

Sarah Elizabeth Dziedzic  
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Professor Elizabeth Blackmar  
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Closets in the Farm Home:  
The Spread of Domestic Science to Rural America, 1900-1935

We should not have the many absurd, narrow, citified farmhouses—which look as if they had strayed out from town and got lost—that one sees in some parts of the country.

- Mary Meek Atkeson, *The Woman on the Farm*

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, electric light and power reorganized workers in interior factory spaces around efficiency and production. In domestic spaces during this same period, home economists applied similar rules of efficiency to housework, refashioning women in the image of factory managers who held the tenants of efficiency, productivity and economy in the highest regard. Home economists reordered workspace in the home by investigating a variety of household issues with scientific rigor. No part of home life was safe from evaluation—the height of the kitchen sink, the time when peaches must be preserved, the method for laundering bedclothes in the sickroom, the exclusion of bookshelves to prevent accumulation of dust, and even the arrangement of highly specialized storage spaces for items such as mourning apparel, off-season bed linens, and kitchen cleaning supplies all received meticulous attention.<sup>1</sup>

As electricity was installed in many urban and suburban areas, which occurred rapidly through the 1920s, home economists were increasingly focused on how new electrical appliances could transform housework from a grueling experience that

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Beecher was the first to rigorously analyze housework in this way in her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* published in 1841. This study picks up where Home Economics was forming as a discipline and being taught formally in schools.

demanded bodily labor to a process completed by small machinery with a simple flick of a switch.<sup>2</sup> While literature that promoted this transformed conception of housework made its way to homes throughout the country through the first three decades of the twentieth century, publications directed to farm women instead emphasized an approach to economy that was situated within the more traditional framework of self-sufficiency and solid planning characteristically promoted by supporters of the Country Life Movement, who advocated for farm life and idealized rural values.

An examination of these publications<sup>3</sup>, the output of newly formed Agricultural Colleges and Extension Offices, reveals the way in which the domestic science movement was presented to this demographic at a time when many farm homes were yet to be electrified; as late as 1935, only one in nine American rural farmhouses had been wired for electricity.<sup>4</sup> The lack of electricity meant not only a peripheral presence of electrical devices in the home, but also a sustained depiction of the home as a site of production and labor while the urban and suburban home was increasingly recast as a site of consumption and leisure.<sup>5</sup> Before electricity transformed the interior and outlying spaces of the farm, publications to rural women addressed both the traditional needs of the farm home in terms of self-sufficiency and production, as well as its transitioning needs, which included a careful balance between new technologies and centuries-old agrarian ideals. The farmhouse closet was just one site where these adjustments and

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<sup>2</sup> David Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology*, Fifth printing, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 290.

<sup>3</sup> It is more accurate to say “a *sample* of these publications,” since my access to collections of agricultural education materials was rather limited by my location in New York City. Nonetheless, Cornell University has a vast online database of such materials, which, along with the help of librarians at the Albert R. Mann Library, gave me a sense that my examination was, if not fantastically thorough, then at least certainly comprehensive.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>5</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, “The Westward Moving House” in *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, Helen Lefkowitz Horwitz, ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 102-4.

preparations were visible. Attention to such small and hidden spaces as household closets suggests a full scale evaluation of space and utility in the farm home—one that left it organized in accordance with the newest scientific advancements but that also dutifully arranged and tucked away each reliable broom, brush and workboot.

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With the establishment of the Committee on Extension Work formed by the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations in 1905, farmers became the target of many bulletins, pamphlets and publications. These materials aimed to distribute information tested on demonstration farms and experiment stations made possible by the Land Grant Colleges and early on-the-ground activities of the U.S. Department of Agriculture during the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> The Committee on Extension Work organized the research gathered from these stations into a large scale outreach campaign that exhibited the scientific approaches performed in agriculture as a parallel to the highly rationalized reordering of factories and other industrial spaces. In other words, farming in the twentieth century was not to be a matter of folk wisdom and blind adherence to tradition; it too was to be as highly specialized and precise as the most advanced factory-floor machinery. As Edmund de Schweinitz Brunner and Hsin-pao Yang note in *Rural America and the Extension Service*, scientific attention had been given to farming since the days when George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were active members of the Society for Promoting Agriculture.<sup>7</sup> But the

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<sup>6</sup> Land Grant Colleges were a product of the Morrill Land-Grant Act passed in 1862 in which congress appropriated a \$5,000 per year endowment to teach agriculture and other practical professions to the “industrial classes.” This history is outlined in Edmund de Schweinitz Brunner and Hsin-pao Yang, *Rural America and the Extension Service: A History and Critique of the Cooperative Agricultural and Home Economics Extension Service*. (New York: Bureau of Publications Teachers College Columbia University, 1949), 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Brunner and Yang, *Extension Service*, 2.

onslaught of publications directed towards the farmer, as well as to his wife, indicated that the rural family needed a bit of a reminder of their respectable place within this historic American tradition. And equally important, rural families needed access to the information available at these institutions so that the occupation of farming could indeed become a practice that benefitted from the push to measure, compare and rationalize.

The first aspect of this campaign required a new understanding of education itself. Materials published through the U.S. Department of Agriculture or through schools such as the New York State Agricultural College, which published a number of series for rural readers, oriented the farmer to a particular type of education. The Country Life Commission reported in 1911 that a “lack of the proper kind of education” represented the biggest gulf between city dwellers and country folk—a gulf which needed to be bridged in order to re-establish farming as a respectable way of life.<sup>8</sup> Rural families did not require the same education as families who lived in town; they needed, rather, a distinct but compatible relationship to education and to the educational institution that would situate farming *within* the American agrarian tradition rather than *outside* the reach of modern developments.

