
“A Great Influence Still Further Multiplied’: Martha Van Rensselaer and the Home-Making Department of the *Delineator*”¹

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In the early twentieth century practitioners in the new field of home economics were offered various opportunities to provide information to consumers about household products. The work of Martha Van Rensselaer (1864-1932), pioneering home economist and co-founder of the Home Economics School at Cornell University, provides an example of the opportunities and complexities in this advisory role. Her work as Home Economics editor at *Delineator* in the 1920s highlights Van Rensselaer’s choices with respect to consumers and product manufacturers. The content and placement of articles and the ads around them, as well as Butterick Publishing Company’s promotion of Van Rensselaer, created complex messages that went beyond the household advice provided to readers. Qualitative analysis of the Home-making Department under Van Rensselaer shows a shift to a greater emphasis on specific housekeeping tasks with diminished placement of those tasks in a broader social context. Positioning of the department changed as well.

INTRODUCTION

In the early twentieth century practitioners in the new field of home economics were offered various opportunities to provide information to consumers about household products and technologies. Some home economists stepped into the commercial world, becoming close advisers to advertisers; others chose careers within particular companies. Some remained firmly rooted in academia where they fought for recognition, while others, trained in these programs, taught in high schools (Goldstein 1994, Rutherford 2003). In looking at the goals of home economists in these early years, analysis of the career of a pioneer in the field, Martha Van Rensselaer (1864-1932), provides insight. This paper looks at one aspect of Van Rensselaer’s work, that of Editor of the Home Maker Department at the mass circulation women’s magazine *The Delineator*. This example illuminates the issues faced by a home economist providing information and advice to homemakers within a journalistic and commercial setting.

Martha Van Rensselaer was a home and consumer economist, journalist and academic administrator. She communicated with women through mass media, the classroom and demonstrations. From her platform in the School of Home Economics at Cornell University, as well as her innumerable magazine articles and eventual leadership of the home-making section at *Delineator*, Van Rensselaer gave guidance to homemakers on the best ways to incorporate modern products and techniques in their homes. However, when she became involved with consumer magazines supported by advertising, she also became entangled with the business world.

Van Rensselaer was one of a number of home economists (including Christine Frederick, Sarah Splint and Katherine Fisher) who published in women’s journals and at the same time were engaged with the nascent advertising industry (Strasser 1989). By looking at the material provided by Van Rensselaer in *The Delineator* as well as the magazine’s use of her position and Cornell University’s name, this paper continues exploration of the history of the relationship between home economics, advertising and consumer behavior, fields designed to understand, inform and guide consumers, particularly female consumers (Berlage 1998, Stage and Vincenti 1997).

BACKGROUND

Martha Van Rensselaer was born and raised in western New York. After teaching for a number of years she was elected school commissioner of Cattaraugus County, NY. In this position she spent time in countless farm wives’ kitchens, gaining a keen understanding of their home-making problems and priorities, information she drew on throughout her career. In 1908 Van Rensselaer, with home economist Flora Rose, established the Department of Home Economics at Cornell. Van Rensselaer served as President of the American Home Economics Association from 1914 to 1916, and served as co-director of the Home Conservation Division of the US Food Administration under Herbert Hoover during World War One (MVRP). From early in her career at Cornell Van Rensselaer wrote for magazines, including *Farmer’s Magazine*, *Youth’s Companion*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Good*

Housekeeping. Thus Van Rensselaer had experience with magazine journalism when she came to the *Delineator*, and saw mass magazines as an appropriate outlet for educating consumers. She also was aware of the strong role played by advertisers in magazine publishing.

THE HOME-MAKING DEPARTMENT AT THE DELINEATOR

Van Rensselaer took over as Editor of the Home-making Department at the *Delineator* in spring 1921. Marie Mattingly Meloney, *Delineator's* editor, had previously used Van Rensselaer's work at two other Butterick (*Delineator's* publisher) publications. *Delineator* boasted a larger audience, drew more advertising dollars and was targeted at a generally higher income level than Butterick's sister journals. At this time it was engaged in competition with the other top five women's magazines. Butterick wanted the best "experts" it could find and Van Rensselaer qualified. Her picture and credentials were aggressively publicized, not only in the magazine but later in a Butterick promotional booklet aimed at advertisers which touted Van Rensselaer and the great household work she was doing at Cornell University (Story, 1925).

