

COOKING THEIR CULTURE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
COOKBOOKS AND THE WOMEN WHO OWNED THEM
IN THE 1940s AND 1950s

A Senior Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Cooking Their Culture: The Relationship Between Cookbooks and the Women Who Owned them in the 1940's and 1950's (April 2008)

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My research explores the idea that the women of America's past used cookbooks as life manuals and not just as collections of recipes. This project involves American gender roles and will be an important contribution to our women's studies deficient academic community.

I chose two different eras that have contrasting roles for women: World War II and the subsequent period of suburban growth. Next, I did a broad survey of as many cookbooks as I could that were published between 1942 and 1960, nationally distributed, and not regionally or ethnically focused. From this survey, I chose two books from each era that best represented these common characteristics to perform a close reading on each text not as literature, but as an artifact of material culture.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | iv |
| LIST OF FIGURES..... | vi |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| II. LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 6 |
| III. SOCIAL CLIMATE FOR WOMEN IN THE 1940s..... | 8 |
| IV. SOCIAL CLIMATE FOR WOMEN IN THE 1950s..... | 12 |
| V. OVERVIEW OF TRENDS IN COOKBOOKS FROM THE 1940s..... | 15 |
| VI. OVERVIEW OF TRENDS IN COOKBOOKS FROM THE 1950s..... | 21 |
| VII. CLOSE READING OF CHOSEN 1940s COOKBOOK NUMBER ONE: <i>THE JOY OF COOKING</i> (1943)..... | 27 |
| VIII. CLOSE READING OF CHOSEN 1940s COOKBOOK NUMBER TWO: <i>BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS COOKBOOK</i> (1943)..... | 40 |

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| IX. | CLOSE READING OF CHOSEN 1950s COOKBOOK NUMBER ONE: <i>BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS NEW COOKBOOK</i> (1953)..... | 47 |
| X. | CLOSE READING OF CHOSEN 1950s COOKBOOK NUMBER TWO: <i>HOME INSTITUTE COOKBOOK</i> (1947)..... | 59 |
| XI. | CONCLUSIONS..... | 68 |
| | REFERENCES..... | 70 |
| | CURRICULUM VITA..... | 73 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| FIGURE | Page |
|---|------|
| 1 Percentage of Women in the Workforce (1940-1960)... | 14 |
| 2 Guarantee..... | 21 |

I. INTRODUCTION¹

“You are going to Boston to study cookbooks? Well, I hope you find some really great recipes to try!” This statement and many others like it have been commonly heard in the past year that I have been working on this project. People understand traditionally academic endeavors—studying Shakespeare, marketing research, and experiments with lab rats. It is difficult, however, to understand the benefit of research involving things that they themselves have at home and have used all their lives. Cookbooks are a wonderful piece of material culture, which is the study of people and their society by examining the objects they used and relationship between the object and the owner’s life.

So much more than recipes, cookbooks are filled with messages, some encrypted, while others are more forthcoming, in the forms of images, instructions, and even conversational addresses. Assuming that gender roles have indeed changed over time, and that those changes must have been the result of something other than a natural occurrence, it may be possible that the messages found in these cookbooks are in some way related to the changes in perceived gender roles as the times shifted.

¹ This thesis follows the style and format of the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

I chose to study cookbooks in particular because they have historically been a large part of American women's lives, making them a valuable tool to explore women's history, a topic that deserves immediate attention because there is so much more to learn. Cookbooks also boast very wide spread distribution and use across ethnic and regional boundaries. This attribute is especially important because it means that my research will have a broad sense of the history of the American Woman, as opposed to focusing on a certain group. Although the books in my study were available to all women, feedback in the form of fan mail and messages embedded within the text seem to be of the white, middle class variety. Cookbooks are also prescriptive in nature and often times include large sections offering advice on everything from family management to proper social behavior. Because these texts are not literary in nature, owners felt more casual about them and use is apparent. These were not the type of books to be delicately handled and preserved for all time; they were utilitarian. It may be difficult to discover whether or not a particular novel was especially important to a reader, but a cookbook is less apt to keep such a secret. A well loved and often used cookbook might of course have worn pages, but also perhaps food stains, notes in margins, or even added recipes from other sources. Proving that books contain messages

to readers is a worthless attempt until one can also prove that these messages were indeed received.

In order to decide if cookbooks are related to American gender roles, which have evolved over time, I compare two eras that supported very different idyllic roles for women. The American involvement in World War Two, occurring between 1941 and 1945, is perceived as a time when women went into the workforce in record numbers, filling the essential jobs left vacant by the men who had gone to war. In this thesis, the time period of World War Two is often simply referred to as the 1940s. Due to demand for home front participation, women's lives were focused on contributing to the war effort. The post war era from 1946 to 1963 was characterized by suburban growth. This thesis refers to this time period as the 1950s. The overall perception is that at this time, women came back out of the workforce and into the more feminine realm of the household. Focus was now on having children, maintaining a comfortable home, and achieving a certain level of beauty and social grace. This sharp contrast in gender roles occurring in two consecutive eras with such a relatively distinctive event to mark the shift from one to the next, makes these two periods ideal for this study. The cookbook publishing industry exploded during this time and vast amounts of them are still in good condition and easy to find. Many are still kept by their original owners, making it easy to connect the object with the user.

My first step was to survey the literature already published. These tools were very helpful as they showed me the directions that people had already taken with cookbooks and illuminated the holes that needed to be filled. I also kept notes on the cookbooks that these authors seemed to commonly deem important and any others that sounded worth a further look. I soon compiled a list of books that I wanted to find to add to my research. In addition to these cookbooks that I specifically sought, I conducted a mass survey of any and all cookbooks that I could find that met my criteria. I wanted only books that were originally published between 1942 and 1963, were nationally distributed, and were not regionally or ethnically focused. From these books I constructed an idea of all of the common characteristics of a cookbook in each era. My next step was to choose two books from each era that not only encompassed as many of these characteristics as possible, but were also distributed in large quantities and commonly found in homes across the country. From here, I performed a close reading on each chosen book focusing on the images on the cover, summary and advertising on the jacket, personal dedications and notes, forward from author, advice from the author sprinkled into the meat of the text, any images depicting women, and evidence of use by owner. Finally, I studied labor statistics and other historical accounts to determine what was really happening with the presence of women in the workforce

during these two eras in order to see if the gender messages in the cookbooks reflect not only our perceived ideas about what gender roles were like, but if they are actually related to what was really going on.

