

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: “SO COMPREHENSIVE A FIELD”: HOME ECONOMICS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, 1915-1968

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This thesis argues that the Bureau of Home Economics at the United States Department of Agriculture emphasized the importance of women’s work and highlighted the household as a domain deserving of governmental attention for several decades. However, the Bureau did not represent the full comprehensive scope of home economics. Home economics was, at its inception, multifaceted, research-driven, and reflective of the ambitions of the Progressive Era. Home economics’ founders and practitioners believed that the field's wide-ranging interdisciplinary focus was critical to successfully understand the everyday problems faced by citizens across the United States. The Department of Agriculture was not the right place to champion home economics, given its strict focus on farming and rural life. The decline of the Bureau of Home Economics was indicative of the broader decline in the field of home economics from the 1950s through the 1970s. This thesis tracks the rise and fall of the Bureau of Home Economics to better understand the relationship between gender, the home, and government in the twentieth century.

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by

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Introduction

In 1958, Dr. Hazel Stiebeling, Director of the Institute of Home Economics (IHE) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), noted the role of research and education in home economics. Writing in the *Journal of Home Economics*, Stiebeling posited, “home economics is concerned with the basic needs and wants of people... for food, clothing, shelter, and for living together in the family and community. This is a tremendous order. How can we acquire the information basic to education in so comprehensive a field?”¹ While for many, home economics conjures an image of middle school lessons on sewing and cooking, the discipline was, at its inception, multifaceted, research-driven, and reflective of the ambitions of the Progressive Era. The field focused on nutrition, chemistry, clothing and fabric research, household technologies, consumer education, budgeting, scientific cleaning, child development, psychology, and economics. Home economics was a diverse discipline, making it difficult to fit into a single box. However, its founders believed that the fields' wide-ranging interdisciplinary focus was critical to successfully understand the everyday problems faced by citizens across the United States. Viewing the diverse issues affecting the home in isolation would not, in their view, address the complexities of supporting the well-being of the whole person or family units. The field's comprehensive nature was so promising to its founders, but it was ultimately a central factor in home economics' demise.

The Bureau of Home Economics at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was the first federal office dedicated to home economics and the only large, well-funded research institution in the field outside of smaller programs at universities; as such, the Bureau was a

¹ Hazel Stiebeling, “The Role of Home Economics Research.” *Journal of Home Economics* 50, no. 7 (October 1958): 619.

leader in home economics research. Founded in 1923 as an independent, women-led bureau within the USDA tasked with determining basic living needs of American families, the Bureau of Home Economics provided data on home and family life to the government, business, and, critically, homemakers. Ultimately, a wide-reaching interdisciplinary research program on the home was never a good fit for the Department of Agriculture, whose jurisdiction was limited to agricultural products and rural life. Home economists pushed back against this narrow vision for their work in the Department of Agriculture and, from the 1920s through the early 1960s, conducted large research projects beyond an agricultural focus. Yet despite these efforts, the strongest area of government home economics research was consistently nutrition, the topic most closely aligned with how administrators and legislators viewed the USDA's mission.

In this thesis, I argue that the Bureau of Home Economics ultimately failed to accomplish its central mission because home economics was too comprehensive a field to work within the Department of Agriculture. The BHE emphasized the importance of women's work and highlighted the household as a domain deserving of governmental attention for several decades, though it did not represent the full scope of home economics. Instead, the USDA prioritized certain aspects of home economics and devalued others. Research on topics such as nutrition was valued because it aligned with the USDA's mission, while research on clothing, housing, and household economics was eliminated in the 1960s, and work in child development, for instance, was never even started in this government bureau. Without a strong federal agency championing research and amid funding and recruiting struggles in academia during the 1950s, home economics struggled to remain a unified field and ultimately splintered into disparate parts.

The decline of home economics work in the federal government was not inevitable. Professional home economists outside the government pushed for a strong federal research

program but ultimately focused their own work on education rather than research. The field of home economics was built on producing scientific research on the home that would, in turn, be shared with homemakers. Education and research had to be balanced to achieve the interdisciplinary field's mission. The failure to balance the field's broad scope and misaligned missions with the USDA led to a significant decline by the mid-twentieth century. By studying the demise of federal home economics research, we can better understand broader trends in federal government priorities in the mid-twentieth century.

From the 1920s through the 1950s, the USDA Bureau of Home Economics was a popular government division dominated by women, like the Women's Bureau and the Children's Bureau in the Department of Labor. Many historians have studied the women in the latter bureaus, focusing on the progressive activism that drove women in government to advocate for working women and children.² My thesis is built on the breadth of literature about gender and work during the immediate post-World War II period, including Elaine Tyler May's theory of domestic containment, which emphasized rigid standards for the nuclear family as a response to the uncertainty of the Cold War. May examined marriage trends from the 1930s through the

² For scholarship about the Women's Bureau and women in government, see Kathleen A. Laughlin, *Women's Work and Public Policy: A History of the Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, 1945-1970* (Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 2000); Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). For scholarship about the Children's Bureau, see Judith Sealander, *As Minority Becomes Majority: Federal Reaction to the Phenomenon of Women in the Work Force, 1920-1963* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1983); Kriste Lindenmeyer, *A Right to Childhood: The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way: Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

1950s and argued that the privatization and individualization of the nuclear family and Cold War politics were mutually constitutive. In particular, she argued that a patriarchal nuclear family was considered by many Cold Warriors to be a bulwark against communism. While home economics studied and often upheld the nuclear family, the Bureau of Home Economics was dismantled during the early Cold War period. One factor in the demise was the push towards privatization and individualization of the home.³

Other historians have examined trends among working women in the postwar period, dispelling myths that women only worked during World War II and were content to return home in the 1950s before second-wave feminism sprouted up out of nowhere in the 1960s. Women worked for wages consistently throughout the 20th century, especially working-class women and women of color.⁴ By highlighting the research conducted by women in the Bureau of Home Economics on quantifying household work and balancing housework and paid labor, I am contributing to this scholarship in women's history.

Historians have examined specific professions, such as Margaret Rossiter's extensive work on women in science, which argued that women sought to advance in science during the twentieth century but faced intense sex discrimination. Home economics was often the only scientific discipline open to women in the first half of the twentieth century, and home economists were not taken seriously in academia.⁵ I build upon Rossiter's work by situating

³ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Fully rev. and updated twentieth anniversary ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008).

⁴ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), viii.

⁵ For scholarship about working women postwar, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The*

government home economists alongside those in academia. Her research contextualized the challenges faced by home economists in the postwar academy, which shaped the direction of federal research and, as I will show, ultimately made the federal government the central source of home economics research through leadership and funding.

Despite research on women in government and on postwar working women, the BHE has received little attention from historians. Several books on the history of home economics were published in the late 1990s through the 2020s. Many were written by home economists, looking at specific sectors of the field in broad anthologies.⁶ Historians have not ignored federal home economics work, but they often situate it within the broader context of corporate and academic home economics. Home economists pushed to modernize the field in the 1950s but faced pushback from administrators who viewed home economics' interdisciplinary scope as a liability. Journalist Danielle Dreilinger argued that there is much to learn from home economics and that the field should be prioritized in schools, in contrast to other authors who see home economics as a failure and, by the late twentieth century, a thing of the past. Dreilinger focused on individual stories and diverse perspectives in the postwar period. Among the central works in the field,

Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995 (College Station, Tex.: Texas A & M University Press, 1997); Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

⁶ Two compilation histories of home economics differ only slightly in their titles. Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Sharon Nickols and Gwen Kay, *Remaking Home Economics: Resourcefulness and Innovation in Changing Times*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

Dreilinger wrote the least about the Bureau of Home Economics.⁷ Building on this literature, I argue that the BHE ultimately failed as an interdisciplinary Bureau, due to many factors, but in part because of the poor fit between this comprehensive field and its research home in the federal government.

My thesis also contributes to the historiography of consumerism, following Carolyn Goldstein's lead. Goldstein argued that home economists were an important driver behind the consumer society we have today. Goldstein explained that the BHE was an important authority on consumption habits throughout the interwar period through the late 1950s. The Bureau conducted research on consumer habits, nutrition, and the quality of household appliances, among other projects. While advocating for consumers was central to the field of home economics, in the postwar era, it became more closely associated with consumerism than with consumer protection or empowerment. Family economist Sharon Nichols argued that home economics' promotion of consumption over social issues, such as protecting consumers, negatively impacted the field in the 1960s and 1970s, the same period that marked the end of a unified federal interdisciplinary research effort.⁸ While the founding of home economics was rooted in pro-labor, feminist, and government-expanding ideals of the early twentieth century, the embrace of consumerism over socially conscious consumption solidified after World War II. The field could have remained aligned with social justice movements like consumer and feminist movements, but, as my thesis shows, within its government home in the Department of Agriculture, it was pushed away from those alliances.

⁷ Danielle Dreilinger, *The Secret History of Home Economics: How Trailblazing Women Harnessed the Power of Home and Changed the Way We Live* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022).

⁸ Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012)

I also build on the work of historian Lizabeth Cohen, who argued that a significant shift took place in the United States after World War II, solidifying mass consumption and altering the relationship between citizens and consumers.⁹ Consumerism was a way for Americans to find identity and happiness through the purchase of goods. By the 1960s, counter-culture and anti-consumerism movements found consumerism shallow and sought individual fulfillment rather than material fulfillment.¹⁰ While home economists in the federal government expected to arm consumers with information to empower them against false corporate claims and unnecessary spending, over the course of the postwar period, this commitment was undermined by pressures from the USDA to promote consumption, pure and simple.

Many historians and home economists have discussed the erosion of the field during the 1960s and 1970s. The growing backlash from feminist and anti-consumerism movements forced a reconsideration of the field's identity. Historian Megan Elias examined the decline of home economics by focusing on its gendered nature. She argued that home economists should have done more to change gendered categories, rather than reinforce them.¹¹ Feminists criticized home economics for its reinforcement of gender roles. Betty Friedan critiqued home economics in *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, and Robin Morgan spoke to the American Home Economics Association in 1973, declaring home economics the enemy of feminism. These evaluations inspired home economics to reframe itself as an essential field for creating social change in the 1970s. However, at this point, home economists were scattered in different specialties. Home

⁹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 8.

¹⁰ Christopher Gair, *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Megan J. Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

economist Virginia Vincenti argued that with so many different foci, it was difficult for the field to come together when it desperately needed to. Unable to combat cultural criticism, home economists knew they needed a rebranding and renamed the field Family and Consumer Sciences in 1993. This new name did not revitalize the field as intended. While the breakdown of home economics during the 1970s through the 1990s has been studied and debated, there has not been a definitive history on where the erosion began. It did not pop up out of nowhere. My research on the demise of home economics work in the Department of Agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s helps close some gaps regarding the broader field's downward spiral.

The demise of the BHE began in 1955 with cuts to research outside of nutrition and culminated in the defunding of clothing and housing research by 1967. My research indicates that home economics' downward trend started in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and was evident by the early 1950s. This timeline introduces an apparent contradiction: the decline in government interest in home economics alongside its insistence on the centrality of domestic life to the nation's welfare. Wouldn't government research and publications for homemakers have been in high demand, with the lip service given to the value of American homes, even to national defense? Not necessarily. Diminishing the Bureau's role indicated a shift in the federal perception of homemaking from a profession requiring training to an innate role for women or one best learned from the private sector, whether from a woman's female kin or corporations. The assumption of many policymakers in the postwar period was that women should go to corporations for homemaking advice, bolstering consumer capitalism rather than following the progressive home economics founders' teachings on conscious and ethical consumption.

My work thus contributes to the growing literature on the history of home economics. Historians, home economists, and journalists have analyzed the rise and fall of the discipline. The Bureau of Home Economics is featured in these histories as a contributor to home economics. However, no work has focused exclusively on the Bureau of Home Economics and the federal government's key role in the expansion and demise of home economics. Furthermore, my research fully unpacks the difficulties of a federal agency pursuing a multifaceted research field. Home economics consisted of physical science, social science, education, information, and design. Ultimately, I argue that the project of home economics was too expansive ideologically to be fully represented in the USDA. With so many subcomponents, it was impossible for an agency situated within the Department of Agriculture to give adequate attention to all aspects of the home. However, this does not mean that federal support for home economics was unimportant or unnecessary. By acting as a central clearinghouse of research on the home, the Bureau of Home Economics elevated women's work and emphasized the home as an area worthy of government attention for several decades, even if it did not fully represent the entirety of home economics.

The Bureau of Home Economics existed in some form in the US Department of Agriculture from 1915 to 1962. BHE followed a pattern of decline in the second half of the twentieth century, similar to that in universities and businesses with home economics programs. However, I was curious about what was unique about the Bureau in both the field of home economics and the federal government. This thesis seeks to understand why the Bureau of Home Economics fell apart during the 1950s and 1960s and what that demise meant more broadly for the field of home economics. In my research, I asked what factors contributed to the breakdown of the Bureau of Home Economics (BHE)? Building on Elias and Goldstein, I was curious

whether feminism or consumer culture was a critical factor. I found that, while they certainly affected the trajectory of home economics within and outside the government, its comprehensive and misunderstood nature led to its demise in government.

No history of government is complete without a relentless scouring of government documents. Therefore, it is unsurprising that government documents make up the bulk of primary sources. Many records of the Bureau are held at the National Agricultural Library (NAL) and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). While I was unable to review all the records on the BHE for this project, I have focused on certain records.

Organizational records, like the Secretary of Agriculture's memoranda, are important for understanding how the Bureau changed over time. Records of work done at the Bureau between 1948 and 1962 are essential, since they cover the ongoing priorities and reorganizations that ultimately pushed home economics out of the USDA. NAL also holds records of Hazel Stiebeling, the last director of the Bureau, which have aided this project. Nutrition work survived at the USDA as the Human Nutrition Information Service (HNIS) in the 1970s, so NAL's HNIS collection contains useful organizational records for the Bureau. NARA contains many records of the Bureau, especially those from its time under the Agricultural Research Service starting in the 1950s, which have been fruitful for this project. I have not uncovered all documents and publications related to the Bureau of Home Economics, so there are opportunities for further research, especially work that drills down into specific research lines or staff members of BHE.

Furthermore, the *Journal of Home Economics* was an invaluable source, as it covered the broader field of home economics monthly from 1914 through 1994. There are specific sections in each edition that share news from Washington and research conducted at the USDA. As the mouthpiece of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA), the publication shared

research from the USDA, reflected on the field's trajectory, and outlined its legislative priorities for home economics and other home-and-family-related issues, such as education, welfare, housing, and health. Other primary sources include histories of the USDA and the Bureau written in the 1950s and 1970s. *The Congressional Record* added further insight into funding and the broader conversation about government priorities. Reviewing Congressional documents during key moments of reorganization in the USDA, such as appropriations debates and Hazel Stiebeling's retirement in 1963, illuminated that Congress held mixed views on the BHE but ultimately did not view it as a priority for resources. These sources situated the Bureau within government and the discipline of home economics, which helped me to evaluate how it was viewed by other home economists and by politicians.

The founding of home economics sheds light on the field's comprehensive nature, the AHEA, and the role of government research within the larger discipline. In September 1899, a group of academics met in Lake Placid, New York, to define the field that would become home economics, seeking to elevate the home as a focus of academic and scientific study. The first Lake Placid Conference aimed to formalize the discipline of household economics, plan programs at state universities, develop scientific practices for the home through research, and improve technical and scientific knowledge in the home. After the passage of the 1862 Morrill Act, classes in domestic economy were already taught across the country, especially at state agricultural colleges, but there was no set body of literature or agreed-upon aims for the study of the home. For ten years, the annual Lake Placid Conference was used to promote academic literature, courses of study, teacher preparation, and to encourage research. Ellen Swallow Richards, a central conference member, was an instructor in sanitary chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) who became the first President of the American

Home Economics Association (AHEA) in 1909. Richards became known as the founder of home economics. The Lake Placid Conferences launched a movement and created a field that studied and valued women's contributions to the home as part of the wider society.¹²

Participants in the Lake Placid Conference set standards for the field but at first lacked a name for this diverse discipline that studied problems of the home. They considered many names like euthenics, domestic economy, and domestic science, but ultimately decided on home economics. Ultimately, the decision to name the field home economics led to popular understandings of it as less of a hard science and more of a social science. This understanding was contrary to the intentions of the early founders. While home economists came from a variety of backgrounds, many leaders, like Richards, were interested in chemistry and wanted to create opportunities for women to study science at higher education institutions. At the same time, social sciences like economics played a key role in the creation of the field. The tension between the physical and social sciences would continue to plague home economists as they reevaluated their field in the decades to come.

Once the American Home Economics Association was founded, home economics became a professional career for women. Through professionalization, home economics promoted the home as a place to be studied scientifically. Some new technologies promised to make households run more efficiently, such as vacuums and laundry machines. Home economists aimed to provide women across the country with authoritative guidance on using these new technologies and on rational, as well as socially responsible, consumption. They

¹²“Announcement: The American Home Economics Association and the Journal of Home Economics,” *JHE* 1, no. 1 (February 1909): 6; Emma Seifrit Weigley, “It Might Have Been Euthenics: The Lake Placid Conferences and the Home Economics Movement,” *American Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1974): 79–96.

wanted that guidance to come from qualified research to encourage informed consumption rather than consumption-driven research created by producers of these new technologies. At the turn of the century, the household was switching from a place of production to a place of consumption. As food, medicine, and clothing, for instance, were increasingly produced by corporations rather than families themselves or local producers known to them, homemakers needed to learn how to determine whether the food, medicine and other necessities they purchased for their households were safe; they needed to learn how to store and care for the products so that they remained safe; and homemakers needed to understand the conditions in which the products they purchased were made. By understanding those conditions, homemakers could, according to some home economists, exercise enormous power: they could use their purchasing power to improve the working conditions of wage-earners hired by corporations to produce goods and improve the quality of goods themselves by refusing to purchase those of poor quality. Homemakers could also learn how to keep their families healthy by staying up to date on the latest findings of nutritionists and sanitary scientists. They could also wisely purchase and care for textiles and household equipment by gathering information from home economists rather than from corporations that aimed strictly to make a profit by selling their goods. Early practitioners and researchers often argued over where the field's center lay, but nutrition was always among the most popular aspects of the field.¹³ The desire to balance different areas of home economics would continue to pose challenges to the field.

Home economics emerged precisely because women trained in the social and physical sciences were discriminated against in academia by chemistry and economics departments. Enterprising women then found a way to carve out a place for themselves in academia by turning

¹³ Weigley, "It Might Have Been Euthenics," 95.

their various expertise toward domestic life, an area associated with women. This move was temporarily brilliant but created a vulnerable interdisciplinary field. Home economics was vulnerable due to its association with women and the home, both of which were subordinated to public life, commerce, and men in the larger society, and because it rested on disciplines that were taught in other departments, which could produce experts in the same work as home economists.

Home economics was created to share research with the public. This mission aligned with that of many federal agencies, like the Department of Agriculture, where federal home economics research was originally centered. The federal government had the resources to broadly share research findings. By studying the Bureau of Home Economics within the Department of Agriculture, we can understand the purpose and evolution of home economics. In this thesis, I will unpack the progression of federal home economics research to better understand the relationship between government and the demise of the field.