The new relationship was evident in the name of the educational program itself: *extension*. It represented both the extension of information from the institution into the home, as well as the extension of schooling into and throughout adult life. Education was no longer the luxury of the wealthy or privileged classes or limited to those who lived in the cities or towns where educational institutions often existed. Nor was education predominantly for men. Education to rural residents in this period was envisioned as a

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<sup>8</sup> Commission on Country Life, *Report of the Commission on Country Life*, (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1911), 125-127.

means through which both rural men and women could learn of new research that was equally applicable to the farm and to the home.

Martha van Rensselaer, who headed the Department of Home Economics at Cornell University's New York State College of Agriculture and oversaw many of its extension programs, writes of this dual approach to education in her article, "Home Economics at the New York State College of Agriculture":

The ultimate object of education by means of agriculture is to redirect country life. The redirection of country life rests on two corner stones, which are improved farming and improved homemaking. If it is essential that the man be trained in better farming methods, it is equally essential that the woman be trained in better householding methods. The farm and the home are the two underlying factors in the country life development.<sup>9</sup>

This edict communicates first that rural residents had the freedom to choose, or "redirect," which developments were compatible or desirable in order to shape their "country life"; if it ever appeared they lagged behind city life it was because they had already assessed new trends—and rejected them. Those who lived in towns or cities had, by comparison, little control over what products or ideas entered their homes.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, it also establishes that education to both men *and* women was an essential component of this rearticulated ideal rural society. No matter how productive a farm was in terms of its agricultural output, it could not survive without equal attention to how that productivity was extended to the management of the household. Women were not only responsible for the literal use of raw materials, such as turning wheat into flour or wool into yarn, but also the more figurative translation of making a home out of the raw labor characteristic

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<sup>9</sup> Martha van Rensselaer, "Home Economics at the New York State College of Agriculture," *Rural Life Series* 2 no. 37 (1913): 125.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Meek Atkeson, *The Woman on the Farm*, (New York: The Century Company, 1924): 5.

of farm life. In Van Rensselaer's words: "Men are interested in the production of raw material; women in the use of that material."<sup>11</sup>

The farm woman, therefore, had a unique place within this redirected country society, and the American Home Economists Association, which formed in 1908, was in many ways responsible for introducing her to the details of her role.<sup>12</sup> An early article by Helen Binkerd Young entitled "Household Furnishing" was published in the *Cornell Bulletin for Homemakers* as part of the "Lessons for the Farm Home" series in 1912. It provides an overview of the tenants of homemaking, which she describes as a "threefold study":

It consists, first, in arranging one's present belongings to the best possible advantage; second, in discarding all useless and ugly objects; third, in selecting new articles that shall fit appropriately into the already established home.<sup>13</sup>

These three actions—discarding, selecting and arranging—situate the process of housework in a continuous system that works with close managerial attention. *Discarding* implies that the home is not a place for indiscriminate collection and display, but rather a space that is continually edited; empty space in the home is not indicative of want but of good editing. *Arranging* is based on both aesthetics and utility: advantage can be attained through either stylistic organization or through organization based on the accessibility of items in frequent use. And *selecting* acknowledges the duty of the farm women to choose which new materials belong in the home. The model works for all levels of the home on

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<sup>11</sup> Van Rensselaer, "Home Economics," 122.

<sup>12</sup> One of the major goals of the American Home Economists Association was rural education. They were also responsible for lobbying for federal and state funding to develop programs and print materials for farm families. An overview of the history of home economics is available at the Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition and History, "What is Home Economics?" <http://hearth.library.cornell.edu/h/hearth/about.html> (accessed April 12, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Helen Binkerd Young, "Household Furnishing," *Cornell Bulletin for Homemakers* pt. 3 vol. 1 no. 7 (1912): 65.

an ever-decreasing scale: from a home ordered by distinct spaces based on function, to the specific rooms that represent those functions, to the spaces within those rooms designated to store the tools of those functions out of the way and out of sight.

Young applies this process to other areas in the home and offers details for producing spaces that are comfortable, well-styled and convenient. In each of these areas she also devotes a portion of her article to storage, revealing the thoroughness with which home economics addressed the home as a system for living; no space could be part of the home lest it was efficiently ordered and part of the larger goal to produce a better home life. In this way, closets deserve as much attention as the arrangement of furniture in the parlor or of workspaces in the kitchen; like the engine room of a factory, they stored the well-oiled gears that were the pumping heart of home life.

In the Hall she addresses a debate central to the issue of storage: hook or hanger.

It sometimes happens that a small hall appears more like an enlarged coat closet than like anything else. Garments hanging limply from hooks destroy all attempts at neatness. For this reason, the family apparel, at least, should be hung out of sight, either in a coat closet or on a row of substantial hooks behind a curtain or a screen, which may be supplemented by a few exposed hooks in a convenient place for the temporary use of visitors...Above all, dignity and order must prevail.<sup>14</sup>

She does not suggest that a single solution always triumphs, but rather that the hall and its possible accompanying closet must achieve a balance between neatness and utility; an item used frequently need not be hastily hidden from sight if the labor of continually hanging it up and retrieving it outweighs the effect of neatness. Likewise, a guest should feel welcome to store their coat in an accessible place when visiting and should not be made to feel as though the visibility of their belongings destroy the order of the space.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

Another issue Young raises is the balance needed between storage and display, which she addresses in the Dining Room through a discussion of dish closets. She argues against the use of cabinets with a bowed-front or beveled-glass piece because they suggest the “shop window,” and such display is “always a questionable motive in the home.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, “plate rails catch dust and are reasonable only when one possesses rare or historic china, pewter, or other ornaments”; so-called “fine” china does not necessarily meet these qualifications.<sup>16</sup> Not only, then, is display often considered ostentatious, but it also creates more work by allowing items to sit out in the open and accumulate dust, an age-old enemy of the housekeeper. Moreover, her first preference is a built-in dish closet rather than a specialized piece of furniture. Such built-ins do not need to be moved and blend quietly into the style of the home without unnecessary showiness.