I aim to show the quantity and quality of the prescriptive behavioral messages embedded in these texts. I intend to establish that real women were incorporating these texts into their lives. Through my research, I hope to prove that in the 1940s and 1950s, cookbooks meant so much more to American women than a mere collection of recipes; they served as instruction manuals for life and became vessels for gender role information distribution.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although cookbooks written by and for women have been published for two and a half centuries, it is only fairly recently that they have begun to be discussed in the media and academic communities, giving them literary legitimacy. Craig Claiborne was a very influential food critic for the New York Times for nearly thirty years and in addition to publishing many of his own successful cookbooks, in 1982 he wrote a book called *A Feast Made for Laughter* that gave credit to the many women's cookbooks that were of greatest influence to him as a writer and as well as a cook. This text was a rich resource for focusing my research on particularly popular and influential cookbooks. In *A Woman's Place is in the Kitchen* (1998) Ann Cooper writes a general history of women and cooking and includes a small section about cookbooks, but only discusses pre-twentieth century texts. Cooper does point out the relevance of cookbooks to women because they "have been written by and for women, whose stories have come to life in these books."² For 2000s *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?* Mary Drake McFeely spent an entire year at the Schlesinger library of Harvard, which houses over 16,000 cookbooks, and conducted extensive research about the relationship between women and cookbooks from the first cookbooks

² Ann Cooper, *A Woman's Place is in the Kitchen* (New York: International Thompson Publishing, 1998), 13.

printed, all the way up to the 1990s. McFeely aptly asserts that “as fashion magazines sell body images, cookbooks sell images of the cook as a scientist, artist, master chef, efficiency expert, perfecter of domestic bliss, earth protector or patriot.”³ Because of the broad spectrum that she covers however, she does not have the ability to go into much depth and uses mostly secondary sources, only using the primary text cookbooks for small examples here and there. Janet Theophano specifically studied cookbooks in her book *Eat My Words: Reading Women’s Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (2002). Instead of looking at the relationships between cookbooks and women’s roles during a specific time period or culture, Theophano tries to prove that there is a tie between the two by using examples from all across time and cultures. Finally, in 2004, Laura Shapiro wrote *Something From the Oven* which does not discuss cookbooks but takes a very valuable look at social changes developing in the 1950s that effected the gender roles of women related to cooking.

My research is an important addition to this collection of knowledge on the subject because it uses the technique of in depth close readings of specific texts. It is also the first research to attempt to prove that the messages in the cookbooks were received by the owners by searching for evidence of use.

³ Mary Drake McFeely, *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?* (Amherst: UMass Press, 2000), 2.

III. SOCIAL CLIMATE FOR WOMEN IN THE 1940s

It is generally thought that before World War II, women were almost entirely absent from the realm of paid labor in America. Common American cultural ideals thought it wrong for women to take jobs outside of the home, not just because they might neglect their domestic duties, but more importantly, because they would be taking away jobs from unemployed men. Despite this, over one quarter of the population of American women were actually already in the workforce (Figure 1). Perhaps one reason that modern Americans might be surprised by this statistic is that most of the women in the workforce prior to World War II were ethnic minorities and/or economically disadvantaged and these women's history has not often reached popular knowledge.

Once the war began, women became increasingly encouraged by the government to go out and procure a war job, implored by special propaganda campaigns. Suddenly, women entering the workforce were not hurting the country by taking away precious jobs, but rather helping the country by filling job vacancies in an economy where the demand for jobs was never met by supply. The period of 1941-1945 was "a unique moment in the history of representational forms in America as virtually every vehicle of communication and entertainment joined in promoting

the war aims of the state.”⁴ The Office of War Information’s guidelines, however, stipulated that “any conflict between women, work, and family be minimized in wartime images.”⁵ Perhaps they felt that their campaign might be more successful if they tried to remain reasonably within the boundaries of American domestic ideals. By 1944, women’s participation in the workforce had increased by nearly ten percent of the total population of American women, though only three million of the jobs were in war plants.⁶ Most of the jobs were in sectors of the workforce that had traditionally been feminine, such as clerical work.

Married women, especially mothers, were much less likely to join the workforce. Seventy-five percent of all married women and ninety percent of mothers chose to stay home.⁷ These women were certainly not exempt from certain social expectations regarding the war effort. Facing many different food shortages due to the war, for instance, women were encouraged to do as much of their cooking as possible without traditional staples such as meat and sugar. Victory gardens, home fruit and vegetable gardens meant to provide American families with foods that had become scarce so that more of those foods could be used by the soldiers, were also heavily encouraged by the government.

⁴ Melissa Dabakis, “Gendered Labor: Norman Rockwell’s Rosie the Riveter and the discourses of wartime womanhood”, In *Gender and American History Since 1890*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 188.

⁵ Dabakis, 193.

⁶ National Parks Service. “Rosie the Riveter: Women Working During World War II” www.nps.gov/pwro/collection/website/rosie.htm.