Chapter 1 covers the early history of home economics work at the Department of Agriculture. Nutrition research laid the early foundation for home economics at the USDA in 1894. After home economics was founded as a new profession in 1909, the USDA established the Office of Home Economics in 1915 to coordinate home economics research and education nationwide. That office grew into an independent, women-led Bureau of Home Economics in 1923 that sought to elevate the role of women scientists. In this chapter, I argue that home economists in the Bureau sought to advance research across the wide field of home economics, including housing, child development, consumer education, and emphasized the value of women's work in the home. However, the Bureau had limited resources to pursue expansive research, and instead, nutrition remained the focal point of the Bureau's mission due to the

forward momentum from earlier research and its alignment with the Department's overall mission.

In Chapter 2, I discuss successive reorganizations to the Bureau of Home Economics that solidified its focus on nutrition from 1942 to 1953. The Bureau was successful during World War II, providing research and advice on food, clothing, housing, and budgets to the military and the home front. During World War II, the Bureau was incorporated into the Agricultural Research Administration and renamed the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, which emphasized nutrition above all else. After the war, aspects of research beyond nutrition were undermined by Congress, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and USDA administrators. Home economists still achieved success through economic surveys and housing projects; however, due to a lack of funding and personnel, the majority of research lines outside of nutrition shrank after 1953.

Chapter 3 covers the mid 1950s through the late 1960s, when further changes to home economics research at the Department of Agriculture ended an independent research Bureau focused broadly on the home. As the focus narrowed at the Department of Agriculture, two proposals formulated new ideas for federal home economics work. One idea from Senator Estes Kefauver was to create a Department of Consumers, which would focus more on the economic and social science aspects of home economics but would not take a comprehensive look at the home. The other proposal from the AHEA was an independent institute that would fund research and set priorities for the full interdisciplinary field, as the academic discipline of home economics was struggling to maintain its position within academia. Neither proposal was successful. While the reasons for the AHEA's proposal failure are not clear, I argue that, given that the majority of home economists worked in education compared research, the association

had to focus on representing its members by focusing on education rather than allocating resources to proposals for federal research that were unlikely to succeed. The failure of a comprehensive home economics program at the Department of Agriculture and two other proposals for the federal government occurred alongside early struggles in the wider field that ultimately ended home economics as it had emerged in the early twentieth century.

I argue that the mission of the Bureau of Home Economics and home economics in general was a valiant effort to value women's domestic work and empower the women who performed it. However, the Department of Agriculture was not the right place to champion that mission, given its strict focus on farming issues.

Chapter 1: Foundations of the Bureau of Home Economics (1915-1940)

“Our Bureau was established... because women of the country, and particularly those in the American Home Economics Association, kept asking the Department of Agriculture and State Colleges for information on food, clothing, and housing, which could only come from research. They kept urging the need for a Bureau to provide the kind of factual help that other branches of the government gave to the farmer and the businessman.”¹⁴

-Hazel Stiebeling on the 25th Anniversary of the Bureau

The Bureau of Home Economics (BHE) was established in 1923 to create a federal center for research on the home. Reflecting 25 years later, Bureau Chief Hazel Stiebeling confirmed the Bureau was not created solely to fulfill the needs of the Department of Agriculture (USDA), but to fulfill the needs of the American people. In the modernizing world of the early 20th century, Stiebeling insisted, research on the home was desperately needed. College programs in home economics were present at state land-grant universities, but research was limited. This lack of research capacity called for a federal research Bureau to ensure that homes would be equipped with the facts needed to adapt to the changing world. This mission inspired the creation of the Bureau, but its placement within the Department of Agriculture would ultimately limit its scope to agricultural and rural research rather than an inclusive research program on the home.

Home economics research at the USDA began before the Lake Placid Conferences, when Congress appropriated \$10,000 for nutrition research in 1894, which is equivalent to over \$376,000 in 2026. When the USDA was founded in 1862, its scientists, farmers, and administrators were tasked with creating research programs to assist American farms and the

¹⁴ Hazel Stiebeling, “Birthday Dinner for BHNHE At Minneapolis AHEA,” July 25, 1948, Folder: 25th Anniversary of BHNHE, Box 2, General Records, RG 310, National Archives, College Park, MD.

American people. This mission led the USDA to prioritize nutrition research efforts before the field of home economics was ever developed. Early efforts in nutrition laid the foundation for the USDA's later control over government involvement in home economics. Home economics research was fit into existing categories at USDA, not necessarily the ones that showcased the multidisciplinary field.

William Olin Atwater, a notable scientist at the USDA, was known for his contributions to agricultural experiment stations and nutrition research. Atwater established a pilot USDA experiment station in agricultural and scientific research in Connecticut in 1875. USDA experiment stations were modeled after European programs, to bring USDA research and resources to universities and communities in order to strengthen the agricultural industry. Experiment stations conducted broad agricultural research in areas such as soil conservation, animal production, crop processing, forestry, rural family life, and human nutrition. Atwater's pilot experiment station was a success, leading Congress to expand the program in the Hatch Act of 1887. Through the law, each land-grant university was given \$15,000 to establish agricultural experiment stations. With stable federal funding, land-grant universities integrated experiment stations into their research programs.¹⁵ Atwater continued as the Director of Experiment Stations until 1891, when he chose to focus solely on nutrition research. His 1894 proposal to Congress to fund and promote nutrition research served as the basis for all future home economics and nutrition research in the Department of Agriculture.¹⁶

¹⁵ Nancy Vanatta, "The Agricultural Research Service: A History of Innovation," Agricultural Research Service Office of Communications, December 4, 2023.

¹⁶ Kenneth J. Carpenter, "The Life and Times of W. O. Atwater (1844–1907)," *The Journal of Nutrition* 124 (September 1994): 1707-1714; "Background Information on Human Nutrition Research Division", July 28, 1971, Folder 3, Box 1, HNIS Collection, National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, MD.

While nutrition was always a component of home economics, the different philosophies of W.O. Atwater and Ellen Swallow Richards, a founder of home economics, demonstrated distinct intended outcomes for nutrition research compared to home economics. Atwater was known as the father of nutrition due to his research on metabolism, which informed our modern understanding of calories. Ellen Richards was also interested in nutrition, but with a more encompassing approach to the home. She used her background in chemistry to encourage healthy eating, scientific cleaning, water purification systems, and rational consumption. Both Atwater and Richards agreed that better living could be achieved through chemistry. However, due to the expectations placed on each scientist due to gender, Atwater focused exclusively on scientific research, while Richards pursued both teaching and research. Atwater was not concerned with the home overall, while Richards believed scientific principles should be applied to the home in areas like sanitation science, scientific cleaning, and nutrition, so scientific principles could reach all Americans. Richards' approach was demonstrated by her work at the New England Kitchen, where she applied scientific principles to make affordable, delicious food. To discover what healthy foods could be affordable and delicious to different classes of American families, a researcher needed to study household wages and the cost of food products in various areas of the country as well as the nutritional value of foods and a full range of ways to prepare those foods to make them palatable and maintain their nutritional value. One endeavor of the kitchen was to provide low-cost meals to Boston high school students in 1894, using scientific research to promote better health. The New England Kitchen eventually inspired the National School Lunch Program.¹⁷

¹⁷ Hamilton Cravens, "Establishing the Science of Nutrition at the USDA: Ellen Swallow Richards and Her Allies," *Agricultural History* 64, no. 2 (1990): 122–33

The contradictions between the President of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) and the leader of nutrition research at the USDA demonstrated that home economics and nutrition science were complementary fields with distinctions based on gender and scope of research. Home economics looked more broadly at social and physical science, but included aspects of nutrition, often as applied science. Due to the early introduction of nutrition research in the Department of Agriculture, the USDA's home economics research would place greater emphasis on nutrition than the larger field, with less on elements such as child rearing, and ethical consumption.¹⁸

In 1898, soon after Atwater began studying nutrition at the USDA and before AHEA was founded, Congress began discussing the establishment of a Bureau of Domestic Science in the Department of Agriculture. Senator James H. Kyle of South Dakota proposed the bill. Senator Kyle's wife, Anna Eliza Dugo Kyle, was the president of the National Domestic Science Association. The Association advocated for food research conducted with the home cook in mind. The bill would have appropriated \$10,000 to study food preparation methods and appliances. Domestic science, therefore, solely focused on food and nutrition with an emphasis that this research must incorporate the home, but did not include other elements of what would soon become home economics. Congress held a hearing on the bill, but nothing came of the endeavor.¹⁹ Even at this early stage, when home economics as a field was still developing, Congress and independent groups recognized the importance of the federal government conducting scientific research on and for the home.

¹⁸ Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Oxford University Press: 1988): 116.

¹⁹ "A Bureau of Domestic Science Proposed in 1898," *JHE* 22, no. 5 (May 1930): 378-380; Hearing before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Bureau of domestic science*, 55th Cong., 2d sess, June 17, 1898.

The formation of home economics in academia emphasized both physical and social sciences. Several of the early deans of home economics colleges, such as Isabel Bevier, Agnes Fay Morgan, and Louise Stanley, had backgrounds in chemistry or nutrition. While many early home economics departments were founded by women interested in chemistry, others were more strongly rooted in the social sciences. One example of a social science-leaning home economics department was the University of Chicago's Department of Home Administration, established by Marion Talbot and housed under the Department of Sociology in 1907. Sophonisba Breckinridge led the Department and taught courses on children and the law. Breckinridge, like many female academics, worked in domestic science because other related fields, such as economics, law, sociology, political science, and chemistry, were unwelcoming to women. Breckinridge and Talbot's work was rooted in the progressive movement of the early twentieth century and strove to combine academic research with social activism. Their activism emphasized the power that women had as consumers to affect workers' wages and safety, and to prevent child labor.²⁰

Beyond science, domestic arts, which incorporated textiles and interior design, were less emphasized by early leaders but often pushed into programs by university administrators to round out women's education. Agnes Fay Morgan advocated for household arts and household science to be two separate programs at the University of California, Berkley, but limited funding to operate scientific laboratories and pressure from university administrators to diversify their offerings led Berkley to offer a single home economics program.²¹ The struggle with funding and

²⁰ Anya Jabour, *Sophonisba Breckinridge: Championing Women's Activism in Modern America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021); Marion Talbot and Sophonisba Breckinridge, *The Modern Household* (Massachusetts: Whitcomb & Barrows, 1916); Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion*, 69-72.

²¹ Megan Elias, "No Place Like Home: A Survey of American Home Economics History," *History Compass* 9, no. 1 (2011): 97-105; Maresi Nerad, *The Academic Kitchen: A Social*

balancing the various components of home economics would remain a central challenge for home economics research within the USDA and across the wider field.

Smith-Lever Act and the Formation of the Office of Home Economics

In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, establishing the Cooperative Extension Program, further strengthening the partnerships between land-grant universities and the Department of Agriculture. The bill funded land-grant universities in each state to provide community information and education on agriculture and home economics. Housed within the Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension would work with community members to share information from research conducted at Experiment Stations. The inclusion of home economics reflected the growing number of home economics programs at the approximately 86 land-grant universities.²² With cooperative extension programs focused on home economics, creating an Office of Home Economics to oversee the extension work became a bureaucratic necessity for the Department of Agriculture. Walter Swingle, a botanist studying citrus at the USDA, had recommended that an Office of Nutrition be created in 1913. However, once Smith-Lever passed, the plans for an Office of Nutrition morphed into an Office of Home Economics (OHE).²³ The OHE absorbed some of the Division of Nutrition Investigations' work, but research on the physiological effects of food was transferred to the USDA's Bureau of Chemistry. From

History of Gender Stratification at the University of California, Berkeley (State University of New York Press, 1999).

²²Congress.gov, "The Agricultural Cooperative Extension System: An Overview"; "More Information about the Smith-Lever Bill, *JHE* 7, no. 1 (January 1915): 36.

²³Gladys Baker and the United States. Dept. of Agriculture Centennial Committee. *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture* (Washington: U. S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1963): 81, 83, 106.

the outset, since nutrition research efforts were already established, they became the central focus of the USDA's early home economics work.²⁴

In contrast to university departments and later to the Bureau of Home Economics, the Office of Home Economics was led by a man, Dr. Charles Ford Langworthy, a nutrition scientist and chemist who worked with Atwater. While home economics' purpose was to elevate the home, which was viewed as the woman's domain, men were interested in and involved in home economics. Langworthy was a bachelor, yet "considered to be the best housewife in America because of his expertise in homemaking."²⁵ This juxtaposition highlighted the tension between Langworthy's gender and career. The description reinforced home economics as a place for women; Langworthy was an outlier. Given his position, Langworthy sought to argue that home economics was also for men. He authored a pamphlet titled "Work in the United States for Men and Boys," sometime between 1915 and 1920. Langworthy argued that areas such as hygiene, food, heating, lighting, and budget balancing were all interesting to men. He suggested that boys were taught forms of home economics, albeit under different names. Boys and men studied self-sufficiency and the home through Boy Scouts and military academies. Langworthy's focus on bringing men into the fold of home economics demonstrated the field's fluidity. While women led, men had a stake in studying the home and family life. Langworthy viewed home economics as the broad, cultural movement envisioned by the founders at the Lake Placid Conferences.²⁶

²⁴ H.L. Knight, "The State Relations Service of the United States Department of Agriculture," *JHE* 7, no. 10 (October 1915): 415.

²⁵ Background Information on Human Nutrition Research Division," July 28, 1971, Folder 3, Box 1, HNIS Collection.

²⁶ Charles F. Langworthy, "Work in the United States for Men and Boys," undated, RG 310, Box 376, Folder: Home Economics Research in USDA (statements prior to 1920); "Charles Ford Langworthy, 1864-1932," *JHE* 24, no. 5 (May 1932): 442-444.

While the field was created to promote the home as a focus of scientific study and was primarily led by women, there was room for men to participate and find significance in studying the home.

Beyond his position as Chief of the Office of Home Economics, Langworthy was the chairman of the first meeting of the American Home Economics Association (AHEA). He was later nominated as one of the first Vice Presidents, along with Isabel Bevier, who led household science at the University of Illinois, and Mary Urie Watson, Principal of the MacDonald Institute of Domestic Science in Ontario, Canada.²⁷ Langworthy's leadership role alongside important women in the early history of home economics highlighted both his interest in the field and his background as a nutrition scientist, which helped shape the USDA's approach to home economics.

The Office of Home Economics was established to complete two branches of work: scientific and practical studies of agricultural products in the home, and calorimeter investigations.²⁸ Both branches focused on nutrition research conducted through laboratory studies. The vision was narrowed to these topics because of the USDA's former work in nutrition and its mission to promote agriculture. Initially, rural Americans were the Office's exclusive audience. Farm families were more closely connected to agricultural products and were the main recipients of cooperative extension information nationwide. This rural focus left the office poorly positioned to meet demands for information valuable to homemakers as the country became increasingly urbanized. Urban Americans had a need for insight into agricultural products, nutritional information, and the scientific running of the home. Federal home economists sought

²⁷ "The American Home Economics Association," *JHE* 1, no. 1 (February 1909): 1.

²⁸ H.L. Knight, "The State Relations Service of the United States Department of Agriculture." *JHE* 7, no. 6 (June 1915): 340. Agricultural products are food, fibers, and raw materials produced by farming, livestock, forestry, or aquaculture.

to address both rural and urban concerns, following Ellen Richards' ideals of bringing scientific home management to all Americans. However, pressures from the Department of Agriculture kept early efforts focused on rural life.²⁹

The Office of Home Economics proved flexible and equipped to address some of the nation's problems during challenging times. The Office answered the call during the First World War to assist with emergency work, including testing wheatless recipes for items like cake, since wheat was in short supply due to wartime rationing. The Office's findings were then disseminated to the American people. The home economists' research in food preparation demonstrated their expertise in guiding life on the home front, which became more crucial during the Second World War. The Office had to be flexible; its own experimental kitchens were too small to handle emergency work, so the Office shared space with a wartime agency, the Food Administration. OHE's ability to serve the country's needs without major funding increases demonstrated its ingenuity and persistence.³⁰

From the start of the Office of Home Economics, leaders discussed the challenges of acquiring enough funding to pursue varied and interesting projects. Minna Denton, Assistant Chief of Home Economics, argued for the value of research in home economics in the *Journal of Home Economics*. She used the example of studying the durability and value of different stocking materials, such as cotton or silk.³¹ This example highlighted how the Office pushed for

²⁹ Rima Apple "Liberal Arts or Vocational Training? Home Economics for Girls," in *Rethinking Home Economics*, ed. Sarah Stage and Virginia Vincenti (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Elisa Miller, "In the Name of the Home: Women, Domestic Science, and American Higher Education, 1865–1930" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign): 200.

³⁰ Katherine Wicker, "Salvaging Food Containers," *JHE* 10 no 8 (August 1918): 378.

³¹ Minna C. Denton, "What Constitutes Research in Home Economics?" *JHE* 12 no. 2 (February 1920): 59-63.

home economics work beyond nutrition. Clothing and textiles research consisted of studying the chemical effects of starch, detergents, and bleach on clothing and designing practical clothing patterns. While clothing and textiles did not rise to the same level of importance and funding as nutrition, OHE was able to expand their research focus since clothing materials were often agricultural products and therefore aligned with USDA's mission.

Beyond the challenges of war work and funding, broader issues at USDA prevented the Office of Home Economics from communicating its findings, which were a central element of its mission to support Cooperative Extension. Harlan Smith, who worked in information at the Department of Agriculture, told the American Home Economics Association's Thirteenth Annual Meeting in 1920 that the USDA lacked the resources to print findings. He particularly mentioned that the Office of Home Economics often faced a ten-year backlog. Smith encouraged the Association to advocate for increased appropriations and to use its press connections to publicize the Office's work. Ultimately, the printing backlogs meant the Office of Home Economics could not meet its purpose of delivering insights about the American home. As just one small office within a larger department, the Office was not adequately resourced, but that would soon change.³²

A Bureau is Born

In 1922, Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace appointed a committee to discuss the creation of a Bureau of Home Economics (BHE). A Bureau acted as an independent agency within the larger Department of Agriculture, reporting to the Secretary. Compared to the Office of Home Economics, which was situated under State Relations and had several layers of

³² Harlan Smith, "The Publicity Work of the Department of Agriculture in Relation to Home Economics," *JHE* 12, no. 12 (December 1920): 533.

hierarchy before the Secretary of Agriculture, this change was a step up. Secretary Wallace received several inquiries from interested parties, including the AHEA, eager to elevate the status of the Office of Home Economics.³³

Prior to the BHE, there was no large research center focused on the interrelated issues of food, housing, cost of living, wages, politics of consumption, and family health. The Office of Home Economics was a start. Women were seeking scientific expertise they could apply to their work at home. Calls from home economists and housewives across the country sought a government authority on the home. Their call was heeded by Secretary Wallace, who envisioned the Bureau led by a woman of “executive ability, thorough scientific training, and a broad and sympathetic understanding of what is needed to make such a Bureau most helpful to the women of the land.”³⁴ Wallace’s insistence a woman lead the Bureau demonstrated the gendered nature of home economics had solidified. Secretary Wallace viewed the Bureau as being created by women to serve women, enabling it to pursue an independent mission separate from other bureaus that served farmers or conducted other types of research.