Built-in closets are also preferable in the Bedroom, where the general rule is for every item of apparel to be kept out of sight. She does offer a few alternatives, however, to address the need for storage space in each bedroom, including a wooden wardrobe that matches the other woodwork of the room and one in which burlap or denim is stretched tightly around a wooden frame and fitted with a movable curtain.<sup>17</sup> She states that the particular function of the bedroom closet is to store a variety of clothes on hangers appropriate to their shape in order to avoid wrinkles, and also to provide shelves for hats (above) and for shoes (below). In terms of design, she offers some additional ideas:

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 82. A similar construction was used for “iceless refrigerators” with the added component of a shelf that held a bowl of cold water and cooled food through condensations. This is described in Madge J. Reese, “Farm Home Conveniences,” *Farmers’ Bulletin* no. 927 (1918).



A long, narrow closet prepared in this way will furnish more hanging space than will a square closet of greater size...A closet that one reaches rather than steps into may be provided with a strip at the threshold to keep out the dust. The closet should be finished white or very light inside, so that garments may be easily seen and selected and moths may be detected. Closet space may be supplemented with boxes of any desired size, covered with cretonne or matting, fitted with hinged lids and made the height of a seat, thus answering two purposes.<sup>18</sup>

Her suggestions result in clothes that are less wrinkled and dusty and therefore require less upkeep to attain a neat appearance. Clothes that are well cared for also last longer—an important budgetary consideration. The arrangement of the closet as well as its color both ensure the process of dressing will flow well; it is the product of thoughtful and economic design.

Although Young's article was distributed as part of the "Farm Home Series," she does not explicitly address the unique position of the farm woman. Her article on furnishings and home organization does not differ tremendously from other home economics materials from this era directed towards urban audiences or even to women who read such materials in order to address the unsatisfactory performances of their hired help.<sup>19</sup> As the movement to educate rural women on the topic of domestic science developed, however, and the rural lifestyle provided an increasing contrast to city life, the unique considerations of farm women were addressed more explicitly.

The subject of a 1918 volume of *Farmers' Bulletin*, "Farm Home Conveniences," began to illustrate the sorts of domestic issues that were most relevant to farm women. In part, the issues of farm women were the same as those that propelled the home economics movement to women throughout the country—namely, saving time and energy. Yet the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> As an example, see Flora Klickmann, *The Mistress of the Little House: What She Should Know and What She Should Do When She Has An Untrained Servant*, (New York: Frederick a. Stokes Company Publishers, 1915).

equipment that was often automatically (in keeping with the increasing mechanization of the time) donned “convenient” underwent a unique scrutiny before the rural audience. Madge, J. Reese, a Senior Home Economist from the Office of Cooperative Extension Work, begins this volume with a short essay on conveniences. She acknowledges that labor-saving devices are just part of the conservation of time and energy; an equal aspect of this equation is the careful thought given to the methods a woman uses to do her work and assemble the tools required to complete it. “The household conveniences described in this bulletin,” she writes, “have been selected because they may be made at moderate cost by anybody who has a few simple tools and the ability to use them.”<sup>20</sup> Reese refers to items that have been tested at agricultural colleges, distributed by home demonstration agents and, finally, selected by herself or perhaps her colleagues—they have, in other words, been both devised in the laboratory and tested in the home. A “convenience” was not a convenience to this audience simply because it represented the newest technology or because it was advertised as such. Rather, it had to earn that designation by passing a number of protocols to prove that it was worth the investment.

The conveniences she recommends are also not electrical; Reese notes that the items on her list can be made at home. Although many urban homes had been wired for electricity since the turn of the century, and companies like General Electric were beginning to develop their domestic markets in suburban areas, rural residents likely had another twenty years before electricity would be available in their homes.<sup>21</sup> The electric iron, vacuum cleaner and washing machine—the winning team of labor-saving electrical

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<sup>20</sup> Reese, “Farm Home Conveniences,” ii.

<sup>21</sup> General Electric began their “positive electrical consciousness” campaign directed to the domestic market in 1920, and it wasn’t until the New Deal’s Rural Electrification administration beginning in the 1935 that rural homes began to be wired for electricity on a large scale. Nye, *Electrifying America*, 264-5.

appliances—were not yet an established part of the housekeeping system in rural areas. Recommendations to the rural audience, therefore, resulted in minimal attention to items that required electricity and plenty of consideration to organizing the diversity of tools needed to maintain the home.

