promotional talent. She continued: “… it seems desirable as years pass by to have some means of keeping up the acquaintance with our students who leave our Winter course classes. It was therefore decided that the officers of the Van Rensselaer Club which is organized from the Winter Course students should be the officers of the Homemakers’ Conference and assist the Home Economics staff in the preparation of the program and carrying out the details of the meeting” (MVR to Miss Crawford, 5/31/1911, Box 20, MVRP). Van Rensselaer thus found a strategy to increase attendance and participation in the Farmers’ Wives week, while developing membership across the state, through having the Winter Course participants become part of the Farmers’ Wives week group. Her ongoing contact with participants strengthened the credibility of Cornell and its experts. These activities supported Van Rensselaer’s vision about educating a community of farm women across the state and at different points throughout their lives.

The 1913 agenda for the Homemakers’ Conference, held in the Assembly room of the new, state-funded Home Economics building, focused on topics commonly seen in conferences run by the emergent home economics field. Flora Rose started off with a detailed discussion about the nutritive value of milk, pointing out the low cost of milk produced on the farm. The next speaker followed up with a talk on the care of milk in the home. In stressing the importance of consuming only milk free from bacteria, he noted that it was best to buy the beverage in bottles, with the containers completely washed and sterilized. The audience received a mixed message here, with speakers telling them to use both milk from the farm and in bottles from the market. A compromise of course was to bottle the farm milk in sterilized containers (Program of Homemaker’s Conference, 1913, Box 16, MVRP).

Other topics reflected the scientific management strain of home economics, with one lecturer laying out the need for a well-planned house, because “on a good arrangement of this depends the proper carrying out of the functions of the home---such as the preparation of food, the home management, sanitation and happiness” (Program of Homemaker’s Conference, p.2, 1913, Box 16, MVRP). This speaker, as well as Van Rensselaer the next day, stressed the need to save steps and rationally assess the home for any energy saving changes that could be made. Van Rensselaer encouraged farm wives to make tools, clothing and overall work arrangements as convenient as possible, and to use good time management. Other topics included learning about “Dressing and Trussing a Chicken,” a demonstration on using candies to create a dessert, Flora Rose talking about bread, and lectures on home beautification, decorating, art work and the importance of reading.
A number of these topics received coverage in the bulletins the extension unit distributed (Program of Homemakers’ Conference, 1913, Box 16, MVRP). Attendees learned about bulletin topics such as the need to rid the home of dust (and any ornamentation, furniture, rugs, curtains, floor surfaces that attracted and held dust), and “the scourge of the pest,” as well as food hygiene and laundry hygiene. Van Rensselaer herself noted in 1912 that Farmers’ Week brought a large group of people interested both in agriculture and “Scientific homemaking,” which these topics addressed (MVR to Mrs. Trowbridge, 2/20/1912, Box 16, MVRP). Lighter fare appeared as well, with music from a local singer and a play by young women enrolled in the Home Economics department.

For the February 1913 Farm and Home Week, Van Rensselaer and Rose had promised that all attendees could be fed at the cafeteria in the new Home Economics building they had moved into that fall. This promise proved difficult to keep, as much of the up-to-date equipment for the cafeteria had not yet been installed. But Van Rensselaer and Rose managed to organize their staff and students to provide food for the guests, showing off the equipment that was present and the modern furnishings. At future gatherings all the new conveniences, equipment and ways of preparing nutritious food and efficiently cleaning up could be demonstrated in this new building for the Farm and Home participants.

Home Economics staff and other faculty from the School of Agriculture dominated the program with a sprinkling of local experts, hands-on demonstration agents and state officials. For example, Van Rensselaer noted, “Miss Barrows, I think, is one of the best demonstrators in the country. She has been here for that purpose and delighted the women. She is on the Farmer’s Institute staff this Year (1910), giving two days in the week to the work” (MVR to Mrs. Addie B. Guldfin, 12/3/1909, Box 12, MVRP). More nationally known names appeared occasionally, adding to the Institute’s credibility. In 1918, with the war effort on, social activist Jane Addams and Julia Lathrop of the Children’s Bureau of the Department of the Interior both appeared at the conference (Conservation Program, February 11-16, 1918, Boxes 16, 23, MVRP). In the 20s, politicians such as Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt and Nellie Taylor Ross, former governor of Wyoming participated at what was called by then Farm and Home Week (New York Herald Tribune, February 17, 1929, n.p.; and “Program of 21st Farm and Home Week Announced, n.d., n.p. both in Box 16, MVRP).