Secretary Wallace named Dr. Louise Stanley as the first Chief of the Bureau of Home Economics when it was created in 1923. Stanley was a professor of home economics at the University of Missouri and chaired the AHEA’s legislative committee. She was well-known in home economics and had earned a PhD in biochemistry from Yale University. Wallace chose Stanley due to her scientific background and their close family friendship. When Stanley assumed her new position, she became the highest-paid woman in the federal government. Chief

³³ Henry A. Wallace, “Memorandum 436: Changes in Departmental Organization,” July 1, 1923, Folder 435-438, Box 4, Office of Secretary’s Memoranda, National Agricultural Library.

³⁴ “The Bureau of Home Economics,” *JHE* 14, no. 12 (December 1922): 634; Gladys Baker, *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture*.

Langworthy and Assistant Chief Denton, leaders of the previous Office of Home Economics, remained in the newly created bureau, but not in leadership roles.³⁵ Stanley would lead the Bureau for twenty years, acting as a visionary and advocate for home economics research.

Stanley's background in chemistry and nutrition reflected the priorities of the Department of Agriculture. In the Bureau's first year, they had a small staff of about 50 and an appropriation of \$78,950, which would be just shy of \$1.5 million today.³⁶ In her first report on the BHE in 1924, Stanley emphasized the ongoing work in food and nutrition, which had been inherited from the Office of Home Economics.³⁷ The Bureau began with three components: food and nutrition, economics, and textiles and clothing. Stanley planned a fourth component focused on housing and household equipment, but it was blocked by a lack of staff and funding. Stanley affirmed this in the plans she wrote for the Bureau in the *Journal of Home Economics*, citing the lack of funds and available personnel to create the ideal research program. However, Stanley intended to develop the Bureau into an organization postured to research the interdisciplinary nature of home economics.

The expansion beyond nutrition began with economic research, focusing on studies of expenditure and consumption to better understand how American households spent their money and how much money they needed to live healthy, full lives. The economic research was conducted primarily through surveys of rural and urban households on topics such as the cost of

³⁵ Henry A. Wallace, "Memorandum 436: Changes in Departmental Organization"; "Seventh Annual Meeting Preliminary Itinerary," *JHE* 16, no. 5 (May 1924): 296.

³⁶ Hazel Thompson Craig, *The History of Home Economics* (Practical Home Economics, 1946); "Background Information on Human Nutrition Research Division", HNIS Collection.

³⁷ Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics, Report of chief of Bureau of Home Economics, Louise Stanley. A42.1:924, (Washington, DC, 1924); Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics, Report of chief of Bureau of Home Economics, Louise Stanley. A42.1:929, (Washington, DC, 1929).

living, retail pricing, consumption habits, and consumer pricing.³⁸ The cost-of-living studies fit into the definition of home economics as a part of the broader field of economics. Stanley and BHE had to push back against claims that other agencies, such as the Department of Commerce, should conduct these studies. Stanley argued that the Bureau was doing work that other agencies had not yet done, such as establishing standards of living through identifying the cost of good nutrition and satisfactory clothing.

Furthermore, the cost-of-living studies challenged the BHE's role in Agriculture. While the Department of Agriculture had only the mandate to research problems related to rural life, the Bureau's cost-of-living studies looked beyond farm families, collecting data from cities and towns. The three types of families studied included farm families, families of business and professional men living in cities, and families led by single mothers who received mothers' pensions. By studying different types of families, BHE could tailor its findings and advice to fit varied situations. Other economic and nutrition surveys from the 1920s and 1930s often only surveyed the "typical" two-parent family. Furthermore, by surveying poor families and single mothers, the Bureau sought to address broader social and economic problems. Through documenting class differences, the Bureau's work supported other government programs that sought to ameliorate the harms of poverty. Despite limited resources, the Bureau, through its extensive research, was advancing a vision of home economics aligned with the field's diversity, aiming to raise living standards for all Americans, regardless of class or location.³⁹

³⁸ "The New Chief of the New Bureau," *JHE* 15, no. 9 (September 1923): 494-495.

³⁹ Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics. Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics. Louise Stanley. A42.1:929 (Washington, DC, 1929); Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics. Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics. Louise Stanley. A42.1:930 (Washington, DC, 1930); Hannah Findlen LeBlanc,

The Bureau's work in serving consumers was evident in 1925 when the clothing and textiles division assembled a collection of sewing machines and displayed them throughout the office so women could come in and test products. This was the first time many machines were placed together since there was no association or agreement among sewing machine manufacturers. The Bureau's innovative approach showcased the latest technology in a manner that would assist consumers. Women could come in and see the products on display, which helped them develop an informed opinion on which machine to buy. The sewing machine showcase from the Clothing and Textile division pushed boundaries to empower consumers. Given the division's under-resourcing, its ability to complete this showcase is even more impressive. While producers might have wanted to keep their machines separate, placing them all together led to an informed consumer.⁴⁰

As the Bureau developed and grew, other staff worked to define its mission and relationship with the broader field of home economics. By 1925, the Bureau expanded to study housing and household equipment with two staff members. In future housing work, the Bureau evaluated household standards and pushed for minimum requirements for household size and utilities such as electricity and running water. Bureau findings indicated that Southern farmhouses were more dilapidated compared to those in the North and West, due to lower incomes and smaller farms.⁴¹ By 1929, the BHE had a staff of 60, evenly split between professional researchers and administrative staff. That same year, Stanley defined the purpose of

"Nutrition for National Defense: American Food Science in World War II and the Cold War" (PhD diss., Stanford University, May 2019): 66.

⁴⁰ "U.S. Bureau of Home Economics," *JHE* 17, no. 4 (April 1925): 236.

⁴¹ Bureau of Home Economics. Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics. Louise Stanley. A42.1:925 (Washington, DC, 1925); Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics. Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Nutrition and Home Economics, Hazel Stiebeling, A42.1:925 (Washington, DC, 1953).

BHE: “to study home problems and evaluate the utility of agricultural products for the home.”⁴²

The general nature of “home problems” gave the BHE a broad arena to operate in beyond nutrition science. Home problems could mean budgetary concerns, child rearing, or family dynamics. However, the Bureau’s position in Agriculture emphasized agricultural products, which weighted the focus toward food and textiles.

One food-specific project the Bureau was praised for in the 1920s was the implementation of educational campaigns for hot school lunches, which pushed boundaries by applying a holistic approach through food economics that impacted the whole country, not just farmers and their families. Prompted by the Bureau’s nutrition survey of hungry children, the Bureau found that providing prepared lunches in schools significantly improved children’s nutritional outcomes.⁴³ Through the Bureau’s documentation of nutritional deficiencies among school-age children and its efforts to address them through school lunches, the Bureau encouraged government interventions that improved children’s health and well-being. This application of nutrition research extended beyond the home, demonstrating that the boundary between homes and public institutions was permeable, aligning with the Bureau’s mission.

Later in 1937, Stanley provided several specific purposes for the Bureau of Home Economics: “(1) furnishing basic data to agencies responsible for formulating public policies; (2) pointing out to producers how to fit their programs to people’s needs and desires; and (3) giving facts on food, human nutrition, clothing and other household commodities and services to

⁴² Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics. Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics, Louise Stanley, A42.1:929 (Washington, DC, 1929).

⁴³ Gladys Baker, *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture*.

families so that they may choose and use goods more wisely.”⁴⁴ Through collecting data, the Bureau could stress rational consumption, which was especially critical during the Great Depression.⁴⁵ Moreover, compiling data for public policy use was indicative of the unique role the Bureau of Home Economics played through the collection of household economic data, nutrition information, and research on household materials and equipment nationwide.

Getting the Message Across

In line with the third aspect of the Bureau’s purpose, BHE reported its findings to everyday families. The field of home economics endeavored to create well-informed consumers. Stanley argued that meeting homemakers’ need for information contributed to national welfare. The Bureau promoted health, efficiency, and well-being, which would improve the individual, the family, and ultimately the country.⁴⁶ Government publications were a popular and conventional way to disseminate information. The BHE found unique ways to reach women across America, including radio. In 1926, when radio was still relatively new, the Bureau launched a Housekeeper’s Chat radio show featuring Aunt Sammy, wife to Uncle Sam, who shared recipes, answered questions, and offered general information about domestic life, all informed by the Bureau’s research. The Bureau wrote the scripts and sent them to radio stations, which put their local spin on the material. The show generated lots of interest and ran until 1946. Listeners often wrote into the Bureau asking for recipes or sent questions to Aunt Sammy,

⁴⁴ Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics, Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics, Louise Stanley, A42.1:937 (Washington, DC, 1937): 1.

⁴⁵ Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics, Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics, Louise Stanley, A42.1:934 (Washington, DC, 1934): 35-36.

⁴⁶ Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics, Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics, Louise Stanley, A42.1:925 (Washington, DC, 1925).

allowing the Bureau to reach Americans who might not otherwise seek out government publications.⁴⁷

Radio was invaluable because the Bureau of Home Economics, like its predecessor, the Office of Home Economics, had difficulty printing and presenting its information. In 1924, the Bureau published a bulletin on food care in the home, focusing on preventing spoilage and promoting cleanliness. The bulletin presented simplified scientific language to make it accessible to all. Without an extensive budget for independent printing and publishing, the bulletin was published through the existing USDA Farmers' Bulletin.⁴⁸ The BHE had to leverage existing publications and USDA resources to reach a broad audience, but further resources would have made a difference in communicating the Bureau's message.

However, government publications were not well received by everyone. The *Journal of Home Economics*, in November 1926, included a sharp critique of the appearance of government publications. Due to cost-cutting measures, the publications appeared plain compared to commercial publications, which were designed to look attractive to consumers but often provided inaccurate information to sell a product. If the Bureau wanted to encourage informed consumption, it had to compete with commercial publications to share its message. This message appears to have reached the Department of Agriculture, as by 1928, the *Journal* noted that the appearance of pamphlets had improved.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Broadcasting Home Economics From the US Department of Agriculture," *JHE* 19, no. 5 (May 1927): 276; Alexis N. Hill, "Aunt Sammy and Her Radio Recipes," *The Unwritten Record*, March 17, 2022.

⁴⁸ "Care of Food in the Home," *JHE* 16 no. 2 (February 1924): 95-96.

⁴⁹ "The Look of Government Publications," *JHE* 18 no. 11 (November 1926): 634-636; "Bureau of Home Economics," *JHE* 16 no. 4 (April 1924): 229-230.

The Bureau's research dissemination methods reflected the organization's commitment to informing homemakers. In 1932 and 1933, several popular magazines criticized the BHE's pamphlets as trivial. One particular research avenue, studying the placement of buttons on boys' pajamas, received public pushback, as some thought it was below the government's purview. But the Bureau's work had its fans and, of course, did not stop with where to locate buttons. A writer from the *Scientific American*, T. Swann Harding, appreciated the Bureau's work and argued that this research protected consumers from shoddy manufacturers.⁵⁰ The Bureau itself argued that housewives appreciated its unbiased, research-based findings on home-related matters, rather than relying on information solely from producers. The goal was to ensure consumers could protect their families from fraudulent claims by manufacturers and from dangerous or substandard products. Furthermore, the Bureau's work went beyond consumers and helped producers; for example, promoting a lamb recipe benefited the meat-producing industry. Once again, the Bureau's work met its mandate to provide information to the government, producers, and consumers.⁵¹

The BHE faced a lack of appreciation from its earliest days as it struggled to fulfill its vision with inadequate funding. In 1926, the Bureau was already facing funding difficulties; it sought increased funding to expand avenues of research but received only a slight budget increase.⁵² From inception, BHE was the lowest-funded Bureau in the Department of Agriculture. At first, that status was sensible; being new, the Bureau had to prove its worth and

⁵⁰ T. Swann Harding, "How to Fritter Away Your Money," *Scientific American* (August 1933): 53-55.

⁵¹ "Popular Publications of the Bureau of Home Economics," *JHE* 24, no. 5 (May 1932): 444-446.

⁵² "Legislative Program," *JHE* 18, no. 2 (February 1926): 86; Katharine Blunt, "President's Address," *JHE* 18, no. 10 (October 1926): 545-559.

effective use of funds. However, by 1928, the Bureau still lagged far behind the other components of the USDA. It received \$137,000 in annual appropriations, only a third of the amount appropriated to the Bureau of Dairying and much less than other Bureaus. Any small increases given to the Bureau were geared towards specific projects, usually located in the field of nutrition research.⁵³ The increases in nutrition were evident in the Bureau's overall funding, which increased to \$221,749 in 1933. However, most of those gains were fleeting, as the Bureau's funding was cut to \$170,000 in 1934 due to the government's overall tightening of expenditures during the Great Depression.⁵⁴ BHE was expected to cover the extensive field of home economics, with fewer resources than other Bureaus in the USDA that had narrower research areas.

The American Home Economics Association lamented this treatment of BHE, often lobbying and spreading the word about the Bureau's vital work. AHEA made a few salient arguments to encourage investment in BHE. For one, they understood what home economics was up against, stating, "most men think of the home as an individual affair and nobody's business but its own."⁵⁵ However, home economists recognized their essential role as consumer advocates and used that language to encourage greater interest in home economics. This message was particularly useful during the Depression because the Bureau provided information on consumption when Americans needed advice on how to stretch their budget.

The Bureau's work was important due to the uniqueness of the clothing and textiles research program. No other government agency or university was conducting textile research at

⁵³ "The Bureau of Home Economics," *JHE* 20, no. 3 (March 1928): 184-185.

⁵⁴ "Federal Appropriations," *JHE* 26, no. 3 (March 1934): 106.

⁵⁵ "Appropriations for the Bureau of Home Economics," *JHE* 21, no. 2 (February 1929): 116-117.

the same scale as the Bureau, whose home economists argued for better products, such as high-quality fabrics.⁵⁶ The Bureau advocated for consumers through its research on textile labeling standards. In 1939, the Bureau analyzed 51 cotton broadcloth fabric samples, which varied in weight and thread count. The Bureau recommended a specific standard, later adopted by the American Society for Testing and Materials. Clothing researchers in the Bureau recommended specific standards across all fabrics, noting that 'part wool' or 'part silk' was not a helpful label, and that a percentage scheme would build consumer trust, a scheme still in place today.⁵⁷ Despite the clothing division's impact on the industry, it was the least funded, so it needed all the advocates it could get.⁵⁸ Messages from friends of the Bureau of Home Economics appeared to be effective, as the Bureau's overall budget increased back to \$264,085 in 1937.⁵⁹ Funds were an ongoing problem for the Bureau from its inception, but its impact as a clearinghouse of consumer information was potent.

BHE did impressive, coordinated work with limited funding, such as vitamin research and children's clothing design in the 1930s. One example of a joint effort between nutrition and clothing research was the design of the sunsuit. After nutrition researchers studied vitamin deficiencies, such as Vitamin D, which caused rickets and other health issues, they recommended that children spend more time in the sun to increase vitamin D levels. The clothing design team then created a brightly colored cotton sunsuit to increase visibility, comfort, and ease of

⁵⁶ "The Bureau of Home Economics," *JHE* 24, no. 3 (March 1932): 251-252.

⁵⁷ Julia Ezzo, "Stitching Solutions: The Bureau of Home Economics as a Fashion Influencer," *DttP: Documents to the People* 53, no. 4 (2025).

⁵⁸ "Appropriations for the Bureau of Home Economics," *JHE* 22, no. 2 (February 1930): 119.

⁵⁹ "Congressional Action and Inaction," *JHE* 29, no. 9 (November 1937): 632; For context, the other women-led government bureaus received the following funding in 1937: The Women's Bureau was appropriated \$152,000, and the Children's Bureau was appropriated \$662,000.

laundering.⁶⁰ By bringing clothing and nutrition research under the same Bureau, cross-collaboration was easily implemented, demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary research.

Providing clear and accurate information for consumers was essential during the Great Depression. During the Depression, Bureau information about low-cost diets was genuinely helpful to the masses of Americans struggling with unemployment and underemployment. By building on existing nutrition research, several plans for low-cost yet still nutritious diets were developed. The BHE did not complete this crisis work on its own but partnered with relief agencies to spread information.⁶¹ The Bureau made a point of picking up additional projects to support the country in a time of need. At a time when careful consumption was critical to survival, the Bureau had the expertise to provide consumers with critical insights.

A new phase of the consumer movement began alongside the Great Depression in the 1930s, when the Bureau of Home Economics asserted its role as the consumer's branch of government. Consumers demanded more accurate product information after advertisers consistently deceived customers with false information. A battle between consumer advocates and advertisers occurred over an amendment to the 1906 Food and Drug Act in 1934, but little change immediately resulted. The proposed amendment, known as the Copeland Bill, was named for its introduction by Senator Royal Copeland, a Democrat from New York who was trained as

⁶⁰ Clarice L. Scott and Margaret Smith, *Fabrics and Designs for Children's Clothes*, Farmers' Bulletin No. 1778 (Washington, D.C., US Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Home Economics, 1937), 4.