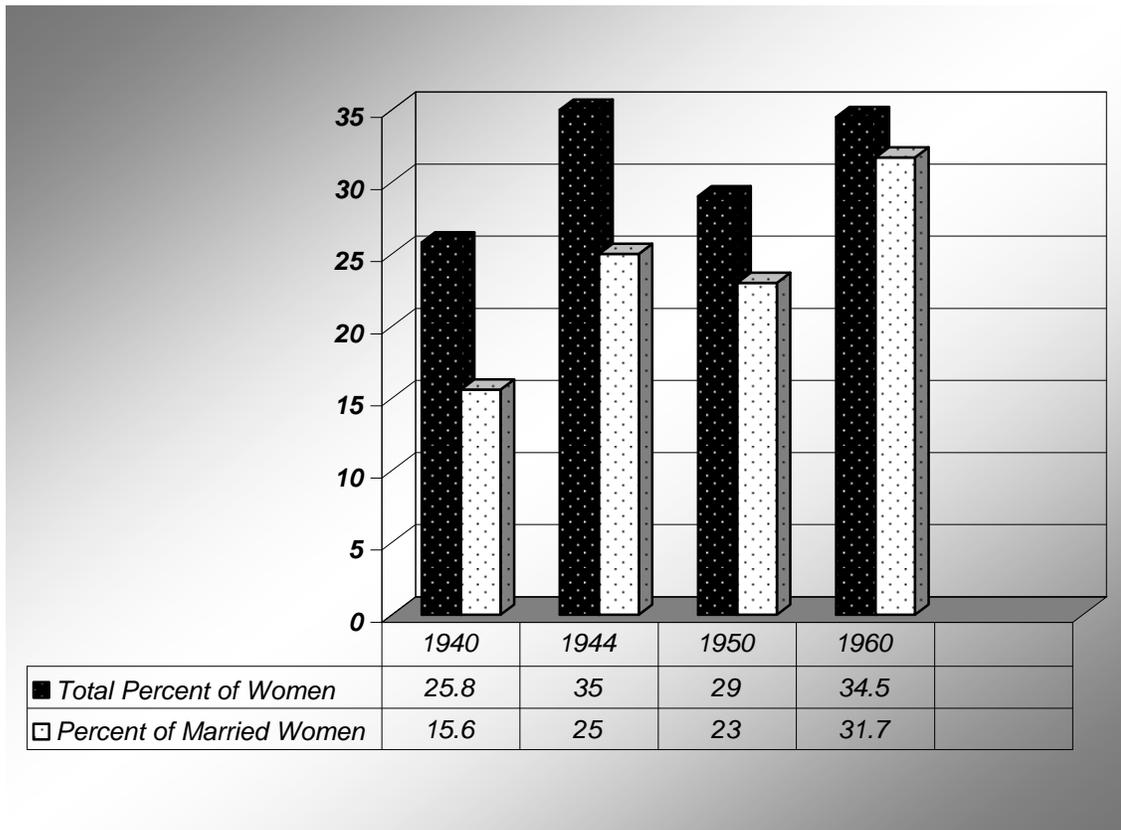
⁷ National Parks Service

In fact, by 1943, there were around twenty million victory gardens and more than forty-percent of the fresh vegetables consumed in the U.S. were victory garden grown.⁸

With the occurrence of V-Day and the end of America's involvement in World War Two, it is popularly believed that all of the women who came into the workforce during the war left employment and returned home. This idea is not entirely true, however, as participation had only dropped by six percent of the total population of American women by 1950. It is true that many of the women in higher paid, traditionally male dominated jobs during the war were let go when it ended; however, many of them simply found lower paying work elsewhere. The three million women who worked in war plants lost their jobs of course, but so did the men. Producing such a large amount of weapons became unnecessary.

⁸ Douglas Bowers, "Cooking Trends Echo Changing Roles of Women", *Food Review Magazine* 231, (May 2000): 23-9.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women in the Workforce (1940-1960)



Douglas Bowers, "Cooking Trends Echo Changing Roles of Women", *Food Review Magazine* 231, (May 2000): 23-9.

IV. SOCIAL CLIMATE FOR WOMEN IN THE 1950s

After the World War II commenced, ushering in a new era of the pursuit of the ever morphing American Dream, the expected gender roles for women shifted again. These changes were catalyzed by a mass move to the newly developing suburbs and an effort to bring American women back into the home, and complicated by developing technologies and an expanding job market.

The partial expansion of female gender roles into traditionally masculine territory was only short lived, for there was “no intention on the part of those in charge of public policy to support permanent changes in the definitions of femininity.”⁹ Exceptions to the domestic rule had only been in place for the benefit of the government and economy. When women’s services were no longer beneficial in the same manner they had been during the war, society felt it best for them to return to their pre-war “place.” Women did not leave the workforce entirely, however, most of the more lucrative and respected jobs that some of them had gained during the war had to be given up for more feminine types of work such as secretarial positions.

The 1950s version of the domestic ideal was similar to what it had been before the war; “[f]emininity was still defined in terms of wifehood,

⁹ Sylvia Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America, Essays, Documents, and Articles* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 367.

motherhood, housekeeper and economic dependence.”¹⁰ Women’s books and magazines peddled encouragement for women to re-embrace their femininity by perfecting themselves as wives and mothers.

However, new developments complicated the situation. The new suburban homes were equipped with modern kitchens, and rising salaries meant that couples could afford new time-saving appliances. In fact, by “1950, 80 percent of families owned electric refrigerators [and]...by 1960, nearly three-quarters owned electric washing machines.”¹¹ These modern conveniences meant that women no longer had to devote nearly as much time and energy to their housework, and a job that used to take well over forty hours a week, might have turned into a job totaling merely half those previous hours. Facing a substantial amount of time on their hands, many women “looked to outside work to enrich their lives as well as enhance their family incomes.”¹²

Because working outside the home was not traditionally a part of the feminine ideal, societal attitudes had to be edited a bit to allow for some female entrances in the workforce. During the 1950s, “the expression of womanliness through wage labor was increasing despite the refusal on the part of most Americans to change their belief that a

¹⁰ Hoffert, 369.

¹¹ Bowers, 26.

¹² Bowers, 26.

woman's place is in the home."¹³ The post-war stance was that women could work as long as the economy was optimal, they were not competing for a man's position, and the woman was not working for the goal of having a career. By the end of the decade, "34.5 percent of women were again in the labor force, including a record 31.7 percent of married women."¹⁴ Despite the baby boom and the accompanying "cult of domesticity,"¹⁵ women were discreetly moving into the workforce, motivated by a force that must have been even more compelling than patriotism—their own well-being.

¹³ Hoffert, 369.

¹⁴ Bowers, 27.

¹⁵ Hoffert, 367.