Large numbers flocked to hear experts and well-known figures provide useful information and ideas. An analysis of the 1915 Farmers’ Week noted that 3,077 individuals had registered, an increase of 526 over the previous year. 31 % of these were women, and “This proportion of nearly one-third women is said to be due mainly to the courses in home-making, offered by the department of home economics” (Press Release, Attendance at Farmer’s Week, A-24, Box 16, MVRP). People traveled to the Cornell campus from all but three New York state counties (Rockland, Hamilton and Queens, the latter two, the analysis noting, being largely urban). Nineteen states and Washington DC also sent participants; some representatives even came from Japan. Sessions were well attended and handwritten notes on the program indicate that the inadequate seating needed to be increased the following year (Rose, 1969, p.52).

Materials from organizations outside Cornell appeared at the Homemakers’ Conference. Van Rensselaer wrote to an interested party, “I would suggest you send me a few copies (of her bulletin) to be placed upon exhibition during Farmer’s Week which occurs February 19th-24th. We have a Homemakers’ Conference at that time... There are a large number of farm women who are interested in progressive things and I shall be glad to place these bulletins where they will be seen” (MVR to Mrs. Harriet Bishop Waters, 2/3/1912, Box 12, MVRP). Outside organizations coming to Farmers’ Week tended to be governmental or not-for-profit entities, rather than commercial businesses. Participating groups included the Home Bureau, The Red Cross, the Consumer’s League, the Children’s Bureau, the U.S. Department of Labor and New York State Department of Education, among others (List of organizations, n.d., Box 16, MVRP).

By the 1920s book exhibits could be seen. Here there exists evidence that seeing products at the Farm and Home conference led to purchases, even though attendees couldn’t buy the volumes there. Cornell librarian Dorothy Riddle reassured a publisher who had sent books for display, “Although we are unable to make sales at the Book Fair owing to this being a state college, we do have very definite proof that a large number of sales are made as result of the books being seen here. Could you have seen the hundreds of people who sat at the tables taking notes of authors, publishers and prices for the sole purpose of buying books either individually or for their
clubs, or for recommendations to their local libraries, I think you would feel repaid for the effort you put into sending these books to us” (Dorothy Riddle to Robert F. Evans, 3/2/1930, Folder 12, Box 16, MVRP).

Farmers’ Week exposed both men and women to farm equipment and household products (including books) that could be purchased, so got them thinking about buying. At an opening session in 1911, the building where the women met was decorated with flags and bunting but also with various types of “implements” used on the farm (Daily Union, Schenectady, March 23, 1911, n.p., Box 16, MVRP). Demonstrating the uses of these equipment, ways of preparing foods, cleaning and decorating the home, making clothes and efficiently carrying out the homemaker duties transmitted a persuasive message. The setting felt personal and the speakers had expert credibility in the eyes of their audiences, as well as a sense of familiarity, as many of the product demonstrators had, like Van Rensselaer, experienced rural life. The need to buy appropriate utensils, equipment, storage containers, and cleaning supplies for the most efficient and hygienic home was communicated powerfully to the audiences (Holt, 1995, p.48; Tomes, 1998, p.197).

In reflecting on the weeklong conference, an Ontario county farmer commented on the utility of the information gained: “‘You know they have a meeting called Farmers’ Week down at Cornell each year and two years ago I went. At first I thought I couldn’t afford it but my wife thought it would do me good. I intended to stay two days but I found I could stay an extra day for what I had planned to spend, about ten to twelve dollars, and what I picked up down there helped me so much that year that when it was time to go last year I just made Martha, that’s my wife, go with me. Well, I believe that’s been our best farm investment’ (“Farm and Home Week,” Ralph H. Wheeler, n.p., Box 16, MVRP).