⁶¹ Gladys Baker, *Century of Service: The First 100 Years of the United States Department of Agriculture*; Megan J. Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture*, 92; Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics, Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics, Louise Stanley, A42.1:932 (Washington, DC, 1932); Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics, Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics, Louise Stanley, A42.1:933 (Washington, DC, 1933).

a homeopathic doctor. The bill sought to update labeling for food, drugs, and cosmetics to prevent adulteration and protect consumers. While the amendment did not pass in 1934, it took a tragedy for it to gain passage in 1938 as the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, after an improperly prepared antibiotic killed over 100 people.⁶²

As proposed consumer reforms gained momentum, home economists were considering the government's relationship with consumers. In 1935, in the *Journal of Home Economics*, Hazel Kyrk, who later worked for the Bureau of Home Economics, argued the government should protect consumers. She explained that consumers faced a barrier in expressing their concerns to the government. Individuals viewed their economic concerns first in terms of what they earned, not what they spent, which tied them to producers and labor interests. However, an individual's economic role as a consumer was foundational to their economic life. Therefore, Kyrk asserted that consumer interest groups should work with the government in the same manner as business and labor interests. Kyrk produced three ways New Deal initiatives would help consumers: One, by breaking up private monopolies; two, by increasing the Federal Trade Commission's powers to prevent deceptive and misleading trade practices; and three, by improving consumer education. Kyrk argued that the Bureau of Home Economics' purpose was consumer education. She stated that if consumers were the priority, the Bureau of Home Economics would be well funded and made into an independent Department of Consumers. Kyrk was optimistic that consumer interest would increase, and that the federal government would

⁶² Office of the Commissioner, "Laws Enforced by FDA," United States, *Food, Drugs, and Cosmetics. Hearings before the Committee on Commerce, United States Senate, Seventy Third Congress. Second Session, on S. 2800, a Bill to Prevent the Manufacture, Shipment, and Sale of Adulterated or Misbranded Food, Drink, Drugs, and Cosmetics, and to Regulate Traffic Therein; to Prevent the False Advertisement of Food, Drink, Drugs, and Cosmetics; and for Other Purposes. February 27 to March 3, 1934.* (U. S. Govt. print. off., 1934).

prioritize consumer education through the Bureau of Home Economics. Kyrk and other home economists believed in the power of consumers and that the government had a vested interest in protecting and informing consumers.⁶³

Americans used their economic power to disrupt businesses and fight for better practices and a better future in the 1930s. Women founded consumer groups to use their purchasing power to lower prices, support unions, and oppose racism. Much of the consumer organization in the 1930s was led by housewives. In several major cities across the country, like Detroit and Chicago, Housewives' Leagues led by Black women used their power as consumers to pressure local businesses to hire Black workers and promote them beyond menial labor.⁶⁴ Historian Jacqueline Jones claims that Housewives Leagues opened up more jobs to Black people during the Great Depression than any entity other than the federal government.⁶⁵ Housewives' Leagues were an incredibly effective organizing force, using their consumer, community, and business power to enact change. Historian Emily Twarog analyzes housewives as both a political force and an imaginary ideal. Housewives invoked their identity in their activism and pushed public institutions to see unpaid labor as valuable through what Twarog calls "domestic politics."⁶⁶ Consumer activism among housewives aligned with the Bureau of Home Economics' research on

⁶³Arthur M. Hyde, "The Producer Considers Consumption," *JHE* 25, no. 2 (February 1933):93-94; Hazel Kyrk, "The Government and the Consumer," *JHE* 27, no. 4 (April 1935): 201-207.

⁶⁴Darlene Clark Hine, "The Housewives League of Detroit: Black Women and Economic Nationalism," In *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, Ed. Hewitt, Nancy A, and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1993): 224, 231; Kendra D. Boyd, "A 'Body of Business Makers': The Detroit Housewives League, Black Women Entrepreneurs, and the Rise of Detroit's African American Business Community," *Enterprise & Society* 23, no. 1 (2022).

⁶⁵Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2009): 15.

⁶⁶Emily Twarog, *Politics of the Pantry: Housewives, Food, and Consumer Protest in Twentieth Century America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017): 4-6.

homemakers' unpaid labor. BHE's advocacy for consumers did not emerge in a vacuum but was influenced by the growing consumer movements across the country.⁶⁷

Challenging Norms and Expanding the Field

Beyond advocating for consumers and conducting cost-of-living studies, the Bureau of Home Economics sought to challenge the Department of Agriculture's expectations and expand its work to better reflect the field. In 1940, BHE conducted expenditure surveys on single, professional women working in government. The Bureau recognized that not all households appeared traditional; it was essential to study how single women earned and spent their salaries. These surveys were published to assist women who were moving to Washington DC for government work during the New Deal and World War II. These women were not living the typical farming lifestyles expected by the USDA; instead, they were conducting professional careers. This interest in single professional women also reflected the status of many home economists, including those at the Bureau, as they were often unmarried or did not follow traditional lifestyles. Through surveys of single women, BHE demonstrated that households could take a variety of forms, and that the Bureau believed the government should be supporting all of them.⁶⁸

The Bureau further expanded beyond the narrow focus on agriculture through its interest in children's issues and child psychology. C. Rowena Schmidt at the BHE reported her findings on the psychology of children's nutrition in 1925. While still centered on nutrition, Schmidt's

⁶⁷ For more about women's consumer activism see Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economics Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005); Landon R. Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁶⁸ "What Professional Women Buy," *JHE* 32, no. 2 (February 1940): 133.

interest in the psychology behind children's food choices was far beyond the calorimeter research initially expected of the Bureau. Furthermore, the economics branch studied the time spent caring for babies in 1926 to accurately assess the work of housewives. Childcare, child development, and child psychology were all important elements of home economics included in university-level classes. However, children—beyond their nutrition needs—were not a clear element of the Department of Agriculture's vision for home economics research. However, employee interest and the broader field of study meant that children's issues were considered for the Bureau of Home Economics' research.⁶⁹

The Bureau continued to challenge norms by recognizing the value and time given to women's work in the home. Indeed, the Bureau went to great lengths to identify women's labor at home as work. When formulating her plans for the Bureau, Stanley recognized the invaluable nature of women's work in the home. However, she also wanted the Bureau to estimate the wage basis for the work a woman did around the home. By calculating the monetary value of women's labor, women's work would, she thought, be more appreciated, and women who had the choice of working outside the home would be better enabled to make that choice wisely. Stanley's discussion of women working outside the home was somewhat modern for 1923. While women have always worked outside the home, Stanley framed women's labor as a choice rather than a necessity for supporting themselves and their families.⁷⁰

In 1929, the Bureau followed through on Stanley's plan, conducting a time-use study of homemakers across the country. The study found that homemakers spent, on average, 51 hours a

⁶⁹ Laura Cowley Brossard, "A Study of the Time Spent in the Care of Babies," *JHE* 18, no. 3 (March 1926): 123-127; C. Rowena Schmidt, "The Psychology of Child Nutrition," *JHE* 17, no. 5 (May 1925): 260.

⁷⁰ Louise Stanley, "Plans for the Bureau of Home Economics," *JHE* 15, no. 12 (May 1923): 679-683.

week on household work, with similar figures across urban and rural homemakers. When conducting the survey, the Bureau expected farm hours to be far greater, but that was not the case. By surveying the time homemakers spent on household work, home economists quantified the value homemakers bring to their families and created an apt comparison with wage labor.⁷¹ Time-use studies were perhaps an outcropping of Taylorism or scientific management that sought to improve labor productivity. Furthermore, the Bureau's time-use studies add to historian Ruth Schwartz Cohen's work, which explained that women maintained or even increased their amount of housework after households shifted from places of production to places of consumption and introduced electric household technologies.⁷²

From the Bureau's research avenue on household labor, which began in 1929, the Bureau extrapolated that the 32 million homemakers in 1945 contributed 34 billion dollars of unpaid service.⁷³ The Bureau's studies on household labor were an early inkling of a later feminist theory called social reproduction theory, which posited that household labor produced the wage-earner. Work in the household, usually performed by women, therefore benefited the economy in the same manner as paid labor.⁷⁴ In that sense, the Bureau's studies had a feminist intention to uplift "women's work."

⁷¹ Hildegard Kneeland, "Is the Modern Housewife a Lady of Leisure?" *JHE* 21, no. 10 (October 1929): 745-746.

⁷² Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books: 1983); Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1911).

⁷³ E.C. Auchter, Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Research Administration (ARA), *Report of the Administrator of Agricultural Research*, A77.1:947, Washington, DC, 1947.

⁷⁴ Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), x-3.

Beyond the economic value of homemaking, if homemakers used the time-saving techniques recommended by the Bureau, they would have more time to spend outside the home. Bureau employees remarked on this idea at the 1948 Bureau 25th anniversary dinner, staging a mock congressional hearing. The fictional Congressman asked, “Have you considered the serious impact on family relations when the homemaker is no longer occupied fully in the home as a result of this time-saving, and will expect and may even demand to accompany her husband in activities outside the home? How do you propose to meet this impact on the American family?”⁷⁵ By relieving women from the burden of certain household chores, the Bureau aimed to enable women to live more independently. This scenario reflected the Bureau's feminist intent to improve the lives of women and homemakers by equipping them with techniques to make the home more efficient and, thus, to free them to gain greater scope in their own lives.

At its core, the Bureau of Home Economics sought to understand consumption by collecting data and producing research to inform consumption decisions. This was contrary to the Department of Agriculture's goal to understand how agricultural products were used in the home. Hildegard Kneeland, who led the economics division in the Bureau from 1924 to 1935, made the case for taking an expansive approach to economic research, writing: “We must overcome our tendency to stay within the four walls of the home in our research. We must go out into the complexities and difficulties of the economic world to find the answers to our problems.” Problems did not start and end in the home; they were constantly influenced by the world around. She reiterated this point by comparing economic research to nutrition research. If nutrition research had been kept to the home, the Bureau would not have completed most of its

⁷⁵ “Birthday Dinner for BHNHE At Minneapolis AHEA,” July 25, 1948, Folder: 25th Anniversary of BHNHE, Box 2, General Records, RG 310.

work. Nutrition research examined food in general because its properties influenced diets and practices both inside and outside the home.⁷⁶ Thinking of the home as an extensive place that touched many aspects of life was central to the field of home economics. The home was not trivial or separate from the larger world; it was central to all social and economic problems. Applying this thinking to the Bureau's work pushed it beyond its original place as a Department of Agriculture subcomponent, where it would struggle to fit in the confines.

⁷⁶ Hildegard Kneeland, "The Field of Research in the Economics of the Home," JHE 17, no. 1 (January 1925): 15-19.

Chapter 2: Nutrition Above All Else (1941-1956)

In June 1948, home economists held a jubilant celebration of the 25th anniversary of the federal government's Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics (BHNHE). The staff compiled a scrapbook to document the history and accomplishments of the BHNHE. The Bureau's chief, Dr. Hazel Stiebeling, remarked on the unique role of the Bureau in serving women and the home at the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) meeting in 1948. Stiebeling's remarks were met by home economists from across the country, who sang songs to commemorate the occasion.

“Hail, Hail, the Bureau's here
Come again to see us,
It's good to have you with us.
Hail, hail, we're glad you're here,
Come again in '73.”⁷⁷

The home economists' optimism for the future in 1948 was reasonable, given the Bureau's successful projects in recent years, especially its support for the war effort during World War II. However, challenges would continue to plague the Bureau, one of which the home economists recognized at the same anniversary dinner. Home economists from the Association and the Bureau noted the questioning they received from Congress during previous budget hearings for the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics. Home economists

⁷⁷ Hazel Stiebeling, “Research in the Bureau of Home Economics,” June 2, 1948, in Scrapbook detailing the 25th Anniversary of the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, 1923-1948, USDA Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics Records, National Agricultural Library.

understood the information they shared was powerful and not without controversy. They empowered women by sharing information about a controversial subject: the home.⁷⁸

By 1948, it became clear to home economists at the USDA that their work was contentious. Members of Congress, USDA leadership, and other government officials questioned the value of the Bureau's research. In part due to this criticism, the Bureau's prospects would soon change as it struggled to maintain its multifaceted approach to research on the home. Despite the promising indicators of 1948, the home economists' belief that the Bureau would still be around in twenty-five years was unfounded. Successive changes to home economics within the Department of Agriculture during the 1940s and 1950s focused on nutrition and reduced the Bureau's independence, factors that ultimately led to its demise. During World War II and the postwar period, USDA administrators, Congress, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower pushed to make nutrition the sole focus of home economics research at the USDA. Home economists within and outside the Bureau pushed back against these efforts to restrict the research, which at times proved successful, but the Department of Agriculture never fully accepted the broad research agenda that defined the field of home economics.

World War II Solidified The Focus On Nutrition

The Bureau achieved significant success during World War II, disseminating information on how to eat and make clothing during challenging times. Due to the war, the USDA reorganized its bureaus, altering leadership structures and solidifying home economics' focus on nutrition. During the Second World War, information for homemakers was more critical than ever, given the scope of the war, wartime economic changes, rationing, and the need to maintain

⁷⁸ "Birthday Dinner for BHNHE At Minneapolis AHEA," July 25, 1948, Folder: 25th Anniversary of BHNHE, Box 2, General Records, RG 310.

production for military needs.⁷⁹ The Bureau reiterated in various reports that homemakers needed information to manage their households during wartime, and that the government was the best source of that information. First and foremost, Stanley argued that establishing a sustainable balance between consumption and production was critical for both wartime needs and civilian morale. Providing facts to both government agencies and families was a key part of finding that balance. BHE's clothing section provided information on practical women's clothing for factory and farm work, as well as on tent fabric for the military. Stanley argued that in crisis, families sought "reliable, unbiased scientific facts" from the Bureau of Home Economics, and that through this information, morale and ways of living improved during difficult times.⁸⁰ The Bureau successfully met increased expectations in both defense and routine work and was appropriated \$321,000 in 1941. The Bureau argued that scientific homemaking information helped families support the war effort. By shifting their purchasing and eating habits, families would not place undue stress on factories required for the war effort. Research alone was not enough; information needed to be shared with citizens to improve the home front.⁸¹

Stanley wrote a report on BHE's cooperation with defense agencies in April 1941, ahead of the official United States declaration of war. Stanley outlined how the Bureau's previous nutrition research laid the groundwork for national defense planning, including the determination of vitamin requirements. The Bureau also conducted research on behalf of the Army and Navy to

⁷⁹ For more about wartime rationing, see Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

⁸⁰ "The Bureau of Home Economics in Wartime," Folder: 30th anniversary, Box 2, General Records, RG 310.

⁸¹ "The Bureau of Home Economics In Wartime."

evaluate the nutritional quality of rations. Not only did the Bureau assist the US military, but it also supported the British under the Lend-Lease Act.⁸²

During the war, scientists from the Bureau of Home Economics collaborated with the National Nutrition Program, which eventually became the War Food Administration, housed within the USDA, to promote the Basic 7 food groups. The Bureau had long focused on food groups and nutrition guidance. In a 1921 Bureau of Home Economics publication, Caroline Hunt devised a nutrition guide for families, organized into five groups: milk and meat, cereals, vegetables and fruits, fats and fatty foods, and sugary foods. In 1943, the five groups were updated to the Basic 7 as a wartime nutrition guide. The seven groups were green and yellow vegetables; oranges, tomatoes, and grapefruit; potatoes and other vegetables and fruits; milk and milk products; meat, poultry, fish, and eggs; bread, flour, and cereals; and butter and fortified margarine. The idea behind the 7 was to encourage a varied diet with sufficient vitamins amid rationing.⁸³ The guidance of the Basic 7 ensured Americans would get daily vitamins and nutrients. A mal- or under-nourished population was more likely to get sick and then become unable to work and contribute to the war effort. Creating the major food groups was a signature accomplishment of the Bureau, which continues to impact how Americans think about food and nutrition requirements today.

Wartime reorganizations, nevertheless, weakened the Bureau's independence and emphasized nutrition. After the United States entered World War II in 1942, the Agricultural Research Administration (ARA) was created to take over numerous research bureaus within the

⁸² Louise Stanley, "Defense Activities of the Bureau of Home Economics," April 24, 1941, Folder: 30th anniversary, Box 2, General Records, RG 310.

⁸³ Carole Davis and Etta Saltos, "Chapter 2: Dietary Recommendations and How They Have Changed Over Time" in *Recommendations Over Time*, USDA-ERS (1999): 33-36.

US Department of Agriculture, including the Bureau of Home Economics. This move reduced the independence of the previously comprehensive, woman-led research center focused on the home. During the ARA reorganization, the Bureau retained its personnel, including information specialists, but it was subject to an administrator with the authority to consolidate units to promote efficiency and protect programs central to the production and utilization of agricultural products.⁸⁴

In 1943, BHE merged with the protein research program and was renamed the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, thereby assuring nutrition's prominence in home economics research within the federal government.⁸⁵ The merger was directed by the ARA administrator, demonstrating how a centralized research administration impacted the Bureau's independence. While nutrition and food were key aspects of home economics, the field's interdisciplinary interests meant all subfields were just as important to home economists. The new Bureau structure from the Department of Agriculture, however, prioritized nutrition, owing to early nutrition research by Atwater and to the importance, high-profile successes, and demand for nutrition research during the war and earlier periods of crisis.

Furthermore, during the 1943 reorganization, Louise Stanley left her role as chief of the Bureau to become a special assistant for food problems overseas, a position she held until her retirement in 1950. As the Department planned for war recovery and the Marshall Plan, Stanley worked as an expert, directly advising the Secretary of Agriculture. Elevating Louise Stanley during a time of war underscored the value the Department of Agriculture placed on nutrition

⁸⁴ Department of Agriculture (USDA), *Department of Agriculture Memorandum: Establishing Agencies of the Agricultural Research Administration*, Memorandum No. 986, A1.41:986: 1.

⁸⁵ Claude R. Wickard, "Memorandum 986: Establishing Agencies of the Agricultural Research Administration," February 25, 1942, Folder 976-999, Box 5, Office of Secretary's Memoranda.

research. In 1943, as Stanley moved into her new role, she was temporarily replaced by Henry Sherman, a nutrition professor at Columbia University.⁸⁶ Sherman's appointment and the name change emphasized that nutrition was the most critical component of the reformed home economics research program at the USDA. Placing a male nutritionist at the helm of home economics research was indicative of how wartime reforms undermined the Bureau's original mission to conduct wide-ranging research for the home, a mission led by a woman well connected to the academic field.

In 1944, Hazel Stiebeling assumed the role of Bureau Chief. Over the next twenty years, she led the Bureau as its focus was increasingly narrowed to nutrition. Stiebeling joined the Bureau in 1930 to lead the Food Economics Section. Her 1941 report, "Are We Well Fed?" summarized findings about nutrition during the Great Depression. The report found that most US families had poor diets, and those living in towns or cities had worse diets than those living on farms.⁸⁷ Stiebeling's accomplishments in nutrition and food economics earned her respect within the Department. Once she took over, the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics' annual report placed further emphasis on nutrition research and food economics, most likely due to her personal perspective and Departmental pressures. Stiebeling did not report on other aspects of the Bureau's mission, such as clothing, housing, the politics of consumption, and

⁸⁶ Committee on Agriculture, "Men and Milestones in American Agriculture," 89th Cong., 2nd sess., 1966.

⁸⁷ Hazel Stiebeling, "Are We Well Fed?" 1941, Folder 5, Box 1, Hazel Katherine Stiebeling Papers, Special Collections, USDA National Agricultural Library.

household equipment, to the same extent as Stanley. The original plan for an interdisciplinary expansive research program was beginning to fade from view.⁸⁸

In January 1945, the Department of Agriculture reviewed its subcomponents, including the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics. The USDA's report confirmed the BHNHE's purpose was to furnish American families with facts to promote physical and social well-being. The emphasis on social well-being demonstrated home economists' intent to encourage community and healthy family units. In nutrition research, the USDA report described research on nutritional requirements, the nutritive value of foods, and food preparation and preservation. For clothing, the Bureau designed functional garments and specified consumer requirements for fabric types. The household equipment team created performance requirements for common appliances. The economics team developed budgets based on data collected from families with varying economic statuses and occupations. The Department's evaluation confirmed the Bureau's focus on consumer education. While the renaming and reorganization under BHNHE had shifted the priority further toward nutrition, other aspects of the home were still studied, just not to the same extent, to ensure well-educated consumers.⁸⁹

By 1946, the emphasis on consumer education shifted towards promoting agricultural products. Stiebeling envisioned three priorities for the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics: defining the basic human needs for food, clothing, and other goods and services; researching the nature of goods, such as the nutritive value of food; and formulating a

⁸⁸ E.C. Auchter, Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Research Administration (ARA), *Report of the Administrator of Agricultural Research*, A77.1:944, Washington, DC, 1944.