Reese explains that a well -placed and -organized cleaning closet for storing supplies with a similar purpose in a way that maintains their longevity is one major convenience of the farm home. “Much time and energy is spent in collecting the utensils needed for cleaning,” she explains, and therefore a special closet, cupboard, wardrobe, backstair or enclosed area on a back porch should be devoted to keeping the tools of cleaning together and accessible.<sup>22</sup> [*See Figures 1.1 and 1.2, pgs 19-20*] She recommends plenty of hooks and racks for the personally selected assortment of utensils that every housekeeper must obtain based on her cleaning needs. Her list of cleaning utensils gives a sense of what the experience of housework entailed:

- Bucket with wringer for mopping
- A platform with rollers on which to set the mop bucket
- Wall mop made by tying wool or cotton cloth over an ordinary broom
- A broom with a hook on the handle by which it can be hung up
- A long-handled dustpan
- Several brushes for cleaning surfaces
- Cheesecloth, worn silk, and flannelette for dusters
- A blackboard eraser covered with flannelette for stove polishing
- An oiled floor mop to use on oiled or polished floors<sup>23</sup>

She concludes with a note on cleaning carpeted floors: “A carpet sweeper or a vacuum cleaner should be used in the daily cleaning of the carpets and rugs. A vacuum cleaner operated by hand or electric power removes practically all the dust and dirt from carpets

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<sup>22</sup> Reese, “Farm Home Conveniences,” 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-3.

and rugs in a dustless manner.”<sup>24</sup> Notably, she does not make the claim that an electric vacuum cleaner has the power to transform the experience of housework. Rather, her attitude is that either an electric *or* a hand-operated vacuum cleaner will perform the job of removing dirt and dust equally well. What is most important to Reese is that the vacuum cleaner be stored in an appropriate place so that it can serve as one of the many tools involved in the regular cleaning of a house. Moreover, she presents it as a *choice* between two equal devices; the point is to get the carpet clean rather than to buy the most extravagant tool.<sup>25</sup>

“House Cleaning Made Easier,” a *Farmers’ Bulletin* volume from 1921, expands on the distinctive functions of various household tools and the well-curated collection that belongs in the cleaning closet. Sarah J. MacLeod, Specialist in Household Management from the Office of Home Economics, addresses her readers’ primary concerns: farm women must balance the issue of minimal help in the household with the high expense of purchasing new materials and devices.<sup>26</sup> Because these are such important issues to household management, her suggestions are based on both “the well-tested experience of practical housekeepers and on the results of scientific studies of saving labor in the household.”<sup>27</sup> The basic questions used by these professionals are similar to those that any farmer might visit when considering the purchase of a new tool:

Will it be used enough to justify the cost?  
How much care in cleaning and storing will it require?

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> While some farmers spoke *for* rural electrification, most of the targeted advertising seemed to come from periodicals devoted to the technology, such as *Electrical World*, *Electrical Review*, et al. Articles published by extension offices or home economics journals made up a smaller portion of such targeted promotion. See Dorothy Graf, ed., *Electricity on the Farm: A Partial List of References*, (Washington, D.C.: USDA Department of Agricultural Engineering, 1935).

<sup>26</sup> Sarah J. MacLeod, “Housecleaning Made Easier,” *Farmers’ Bulletin* no. 1180 (1921): inside front cover.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

Will it really save time and energy?  
Will it make some especially disagreeable task less unpleasant?<sup>28</sup>

MacLeod's emphasis is on necessity and practicality: farm women must be discriminating consumers who use the farm income wisely and consider an item's cost not just in terms of its initial price but also in terms of its maintenance and storage. As Van Rensselaer outlined, these duties in the farm home are no less important than those of the farmer out on the field. Both are part of one farm-home system which, when it is well-maintained, leads to a sustainable and desirable country life.

A study by Maud Wilson of the Bureau of Home Economics in 1934, *Closets and Other Storage Arrangements for the Farm Home*, treats closets as a primary indicator of the success of the household. Rather than describing the contents of closets—the labor-saving devices that Reese and MacLeod described with such detail—Wilson foregrounds the importance of the closet itself as an indicator of a smartly-designed and well-ordered house, which systematically reduces the overall costs of maintenance and storage for any household item. She writes that “every housekeeper knows the importance of having a place to put things. It saves time...it saves labor...and it helps to keep the house in order, which has much to do with the comfort and efficiency of the family.”<sup>29</sup>

She lists the lack of storage space as one of the “historic faults in house planning,” and argues that although built-in storage may be abandoned by the house builder in order to save money, ample and well-placed storage actually reduces the costs of running a home in the long run.<sup>30</sup> She offers plans that “show how to utilize a specific location such as the space above a stairway or under a sloping roof,” allowing traditionally awkward

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Maud Wilson, *Closets and Other Storage Arrangements for the Farm Home*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1934), 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

spaces a new purpose as places for built-in specialized storage. [*See Figure 2, pg 21*]

Like Young, who advocated for the intelligent use of space to create a home where function was balanced with order, Wilson writes about closets as though they were a means by which the overall character of the family could be read; they were not just the engine room of the house but also the well-composed story of a family's life together.

[*See Figure 3, pg 22*]

Yet her study of housekeeping downplays Young's earlier tenants of selecting, arranging and discarding. She advocates instead for proper storage of the family's possessions, stopping just short of proclaiming "the more storage, the better!" She describes a great many kinds of storage spaces, including shoe-cleaning cabinets, farm business storage places, furniture and trunk closets, out-of-season bedding storage, canned and cured foods storage, combination laundry-and-cleaning closets, and sewing closets. This list does not reveal that farm families could purchase products with abandon and disregard the earlier measure of cost that included the space needed to store an item in the home; increased storage did not necessarily mean increased consumption. Instead, it shows that many farm families in 1934 still preserved their own food, made or mended their clothing and engaged in daily chores that required special garments or equipment on a regular basis—an indication that the farm home was still very much a site of varied work and production, and that specialized storage space played a large role in the completion of that specialized work.