V. OVERVIEW OF TRENDS IN COOKBOOKS FROM THE 1940s

While conducting my survey of cookbooks from the World War II, I compiled a list of nine recurring characteristics.

One element consistently found in the cookbooks studied is the comparison between housewives and military personnel. These comparisons run from the lowest rank all the way up to the highest, one author associates the work of housewives as being “no less important than that of the worker in the munitions plant of the soldier advancing with the tanks,” but later she states that a homemaker is “like the general on the field of battle.”¹⁶ Another author believes that “[e]very part-time homemaker corresponds to a mess sergeant.”¹⁷ By making these comparisons, the authors are elevating the social status of the women reading their books, appealing to their sense of patriotism, and even bending gender roles a little bit by adding a masculine element.

The emphasis on victory gardens is another very common element in these cookbooks. In an effort to encourage women to go back to growing their own produce during the war’s shortage, the books discuss victory gardens in a manner that seems to assume that the readers

¹⁶Alice B. Winn-Smith, *Thrifty Cooking for War Time* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), vii-viii.

¹⁷Ida Bailey Allen, *Double Quick Cooking for Part-Time Homemakers* (New York: M. Barrows and Company, 1943), 14.

already have them. Putting herself into her statement, one author declares “[w]e shall all be planning on our Victory gardens and foods we can grow at home during the war period”¹⁸ and later “[a]ll of us being interested in our own home gardens... do our part in the Victory program and the conservation of food.”¹⁹ None of the books treat gardening as a lifetime hobby, but merely a temporary program with a patriotic mission.

The importance of canning is another common characteristic during this era. Women were encouraged to take up the process that many had given up when commercially canned products began to flood the market. However, during the shortage, canning became an important process to be readopted by housewives to go hand in hand with their home gardening. Many American climates prevent gardens from being productive year round, so in order to make the Victory garden program successful all year, women had to be encouraged to save surplus harvests for the off months. Appealing to her reader’s sense of nationalism, one author announces that “all patriotic homemakers are urged to can as many locally or home raised fruits and vegetables as possible.”²⁰ Here, again, food is connected with patriotism.

¹⁸ Winn-Smith, 90.

¹⁹ Winn-Smith, 107.

²⁰ Marjorie Mills, *Cooking on a Ration or Food is Still Fun* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 152.

Another common attribute of these cookbooks is the placement of reminders not to forgo any household duties even while busy saving the country. Interrupting a passionate appeal to housewives, touting their essential part in the war effort, an author sidelines “with it all, none of us will neglect the home, to preserve which all this fighting is done.”²¹ Even though women were taking on global responsibilities both in and outside the home, there really was still no option to share the second shift and the books are sure to point this out should there be any confusion.

Many of the cookbooks from this era also feature an acknowledgement that some of their readers might be working outside of the home in addition to their domestic duties. One book even recognizes that many American women have always had full time jobs, specifically referring to the pioneers. Referring to these women of the past, the author explains that “she carried on most of her multiple jobs in the home... [while] you, [the reader], carry on your full time job away from the home.”²² Acknowledging the fact that some of the readership of these cookbooks was indeed in the workforce begins a discourse to eventually legitimize women’s work.

²¹ Winn-Smith, ix.

²² Allen, Introduction.

The images contained in these war-time cookbooks are very centered on process rather than aesthetics. There are little to no messages to women about how they ought to look found in the images presented in these cookbooks. When women are portrayed, they are most often black and white photographs, adding a sense of grounded reality to them—no fantasy here. Also, more often than not, the women are not the focus of the pictures and are often cut off so that only their hands completing the task demonstrated are shown. This reinforces the idea that women during this time were utilitarian in their fight for victory, rather than objects of beauty to be admired in the home. There are some more elaborate photos of displayed food sans humans, but even these only occur in the larger cookbooks that were mostly put together before the war broke and are completely absent from their special war-time sections.

The notion of American homemakers being completely selfless is also a very common element found in this study. One author observes that women “are showing dauntless spirit, courage and the resolve to turn out delectable food with whatever materials may be available.”²³ Going into more detail, another comments that “American women are willing to scrub, work in defense plants, drive ambulances, and do

²³ Mills, xi.

hundreds of other things for Victory.”²⁴ By stating these descriptions of American women as a group, the authors are encouraging and instilling this desired altruistic behavior in cookbook readers.

Another common element found is the idea that by providing meals containing a sufficient amount of energy and nutrition for their families, women were in effect fortifying the American war effort. The chapters on nutrition in these books spun the information in a manner that emphasized not only the properties of the different nutrients themselves, but by extension, how each nutrient might strengthen a woman’s family and therefore make them more productive members of the war effort. One cookbook instructs readers to pack “the kind of [lunch] that goes to work in a battered lunch box and enables a tired man or woman to go back to bench or lathe, refreshed for work that is vital. Every ounce of food in that sort of lunch box works for victory.”²⁵

Most of the cookbooks in this study also discuss rationing. Because certain staples were rationed and not necessarily available at all during certain times of the war, the books had to add adjusted recipes that utilized meat and sugar stretching or substituting techniques. Beyond these adapted recipes, however, many of the books offer some explanation and even a bit of justification for the occurrence

²⁴ Winn-Smith, ix.

²⁵ Mills, 110.

of rationing. When explaining how to work with ration points, an author rationalizes that “[u]nder rationing one can buy only so much in the way of food, which is the democratic and sound solution.”²⁶ By referring to rationing as democratic and sound, the author is appealing to the reader’s sense of patriotism, fairness and logic.

Overall, the themes found in the cookbooks from the 1940s define gender roles in a utilitarian manner. Through the use of simplistic non aesthetic central photographs and patriotic appeals, women are taught to be useful and enthusiastic in aiding their country to victory.

²⁶ Mills, 163.

VI. OVERVIEW OF TRENDS IN COOKBOOKS FROM THE 1950s

When conducting my survey of cookbooks from the 1950s, I compiled a list of ten recurring characteristics.