⁸⁹ "Structure Functions, and Origins of the Department of Agriculture and Its Constituent Agencies," Folder: 30th Anniversary, Box: General Records Concerning the History and Philosophy of Home Economics and Nutrition Research, 1932-1970, RG 310.

comprehensive picture of what American families buy and use.⁹⁰ While the main tenets of research remained similar, like nutrition, clothing, and consumption research, the purpose shifted. The priority was not to share this information with consumers to empower them, but to find conclusions that would expand the use of agricultural products.

The shift away from broad research on the home towards the promotion of agricultural products made the BHNHE more aligned with other USDA agricultural research bureaus. The change diminished the Bureau's unique role of translating research for all Americans to help them discern which products might best serve them, thereby limiting the overbearing power of corporations and producers. Instead, home economics research began to narrow its focus to how families can better use American-grown foods and fibers.

Home Economics Wrestling With Its Place

The Bureau's publications were popular; however, Congress, the President, and USDA administrators did not want a comprehensive home economics research program within the Department of Agriculture. Policy makers suggested that research on dishwashing, economic studies on living expenses, and home design should be completed by the private sector or other government agencies. The public, however, appreciated the broader agenda of federal home economics research, which sought to share knowledge with families and consumers. From 1947 to 1948, BHNHE issued 33 new publications, 24 technical articles, 109 popular articles, 11 radio scripts, and distributed 5,750,000 copies of bulletins.⁹¹ More than 150 million copies of the

⁹⁰ E.C. Auchter, Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Research Administration (ARA), *Report of the Administrator of Agricultural Research*, A77.1:946, Washington, DC, 1946.

⁹¹ Benjamin R. Andrews, "Home Economics, 1848-1948," *JHE* 40, no. 6 (June 1948).

Bureau's bulletins were printed from 1923 to 1958.⁹² In *Remaking Home Economics*, historian Rachel Moran argued that the BHNHE had a unique role in the Department of Agriculture because they were motivated to answer the public's questions and make their research easily accessible for the everyday woman. This was similar to other women-dominated government bureaus, such as the Children's Bureau and the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor. Research was not conducted solely for research's sake, but Moran defined the Bureau as part of the advisory state: federal research with specific social aims.⁹³ BHNHE conducted research to improve Americans' quality of life. Scientists had to work with information specialists to translate their research into formats that would be well-received by the American public.⁹⁴ In 1955, six of the ten most-requested publications from the Department of Agriculture were in human nutrition and home economics.⁹⁵ Despite the popularity of these publications, the Bureau would later face uphill battles in getting the resources needed to disseminate its information to the public.

By 1949, home economics was wrestling with its place within the USDA. The first Hoover Commission, convened in 1949 and chaired by former President Herbert Hoover, sought to eliminate inefficiency within the Executive Branch. After the Second World War, the US was grappling with the unprecedented expansion of the Executive Branch's power. The report argued that the many independent bureaus in Agriculture were a weakness due to competing interests

⁹²U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service, *Home Economics Research in the U.S. Department of Agriculture*, 1958.

⁹³ Rachel Moran, "Weighing in About Weight: Advisory Power in the Bureau of Home Economics," in *Remaking Home Economics*, ed. Sharon Nickols and Gwen Kay, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

⁹⁴ "Government Speaks to the Consumer Through Home Economists," *JHE* 55, no. 3 (March 1963): 157.

⁹⁵ Emily C. Davis, "BHNHE Reporting," *JHE* 47, no. 4 (April 1955): 261.

and, in the case of BHNHE, the subordination of some bureaus to others. The Hoover Commission confirmed that the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics fit best within the USDA. Hoover found that the USDA's relationship with land-grant colleges, cooperative agreements, and the extension service aligned with home economics work.⁹⁶

However, the Hoover Commission also found several disadvantages to home economics' place in Agriculture. The limited focus on agricultural products meant that food and nutrition were prioritized over other elements of the field. The report determined that the Bureau's work could have been broader, encompassing child development and family relations, if it were in another department. The Hoover Report stated that the Department of Agriculture viewed BHNHE as a service unit to promote agricultural products and as secondary to other research offices. Even at the time, an outside perspective could see the stifling relationship between the Bureau and the Department of Agriculture. Furthermore, the commission saw the Bureau's work overlapped with other government agencies and that home economics work was duplicated across the government. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, work related to home economics was carried out across the federal government, though not necessarily under that name. Connections with Agriculture and land-grant colleges kept the Bureau within the USDA, but it also limited the Bureau's possibilities.⁹⁷

Despite the challenges posed by the larger Department and directives to prioritize nutrition research, the Bureau achieved success with projects in housing and economics with limited staff and funding. In 1950, the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics released its Step-Saving U-Kitchen Plan to improve kitchen functionality. The Bureau's designs were practical,

⁹⁶ "The Hoover Committee upheld the place of the bureau in USDA," March 12, 1953, Folder 5, Box 1, HNIS Collection.

⁹⁷ "The Hoover Committee...", HNIS Collection.

treating the kitchen as a workplace first and foremost, prioritizing durable equipment and convenience. Homemakers' initial reception of the plan was highly positive, affirming that the step-saving kitchen would increase family satisfaction and health.⁹⁸ In 1952, the Bureau conducted research on clothing consumption in major cities and rural areas to compare living standards nationwide. This research was important for determining welfare benefit amounts for rural and urban families, as well as defense needs for supplies and apparel. The Bureau conducted a comprehensive survey of consumption across Illinois during the 1940s, comparing city and farm families. The study revealed that rapid change occurred during this period; purchasing power doubled between 1940 and 1946, and electricity and technology became more widespread. However, this work was discontinued after the publication of the Illinois survey in 1952 and was not replicated in other states because the supervisory leader on the research, Mollie Orshansky, was transferred to a defense agency.⁹⁹ In future work, Orshansky worked for the Social Security Administration and developed the US poverty thresholds we still use today.¹⁰⁰ During the 1950s, home economists proposed extensive nationwide surveys that encompassed both urban and rural areas, aiming to analyze all facets of family spending. These surveys were designed to offer precise budgeting guidance to households and inform policymakers in adjusting stipends for public assistance programs. Home economists sought to address broader social

⁹⁸ "Step Saving U-Kitchen Plan," November 1950, Folder: Research Achievement Sheets, Box 2 General Records, RG 310; Step Saving Kitchens, Emily Marsh, Step-Saving Kitchens, Stories from the Collection, USDA National Agricultural Library.

⁹⁹ "Consumption Levels and Budgeting and Buying Problems," April 20, 1952, Folder: 1952 Reports, Box 1, Consumer and Food Economics Work and Line Project Annual Reports 1945-1953, RG 310; "Present and Potential Family Utilization of Clothing and Housing Textiles April 1950 through March 1951," Folder: 1952 Reports, Box 1, Consumer and Food Economics Work and Line Project Annual Reports 1945-1953, RG 310.

¹⁰⁰ "Mollie Orshansky," Social Security History, <https://www.ssa.gov/history/orshansky.html>.

problems through their research, especially mitigating the effects of poverty. These ambitions were thwarted in the Department of Agriculture by limited funding and staffing, which discouraged expansive—and expensive—consumer research.

During the postwar period, Congress prioritized defense funding. Home economics fell outside the category of essential non-defense research, which harmed the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics prospects for funding and support. Instead, home economists were hired across government and into defense agencies, spreading the influence of home economics but weakening the centralized bureau.¹⁰¹ In 1950, Congress was concerned about the Department of Agriculture's efficiency. The Appropriations Committee ultimately would not justify increases for the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics. Instead, the Committee suggested that other agencies could do surveys of rural family living expenses or farmhouse plans; as a result, funding for those non-nutrition research lines at the Bureau was cut. Some consumption surveys were conducted at other agencies, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Social Security Administration, but work on house plans like the Step-Saving Kitchen was not undertaken elsewhere. Ultimately, the multifaceted and varied focus of BHNHE hurt its chances of survival as an interdisciplinary agency. A government focused on defense spending and efficiency sought to cut out duplicative research. Much of the Bureau's work overlapped with other government research on economics and family, making the Bureau as a whole vulnerable to cuts.

¹⁰¹ "House Committee on Appropriations report no 1797," March 21, 1950, Box 1, Folder 5, HNIS Collection; Cong. Rec., 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, vol. 96, pt. 8, 10377; "Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, Advisory On," *JHE* 42, no. 7 (September 1950): 550; Cong. Rec., 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, vol. 96, pt. 5, 5916.

Home economics research in the Department of Agriculture maintained a small but mighty staff after some cuts in the 1950s. The Bureau started with 50 staff in 1923 and by its 25th anniversary in 1948, had grown to around 300. In 1951, 58 staff members were fired due to reduced funding in BHNHE. The Bureau's \$1.5 million in funding in FY 1951 was reduced to \$1.35 million in FY 1952. The Department of Agriculture received a slight increase in funds that year, but home economics was simply not a priority for Congress or the Department. This new level of funding and staffing was retained, with some slight ups and downs across different divisions, through the early 1960s.¹⁰² Home economists strove to work more efficiently, and improvements in work management were rewarded with cash awards. However, efficiency with fewer staff members meant any lines of research that were not a top priority fell to the wayside.¹⁰³

Many members of Congress and USDA leadership believed home economics research would be more appropriate in the private sector, further eroding federal support. During testimony to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture in 1951, Agricultural Research Administrator Byron Shaw assured Congress that private consumer research organizations could pick up the slack created by cuts to the federal Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics. He acknowledged that Agriculture's research did not cover all the lines of work wanted by home economists because some work is better suited to private or state

¹⁰² Emily C. Davis, "The BHNHE Reporting," *JHE* 44, no. 9. (November 1952): 721; "Government Speaks to the Consumer Through Home Economists" *JHE* 55, no. 3 (March 1963): 157; "Audit of the Institute of Home Economics," July 21, 1960, Folder 24, Box 2, HNIS Collection.

¹⁰³ Hazel Stiebeling, *Report of Chief of Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics*, Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics (BHNHE), Department of Agriculture (USDA), A77.701:951, Washington, DC, 1951.

organizations. Shaw's lack of advocacy for home economics was reflected in his budget requests since he did not request increased funding for the Bureau. Instead, members of the House agreed that private industry would lead research, with exceptions for military food research.¹⁰⁴ Without strong allies in the Department of Agriculture leadership, funding and support for home economics work beyond nutrition continued to dwindle through the 1950s and 1960s.

Seeing recent reforms at USDA, the American Home Economics Association pushed to restore the Bureau to a broader research scope but ultimately sought to support other federal home economics projects. AHEA developed an advisory committee for the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics in 1944, which an official USDA committee later took over in 1955. The AHEA promised to connect the Bureau with state home economics associations and national women's groups to share the Bureau's findings more broadly.¹⁰⁵ AHEA was an advocate and sounding board for federal home economics research. The *Journal of Home Economics* featured a regular section on federal government home economics research from 1952 through 1965. However, AHEA's primary federal focus on research at the USDA waned in the mid-1950s due to the Department's shift from home economics to nutrition. In response, the organization changed its focus to include work conducted by other federal agencies in fields such as education, housing, children, and health. The AHEA's legislative efforts extended to the Office of Education, the Children's Bureau, the Women's Bureau, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Housing and Home Financing Agency.¹⁰⁶ Home economics research was conducted across the government, beyond the USDA.

¹⁰⁴ Cong. Rec., 82nd Cong., 1st sess., 1951, vol. 97, pt. 4, 5210-5211.

¹⁰⁵ "Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, Advisory On," *JHE* 43, no. 7 (September 1951): 547-548.

¹⁰⁶ "Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, Advisory On," *JHE* 48, no. 7 (September 1956): 548-549.

Following pressure from AHEA, Stiebeling affirmed the Bureau's commitment to consumer research. In BHE's 1952 annual report, Stiebeling wrote that consumer research was as important as other government work that served the farmer, businessman, and wage earner.¹⁰⁷ Her shift from nutrition to consumer research was a change. Home economics research provided a factual basis for consumers to make decisions on both what to buy and how to run their households. Instead of corporate advertising, the government provided unbiased product information to improve everyday life for Americans. The government was not trying to sell items in the same manner as corporations, and instead, Stiebeling viewed the Bureau as a clearinghouse for data on the home that would reach the general public. While not everyone considered household commodities worth federal attention, both Stiebeling and Stanley thought the Bureau should provide families with facts on household commodities.

On October 14, 1952, at a presidential campaign event in Waco, Texas, Republican candidate for president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, cracked jokes about a bulletin titled "Tips for Dishwashing" written by the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He promised that during his presidency, no federal funds would be spent on dishwashing. Eisenhower called the booklets from the Bureau silly, and he preferred to leave the dishwashing and food selection to America's housewives. He promised that under his

¹⁰⁷Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Home Economics, *Report of the chief of Bureau of Home Economics*, Louise Stanley. A42.1:937 (Washington, DC, 1937); Department of Agriculture (USDA), Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics (BHNHE), *Report of Chief of Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics*, Hazel Stiebeling, A77.701:952. Washington, DC. 1952.

presidency, the Department of Agriculture would pursue more serious issues, such as soil conservation and price supports for farmers.¹⁰⁸

Eisenhower's comments, which trivialized dishwashing research at the USDA, elicited different reactions. The dishwashing research examined the specifications of different dishwashing machines and evaluated their efficacy. This research was of interest to consumers making choices on how to run their household, spend their limited incomes, and wash their dishes. Agriculture Secretary Charles F. Brannan was upset and wrote Eisenhower a public letter calling Eisenhower's jokes crude and assured that the Department's pamphlets about dishwashing were helpful to many Americans.¹⁰⁹ Despite the tense relationship between Eisenhower and home economics research, just a few months into his presidency, in May 1953, Eisenhower visited the Agricultural Research Center in Beltsville and enjoyed a meal of foods developed by the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics. Like Department officials and members of Congress, Eisenhower saw the value in nutrition research, but did not value other research conducted on the home.¹¹⁰ Eisenhower eventually honored Dr. Stiebeling with a Distinguished Federal Civilian Award, citing her contributions to nutrition and food economics. As the top government official, President Eisenhower valued the work of the BHNHE; however, he was the latest in a growing trend of senior officials who viewed nutrition research as the key and research about other domestic issues as superfluous.

¹⁰⁸ Dwight Eisenhower, October 14, 1952, Folder 1, Box 2, Eisenhower Speech Series, Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS.

¹⁰⁹ "Brannan Twits General for Dishwashing Taunts," *New York Times*, October 17, 1952.

¹¹⁰ Emily C. Davis, "The BHNHE Reporting," *JHE* 45, no. 8 (October 1953): 584.

No More Bureau: Centralized Research

Following a second Hoover Commission in 1953, President Eisenhower submitted a reorganization plan to Congress, granting the Secretary of Agriculture broad authority to reorganize the Department. This culminated in a series of reorganizations from 1953 to 1955 that further diminished home economics research. In early 1953, the Agricultural Research Administration was renamed the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), but the Bureau stayed the same.¹¹¹ That did not last for long. By the end of 1953, the Department of Agriculture announced plans to reorganize all its service agencies. The Agricultural Research Service was placed under federal-state relations. Most consequentially, the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics would be made into two research units under a central director, former Bureau Chief Dr. Hazel Stiebeling. The two units were, predictably, Human Nutrition and Home Economics. Stiebeling assured AHEA that home economics research would be strengthened under this reorganization, but that assurance proved short-lived. The Bureau's information division was also eliminated, and information was centralized in ARS.¹¹² This made publishing and presenting research to the public more difficult since home economics research had to compete with the many other functions of ARS. Central information specialists might not have the same level of expertise in home economics under this new system. Without a dedicated information staff, this reorganization diminished the unique nature and capacity of an independent, women-led Bureau that corresponded with families nationwide.

¹¹¹ Ezra T. Benson, "Memorandum 1320, Supplement 4: Reorganization of the Department of Agriculture," March 12, 1953, Folder, 1300-1349, Box 5, Office of Secretary's Memoranda.

¹¹² "Background information on human nutrition research division", July 28, 1971, Folder 3, Box 1, HNIS Collection; Hazel Stiebeling to Byron Shaw, November 19, 1953, Folder 5, Box 1, HNIS Collection; "Washington News - U.S. Department of Agriculture Reorganization Plans," *JHE* 45, no. 10 (December 1953): 704.

The reorganization of the Bureau into the Agricultural Research Service further diminished the role of female scientists at the USDA. Before World War II, the Department of Agriculture was the largest government employer of women scientists. In 1939, according to research by the Women's Bureau, women made up 20 percent of the Department of Agriculture's employees, which did not distinguish between scientific and administrative positions.¹¹³ However, by 1954, the USDA employed 392 women scientists, just 2.43 percent of total USDA scientists, with the majority concentrated in home economics. The Department of Agriculture did not increase opportunities for women in the 1950s as it did in the 1920s. Instead, the Department of Defense (DOD) and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) employed the first- and second-most women scientists in the federal government. While HEW worked on home economics projects, especially in education and child development, no other department had a dedicated focus on home economics like the USDA. The shrinking proportion of women scientists in Agriculture demonstrated the weakening influence of home economics and portended future efforts to eliminate the research led by women scientists in the Department of Agriculture.¹¹⁴

Facing declining funding from Congress and staff reductions in 1955, ARS Administrator Byron T. Shaw realigned the home economics budget, allocating 87 percent to food and nutrition and 13 percent to everything else. Shaw briefed the Secretary's executive assistant, understanding that the Department would receive questions about home economics' place in

¹¹³ Rachel Fesler Nyswander and Janet M. Hooks, "Employment of Women in the Federal Government 1932 to 1939," Bulletin of the Women's Bureau, No. 182, Women's Bureau, Government Printing Office: 1941.

¹¹⁴ Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America Before Affirmative Action*, 280.

Agriculture, and was open to discussing moving the research.¹¹⁵ This proposal moved staff from home economics to human nutrition, reflecting the Department's and Congress's priorities. Additionally, Shaw proposed eliminating all clothing and textiles research, but public pushback from home economists was strong enough that the research remained on a smaller scale.¹¹⁶ Congress agreed with Shaw on shifting the home economics budget. Rep. Jamie Whitten, a Democrat from Tennessee, who asked during an appropriations hearing why agriculture was conducting research on clothing, family expenditures, and consumption. Congress acknowledged that home economics' many interests did not fit squarely within the Department of Agriculture.¹¹⁷

The 1955 realignment discontinued bulletins for homemakers and consumers, further eroded the federal government's unique role in home economics research. USDA's home economics research had dual functions: gathering information for the government and sharing it with the general public. Without a direct line to the research through bulletins, families lost a valuable resource. Families and homemakers had few alternatives but to turn to private sources of information. Research was still published, but not with the specific lens of communicating with homemakers and families, which meant more technical language and less widely published

¹¹⁵ Byron Shaw to Milan Smith, March 10, 1955, Folder 5, Box 1, HNIS Collection; "Washington News," *JHE* 47, no. 4 (April 1955): 232.