The interior space of closets contributed to making this demanding lifestyle sustainable. Wilson's storage plans feature designs that can be adjusted in size and shape in response to the closet's user—plans that predate the wide-spread use of modular

furniture in homes in the 1950s and '60s.<sup>31</sup> She notes that “the interior arrangements of the closets are so planned that it will be easy and inexpensive to alter them to meet individual requirements.”<sup>32</sup> Children, for instance, began their lives with child-size closets that were miniature replicas of those built for adults. [See *Figure 4, pg 23*] By providing such access, children could, without the aid of adults, retrieve the chore clothes they needed to complete their morning duties, dress themselves for school and don their coats and shoes before going to school. Moreover, they could also *put away* these items when they returned from chores or school, saving adults the labor of following throughout the house a trail of kicked-off shoes and thrown-off coats and hats. In this way, closets provided children with an in-home education about farm work and responsibility, making their participation just as essential as that of adult men and women.

While closets were not the most noticeable features of a home, their use did not intend to obscure the work entailed in farm life. Rather, their use helped create a space that was flexible and could serve a variety of functions:

Rooms serving more than one major purpose are often more convenient, and no more expensive, if provided with adjacent storage spaces planned for specific uses, such as sewing in the living room or using the living room as a bedroom. Specialized storage spaces are indeed a response to the activities that comprise daily life.<sup>33</sup>

This flexibility of space suggests a return to the hearth, the open space that served as kitchen, dining room, and living room that had been the central gathering point in homes throughout earlier centuries.<sup>34</sup> In direct response to the activities of daily life, closets

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<sup>31</sup> Atom-A: Modern Design Excellence from the Kingdom of Belgium, “Modular Furniture History,” <http://www.atom-a.com/modularfurniturehistory.html> (accessed April 25, 2010). The first modular furniture plan was designed by Belgian architect Louis Herman de Konink in 1932. His design, called “Cubex,” was for the kitchen.

<sup>32</sup> Wilson, *Closets and Other Storage*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Nye, 239.

freed a room from a singular, isolated function, and reclaimed the communal, multifunction space as part of the production- and efficiency- minded home economist. The hearth—that symbol of the busy and bucolic farmhouse—could be salvaged as an ideal of the Country Life lifestyle *and* a space that met with scientific approval. Symbolically, it would not be a sign of backwardness, but rather of a family’s redirected intention to work towards the reshaping of a rural society.

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Changes that occurred in the farm home during 1900-1935 as a result of domestic science publications directed to farm women may not have been as drastic as those in urban and suburban areas. Indeed, many rural communities in the twentieth century saw families grow by another generation without experiencing the transformative effects of electricity in their homes. The introduction to domestic science that many rural women received was carefully housed within the hallowed American agrarian ideal and was reestablished through programs like the Committee on Extension Work and through outreach campaigns initiated by the American Home Economists Association. Such campaigns introduced ways in which managerial attention, as well as flexible space, could make the farm home more efficient. New electrical tools were discussed in literature for farm women, though they did not render obsolete the age-old balance of cost and benefit that had always governed purchases on the farm. Together, the field of Home Economics and the adult education programs promoted by the Country Life Movement reestablished life in the farm house as an morally admirable *and* scientifically solid venture that was made possible by cooperation of the men, women and children in



the household. Evidence of this could be found behind any door in the house—especially, perhaps, behind those that were oddly shaped and hidden under the stairs.

As Wilson’s study was published in 1934, a year before the Rural Electrification Administration began to bring electricity steadily to still-unwired farms, her work perhaps signifies an end of its kind. In the coming years, rural home economics departments and extension offices could choose to follow General Electric’s example by promoting electricity as a naturalized part of home life, thus joining the ranks of those who fervently advocated consumption over production.<sup>35</sup> And even though Wilson’s recommendations on storage in farm houses detailed spaces that were increasingly specialized, and for farm life in particular, they undeniably *made room* in the home. And for what? Despite their specificity, they are also somehow ambiguous. Farm life in 1934 yet remained a separate-but-equal way of life, distinct in regard to its honorable goal of production. But the additional room that more storage space created—the closets under every staircase and in every corner nook—was an essential component of a flexible home that in some way prepared families to adapt to coming changes in tools, methods and overall lifestyle.

At this particular moment, however, home economics for a rural audience remained solidly situated within a larger social movement that valued and validated the hard work that contributed to the image of the farmer and his wife as self-sufficient and proud of their focus on hands-on production. *The Woman on the Farm*, a book by Mary Meek Atkeson published in 1924, summarizes this historical moment for the farm woman with eloquence:

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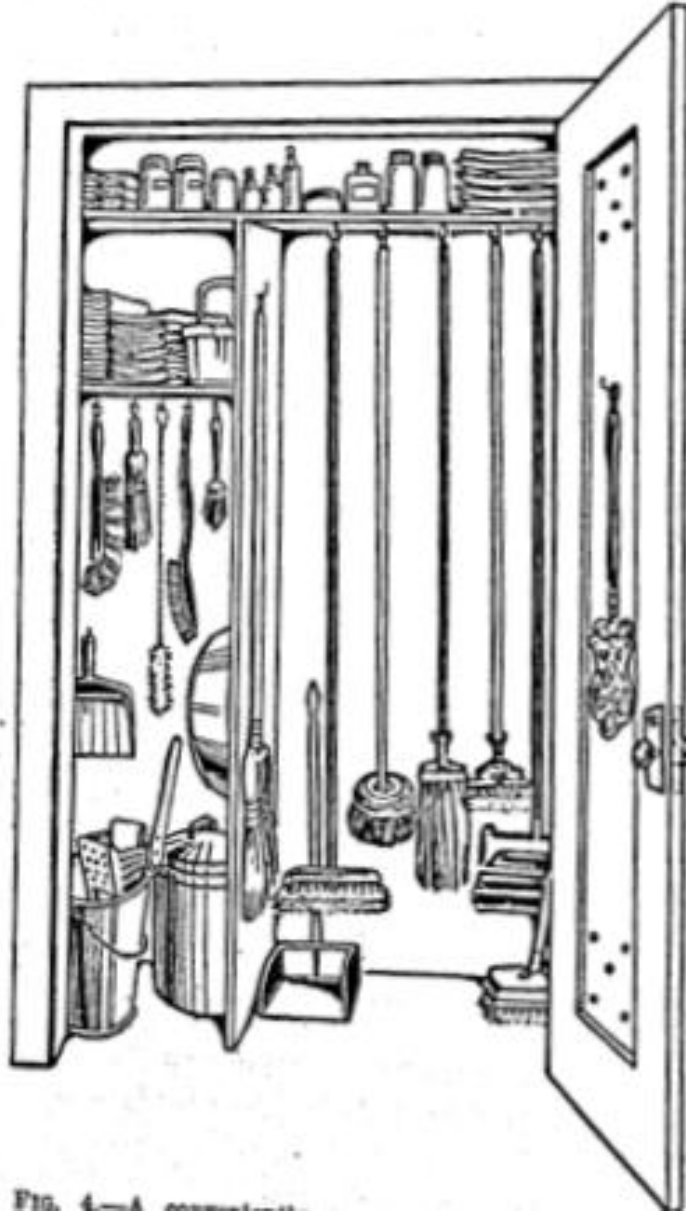
<sup>35</sup> Nye, 375.

Her service makes life beautiful and rich for her in the midst of her toil and her days are filled with the satisfaction of well-directed effort. In this respect she is much better off than the average city woman, from whom so many of her really vital tasks of the family life have been taken away by other agencies, one by one, until only the husks are left in her hands.<sup>36</sup>

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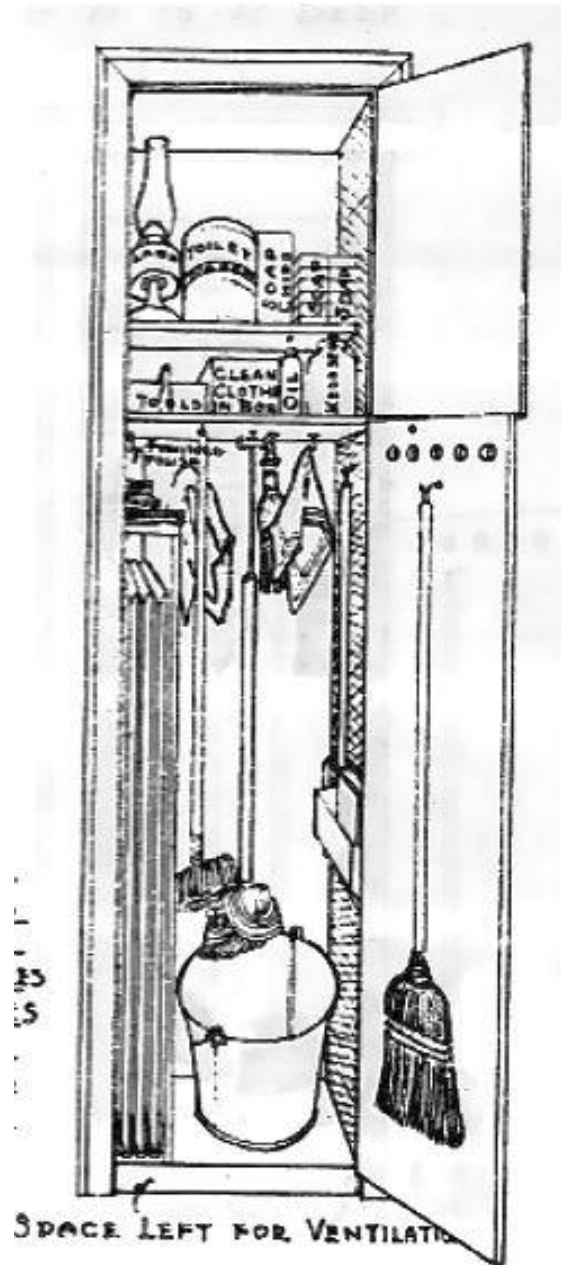
<sup>36</sup> Atkeson, *Woman on the Farm*, 9.