Not all men felt as positively about the women’s week. Some farmers expressed hostility toward the home economists and the suggestions they had about sanitation, nutrition and efficient household management. In her time spent in farm households Van Rensselaer had learned that often the home received the lowest priority, with dollars spent instead on agricultural equipment and innovations. Ever pragmatic, Van Rensselaer realized that the best way to engage farmers concerning the needs of the home was to involve her male colleagues, already speaking at the Farmer’s Week. While some farm women had their own money, earned by side businesses such as dairy products eggs or crafts, many depended on their husbands for dollars so the men needed to be persuaded (Tomes, 1998, p.200).

By 1930, audiences could listen to radio broadcasts of parts of Farm and Home Week. Van Rensselaer’s contacts continued to pay off, and in 1930 Frances Perkins (at the time in the Albany, NY Department of Labor) came to speak. Eleanor Roosevelt appeared in the years 1932 through 1939, and New York Governor Franklin Roosevelt continued his visits in 1930 through 1932.

However, changes came to extension services overall, in large part due to changes in government funding of programs. Use of Federal funds for Farm Institutes was discouraged, as the government sought to professionalize the educational messages to rural households, ensuring that they came from expert sources. And commercial sources of information expanded at this time, with the growth of mass advertising.

At Cornell, the study clubs died out with the onset of the strong county demonstration agent system in the teens. The informational bulletins that had been part of the Farmers’ Wives Reading Club continued, but focused on particular projects, to support and strengthen the county extension workers. The Home Economics School stopped running the winter course in 1923 because of lack of resources: budget cuts in the teens, the need to support the every growing residential program and the fact that this type of program failed to qualify as “extension work” all led to its demise.

But the Farm and Home conference continued on. Its model, with people coming to the experts and their demonstration equipment rather than the experts coming to them, worked well for the College of Home Economics. This ran counter to the national trend. However, Farm and Home Week at Cornell continued to be held annually through 1960, except during 1944, 1945, and 1947. While they existed these Institutes met information and technical needs, provided an excellent venue for communication and created an appetite and a developed market for goods, equipment and conveniences on the farm.

Commercial Interests
In all the communication about the latest equipment, products and ways of managing life on the farm, what role did the manufacturers of those products play? In the Farm and Home Week, as well as through the bulletins, lectures to groups across the state, winter course and regular four year curriculum, Van Rensselaer and the other home economists at Cornell provided advice and guidance about the most scientific, efficient and up to date methods of housekeeping. In so doing, they often referenced new products and goods that manufacturers were bringing to market. However, even if they had wanted to recommend particular brands of goods or get into the business of testing products and certifying them, Van Rensselaer and her colleagues could not. The fact that they were funded by public monies, through the state of New York, constrained them, in a way that the entire School of Agriculture was limited (Colman, 1963, p.211).

Adherence to this policy at times seemed variable. For example, at the early Farm and Home Week, Van Rensselaer shows herself responsive to a suggestion to include a particular book providing information on the “fireless cooker,” a convenience widely promoted in the early 20th century. Replying to a farmer’s wife, Van Rensselaer wrote, “I like very much Miss Mitchell’s book on Fireless cooking. We shall have a demonstration on fireless cooking and I am glad of your suggestion to have the book where it can be seen and bought, if desired.” Van Rensselaer then notes that they will have an exhibition of examples of good and bad furnishing schemes, also observing that women have written in with questions about washing machines among other topics. Farm wives had in their minds the emerging products, and they looked to the college for guidance. This fit with Van Rensselaer’s view of her extension work, as she hoped “the women will learn to call upon the college for information the same as the men are doing in connection with their farm work” (MVR to Mrs. G.M. Wells, 1/14/1910, Box 16, MVRP).

However, demonstration of product use had to be carried out carefully. Van Rensselaer herself settled on the criteria of educational value as the measuring rod to be used. She described the tricky road the state-supported Agriculture School trod in getting out the best information to incipient consumers: “We have found, however, that household conveniences interest people greatly. Manufacturers are generally very glad to put their wares on exhibition. We take the ground that we cannot enter into it from a commercial standpoint, but we can show what we think is good from an educational standpoint and speak a good work (sic) for labor saving devices” (MVR to Mrs. Trowbridge, 2/20/1912, Box 16, MVRP). The issue of product testing and endorsement affected not just home economics but all the agricultural areas. Van Rensselaer needed to comply with the Agriculture School policy, while also meeting the needs of the farm wives she served. She reconciled this by showing the new conveniences, but only after she and her staff were convinced of the utility and soundness of the products and without specifically endorsing a particular brand. The trust bond she and the home economics staff built up with their constituency remained unblurred by advertising pressure, since the School had financial support from the state.