¹¹⁶ Callie Coons, "Strengthening Research in Food and Nutrition," December 1954, Folder 5, Box 1, HNIS Collection; Byron Shaw to E.L. Peterson, Sept 2, 1955, Folder 6, Box 1, HNIS Collection.

¹¹⁷ "Excerpts from: Agricultural Appropriations for 1956 - Hearings before the subcommittee on appropriations, House of Representatives, part 2, pages 458-464, 474-478, 767-776," 1956, Folder 7, Box 1, HNIS Collection.

materials. The discontinuation of the homemaker's bulletins diminished the Bureau's purpose of communicating with Americans and improving daily living.¹¹⁸

The American Home Economics Association was outraged by the 1955 budget realignment. They wrote a press release and shared remarks in the *Journal of Home Economics*, writing that the realignment "produces an unbalanced program of research... it indicates a lack of understanding at the federal research level in the USDA of the fact that all areas of homemaking are the concern of research in home economics."¹¹⁹ Home economists in AHEA saw clearly that Agriculture would not value all aspects of home economics and would no longer consult with home economists outside the USDA. AHEA continued to advocate for the full scope of home economics, but knew the Department of Agriculture would not be the place for expansive home economics research.

AHEA disbanded its advisory committee in 1955 when the USDA itself formed a formal advisory committee on home economics. This new advisory group continued to evaluate the importance of different research programs but did not value a well-rounded program like those proposed by AHEA. In 1955, the committee had eleven women and four men, reflecting the field's female-dominated nature. Many of the men had backgrounds in chemistry or medicine, demonstrating nutrition's trend towards masculinity. Home economics was founded as a field by and for women, but it became less gendered as men entered the field and other areas of study traditionally associated with women. More men were earning doctorates in fields like nutrition

¹¹⁸ Byron Shaw to Milan Smith, March 10, 1955, Folder 5, Box 1, HNIS Collection.

¹¹⁹ "Press Release from the American Home Economics Association", March 8, 1955, Folder 5, Box 1, HNIS Collection; "Washington News," *JHE* 47, no. 6 (June 1955): 382.

and child development outside of Departments of Home Economics.¹²⁰ Starting in the 1950s, the dissolution of this broad, female-led interdisciplinary field was underway. With a weakened leader in federal research, home economics had become an example of how the field could shrink rather than grow to meet the needs of midcentury America. This trend was not due to a general belief that home economics was unimportant work, but to the development of some aspects of home economics expertise into independent fields of research, such as nutrition, psychology, and sociology.

The USDA's emphasis on nutrition reflected changing trends; nutrition studies were increasingly conducted by men trained as biochemists rather than by women trained as home economists. It was no secret that nutrition research fit best in Agriculture and received the most support as a legitimate scientific discipline compared to textile and household equipment research. Often, gender dictated whether a nutrition researcher was considered a biochemist or a home economist. Scholar Rima Apple discussed the gendered nature of science in academia. Nutrition was considered a feminized science in the early twentieth century, but by the 1950s, men accounted for over three-quarters of the discipline. This shift was due to the lack of PhD opportunities for women in nutrition and to the discipline's move from home economics departments to chemistry or agriculture departments in universities.¹²¹ This trend in academia was also evident in government. First, Henry Sherman's brief stint as Bureau Chief in 1943 was an early indicator of the rise of men in government nutrition research. It wasn't until the 1950s

¹²⁰ "Advisory committee on home economics research at USDA," 1955-1966, Folder: Press Releases Institute of Home Economics, Box 4, General Records Concerning the History and Philosophy of Home Economics and Nutrition Research, 1932-1970, RG 310.

¹²¹ Rima Apple, "How gender shaped science and education: A history of nutritional sciences in the 19th and twentieth centuries," *Frontiers of Education in China* 5 (2010):177-185; Nickols and Kay, *Remaking Home Economics: Resourcefulness and Innovation in Changing Times*.

that the impact of academic changes that pushed women out of nutrition became apparent within the Department of Agriculture. During this time, proposals to Congress for expanding nutrition research omitted all other aspects of home economics.¹²² However, this trend of shrinking government-funded home economics research gathered steam in the 1950s.

During appropriations hearings on the topic of home economics research at the USDA in 1956, Senator Milton Young, a Republican from North Dakota, thought a vast amount of information was available to housewives and consumers from producers, and they could procure any information or advice from the corner store, therefore there was no need for the government to supply information related to the home. Young viewed homemaking as unscientific and unprofessional, and that information did not need to come from experts. This view was not necessarily shared across Congress. Senator Paul Douglas, a Democrat from Illinois, assured Senator Young that official government sources were better than commercial producers.¹²³ While lawmakers did not hold uniform beliefs about the role of federal home economics research, misconceptions about home economics negatively influenced appropriations.

Despite conflicts between the USDA and home economists, the Department of Agriculture recognized the value of the home economics staff through awards. Louise Stanley, Hazel Stiebeling, and Ruth O'Brien were honored with Distinguished Service Awards by the Department of Agriculture for their roles as chiefs and assistant chief of the Bureau. In 1955, the

¹²² Proposed Program for Expanded Research in Food and Nutrition - A Report to Congress, prepared by the Agricultural Research Service of the Department of Agriculture, presented by Mr. Young of North Dakota," September 12, 1963, Folder: Food and Agriculture - A program of research, Box 2, General Records Concerning the History and Philosophy of Home Economics and Nutrition Research, 1932-1970, RG 310.

¹²³ "Excerpts from Agricultural Appropriations for 1956 - Hearings before the subcommittee of the committee of appropriations, United States Senate, pp. 223-242," Folder 1, Box 5, HNIS Collection; Cong. Rec., 84th Cong., 1st sess., 1955, vol. 101, pt. 4, 5094-5101.

two research units honored with Distinguished Service Awards in the Department were the vitamin A research team and the school lunch research team in home economics. These teams were housed in nutrition, which was favored within the larger Department.¹²⁴ In 1959, Dr. Stiebeling was the first woman to be awarded the President's Civilian Service Award.¹²⁵ The women who conducted home economics research were highly valued for their contribution to the Department and the nation's families. All the awards were designated, however, to nutrition projects, or in Stiebeling's case, to a researcher who focused on nutrition. Therefore, it was not home economics that the Department of Agriculture and the larger government valued, but nutrition research.

The Department of Agriculture favored nutrition and rural research, which were more closely related to the USDA's mission. Other areas of home economics research, such as clothing, household economics, the politics of consumption, housing, and household equipment, were diminished, discontinued, or moved to other government agencies. The interdisciplinary nature of home economics went beyond agriculture. Perceptions persisted at the USDA and in Congress that nutrition was serious, scientific research, while clothing, consumer political power, and housing were unimportant, and feminine concerns. Through several reorganizations in the 1940s and 1950s, broad home economics research ceased to exist at the Department of Agriculture. Several aspects of the original Bureau continued in different forms, especially nutrition research, which had a strong foundation from the Department's inception. The field of

¹²⁴ "Women in Home Economics Honored by Department of Agriculture Awards," May 1955, Folder: Press Releases Institute of Home Economics, Box 4, General Records Concerning the History and Philosophy of Home Economics and Nutrition Research, 1932-1970, Record Group 310.

¹²⁵ "Woman Win Ike Award: Dr. Stiebeling Is First So Honored," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 1959.

nutrition's position changed over this period, becoming disentangled from home economics, as more men earned PhDs. Therefore, the USDA reaffirmed its commitment to nutrition. Home economists at the Department pursued some avenues of research that ran counter to the rigid focus on nutrition, such as urban consumer studies. However, the pressure from administrators was too strong; without adequate funds, home economists could complete projects only in the most well-resourced areas, such as nutrition, which was a far cry from the Bureau's vision in 1923.

Chapter 3: Federal Reimagining (1957-1968)

From the late 1950s through the 1960s, home economics research, aside from nutrition, was ultimately “reorganized out of existence”¹²⁶ within the U.S. Department of Agriculture due to its lack of alignment with the Department’s mission to serve farmers and promote agricultural goods. Advocates argued that continued and expanded government involvement in home economics was essential and made various proposals to restore the government's research capacity, including Senator Estes Kefauver’s proposal for a Department of Consumers (DOC) and the American Home Economics Association’s (AHEA) proposal for a Research Institute for the American Home (RIAH). The never-realized Department of Consumers would have centralized existing federal components, providing consumers with government representation to voice concerns, gain protection, and learn about the consumer economy. The Research Institute for the American Home, if enacted, would have created a government agency to fund and guide research across all aspects of home economics. This proposal aimed to fulfill two needs: the lack of a federal leader in home economics research due to the whittling of the USDA’s program, and the lack of home economics researchers and funding in academia. Neither of these proposals caught on; as a result, home economics research broadly disappeared from the federal government by the end of the 1960s. The discontinuation of federal home economics research, which preceded the field's broader decline, was not inevitable. While the Department of Agriculture was not the best fit for comprehensive research on the home, Congress and the AHEA suggested other avenues to continue home economics work at the federal level.

¹²⁶ Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972*, 284.

Department of Agriculture

In 1957, Agricultural Research Service Administrator Byron Shaw announced a reorganization: the research units of Human Nutrition and Home Economics would be renamed and consolidated into the new Institute of Home Economics. The institute maintained three divisions: human nutrition, clothing and housing, and household economics. The restructuring incorporated research on the use of agricultural products, such as foods and fibers, into home economics. However, this renaming kept clothing, housing, and household economics, even though they made up smaller portions of the overall budget. USDA administrators still understood home economics involved research lines beyond nutrition, even if they were not the top priority. The Institute was still led by Director Dr. Hazel Stiebeling, who reported directly to Administrator Shaw.¹²⁷ The goal of the Institute was consumer education with a focus on rural families.¹²⁸ Once again, rural families were the focus of the Department of Agriculture, despite home economics' purpose to serve all families.¹²⁹

The Institute's January 1960 report was similar to past Bureau reports, demonstrating that the same priorities persisted. Hazel Stiebeling reflected on the Institute's purpose: to create "better family living and to benefit consumers, producers, educators, and public leaders."¹³⁰ The audience for home economics work remained the same as when Louise Stanley wrote in 1937 about serving government, producers, and consumers. However, the addition of educators demonstrated that education was a priority for the home economics profession. While the

¹²⁷ "USDA Announces Realignment of Agricultural Research Service Functions," Feb 21, 1957, Folder: Press Releases Institute of Home Economics, Box 4, General Records, RG: 310.

¹²⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service, *Home Economics Research in the U.S. Department of Agriculture*, 1958.

¹²⁹ "Washington News," *JHE* 49, no. 4 (April 1957): 258.

¹³⁰ Hazel Stiebeling, "Institute of Home Economics Report, Jan 1960," HNIS Collection.

intended audience was the same, the organization of the work had changed immensely. The Institute's dominant focus was encouraging consumer use of farm-grown foods and fibers. The Institute still published findings through print media, radio, television, and attending conferences. In 1959, 4 million copies of the Institute's publications were printed, a significant reduction from 107 million distributed in 1947.¹³¹ This downgrade was not altogether surprising, given that the Institute for Home Economics lost its dedicated information specialists in 1955. Home economics at the Department of Agriculture strove to maintain the same audience and research level, but, with fewer resources and less independence, the institute was unable to make the same impact.

Nutrition remained a priority at the USDA through the 1960s. Through research conducted in 1961 and 1962, the Weisner Report, led by Dr. Jerome Weisner, Chairman of President John F. Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee, surveyed the country's nutritional needs and concluded that more nutrition research was needed to enable the federal government to meet the needs of everyday Americans. The report was patronizing toward women, insisting that teenage girls, housewives, and the elderly did not know nutritional standards. The report recommended further research and guidance from the Department of Agriculture and the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council.¹³² The Department's smaller distribution of home economics bulletins surely contributed to the lack of knowledge about food and nutrition. More research, while an essential part of the puzzle, meant nothing if that work was not translated for the average American.

¹³¹ Ruth O'Brien, "BHNHE Celebrates a Quarter Century of Service," *JHE* 40, no. 6 (June 1948): 293-296.

¹³² "Food and Nutrition Programs for USA," March 1961, Folder: Wiesner Report, Box 2, General Records Concerning the History and Philosophy of Home Economics and Nutrition Research 1932-1970.

Beyond nutrition, the other two areas of the Institute of Home Economics submitted reports to Congress in September 1961 on their current work and future funding hopes. Clothing and Housing had only 25 scientists on staff and wanted to pursue more cooperative projects with state governments and universities but lacked the funds to do so. Clothing research focused on the best uses of fabric types, how to care for them, and how to make or buy clothing. Housing research examined home appliances such as refrigerators and developed efficient design plans for farmhouses. The next branch of research, household economics, primarily conducted surveys of food consumption to better understand the use of agricultural products, which was a far cry from previous work on total household budgets that surveyed different types of households. Instead of helping consumers, the Institute was geared toward helping farmers make the most money rather than protecting consumers against fraud or empowering consumers against corporations, the middlemen between farmers and consumers. Household economics worked with about a third of state agricultural experiment stations across the country, so while some of their findings were publicized and shared in different communities, household economics' work did not reach the majority of Americans living in cities. As a division, household economics knew they were not favored among the three avenues of research at the Institute of Home Economics, so they did not request an increase in funding; rather, they hoped for an increase in resources for the Institute as a whole.¹³³ These reports to Congress demonstrated that all home economics research outside nutrition was neglected and underfunded.

In 1962, the Department's focus on nutrition was solidified when ARS changed the name of the Institute of Home Economics to Nutrition and Consumer Use Research. Stiebeling still led

¹³³ "A program of research Part III, Unit Rpts. 11, 12, 13" January 1963, Folder: Food and Agriculture - A program of research, Box 2, General Records Concerning the History and Philosophy of Home Economics and Nutrition Research, 1932-1970, RG 310.

the research, but the constant reshuffling and renaming demonstrated that Agriculture did not like the idea of home economics but did value its nutrition research. The AHEA was disappointed with the new name, referred to home economics as the “often renamed unit,” and expressed surprise that home economics was nowhere to be found in the new name.¹³⁴ AHEA had steadily shifted its federal advocacy focus away from the USDA and towards other Departments. However, AHEA was optimistic that home economics could still be a driving force at Agriculture. The USDA recognized the consumer-citizen relationship as a major driving force behind its work in the new Nutrition and Consumer Use division in 1963. In an article titled “Government Speaks to the Consumer Through Home Economists,” in March 1963, the USDA reported on the Nutrition and Consumer Use’s staff of 250, which included scientists, writers, and clerical staff who work together to create publications that might be of interest to consumers. Nutrition and Consumer Use still strove to inform everyday people of its research findings. Many of the home economists employed by USDA had been there for many years, so leadership and staff continued from the Institute of Home Economics to Nutrition and Consumer Use. Stiebeling and the rest of the leadership team remained consistent through the late 1950s and early 1960s, so while funding and research priorities continuously evolved, the idea of sharing research remained a pillar.¹³⁵

The staffing consistency changed when Dr. Stiebeling retired on June 30, 1963; the next day, the Department of Agriculture’s Utilization Research division merged with the Nutrition and Consumer Use Research division. George Irving Jr, who led Utilization Research, became director of both divisions, and Ruth Leverton, the most senior official in home economics

¹³⁴ “Washington News,” *JHE* 54, no. 1 (January 1962): 8.

¹³⁵ “Government Speaks to the Consumer Through Home Economists,” *JHE* 55, no 3 (March 1963): 157.

research, was appointed as an assistant administrator. The combined enterprise was named Nutrition, Consumer, and Industrial Use Research (NCIUR).¹³⁶ Rep. Benjamin Rosenthal of New York was outraged by this realignment, calling it a slight to consumers. He praised Stiebeling's leadership and her advocacy for consumers. In remarks on the House floor, Rosenthal said, "It seems to me that this 'merger' as the Agriculture Department's press release terms it, is likely to be the sad case of a whale swallowing a valiant fish."¹³⁷ Rep. Rosenthal was particularly concerned about the merger because of his dedication to consumer protection. Furthermore, the emphasis on utilization was not to empower or protect consumers, but to enrich farming and corporate interests. The merger after Stiebeling's retirement fully diminished any autonomy for home economics research at the USDA; the Department's support of farmers superseded home economics' support of consumers.

Stiebeling's retirement provided an opportunity for critics to further diminish the field of home economics research within the Department of Agriculture and, by extension, interdisciplinary federal home economics research. The subfields of home economics like nutrition, family economics, and family development, had become successful and spread to other agencies. Furthermore, this reorganization meant the research was no longer led by a woman. One of the original purposes of the Bureau was to elevate women scientists, with Louise Stanley at the helm. However, since the research now focused most squarely on nutrition and crop use, a male biochemist was a good fit for leadership. While the components of the research remained: nutrition, clothing and housing, and household economics, the components were strictly viewed as tools for studying consumers' use of crops in order to make more money for agricultural

¹³⁶ "Dr. Stiebeling Retires as USDA Deputy Administrator," June 20, 1963, Folder: Press Releases Institute of Home Economics, Box 4, General Records, RG 310.

¹³⁷ Cong. Rec., 88th Cong., 1st sess., 1963, vol. 109, pt. 9, 11926-11927.

interests, not as ways to improve the home. Years of prioritizing nutrition research and failing to expand USDA home economics research to encompass the field's breadth meant this retirement and the resulting merger were the death knell of home economics research at the Department of Agriculture.¹³⁸

AHEA remarked on Stiebeling's retirement, praising her accomplishments. Her studies on diets helped American families improve their nutrition; she worked in an international capacity; and she was honored as a federal servant. As a prominent figure in the field, Stiebeling was seen as a distinguished representative of home economics. However, the association was not the same ardent supporter of the Department of Agriculture that it once was. The Committee on Federal Research called for a monthly report on the work of home economists in federal agencies other than the USDA. Since home economics was no longer the central focus of the USDA's nutrition and consumer research, it did not make sense for AHEA to hold it above the rest of the federal government.¹³⁹ Home economics research was carried out in other places in the federal government, just not under the banner of home economics.

While home economics was no longer prominent at the USDA, the Department of Agriculture proposed substantial increases in funding for nutrition research in 1963. Part of the reasoning was the Wiesner Report; policymakers saw the need for more nutrition research. The USDA proposed to increase the number of scientists from 80 to 148 and funding from \$500,000 to \$1,850,000 over three years. This tremendous growth would have further diminished the

¹³⁸ "USDA Consumer Research Is Consolidated," *JHE* 55, no. 8 (October 1963): 612.

¹³⁹ "Hazel Stiebeling Retires from USDA," *JHE* 55, no. 7 (September 1963): 545; "From Committees," *JHE* 55, no. 7 (September 1963): 539.

remaining aspects of home economics.¹⁴⁰ This proposal was not adopted by Congress, but its consideration demonstrated that nutrition research was paramount in the minds of Congress and USDA officials.