The first common attribute found is the importance of aesthetic consciousness when arranging and serving food, claiming that people enjoy artfully presented food more and that this enjoyment will contribute to their overall happiness and sense of well-being. Each book lists several rules for color and texture pairings and one even compares a homemaker to a painter explaining that “[t]he skillful food manager chooses food combinations with the finesse of an artist choosing oils for a picture.”²⁷ The books stress that this attention to visuals is equally important during everyday meals as it is when company visits.

The second attribute is the importance of the aesthetics of the dining area. The books often note that if a family is to eat in the same place three times a day, it might help break the monotony a bit for the table decorations to be rather elaborate and varied, generally agreeing that the “appearance of the table and the precision with which it was set will add or detract from the enjoyment of the meal.”²⁸

²⁷ Dora Lewis. *Family Meals and Hospitality* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 139.

²⁸ Lewis, 154.

The importance of everyday formality is also a major component of the cookbooks studied. Images of women are invariably in elegant attire, even when they are depicting scenes in which the women are in the most casual of situations. Formal table settings are encouraged for all meals and rules regarding proper table service govern every aspect, leaving zero room for doubt. While giving instructions on how to serve a certain menu that she has given, one author commands that “[o]ne guest (not more) may help you take plates out. Turn on coffee maker. Pour gravy into bowl or gravy boat, add gravy ladle or spoon.”²⁹

The struggle between accepting and utilizing modern conveniences and preparing food from scratch is another common element. All of the books studied encourage the use of new technologies such as dish washers, canned food products and refrigerators, often giving detailed instructions for their proper use. Some books, however, add cautionary notes. In one book, the author feels that “canned soups cannot be condemned wholesale, but [she does] insist that many homemakers place too much reliance on them.”³⁰ A common way of settling the inner battle between modernizing but still retaining traditional value as a home cook was to offer recipes that utilized new technologies such as canned and frozen ingredients and combining them into a new dish.

²⁹ Carol Truax, ed., *Ladies Home Journal Cookbook* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 24.

³⁰ Ann Robins, *How to Cook Well* (New York: Crowell, 1946), 195.

Making a direct distinction amongst gendered behaviors is common in these cookbooks as well. Menus are often divided by foods that men like to eat as opposed to foods that appeal to women. One author states that “the male half of the universe’s” favorite meal is a thick steak and a green salad,³¹ a statement repeated nearly exactly in a few other cookbooks, then later she titles a section of her book “Luncheons (They’re For Women. Let’s Face It.)”³² Pronouns are also universally female in all books studied unless the book included a chapter on barbequing, at which point all information would be male-centered.

Many of the books written by single authors rather than corporations also discuss the growing need for cookbooks due to the change many American women were experiencing as hired help became something less and less common to have. Certainly not every reader shared this occurrence as they came from all different backgrounds. Often an author recounts her experience as a new bride and her complete lack of knowledge of the culinary world due to her privileged upbringing. One author even dedicated her book to her “mother’s fabulous cook.” Although this woman never taught the author to cook, in fact, she did not learn until she and her new husband “had just

³¹ Helen Corbitt, *Helen Corbitt’s Cookbook* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 42.

³² Corbitt, 321.

enough money to rent a farm in Maine but not a penny left over for help,” the author did include many recipes later transcribed from the cook.³³ This disclosure of personal information seems to be a tool to establish common ground with the reader.

Another common attribute was the mentality that cooking well is something that could be taught, and that being successful in the kitchen is no more mysterious a talent than reading a recipe and following simple directions. Explained succinctly in a foreword, “the heightened interest in cooking has resulted in (or perhaps been caused in part by) a vast increase in cooking literature. Literacy, rather than talented ancestors would seem now to be the key to fine and varied cooking.”³⁴ The authors encourage homemakers to actually read all of the information in the cookbooks and not just the recipes, one author even declaring that “[l]ike the Simon and Schuster Bible, [her] book is meant to be read.”³⁵ These sentiments help to instill confidence in the cookbook user because cooking well becomes more accessible to them.

The value of a woman based on her merit as a cook is a very strong element presented in the cookbooks from this era. Often making remarks regarding the relationship between a woman’s culinary success

³³ Mildred Knopf, *The Perfect Hostess Cookbook* (New York: Borzoi, 1950), xi-xiv.

³⁴ Theodora Zavin, *The Working Wives (Salaried or Otherwise) Cookbook* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1963), 1.

³⁵ Robbins, 4.

and her husband's and children's happiness and life satisfaction, for "oh, the lovely pedestal that awaits the woman who cooks."³⁶ The books also discuss cooking as a woman's way of showing love. As one author states in her book's preface "the love of a wife and mother tangibly expresses itself in the care variety and imagination which she brings to cooking her family's meals."³⁷ Some books even insinuate that the health of a woman's marriage might be a direct result of her effectiveness as a home cook.

The inclusion of vast amounts of general cooking information was a common element in the cookbooks studied. Glossaries, pronunciation guides, food storage manuals, and measurement conversion tables were all commonly included and often took up a significant amount of the books. One author even used 34 pages to explain the use of different kitchen utensils.

Cookbooks of this era often include subtle acknowledgements of the war that had recently ended. There are certainly no chapters devoted to the subject, but it is made obvious to the reader that World War II was in fact still on the authors' minds. While introducing a chapter about meat, an author expresses her feeling that "most people eat meat for pure satisfaction rather than for dietary reasons and it

³⁶ Zavin, 1.

³⁷ Truax, preface.

needed only the meat shortage during rationing to drive this simple lesson home.”³⁸

The main themes expressed in the cookbooks of the 1950s define gender in an aesthetic and domestic manner. Women are bestowed expectations regarding their own beauty, as well as the beauty of their meals and homes. Also, the influence of women is largely discussed based on what they can accomplish in the home and for the family.

³⁸ Robbins, 231.