In the Household Department's early years, Van Rensselaer always included an editorial section that put household matters into a broader context. Here she focused on health, consumer education, equality in the home and community service. She wrote about her trip to post-war Belgium and a national conference on outdoor education. These pieces contextualized the more technical articles focused on food, recipes, household cleaning and proper use of household equipment.²

Delineator had a testing kitchen, but editor Meloney desired that products and equipment be tested at Cornell University, so the connection could be highlighted. Since the Home Economics School was part of the state section of the university, staff couldn't test or recommend products by particular manufacturers upon request. Whether or not to provide specific product names was a dilemma that other women's journals were facing as well (Rutherford, p.78). In negotiating the editorial position Van Rensselaer had required assurances about not being required to name particular manufacturers in her columns and she adhered strictly to this policy. Information was provided about food products, equipment, household cleaning and furnishing items, but specific branding was absent. Instead, a notice appeared telling readers that they could write in for the names of featured products. For example, an entire article appeared on what to look for when purchasing a washing machine, with a great deal of technical information, yet no specific manufacturers mentioned ("Wanted: a Wash Machine," *Delineator*, August 1926, pp. 21,65).

Shaping materials to appear in the pages of a national consumer magazine necessarily affected their content and placement. Over time, the Home-Making Department under

Van Rensselaer shifted to a greater emphasis on specific housekeeping tasks with less space devoted to broader social issues. By late 1924 Van Rensselaer's general columns had almost completely disappeared. Placement of the Department changed as well, as it eventually moved further back in the magazine. Its shift backward denotes a lessened importance, as fiction and patterns took precedence. The major women's journals were experimenting to see what would best attract readers. As Meloney reworked the content, the magazine became thinner, losing in the advertising wars going on with women's magazines.

All advertising appearing in the *Delineator* was guaranteed, a fact stated plainly in every issue. Having articles by Van Rensselaer side by side with guaranteed advertising could easily give readers the impression that the products were endorsed by the Director of the School of Home Economics at Cornell. Advertising related to the articles appeared in every issue from the beginning of Van Rensselaer's tenure. For example, next to "The Renaissance of the Doughnut," appeared an ad for Crisco cooking oil (*Delineator*, January 1922, 43). An article on good teeth and womanly beauty appeared next to an ad for Colgate's Ribbon Dental Cream. (*Delineator*, April 1923, 63).

Van Rensselaer's editorship ended in the mid-twenties, at the time that Meloney left *Delineator* in a dispute with new owners who sought a more modern look for the magazine. The higher class, urban readers and associated advertisers the new management wished to attract were not a good fit for the wide-ranging kind of product and equipment testing Van Rensselaer undertook at Cornell's academic test facilities, particularly as they targeted rural women (BPCP). Management also wanted to bolster *Delineator's* own Home Service Institute in New York, close to the advertisers so crucial to the magazine's profitability. The new Department on Home-making was edited by another home economist, Mildred Maddocks Bentley. Within months of these changes, specific manufacturers' names appeared in articles (e.g. *Delineator*, December 1926, pp. 22, 23).

CONCLUSION

Through her monthly *Delineator* columns, Martha Van Rensselaer contributed both knowledge and information to millions of homemakers. Her willingness to have staff (listed as working for the School of Home Economics at Cornell) appear in *Delineator's* pages, her authoring of material for Butterick and authorizing use of her name for promotional materials reveal the additional demands involved when working for a commercial enterprise, rather than an academic institution. Changes in the content and placement of the material illustrate commercial pressures as well. Van Rensselaer's venture as a staffer at a major magazine illuminates a dilemma facing many home economists in this early phase of their professionalization

as they struggled to reconcile their mission of helping female homemakers with requests from manufacturers for assistance.

NOTES

¹ Description of Van Rensselaer in Butterick's promotion booklet (Story 1925, 11).

² Content analysis was qualitative, with *Delineator's* entire Household Department reviewed for the years Van Rensselaer served as editor (April 1921-September 1926), as well as several issues before and after her tenure.

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