Figure 1.1



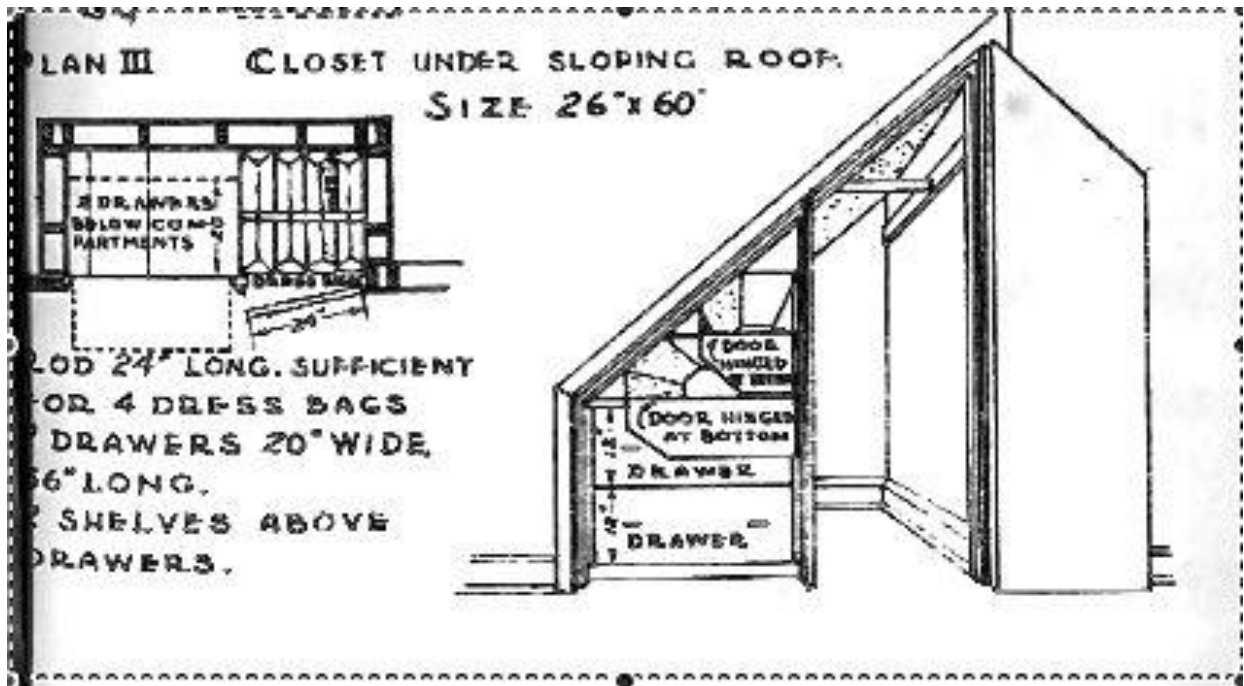
An ideal farmhouse cleaning closet: shelves, hooks and ventilated door. No electrical equipment is shown. From *"Housecleaning Made Easier,"* 1921.

Figure 1.2



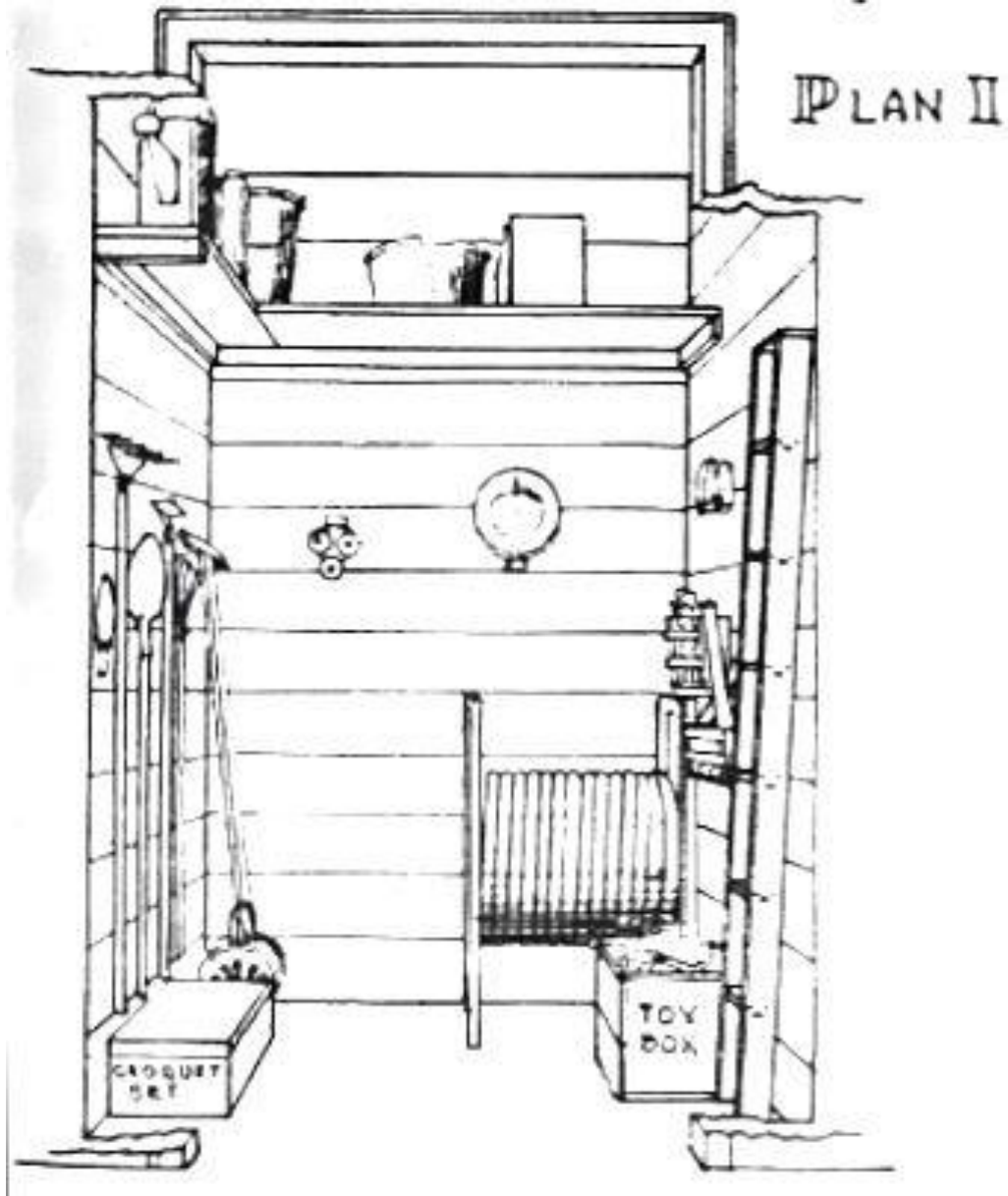
This cleaning closets holds a trusty collection of pieces that do not require electricity. Note the oil lamp on the top shelf. From *Closets and Other Storage Arrangements for the Farm Home*, 1934.