VII. CLOSE READING OF CHOSEN 1940S COOKBOOK

NUMBER ONE: *THE JOY OF COOKING*

Number three on the all time best selling cookbooks list, Irma Rombauer's *The Joy of Cooking* has made quite an impact on American women and culture. Between 1931 and 1985, the 1931 edition alone sold 8,992,700 copies.³⁹ When Irma Rombauer's late husband committed suicide leaving her all alone to support herself, her grown children encouraged her to compile some of her recipes and sell them to make enough money to make ends meet. Rombauer self published her first batch of books and sold them to friends and neighbors. Her daughter, then a school teacher, furnished several copies for each of her students to sell and allowed them to take commission. These first copies did so well that Rombauer was picked up by Bobbs-Merril who persuaded her to add more recipes and expand her book into an even broader range. Although Irma grew too sick to work in the mid 1950s and eventually died in 1962, the operation remained in the family as her daughter, Marion, and later her grandson, Ethan, took over the subsequent editions.

³⁹ Coyle, L. Patrick, *Cook's Books: An Affectionate Guide to the Literature of Food and Cooking*. (New York: Facts on File, 1985), 25.

The Joy of Cooking was revolutionary because it covered so much culinary breadth from how to boil an egg to how to make a first-rate lamb curry to how to set a proper table for scores of different occasions. The book also organized the recipes so that the ingredients list was incorporated into the recipe instead of being cataloged at the beginning. Perhaps the most important aspect of Rombauer's style, however, was the distinctive conversational quality that she inserted into every chapter of her book.

Julia Child was not only a long time family friend of the Rombauers', but also one of the biggest fans of *Joy*. Julia and Irma met in France when Julia was just starting her career and Irma was already a very old and distinguished woman. Asked to contribute to the seventy-fifth anniversary of *Joy*, Julia gushed:

The Joy of Cooking has always been a very important book... Irma's voice is there with you in the kitchen giving guidance and encouragement and friendly tips and reminders... her swan song struck a chord with a huge audience ranging from suburban housewives to hippies on communes to the nation's most admired food writers.⁴⁰

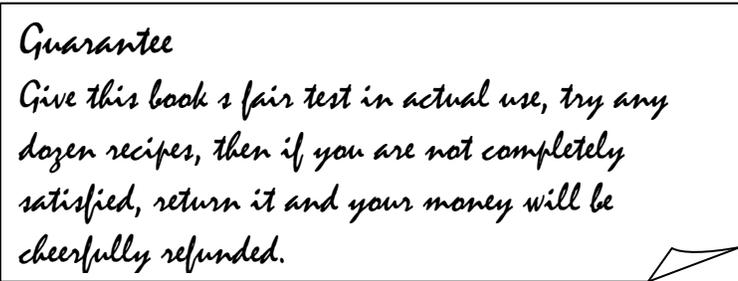
This flattering endorsement hits a few key points about Rombauer's style and influence. Stating that reading the book is

⁴⁰ Ethan Becker, *75th Anniversary Joy of Cooking* (New York: Scribner, 2006), 2.

similar to having the author right there in the kitchen helps reaffirm Rombauer's intimate style of writing and her intention to connect with her reader on a personal level. Child's assertion that this cookbook reached people from many different demographics, helps to develop the notion of how broad Rombauer's audience truly was.

The front cover of the 1943 edition has a giant tan table cloth strewn across the front, laden with colorful drawings of artfully presented food: baked ham, lobster with butter, waffles with syrup, roast turkey, and cherry pie, just to name a few. At the bottom of the cover is an image that gives the impression of a piece of paper lying across the table that reads:

Figure 2: Guarantee



Guarantee
Give this book a fair test in actual use, try any dozen recipes, then if you are not completely satisfied, return it and your money will be cheerfully refunded.

By working the guarantee right into the artwork on the cover, Rombauer has already established a trust relationship between herself and her

user. On the back of the book, the publishers are noticeably hoping that consumers will judge this book by its cover as they use the space for self-advertisement. An unattributed quote touts “[t]he attractive appearance of *The Joy of Cooking* makes it an ideal gift for the bride, for a bridge prize, or for the man who likes to experiment with new dishes.” By suggesting that a man who would use this book would not be finding everyday recipes but rather new dishes to experiment with, says a lot about the idea that women are meant to feed their families, but when men have a relationship with cooking it is a more artful, perhaps even vocational affiliation.

The front inside jacket takes the promotion even further. Now that a consumer has learned the kind of person for whom this book might make a nice gift, they are told why this particular edition of this specific cookbook is a better purchase decision than others. New and standard features are neatly itemized, this edition boasting over 700 new recipes, over 3,200 in total. Another unattributed quote gets at the heart of the difference between Rombauer’s cookbook and others that the publishers wanted the consumers to see:

Most cookbooks are as soulless as an empty cupboard. This one is lively and engaging. The author interpolates interesting bits about the history of a dish, or makes suggestions for variations of a basic recipe in much the same

manner as she would in conversation. There is many a smile in *The Joy of Cooking*.

It seems that the publishers wanted to make it clear that this cookbook would indeed be much more to the owner than a printing of recipes by implying that bringing this book into someone's home would be like actually bringing in the author to offer her friendship and guidance.

The back inside jacket tells a brief biography of Irma Rombauer and how *The Joy of Cooking* came to be. Many details are of course left out. There is no mention of her husband's suicide or even death and no discussion of her financial motivation. Instead, readers find a nice little story about a mother who had devoted all of her life to the raising of her children and decided to organize some of her kid's favorite recipes for them to prepare themselves after they had flown the nest. Perhaps this was just the right amount of information to divulge, despite the sought air of friendship.

This particular volume was originally two dollars and fifty cents as sold by The Old Corner Bookstore in Boston.⁴¹ Sometime later the book was acquired by gift to the Plymouth L.W. T. and eventually by the

⁴¹ "Old Corner Bookstore Building". *Celebrate Boston*.

www.celebrateboston.com/sites/oldcornerbookstore.htm

A very famous store built in 1712 in the heart of old downtown Boston, across from the Old State Building, on the site of Ann Hutchinson's former home. The store went into disrepair in the nineteen-fifties and was eventually restored as a jewelry store in 1960.

Harvard library system. Because it spent most of its printed life as a library book, there is little evidence of use by an owner.