Van Rensselaer emphasized the educational criteria noted above, and felt that by keeping those principles in mind, the extension staff could display products. The Fireless Cooker demonstration actually followed an informational day of presentations on the selection and cooking of meats by Flora Rose and an exhibition on cereals. Van Rensselaer herself showed the features of the Fireless cooker, including the overnight cooking of a whole ham in the appliance (sampled by the attendees). A fireless dinner pail for working men’s lunches also appeared. Other sessions featured the operation of laundry equipment as well as how to use a vacuum cleaner “by which method the task of housecleaning is expected to be reduced to a science” (“Women’s Share in Farmer’s Week,” Rosamond F. Harper, 2/26/1908, n.p., Box 16, MVRP). However, no overt approval of brands by staff appeared.

Van Rensselaer explained the “no brand or product recommendation policy” to Mr. C. E. Pruyn of the Elmira Water, Light and Railroad Company in 1912. Referencing the upcoming Farmers’ Week, where they would be hosting some two or three thousand farmers and their families, she notes, “Our Home Economics Department makes it a point to put on exhibition labor saving devices during that week as we have many visitors on our floor. We emphasize in our teaching the use of power but our problem is largely a rural one, and while electricity will be used on the farm someday, there are many people who come here to whom it would not appeal. However, some of the visitors see possibilities even for farmers and we have visitors who are living where they have electric power. For them a few pieces would be of interest showing electricity as a power. We shall have the Syracuse Easy Washing Machine with electric power. We own a Simplex toaster. Should you wish to send anything for exhibition during the week we shall
be glad to take care of it and have it where it will be seen.” Van Rensselaer recognized that seeing items could develop a taste among consumers even when they couldn’t immediately purchase the product if not yet linked up to electricity.

This seems promising for businessman Pruyn. However, Van Rensselaer went on, laying out the policy mandated by their-state funded status, which actually seems peculiarly unhelpful in some ways to the very state citizens it is trying to protect: “We are a state institution; we can have no commercial interest in exhibiting anything and do it entirely from an educational standpoint. We cannot, therefore, have any special demonstrating. The Syracuse Easy Washer will be put up and operated without any one here to explain it. It stands for itself. (Emphasis added). It would never do for us to use the college as an advertising medium. We thus hold ourselves in readiness to speak for or against labor saving devices. We favor anything that is good because we think it will help women to solve their household problems. I have told you the whole situation frankly in order that you may know where it is best to send anything for this purpose” (MVR to Mr. C.E. Pruyn, 2/14/1912, Box16, MVRP).

This pattern of including products and demonstrating on them without naming brands continued. A 1919 program notes exhibits for Economical household furnishings, clothing and millinery, equipment for stain removal, the economical kitchen, and Fireless and steam pressure cookers and their meal possibilities (Program for 1911 Home-maker’s Conference, February 11-14, p.8, Box 63, MVRP). They showed these equipment and goods but carefully refrained from endorsing or giving detailed explanations on how to use items.

Despite the restrained amount of specific product information that could be gleaned from this Home Conference week, the visual presence of these labor saving devices and home enhancements helped develop consumer desires, if not preferences. Certainly it motivated some individuals to seek out additional information from manufacturers and sales people. Gaining the initial information from a trusted source, such as the state university college, may in fact have increased farm women’s belief that these products would be valuable. These relatively isolated and rural individuals trusted friends and family, but many also placed confidence in the home economics department at Cornell, where the staff, led by Van Rensselaer, had expended so much energy reaching out to them.

At Farmers’ Week Van Rensselaer recognized the increasingly popular topic of how the housewife could be an educated and savvy consumer. She lectured and provided opportunity for shared discussion on the subject of how women keeping house for their families should think about spending their money. However, Van Rensselaer’s focus stayed very much on practicalities and budgeting, not product placement and expanded consumption. In the very first session of the 1911 Farmers’ Week, Van Rensselaer opened with a discussion on “The Cost of Living.” She emphasized the need to understand the costs involved in keeping a household in food, clothing and other day-to-day items. She argued that women should study these costs and know the differences between buying and selling prices (Daily Union, Schenectady, 3/23/1911, n.p. Box, MVRP). This revealed her approach to the topic of consumption and the housewife.