Figure 2



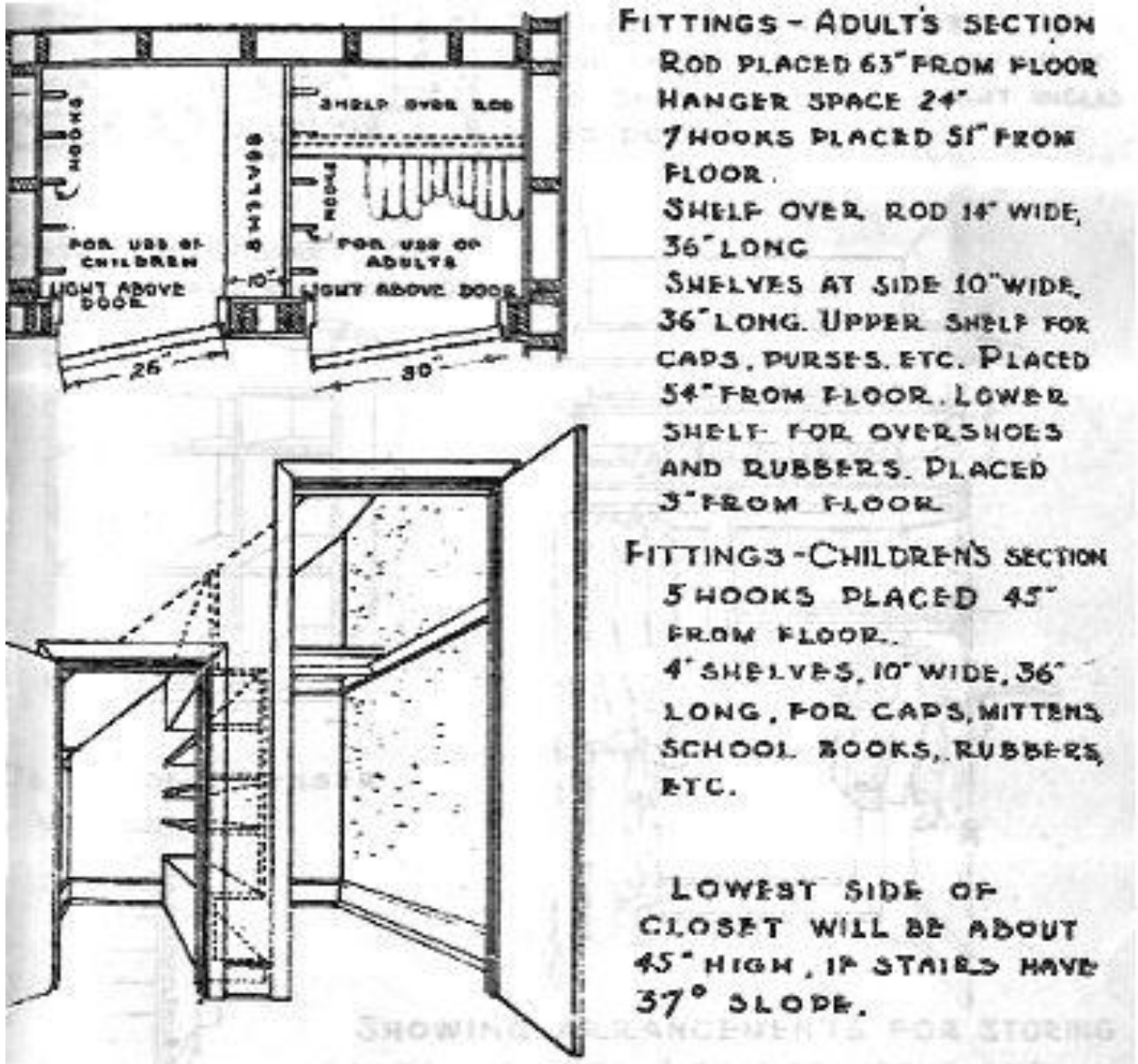
Closets could be a way to utilize otherwise awkward –placed or –shaped areas of the home, such as those under sloping roofs or staircases. From *Closets and Other Storage Arrangements for the Farm Home*, 1934.

Figure 3



This outdoor equipment closet shows the variety of activities the family participates in around the yard. Gardening tools, such as rakes, small shovels and a watering can, are stored along with a croquet set and toy box. From *Closets and Other Storage Arrangements for the Farm Home*, 1934.

Figure 4



Closets for children were modeled on those built for adults and simply scaled down to size. Additionally, lower shelves and racks could be placed in adult closets and then be adjusted to changing height. From *Closets and Other Storage Arrangements for the Farm Home*, 1934.

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