

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 53 | Number 3 (Summer 1994)

pps. 279-280

American Home Life, 1880-1930: a Social History of Spaces and Services

Sally McMurry

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1994 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

McMurry, Sally. "American Home Life, 1880-1930: a Social History of Spaces and Services." *The Annals of Iowa* 53 (1994), 279-280.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9823>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://iowaresearchonline.org/)

American Home Life, 1880–1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services, edited by Jessica Foy and Thomas Schlereth. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992. x, 284 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY SALLY MCMURRY, PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In 1989 academics, museum curators, architects, and librarians gathered at the McFaddin-Ward House in Beaumont, Texas, to discuss "the more ordinary aspects of domestic life" (x), such as housekeeping practices and residents' activities. The participants, whose papers are collected here, share what editor Schlereth calls the "social-history" perspective on house history (5). Thus the papers explore such topics as the decline of the parlor after 1890, home libraries, children in the house, and home utilities. Their methodological base lies in material culture studies and in interdisciplinary approaches to American studies. They analyze such sources as house plans, period photographs, and trade catalogs as well as more conventional documents. Despite the book's far-reaching title, the essays, with few exceptions, concern middle-class or upper-class single-family dwellings in urban and suburban areas, and they also have a decidedly northeastern emphasis. Readers will not learn whether rural or urban housing in other regions (including Iowa) conformed to the same patterns, nor will they glean much information about apartment and tenement life. The editors justify their choice of the period 1880–1930 by arguing that it was an era of transformation, which of course is accurate, though one wonders whether this particular era witnessed any more transformations than any other.

Each essay treats a different room or activity, so a coherent overview of the book is difficult to construct. Regarding spaces, we find that the parlor disappeared by about 1920, replaced by the more informal, multipurpose living room. Separate libraries disappeared, too, as book collections were dispersed around the house. Spaces specifically for children, on the other hand, appeared and then received added emphasis. Bedrooms migrated to a private sleeping "zone" away from public traffic, but they still often had multiple purposes. Regarding activities, housework changed radically, as technological "servants" replaced human ones (in middle-class homes). Housekeeping and child care standards went up, so middle-class women still spent a lot of time doing housework. Other technological revolutions, the availability of plumbing and electricity, reduced the

household's self-sufficiency. The overall impression is that by 1930 the middle-class home was paradoxically more privatized and more dependent on the outside world than it had been in 1890.

Most of these papers give the impression that they underwent little revision in the transition from conference paper to published article. Most of the essays are reasonably accurate, though we know enough about the history of literacy to dispute that before 1830 "few people could read" (35). The sources cited are few and familiar, as befits the oral delivery format of a conference. The arguments are brief and undeveloped. The result is that the book is most useful as a broad overview rather than as in-depth analysis. What makes it less than satisfying for specialist or scholarly consumption is its relative lack of attention to explaining *why* the trends described occurred. Even Katherine Grier's thoughtful essay on the parlor's decline, for example, raises as many questions as it answers. Grier maintains that Victorians brought the world into their parlors in order to render it somehow controllable, "mediate[d]" or "miniaturize[d]" (62). This explanation is plausible, but rests on the assumption that home and the world were indeed separate, an assumption that historians have recently begun to expose as more ideological than actual. In addition to invoking the commercialization of rites of passage and rising trends toward informality, Grier argues that "by the 1920s, cultural memory was not believed to reside in household possessions" (69). But why this shift? Linda Kruger's piece on libraries suggests a promising line of thought—that libraries ceased becoming spaces and became dispersed collections—but does not avail itself of the by now voluminous literature on the history of reading, which suggests (among other things) that reading was certainly not a masculine pastime. Similarly, those who use the term *modern* in their titles could have benefited from Roland Marchand's analysis of modernity in *Advertising the American Dream*. Essays by Grier, Daniel Sutherland, Ruth Schwartz Cowan, Colleen McDannell, and Karin Calvert add little new to previously published material.

In short, the book should find an audience among those who work with historic house museums and other venues devoted to interpreting domestic life. For others, it will serve as a beginning point for further research.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.