Inability to provide manufacturer information and guidance was not the only situation where working for a state agency imposed restrictions. Despite numerous requests, Van Rensselaer could not directly mail the informational bulletins produced by her extension division to anyone outside the state. She hit upon ways around this, such as having printers sell the bulletins, or going through the Chatauqua organization. When Van Rensselaer served for six years as Homemaking editor of Delineator in the early 20s, she and her staff would provide detailed descriptions of labor saving devices, implements to enhance homemaking, but could not let Delineator readers know the brand name so that they might purchase the exact product being shown (MVR to Mrs. Olaf Gudlin, 8/18/1909, Box 12, MVRP; Scholl, 2008, p.152; Zuckerman, 2013).

Van Rensselaer reiterated the School position and her awareness of the need for caution around commercial enterprises to Teachers’ College home economics faculty member Benjamin R. Andrews, when inquiring of him about an organization which had invited Van Rensselaer to appear on the program: “We are perfectly agreeable to this, but I have had an idea that this may be a commercial enterprise and while I shall respect it if it is I want to act advisedly….The question naturally arises as to whether we wish to lend our influence and assistance in a commercial enterprise. As you know there are constant opportunities for this and an institution should not appear in this light” (MVR to Benjamin R. Andrews, 4/12/1910, Box 12, MVRP).
Despite not publicly endorsing products, Van Rensselaer and her staff kept up with the latest appliances and equipment for the home so they could appropriately train their students. For example, in 1910, when planning for the new home economics new building, Van Rensselaer and Rose traveled out west to visit other institutions, taking particular note of kitchens, as they wanted to the best possible equipment in their new demonstration kitchen. Gaining knowledge of possible items available commercially was essential (MVR to Mrs. Dewey, 8/11/1910, Box 12, MVRP).

Conclusion
From the beginning of the twentieth century, through its extension services, Cornell University provided information to farm wives about new, scientific methods for keeping healthy, sanitary and efficient homes. Led by Martha Van Rensselaer, with support from co-director Flora Rose, at the behest and direction of Agricultural School Dean Liberty Hyde Bailey, Cornell’s home economics extension service created home reading programs and study clubs for farm wives, short winter courses and a Home Makers’ Conference during the Farmers’ Week.

Winter courses and institutes, reading material and clubs, for men and women both, conveyed factual information, but more importantly, different ways of thinking about farm problems. As a Cornell brochure put it: “Education consists largely in broadening one’s sympathies and in giving him (the student) new means of attacking any problem” (Cornell Winter Course, 1909-1910, p.1, Box 20, MVRP). These new ways of reasoning included expanding the mind to include the idea of purchasing. This did not form the only or even the main thrust of the curriculum, but it definitely comprised a segment of the education.

Using new conveniences logically resulted from the scientific housekeeping and efficiency propounded by Van Rensselaer and other home economists. When appliances and utensils could in fact make housekeeping easier, farm wives needed to be exposed to and informed about these pieces of equipment, just like the male farmers needed to learn about equipment that could improve output and reduce labor in the fields and barns. Home economists like Van Rensselaer presented these tools in their role as experts in social science, a part of the Progressive movement. While Cornell University did not explicitly link its information and demonstration to consumerism, rather laying claim to informational education, they did in fact help develop the consumer market.

After this exposure to the newest pieces of equipment and products, in addition to the latest information on ways to budget, keep the home sanitary and can foods, and think differently about homemaking, it is difficult to imagine that interested farmers’ wives would not seek out additional information for purchasing products, if not immediately, then in the future. They would fail to receive much brand specific data from the College of Agriculture’s Home Economics department but their newly whetted consumer appetites could seek information from other venues. Fruitful sources could be local newspapers, magazines, family members or neighbors, or commercial outlets such as storekeepers, salesmen or paid advertising.

Overall, the early extension services, such as those provided by Martha Van Rensselaer’s department of Home Economics, provided information, community, exposure and a sense of validation for the rural individuals they targeted. Although prohibited from offering specific product information, Van Rensselaer and her staff raised the awareness of the recipients of these services as to the goods and services beyond their farms which could lessen their work burden and allow them to create more hygienic, healthful and attractive homes.

References


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