In the forward, Rombauer asserts “[e]ncouragement has come from many sources—especially the eloping bride who telegraphed her family: ‘Am married—order announcements—send me a Rombauer cookbook at once!’” This is an interesting choice for a forward. In a situation where an author usually thanks the people in her life that have supported her, Rombauer indicates that her greatest encouragement actually comes from people that she has never met—her fans, the owners of her cookbook.

The preface for this edition is an exceptionally well suited channel for the author to communicate her intentions for her work. She writes in first person formatted in such a way that it is as if she intends this part as a personal letter to each of her readers. She tells her reader “I now feel a close kinship with many thousands of people. I hear from them constantly, through telephone calls, letters, messages and articles, and I am greeted as an old friend in the most unexpected of places.” Clearly this relationship between reader and author has developed into a reciprocally beneficial affiliation. Rombauer even goes so far as to include some of the recipes sent to her by readers and in turn including the women in their own education. As a matter of politeness or true lament, she “regret[s] that all [recipes sent in] could not be included.”

In the closing of the section, Rombauer's tone shifts from personable gratitude to inspirational patriotism. She divulges that most of the book was compiled prior to America's entrance into the war and therefore did not originally account for rationing. At the last minute, extra chapters had to be added at the end to help housewives deal with rationing and scarcity. In a final statement that is truly stirring even now, Rombauer rallies her troops, avowing that it "has been my pleasure to compile this record of our American way of life. Tradition speaks to us from its pages, a tradition of plenty which should always be ours, and which will be, with the intelligent use of our mighty weapon, the cooking spoon!" This quote is especially important for two reasons. First, when Rombauer refers to her cookbook as a record of American life, she is treating the text like so much more than a collection of recipes. In doing this, she sets the tone for her readers, by letting them know that they are not just holding a cookbook, but a compilation of American culture, giving the book more weight and meaning, something anyone would be proud to own. Secondly, by insinuating that the home cooking efforts of her readers could be pivotal to the war effort, she is empowering them and giving them a high value not just within the realm of their family units, but American society as a whole, dignifying the work performed by the homemaker.

At the beginning of each chapter, and accompanying many of the recipes, Rombauer carries out a one-way conversation with the reader, informally offering advice and opinions on the subject at hand. Her tone is instructional, but not in an overly didactic way. If read out of context you might think that you were privy to the passing on of the wisdom of a mother to her young daughter.

According to the boxes of fan mail preserved in the Schlesinger Library, real women were indeed feeling the close personal bond between author and reader as created by Rombauer. Mrs. Myrlie Henderson wrote to Rombauer on January 1, 1943, to say that her book “has certainly made life more bearable...It is written so that I like to read it...[y]ou really have done something for the women of America”. On January 7, 1951, Betty Marrs wrote “I’ve used your *Joy of Cooking* for years, so I feel as though I know you.” Mrs. Frederick Stohlman wrote on July 4, 1950, “[y]ou can’t know how encouraging and cheering it is to someone alone in a kitchen with no bosom friends in town to phone to, to have your friendly and discriminate comments on recipes.” Mrs. Robert E. Kaufman wrote on January 4, 1950 “I could not boil an egg! My mother never learned to cook and I suppose she thought I would never have to either”. All of these letters confirm that Rombauer’s book was full circle communication.

In the first chapter of the main body of *The Joy of Cooking*, entitled “Cocktails,” Rombauer discusses the topic in a chatty manner:

The chief virtue of cocktails is their informal quality. They loosen the tongues and unbutton the reserves of the socially diffident. Serve them by all means, preferably in the living room, the sooner the better. They may be alcoholic or non-alcoholic. For the benefit of the minority, serve the latter with the former. To give this book the impression of sobriety that it deserves, the alcoholic cocktails have been relegated to the chapter on Beverages. There they may blush unseen by those who disapprove of them.⁴²

The substance of this passage is not in what has been said, but rather how it has been said. Rombauer not only tells her readers that they ought to serve cocktails, but also when, where, why and what kind. She is speaking to the reader like a friend talking to another who is a complete stranger to the subject. Rombauer even reveals a sense of humor in her acknowledgement of the taboo nature of alcoholic drinks by depicting a scene composed of alcoholic beverages personified as hiding and blushing. This humor further relates her to the reader.

In chapter four, “Soups,” Rombauer confronts the issue of prepackaged food that modern housewives were facing. Housewives

⁴² Rombauer, 17.

were constantly being told by the food industry that canned and frozen foods were the wave of the future and that home cooking was on its way out. On the other hand, their femininity and value as a wife and mother was still being judged upon their ability to produce a home cooked meal. With many women in the workforce, time was short, but the use of canned and frozen foods still came with a heavy price tag of shame. Rombauer tactfully declares that “[i]t would be a mistake and false economy to eliminate homemade soups from [one’s] menus and to choose only the modern, easier way of preparing soups, gravies and creamed dishes, but it would be equally unfortunate to deny the usefulness of the canned product.”⁴³ Rather than focusing on the livelihood of a homemaker’s reputation, Rombauer spotlights the issue of economics, appealing to the more dignified academic aspect of homemaking. She encourages women to not lose their heritage by halting all traditional methods of home food preparation, but to take advantage of new convenience foods with a “clear conscience.”⁴⁴ In order to foster this idea, Rombauer includes a section devoted to circa twenty home made soups that are prepared simply by combining two or more canned soups. For example, one can of cream of spinach soup plus one can of cream of mushroom soup is mixed together to create St.

⁴³ Rombauer, 68.

⁴⁴ Rombauer, 69.

Patrick's Day soup. This alternative offers women a way to utilize the expedient canned soups while still maintaining an air of home cooking.

In the book Rombauer deals with the designation of gender roles. Her chapter on breakfast menus differentiates between a proper breakfast for a man and a suitable breakfast for a woman. She prescribes that "today the average woman's breakfast is probably: Fruit, dry toast, and a beverage, and the average man's is: Fruit, cereal, eggs with ham or bacon, hot bread, and a beverage."⁴⁵ By making this distinction, Rombauer is making the statement that men and women are so inherently different, that their wants and needs are usually completely dissimilar at the breakfast table. If one were to analyze the foods listed, it might appear that a small appetite and eating light is the mark of femininity, while a more hefty appetite characterizes a masculine disposition.