As in previous years, USDA administrators were dissatisfied with the leadership and organization of the Agricultural Research Service and recommended some changes. In 1964, George Irving Jr was promoted to ARS administrator, and Willis Gortner was promoted to Director of Human Nutrition. According to Gortner, his promotion and subsequent reorganization plans were due to a need for more vigorous and professional leadership. The human nutrition division had been led by a female home economist up to this point, so his calls for vigorous, professional leadership were likely sexist, downplaying the professional nature of home economists. Human nutrition would also narrow its focus, reducing labs from 6 to 5 and investigations from 23 to 14, to ensure work could be coordinated smoothly. Furthermore, consumer use investigations were narrowed to solely focus on the use of agricultural commodities and USDA food distribution programs.¹⁴¹ Even nutrition research, which was the most valued sector of home economics within the USDA, was marred by the sexist attitudes toward home economics as a whole.

At the close of 1964, Agriculture Secretary Orville Freeman announced that clothing and housing research would be phased out to maximize efficiency in support of Great Society programs. Nutrition research would improve the health of low-income Americans, but housing and clothing research was too focused on design and farm families to be broadly applicable to

¹⁴⁰ "Proposed Program for Expanded Research in Food and Nutrition," General Records Concerning the History and Philosophy of Home Economics and Nutrition Research, 1932-1970, RG 310.

¹⁴¹ "A Reorganization Plan for the Human Nutrition Division, ARS," July 1964, Folder 1, Box 1, HNIS Collection.

Great Society programs. Secretary Freeman urged manufacturers and retailers to pay more attention to consumer needs rather than to the government. AHEA disagreed but suggested transferring the research to the Department of Urban Affairs, demonstrating the home economists' lack of faith in Agriculture's ability to pursue research that did not directly address basic agricultural products. AHEA was also concerned about this sudden announcement, which came without warning, because the clothing industry relied on textile and equipment research from Agriculture. Congress was also alarmed by Freeman's large-scale restructuring of agriculture research that extended far beyond home economics. The Senate Committee on Appropriations reported on Freeman's elimination of research lines, which was done without consulting Congress. Eliminating clothing and housing research would save \$550,400; however, the Senate Appropriations Committee favored keeping the division. They underscored its impact beyond rural families: it was relevant to urban families as well. Research that was relevant to the general population was worthwhile. However, to compromise with the Department of Agriculture, which wanted to discontinue the research line altogether, clothing and housing research was appropriated \$274,000, about half of its most recent budget.¹⁴²

One of the main eliminations was household equipment research, which previously surveyed home technologies, including optimal cooking temperatures for various foods, different types of appliances, and the features of various household machines, to provide scientific analysis for consumers. Now, most consumers would get that information from producers and private sources. With all the uncertainty over the clothing and housing division, many staff left in 1965; the division's numbers dwindled from 42 to 3.¹⁴³ The lack of staff would not sustain the

¹⁴² Cong. Rec., 82nd Cong., 1st sess., 1965, vol. 111, pt. 6, 7723, 8536.

¹⁴³ "Advisory Committee Reviews USDA Human Nutrition and Consumer Use Research," December 23, 1965, Folder: Food and Agriculture - A program of research, Box 4, General

program for long. Ruth Leverton, the home economics administrator, recommended that the remaining staff be moved to the Consumer and Food Economics division at the Department of Agriculture. Agriculture was further relinquishing responsibility for research on home economics outside nutrition. The name Consumer and Food Economics was mostly lip service, as the division had little staff and focused solely on crop utilization by farming families. Additionally, clothing research had long been a mainstay of agricultural research, given the use of crops such as cotton in clothing. The focus on nutrition cut off all oxygen from other elements of research on the home.

While the field of home economics remained broad and collaborative within academia, the Department of Agriculture focused solely on human nutrition research and food economics in 1966. Food economics continued to survey the nutrition of rural American households. One study, summarized in a report to the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture in April 1966, surveyed 7,500 households in rural counties that worked with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The survey found that diets considered good decreased by 10 percent over the decade due to increases in bakery products, beef, and soft drinks.¹⁴⁴ While these surveys were useful for informing nutrition research and health outcomes, they were a far cry from the earlier, more feminist and inventive economic surveys in the Department of Agriculture that looked more directly at paid and unpaid labor within the home.

Records, RG 310; "Research in Clothing and Housing in USDA to be phased out," *JHE* 57, no. 4 (March 1965): 172; "AHEA Statement in Support of Continuation of Clothing and Housing Research," *JHE* 57, no. 6 (June 1965): 457; Ruth Leverton to George W. Irving, January 24, 1966, Folder 1, Box 1, HNIS Collection.

¹⁴⁴ "Report to Committee on Agriculture," April 1966, Folder: Nutritive Quality of Diets, Box 4, General Records, RG 310.

The precarious nature of the research and the limited staff prompted the transfer of the clothing and textiles program to the University of Tennessee in 1967, drawing on the Agriculture Department's cooperative extension opportunities.¹⁴⁵ This integral part of home economics research, which was present from the Bureau's inception in 1923, was devalued because USDA administrators deemed it less important than nutrition. Still, information was passed down to the university level to continue this research, albeit with fewer resources and impact. At the very least, there was an avenue for clothing research that did not solely rely on corporations that produced the clothing.

The advisory committee appointed by the Human Nutrition and Consumer Use Research division reported on the division's 1967 activities, which focused on nutrition. They were appreciative of research on iron intake, nutrient content of foods, and the school lunch program. Now the committee was composed of more men than women. Of the 11 committee members, only three worked directly in home economics; the others were biochemists, doctors, and economists.¹⁴⁶ The era of female prominence in federal home economics and consumer research had ended.

After the final dissolution of research on clothing and housing, the Department of Agriculture no longer had a home economics research program; it had only a nutrition research program. Researchers and information specialists over the years strove to inform Americans

¹⁴⁵ "University of Tennessee Chosen as Site of USDA Textiles Laboratory," *JHE* 59, no. 8 (October 1967): 659; Ruth Leverton to George W. Irving, January 24, 1966, Folder 1, Box 1, HNIS Collection; Ruth Leverton to Dixie McKenzie, March 30, 1967, Folder 1, Box 1, HNIS Collection.

¹⁴⁶ Advisory Committee Reviews USDA Human Nutrition and Consumer Use Research," December 19, 1967, Folder: Food and Agriculture - A program of research, Box 4, General Records, RG 310.

about many aspects of home and family life. However, the Department of Agriculture never achieved a fully comprehensive research program at home. Key moments of restructuring, starting in the 1940s and continuing through the 1960s, were opportunities the USDA took to expand nutrition research and downgrade other aspects of home economics. The slow descent away from home economics, however, had inspired new proposals for home economics research in the 1950s: one from a Senator that emphasized its economic aspects, and one from AHEA that called for the federal government to guide comprehensive research on the home.

Department of Consumers

As families earned more income from women's wage-earning and the booming post-war economy, consumption was a key part of American citizenship and home life. Calls for comprehensive federal research on the home and consumers came from many fronts. Senator Estes Kefauver, a Democrat from Tennessee who had just finished a vice-presidential run, proposed a federal Department of Consumers in 1959, which would consolidate the Institute of Home Economics, the Food and Drug Administration, the Division of Prices and Cost of Living at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and parts of the National Bureau of Standards focused on consumer goods. The Department of Consumers would, according to him, protect consumers' economic interests, represent their interests before federal agencies and courts, evaluate trade practices detrimental to consumers, conduct economic surveys, and hold an annual consumer conference.¹⁴⁷

Senator Kefauver believed that well-informed consumers, usually housewives, should be prioritized by the government over producers' interests. Kefauver spoke before the National Democratic Women's Club in May 1959 to share his proposal with those he believed were the

¹⁴⁷ Cong. Rec., 86th Cong., 1st sess., 1959, vol. 105, pt. 10, 13020-13022.

country's primary consumers. He asserted that Department status was crucial to this endeavor. If consumers were represented by a smaller agency within a larger department, consumers would be at the whim of the department and its competing interests. Consumers instead required a department that would demonstrate their importance to the government. The Department would then provide information to consumers since the educational system was oriented towards the problems of producers rather than consumer choice. Kefauver and his staff mentioned that the Department's information efforts would be modeled after the Institute of Home Economics. The Department would also be a central clearinghouse for consumer complaints. Kefauver saw that the voices of women and consumers needed a large place in government that did not already exist. His proposal for a Department of Consumers would build on the work of home economists at the Department of Agriculture but would incorporate more aspects of the consumer experience and be less subject to the whims of administrators who cared more about agricultural products than about consumers and families.¹⁴⁸

Senator Kefauver's proposal was scheduled for a hearing in June 1960. All the Departments affected by the proposal wrote in opposition. The Department of Agriculture, in particular, was opposed because home economics research would focus on individual consumer concerns, rather than broadly determining families' basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Furthermore, True D. Morse, Acting Undersecretary of Agriculture, added that the Department of Consumers would not constitute a strengthened research program for the American family, as it would prioritize economic concerns and exclude nutrition research. The USDA used AHEA's proposal for a Foundation for the American Home to oppose the Department of Consumers. Clearly, Agriculture was aware of AHEA's idea and even somewhat supportive of the idea that

¹⁴⁸ Cong. Rec., 87th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, vol. 107, pt. 5, 6407 - 6413.

home economics research might not fit squarely in the Department of Agriculture. However, the physical scientific foundation of home economics research was important to the Department. The Department's view was supported by its foundation in nutrition research. The economic, psychological, and artistic elements of home economics were not the center points of Agriculture's research program, but it would not give up its nutrition elements to a department focused on the consumer economy.

During the hearing, Administrator Shaw shared his reasoning for why home economics should remain in Agriculture: first, to inform farmers about food and clothing trends; second, to coordinate with states and land-grant universities through cooperative extension; and third, to work in coordination with other Agricultural research, such as animal nutrition. Shaw also asserted that the Director of Home Economics, Hazel Stiebeling, sat in on all decision-making at the Agricultural Research Service, ensuring that the consumer perspective was considered in every decision. While the Department of Consumers might have downgraded federal nutrition research in home economics, the Department of Agriculture subordinated social science research in home economics. Ultimately, the Department of Consumers never came to fruition but instead reflected the growing consumer movement and government interest in consumer protection. This proposal also gave leadership in Agriculture an opportunity to reflect on the fit and purpose of home economics within the Department.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Cong. Rec., 87th Cong., 1st sess., 1961, vol. 107, pt. 5, 6407 – 6413; Hearing before the United States Senate Committee on Government Operations, Subcommittee on Reorganization and International Organizations, *Establish a Department of Consumers*, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., June 23, 24, 1960.

American Home Economics Association

By 1957, professional home economists did not see promise in expanding home economics research within the USDA after reorganizations during the 1950s had reduced the Bureau of Home Economics to a sliver of the multidisciplinary field as defined by home economics' founders. In January 1957, the American Home Economics Association's Committee on Federal Research Related to Home Economics announced its proposal for a federal center of home economics. The proposal, entitled the Research Institute for the American Home, would be a small, independent federal agency that would provide grants and fellowships for home economics research in all areas within the field as academic home economists understood it, rather than focus narrowly on food and nutrition as the Bureau in the Department of Agriculture did. The AHEA's proposal was not the only negative evaluation of the USDA's home economics research. Pennsylvania State University reviewed the USDA's research in 1952 and found that the USDA's home economics research was overly focused on nutrition and thus did not reflect the full agenda of home economics, and called for the federal government to create an independent home economics agency.¹⁵⁰ The proposed research institute would coordinate the ecosystem of home economics research, which was being conducted in at least 35 federal agencies, multiple state agencies, and hundreds of universities, all of which relied on one another to spur research. The leadership at AHEA saw a central government agency for the home and the family as paramount to both the future of their discipline and the nation.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Pennsylvania State University, "Development of Home Economics in the United States," Folder: Home Economics Research In USDA, Box 376, Administrators File Room Misc. Field 1942-53, RG 310.

¹⁵¹ "Washington News," *JHE* 49, no. 1 (January 1957): 8; Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972*, 174.

The AHEA's Committee on Federal Research Related to Home Economics was formed after the 1955 funding struggle at BHNHE, so AHEA could evaluate the best steps forward for federal home economics research following the USDA's abandonment of a broad framework. The committee's first step was to research what work had already been done at the federal level. AHEA worked with the Library of Congress and surveyed federal agencies to identify research projects the federal government was conducting in home economics. They evaluated the following categories of home economics projects: foods, nutrition, family economics, family life, child development, home management, household equipment, textiles and clothing, housing, and family health care. The committee reported that most home economics projects were conducted at the USDA. Out of 373 home economics research projects conducted at Agricultural Experiment Stations across the country, 240 projects, almost two-thirds, were nutrition-related. While BHNHE worked in conjunction with experiment station research, experiment station projects were locally focused and separate from the Bureau. Furthermore, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare received the majority of its grants for nutrition research, but HEW reported its family life research more heavily. Nutrition research was well funded across the government, regardless of the department. The majority of nutrition research was still conducted in the USDA. This report from the Committee demonstrated a wide variety of research types across the federal government; not all research was created equal. Nutrition accounted for most federal research projects that might be construed as related to home economics.¹⁵² Despite hopes for broad federal home economics research at the Bureau of Home Economics' inception, nutrition remained the focal point decades later.

¹⁵² Pearl Swanson, "New Resources for Research," *JHE* 53, no. 3 (March 1961): 170.

Additionally, the AHEA Committee discussed modern societal challenges that could be addressed through home economics research. Social science research in family economics and family psychology were disciplines ready to address societal changes, and home economists needed to embrace them. Pearl Swanson, a member of the committee and Assistant of the USDA Iowa Experiment Station, pointed to four changes to American society after World War II: changing patterns of consumption, the growth of suburbia, shifts in the nature of work, and new types of leisure. Swanson argued that these new family patterns would not be understood by simply researching the basic human needs for food, shelter, and clothing. Home economics research, therefore, needed to expand to other aspects of family life. Swanson emphasized the need for integrated research that viewed family life as a whole to effectively address problems. Keeping research siloed across different agencies did not yield the integrated research required.¹⁵³

The Committee's proposed Research Institute for the American Home addressed the lack of researchers and funding in home economics. Home economics research outside the federal government was funded through experiment stations or small grants, mainly from the Department of Agriculture. In fact, Department of Defense or National Science Foundation grants were not available to most home economics projects. Without sufficient graduate programs, the field lacked trained researchers. The Institute would not replicate work already done at the federal level; instead, it would set research priorities through funding graduate programs and research projects that emphasized interdisciplinary research.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Swanson, "New Resources for Research," 161-172.

¹⁵⁴ Ruth R. Honey "The New Directions for Research," *JHE* 51, no 9 (November 1959): 762; Helen Canoyer, "The Changing Role of Home Economics," in *The Development of the Land-Grant Colleges and Universities and Their Influence on the Economic and Social Life of the People* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Bulletin, 1963): 111.

The AHEA's Research Institute was inspired by wider changes in academia. Women were enrolling in universities in high numbers and contributing substantially to household income during the Great Depression and World War II. However, the share of women among college students decreased following the war. The academic world transformed after World War II with the GI Bill. More men enrolled in universities, and universities thus catered to their academic needs. Therefore, women and their fields of study were not given the same opportunities in the 1950s and 1960s as they had been in earlier decades. After the war, women were pushed out of higher-paying jobs and passed over for many academic opportunities. As a women-dominated subject, home economics struggled in the postwar academic environment. While many undergraduates continued to major in the field, they did not continue into research to sustain it. In 1966, 90,000 people were employed as home economists, which was a slight increase from 1962. However, over half were K-12 teachers, and the number of university-level educators was steadily decreasing.¹⁵⁵ Home economics was struggling in academia.

Furthermore, universities were increasingly professionalizing in the 1950s and 1960s, requiring faculty to hold PhDs, which negatively affected home economics since PhD programs in home economics were limited.¹⁵⁶ In her research on women scientists before affirmative action, historian Margaret Rossiter compiled data on the number of PhDs awarded to women across different scientific fields. From 1948 to 1963, 409 PhDs in home economics were awarded by only 23 institutions in the United States. When compared to the field of psychology, which awarded 1,342 PhDs to women from 111 institutions during the same time period, home

¹⁵⁵ "Occupational Outlook Handbook Notes Increase in Home Economists" *JHE* 58, no. 9 (November 1966): 739.

¹⁵⁶ Paul Marthers, "Sweeping Out Home Economics: Curriculum Reform at Connecticut College for Women, 1952–1962." *History of Education Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2011): 362–88.

economics paled in comparison. This statistic is especially salient, given that women accounted for 80 percent of the total PhDs awarded in home economics, compared with just 15 percent in psychology. Thus, there were not enough PhD-level home economists to maintain strong academic programs. Additionally, many of the field's leaders and pioneers were retiring during this period, which prompted universities to reduce, eliminate, or reorganize home economics programs. Home economics programs peaked in 1955, with 450 programs at universities across the country. However, these programs catered to undergraduates. The lack of graduate students, interested faculty, and administrative support led to the shrinking of home economics programs in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵⁷ The transformation in academia prompted AHEA's hopes for federal funding for research, especially since the USDA was shrinking rather than expanding to support the many areas of study encompassed by home economics.

Home economists were trained in other fields, such as the physical sciences and psychology, because home economics was an interdisciplinary field. While physical sciences like chemistry and biochemistry dominated the field at its start, child development took over with the rise of psychology in the 1950s and 1960s. Since the home economics program at the USDA was developed closer to the start of the field, chemistry was embraced by Agriculture. However, child development was never central to the USDA. There were child-rearing programs at universities, but the USDA did not pursue this area of research.¹⁵⁸ USDA developed children's clothing patterns and studied the eating habits of young people, but children were otherwise not a research focus. Once child development and psychology became the forefront of the home

¹⁵⁷ Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972*, 81-88, 164-166.

¹⁵⁸ Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972*, 171.

economics field, the Department of Agriculture fell behind and lacked the resources or interest to keep pace, further contributing to the decline of home economics at the USDA.

By February and March 1957, AHEA's institute proposal gained momentum among the organization's leadership, so the national association sent it to state associations for discussion and publicity. AHEA leaders were empowered by the positive feedback received thus far and were confident that the proposal would be introduced in Congress soon. AHEA's innovative proposal countered the USDA's emphasis on nutrition by establishing an independent institute to set priorities and fund projects across the many disciplines within home economics. The Institute could be a prominent funding mechanism for home economics research that would embrace the wide spectrum of home economics. AHEA was somewhat encouraged by President Eisenhower's proposed budget increase for home economics research, despite its focus on nutrition; a \$253,000 increase in funding demonstrated the administration's willingness to fund home economics projects.¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, in April, the proposal hit its first roadblock. The USDA decided to rename its own home economics research the Institute of Home Economics, so AHEA had to change its project to the Research Foundation for the American Home.

The USDA reorganization notwithstanding, the idea of an independent home economics agency was received with great enthusiasm at the AHEA meeting in June 1957. The keynote address at the AHEA conference was delivered by C.A. Elvehjem, Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin. Elvehjem argued that the main problem facing home economics was the shortage of researchers, since most home economists entered high school and middle school teaching or extension work. He called for increased research funding and applauded the

¹⁵⁹“Washington News,” *JHE* 49, no. 1 (January 1957): 8; “Washington News,” *JHE* 49, no. 2 (February 1957): 82; “Washington News,” *JHE* 49, no. 3 (March 1957): 162.

proposal for a federal research foundation.¹⁶⁰ Grace Henderson, dean of the College of Home Economics at Pennsylvania State University, addressed the need to both uplift federal home economics research and envision new ideas. She asserted that future research would bridge traditional subject areas. Henderson argued that research was necessary to improve family living. With home economics research faltering due to a lack of funds, increased support for home economics research was necessary. Otherwise, families would rely on opinions rather than facts if home economics research ceased to exist. Henderson further argued that many agencies had supported parts of home economics research, but none had fully embraced it, so a federal research foundation was necessary. Henderson noted that the current times were a contributing factor to this proposal, including the need for an effective response to juvenile delinquency through research on the family and home.¹⁶¹ The Foundation for the American Home received great support from university leaders who worked on and around home economics.

Another university leader at the 1957 AHEA conference was Arthur S. Fleming, who would become Eisenhower's Secretary of Health Education and Welfare the following year. Fleming was currently the President of Ohio Wesleyan University and had no direct ties to home economics. However, he was enthusiastic about AHEA's proposal and expressed his willingness to do whatever he could to help achieve the objective. Fleming valued research on the home but viewed it through the lens of protecting freedom. His speech at the AHEA conference reflected a Cold War attitude toward the home and home economics as a discipline that would help advance American ideals of freedom, democracy, and education. Fleming's connection to power in the

¹⁶⁰ C.A. Elvehjem, "From the Minds of Men to the Lives of People," *JHE* 49, no. 7 (September 1957): 503-507.

¹⁶¹ Grace Henderson, "A Research Foundation..." *JHE* 49, no. 7 (September 1957): 502.

government should have been a boon to the home economists, but his Cold War perspective viewed the home as a private place that reflected American ideals of capitalism and freedom.¹⁶²

Alongside promoting the Research Institute for the American Home, the AHEA advocated for home economics across the federal government. Federal departments beyond the Department of Agriculture worked on issues related to home economics. While there was no formal home economics unit, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) conducted research and addressed problems related to home and family life. The American Home Economics Association closely monitored HEW's actions. In 1958, the President of AHEA, Beulah V. Gillespie, wrote to HEW Secretary Marion Folsom requesting a balanced general scientific education program for K-12 schools. Gillespie argued that science education should connect technical concepts to students' responsibilities as citizens and human beings, rather than isolating science to experimentation and theory. This message reiterated the ethos of home economics: research should not be conducted for its own sake; instead, any knowledge gained must be related to the home, the family, and the wider world. Furthermore, AHEA's focus on HEW demonstrated that home economics had a place in the federal government beyond the Department of Agriculture. Education was a central aspect of home economics from primary education through university, so AHEA worked with HEW to promote home economics.¹⁶³

Changes in academia and government were not the only factors shaping the future of home economics; the changing labor force in the late 1950s also heightened the need for further research on the home. Home economists observed in 1958 that women were increasingly working before marriage and when their children were older. Olga Brucher, the chairman of the

¹⁶² Arthur S. Fleming, "Education for a Dynamic Society," *JHE* 49, no. 6 (1957): 508.

¹⁶³ "Washington News.," *JHE* 50, no. 1 (January 1958): 8.

Program-at-work Committee at AHEA in 1958, argued that home economics prepared women for both homemaking and careers. By focusing on efficiency, thrift, and family life, home economics taught women how to balance home and work. Home economics, therefore, was not solely about training housewives but about lifting up the whole family unit, since women were working for wages and other family members contributed to household tasks.¹⁶⁴ Working women had been a part of the field from its inception, especially since it provided women entry into science, business, and government. Women's employment was a stated factor of significance for the AHEA as they entered the 1960s. A Highlights report from the Women's Bureau in 1960 compared employment data for women in 1920 with that in 1960. In 1920, 20 percent of women were involved in paid labor compared to 32 percent in 1960. Additionally, women experienced gains in the overall labor force: in 1920, women represented 1 in 5 workers; in 1940, 1 in 4; and by 1960, almost 1 in 3. Women's increased labor force participation came from married women who went from 23 percent of women workers in 1920 to 61 percent in 1959.¹⁶⁵ Home economists argued that changes in employment patterns necessitated more research on the home and family life to help women balance wage labor and work at home.

The Department of Consumers faced some progress and setbacks, but AHEA's Foundation for the American Home never got off the ground and seemed increasingly unlikely in 1959. At first, home economists had made slow progress toward introducing a bill on the Federal Foundation for the American Home. But meetings with lawmakers and policymakers were not successful. Congress told AHEA representatives that it remained focused on defense and the economy.¹⁶⁶ By 1960, the *Journal of Home Economics* called creating a separate agency on the

¹⁶⁴ "Womanpower," *JHE* 50, no. 6 (September 1958): 443-444.

¹⁶⁵ United States Women's Bureau, *Highlights, 1920-1960*, January 1, 1960.

¹⁶⁶ "Federal Research Related to Home Economics," *JHE* 51, no. 7 (September 1959): 615.

American home “extremely remote.”¹⁶⁷ In 1961, AHEA instead considered establishing a special unit under a larger agency so home economics could draw on existing resources. AHEA prepared materials making the case for “The National Institute for the American Home,” which were given to legislators and policymakers. The proposed institute would have a three-pronged approach: to strengthen scientific research on the family and its well-being, to provide scholarships for graduate research and teaching, and to make information available based on professional research.¹⁶⁸ Despite adhering to the tenets of the Foundation for the American Home, home economists had to scale back their proposal. Their original goals to elevate home economics beyond the Department of Agriculture and to reenergize the field did not come to be. A special unit within an existing agency would then have suffered the same limitations as the Institute of Home Economics within the Department of Agriculture.

A possible explanation for why AHEA’s proposal never got off the ground was the relationship between education and research in home economics. Clearly, home economics struggled to recruit researchers and funding research over the last decade. However, home economists did not struggle to train educators. The breakdown between research and education made sense. The goal of home economics was to educate homemakers, so many college programs were organized around training teachers. Education was a common specialization for home economics students.¹⁶⁹ However, without research, there would be no basis in fact to teach from. Furthermore, in 1957, Congress sought to improve college and vocational education. They recognized that the supply of college graduates was insufficient in many science fields, including home economics. To encourage college attendance, the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy

¹⁶⁷ “Federal Research Related to Home Economics,” *JHE* 52, no. 7 (September 1960): 556.

¹⁶⁸ “Washington News” *JHE* 53, no. 3 (March 1961): 100.

¹⁶⁹ *Combined Catalogs*, University of Maryland (College Park, MD) 1957.

proposed a tax credit to address financial barriers to college. Given the committee's focus, it viewed the issue of education as a need for manpower to compete with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The committee's focus on education was not exclusively on higher education but also included vocational schools. Home economics was a common subject in vocational training, giving youth and adults technical skills in the home, trades, and business, enabling them to contribute to the US economy.¹⁷⁰ With many home economists and Congress focused on education, it would have been difficult to get a research-centered proposal off the ground.

By March 1965, AHEA's proposed Institute was no longer a priority for the professional organization. At that point, AHEA was not encouraging the establishment of an institute or foundation for home economics research. Instead, it encouraged home economists to seek other federal grant programs to support research. AHEA reiterated that physical and medical sciences dominated research funding for which home economists should apply. The organization encouraged home economists to seek funding from USDA experiment stations. This suggestion was grim, considering the original proposal was created because home economists did not receive sufficient funding from experiment stations.¹⁷¹

Despite advocacy for a stand-alone institute for home economics, the field continued to flounder. Practitioners realized that a federal agency was a long-term objective that would not be achieved in the near future. The government was more focused on alleviating poverty and military preparedness during the Cold War.¹⁷² Furthermore, in the 1950s and 1960s, when the privacy of individual homes was a central value in American culture and politics—connected to

¹⁷⁰*Development of Scientific, Engineering, and Other Professional Manpower (With Emphasis on the Role of the Federal Government)* Joint Committee on Atomic Energy Report, 85th Cong., 1st sess., July 26, 1957.

¹⁷¹"Washington News," JHE 57, no. 3 (March 1965): 167.

¹⁷²Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972*, 175.

the Cold War—many politicians insisted that the government had no business interfering with “the home.” By keeping their proposal for a federal agency attached to the field of home economics, the AHEA did not gain support from Congress. Research on the home and family life might have seemed necessary to some observers, but without widespread support, creating a new federal agency seemed too great a hurdle for policymakers. Instead, the Department of Consumers was marginally more successful, since it went to a hearing. While it never came to be, it would have advocated for ordinary Americans against businesses to protect consumers. AHEA’s Institute, on the other hand, would have funded research that might have eventually educated consumers, but the impact and even the mission would have been less direct. This did not mean either proposal was better or worse, just that the government’s relationship with consumerism, citizenship, and the home was complex and evolving during the early 1960s. Home economics was just one way to mediate the relationship between consumer and citizen, as Carolyn Goldstein argued, and in the 1960s, major players in the federal government either did not see a need for such mediation or did not consider home economics as the most valuable way to provide it.¹⁷³

Without major funding for research, AHEA and Congress continued to prioritize education. President Lyndon Johnson dubbed the 88th Congress (1963-1965) the education Congress due to legislation that provided federal aid to colleges, vocational education, elementary education, and secondary education.¹⁷⁴ Congress’s focus on education was well-supported by AHEA. AHEA prioritized education because over half of home economists were educators. The Bureau of Labor Statistics completed occupational numbers for home economists

¹⁷³ Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America*.

¹⁷⁴ “Washington News,” *JHE* 57, no. 1 (January 1965): 8.

in 1966. There were 90,000 home economists, of whom around 24,000 were considered nutritionists or dietitians. Around 50,000 were teachers, with rising numbers in adult education and falling numbers for university teachers. Only around 2,000 were university educators. 5,000 home economists were employed in business. Only several hundred were employed in research.¹⁷⁵ Thus, while there was a need for more researchers to further scientific understanding of the home, food, families, and budgets, AHEA had to represent the majority of its members, who were educators, even if the need for researchers remained.

Alongside education, home economics expanded into various areas of focus during the mid-twentieth century. While it had always been an interdisciplinary field, more topics had come under the fold of home economics. In 1930, the AHEA published abstracts from the following research topics: Child Development and Parental Education, Food and Nutrition, Textile and Clothing, and Miscellaneous.¹⁷⁶ By 1966, the number of sections doubled. AHEA published abstracts in education, family economics, home management, family relations and child development, food and nutrition, health and welfare, housing and household equipment, institution administration, and textiles and clothing.¹⁷⁷ Home economics did not shrink its subject matter because it drew on research located elsewhere. Instead, they embraced the many disciplines that contributed to improving family life. Many academics in adjacent fields did not consider themselves home economists. Growing numbers of dietitians, sociologists, and psychologists worked on family life and topics central to home economics without identifying as home economists. Helen Hurd, a sociologist at Rutgers University, wrote in the *Journal of Home*

¹⁷⁵ "Occupational Outlook Handbook Notes Increase in Home Economists," *JHE* 58, no. 9 (November 1966): 739.

¹⁷⁶ "Abstracts From Periodicals," *JHE* 22, no. 1 (January 1930): 53.

¹⁷⁷ "Abstracts," *JHE* 58, no. 1 (January 1966): 57-64.

Economics in 1963 about how society had changed due to urbanization.¹⁷⁸ She was interested in the impacts of consumerism and urbanism on families. While home economics expanded to meet the challenges of the 1960s, many professionals instead remained in separate fields to study the questions home economics posed.

By 1968, home economics had long lost its leader in the federal government. Proposals to create a new leader had failed; the discipline was struggling to find a path forward both ideologically and in a manner that would garner support from academia and government. To search for a solution, the American Land Grant Colleges and Universities Association contracted Earl McGrath, former Commissioner of Education, to undertake a comprehensive survey of home economics in 1968 with suggestions for the future. He recommended reorganizing land-grant colleges so home economics could be placed alongside other units, such as human resources as academic departments. Additionally, McGrath saw that ties to rural communities would not serve home economics if they wanted to help all Americans; the discipline needed to be in lockstep with all citizens and needed federal support. McGrath saw that the future might lie in collaborative research amongst disciplines, especially in research focused on cities and foreign countries. Rural communities were shrinking, and not where most homes were located in 1968. McGrath found that employers and Great Society programs wanted home economists. However, the lack of graduate programs and research continued to plague the discipline. The report did not indicate an independent agency as the best path forward for that support.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Helen G. Hurd, "The Changing Society and its Challenges," *JHE* 55, no. 2 (February 1963): 85-89.

¹⁷⁹ Earl McGrath, "The Changing Mission of Home Economics," *JHE* 60, no. 2 (February 1968): 84-92; Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America Before Affirmative Action, 1940-1972*, 179.

The 1960s brought the end of what began in the 1950s: the dissolution of federal home economics research. Home economics was never a perfect fit at the Department of Agriculture, which focused too heavily on physical sciences rather than social sciences. Therefore, it was not surprising that Agriculture only maintained research that relied on physical sciences and laboratory-based nutrition research. Even though the USDA whittled away at home economics research, it did not mean that home economics did not have a place in the federal government. The Department of Consumers was a valiant effort to reflect the needs of homes and families, but it would not have been comprehensive federal research on the home. AHEA's proposal for a Research Institute would have led and represented all aspects of home economics. However, the field was losing popularity within and outside the government, making it difficult to convince the federal government to grant home economics its own perch. Home economics never found its sure path forward, but that does not mean that its broad, interdisciplinary approach to the American home and consumer was not needed.

Conclusion

The history of the Bureau of Home Economics strengthens our understanding of gender, the home, and government in the twentieth century. Home economists in the Department of Agriculture studied urban living, women in the workforce, and how families across the country lived, ate, and spent their money. They developed standards for nutritional requirements, like the Basic 7 food groups. Home economics research influences how we buy goods, eat food, and live in our communities to this day. Home economists responded to broad social and economic problems caused by gross inequities among Americans. Home economics had an expansive vision to elevate the home as a legitimate area of study, to create opportunities for women to work, and to give women the scientific advice needed to run a modern home. And for a while it achieved those goals.

While home economists viewed their profession as a tool to improve the lives of women, second-wave feminists who emerged en masse in the late 1960s thought home economics was an oppressive force. Feminist interventions into home economics, along with expanding opportunities for women, proved to be the nail in the coffin that relegated the field to history. In the annual meeting of the American Home Economics Association in 1972, feminist Robin Morgan opened her address to the association with this remark: “Home economics has functioned in this country... to reinforce three primary areas: marriage, the family, and the issue of consumerism... Now these three areas... are three of the primary areas that the radical women’s movement is out to destroy. So, one could say that as a radical feminist, I am here addressing the enemy.” Her scathing review recognized that home economists themselves might not like that the field was associated with oppressive domesticity.¹⁸⁰ She encouraged home economists to get out of the trap of domesticity

¹⁸⁰ “What Robin Morgan Said at Denver,” *JHE* 65, no. 1 (January 1973): 13-14.

or work to change society. Home economists were used to critiques that their work was not serious but had never been told that their work was harmful, especially to women. Morgan's speech prompted a serious rethinking of the field. While home economics had been teaching the dual roles of women in the home and the labor force, that message had apparently not been clear. Something was not working. AHEA leaders like President Majorie East knew the broadness of the field was difficult to project to people outside the profession. If what most people knew about home economics came from their high school home ec teacher, they missed out on key aspects, such as complex research conducted for government and business.¹⁸¹ A key factor in home economics' demise was the field's inability to integrate its many disparate parts due to structural issues in academia, government, and business that downplayed women's work and did not fund broad home economics research. Instead, a strict association with the nuclear family and consumerism meant home economics did not align with social movements of the latter part of the twentieth century, especially feminist movements. This misalignment helps to explain its demise.

But well before the feminist movement of the late 1960s rejected home economics, the field was breaking up and losing power in American life. The history of the Bureau of Home Economics reveals both the promise and the limitations of situating a comprehensive field within a narrowly defined federal agency. The Bureau of Home Economics sought to provide rigorous research on the home and family to policymakers and homemakers alike. Yet its expansive vision never fully aligned with the Department of Agriculture, which remained focused on nutrition. In the absence of sustained federal leadership and amid financial and recruitment challenges in academia, home economics fragmented. The result was not simply administrative restructuring, but the fracturing of a field originally conceived as holistic.

¹⁸¹ "The Women's Role Committee Speaks Out," *JHE* 65, no. 1 (January 1973): 10-12.

Professional home economists advocated for a robust national research agenda, but over time, the field's emphasis shifted decisively toward education rather than sustained research. Home economics was founded on the conviction that scientific research should inform and improve everyday life and that this knowledge should be shared widely with the public. Its vitality depended on maintaining a careful balance between research and education. When that balance weakened, the field's coherence and stability weakened as well. The comprehensive ambitions of home economics, the misalignment between research scope and departmental mission, and the growing imbalance between education and research collectively contributed not only to the end of the Bureau of Home Economics but also to the field itself.

Despite looking at a comprehensive field, my research was not exhaustive. Since I worked with limited sources, I can see how additional sources, such as the personal papers of government officials and home economists, could add dimension to the fight for federal home economics research. The motivations behind the Bureau of Home Economics research were often opaque, and while I could infer researchers' intentions to empower women and consumers, future research using personal papers would expound on why home economists carried out the work they did. Additional research on other avenues for home economics research in government is needed, particularly research conducted at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, even if it was not considered home economics, which might further illuminate where and how the government conducted home and family research.

We continue to grapple with key issues related to government and home economics. While the idea of creating an independent federal home economics agency never materialized, different agencies have taken the helm in research on the needs of children, families, and the home. Still, scientific research remains under threat. There has been a resurgence of home economics

information online about raising children, cooking nutritious meals, the best appliances, and rural living, not from the government or official sources, but from influencers and the online tradwife movement who peddle practices in homemaking alongside conservative values. Furthermore, online influencers' activity is being bought and sold to sell products. The biased information from producers is disseminated rather than independent research on products, as was formerly conducted by the Bureau of Home Economics.

Home economics continued to struggle to define its purpose after the Bureau's end in the 1960s and after criticism from feminists in the 1970s. The eventual renaming of the field in 1993 to Family and Consumer Sciences reflected a shift toward social science, psychology, and family development. This was a significant departure from the field that had conducted physical and social science research alongside art and design. Someone who studied home economics in 1930 might now be an educator, economist, psychologist, sociologist, engineer, or chemist. Women no longer need home economics to become professionals, and much of its work is now done in other academic fields. The broad vision of home economics could not persist, given the institutional arrangements that nourished it in the early to mid-twentieth century. By the late twentieth century, a narrower focus reflected home economics' new identity. Furthermore, the emphasis on consumerism in the name embodies home economics' embrace of the consumer economy rather than the field's original message of ethical and informed spending, which often meant limiting participation in consumerism. Ultimately, home economists had to face the reality that one expansive field on the home was impossible to maintain.

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