In a section on table setting, Rombauer lectures on the difficult task of setting the perfect table for any occasion, supplemented by meticulously detailed diagrams. In order to build confidence, Rombauer tells her readers that "the average woman, who is frequently endowed with tact, grace and other good qualities derived from her precious American Heritage of hospitality, is capable of this effort and makes it

⁴⁵ Rombauer, 702.

successfully.”⁴⁶ Here, Rombauer asserts that women are naturally tactful and graceful, qualities commonly attributed to femininity.

The first seven hundred and eighty pages were completed before America entered World War II and were therefore nearly irrelevant to readers at time of publishing. To remedy the situation, Rombauer chose to add on sections addressing the new limitations of the war to the end of her book. In the section called “The New Order,” Rombauer begins with what seems to be a rousing pep-talk, as if she has somehow become the head coach of the national homemaking team, declaring that “[t]he ability to adjust one’s needs to an altered condition is a valuable asset. The conviction that the present adjustment is necessary and, if properly met, temporary, makes the adventure both interesting and thrilling. Above all let’s be cheerful about it.”⁴⁷ Here Rombauer puts a spin on the rationing and shortages, calling them an adventure. Next, she uses a stirring metaphor to inspire her team proclaiming that America is on an “economic teeter-totter and may be let down at any moment with a dull thud. [The reader’s] help is needed to balance the board to keep it in play.”⁴⁸ This dramatic appeal suggests that the common housewife can help keep the economy afloat which was certainly an ego booster to Rombauer’s readers.

⁴⁶ Rombauer, 784.

⁴⁷ Rombauer, 786.

⁴⁸ Rombauer, 786.

Later, in her section on meat stretching and cooking with substitutes, Rombauer ends her commentary with a thunderous “[o]n your toes housewives! It is up to you to arrange matters and to...operate with the inevitable.”⁴⁹ The common thread throughout these excerpts seems to be an exponential elevation of the importance of the common housewife to the welfare of her society. By using a direct address approach, Rombauer appears to the readers as if she is speaking straight to them, making the information delivered seem especially important. Additionally, because she has already developed a connection of friendship and trust through her candid tone throughout the book, the reader is assumed to be much more receptive to her appeals than they would be if the information had come out of context or from some other source. If women’s work has historically been unpaid and unappreciated, Rombauer has bestowed upon it substantial value for the war effort. Women were not cooking for their husbands, but for their country.

⁴⁹ Rombauer, 794.

VIII. CLOSE READING OF CHOSEN 1940s COOKBOOK
NUMBER TWO: *BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS COOKBOOK*
(1943)

This version of the all-time best selling cookbook by Better Homes and Gardens encompasses the signature characteristics of the company's publications, simple and utilitarian. The book is in binder format with rings that actually open and close to aid home cooks by allowing them to remove a single recipe to share, or to insert their own. This format also allows home cooks to lay the book flat on the kitchen counter, freeing the hands from the dreary business of page holding. The cover is swathed in a red and white plaid reminiscent of a classic picnic tablecloth. There are no illustrations or advertisements, merely the title and a guarantee that "[e]very recipe [was] tested in Better Homes and Gardens Taste-Test Kitchen." This message is a little less personal than the guarantee on Rombauer's book, but instead of being the creation of a single author, *Better Homes and Gardens* is the result of an entire staff. While reading the intimate advice of a particular housewife may have appealed to some housewives, others preferred to get their advice from an established company that had already earned their trust through their publication of *Better Homes and Gardens Magazine*. Perhaps the lack of advertisements on the outside cover was a result of

the abundant name recognition of the magazine. Readers might not have to be enticed to open the book; rather their preexisting familiarity with the magazine would be enough to encourage them to take a more intimate look.

Touching on the common themes of motherhood, marriage and war, the inside of the front cover is inscribed “Gift of Donald Matheson, in memory of his mother, Harrietta Matheson, a wartime bride.” The inside of both the front and back covers are plastered with measurement conversion charts and common item cook times for quick reference, a tool meant to guide cooks even when they weren’t preparing a meal from the book itself. Although there are no ads that appear on the cover of the book, once the first page is turned, the campaign commences. Among the top features touted by the marketing department are its loose leaf quality, which certainly makes it the most adaptable cookbook available, its intermittent how-to sketches, and its forty page “Key to Today’s Cooking Supplement.” The next page attests that results are guaranteed because the recipes have been tested and adds that “men, as well as women, serve on the tasting committee so [the reader] may be assured when [the reader] use[s] a recipe.” The distinction made that both men and women have tested the recipes further develops the idea that men and women are inherently different in their preferences for

food. This guarantee reiterates the message on the front cover for the purpose of gaining the trust of the reader.

Following an advertisement promoting a subscription to the magazine, the “Wartime Cooking Supplement” begins. The cover page of this section features a black and white photograph of a pretty woman bending over to put a tray of hamburgers into the oven. She has a platter of tomatoes and a dish of eggs sitting on the stove. None of the food is artfully presented, but displayed in a no-nonsense, what you see is what you get sort of manner. The fact that this is a photograph and not a drawing lends a strong sense of realism to the illustration.

Unfortunately, the first two pages are missing from this section, but this is to be expected when the format made it so easy for readers to add and remove recipes as much as they liked. The section on wartime cooking focuses on ways to contribute to the war effort, the importance of using food to fortify the health of a family, and methods specific to home cooks that were now also working outside of the home.

When the government began handing out ration coupons that limited the amount of meat and sugar that a family was allowed to purchase, women quickly discovered that the coupons did not guarantee that just because they were allowed a certain amount, that they were also entitled to it. Availability of certain items became scarce, and their traditional culinary knowledge was nearly rendered useless without

these important ingredients. One option for some degree of relief that is repeated throughout this section is the victory garden. An interesting tactic, the book never outright tells the reader that they ought to grow a victory garden. Instead, the book approaches the subject as if every single one of its readers already has an established home victory garden. In fact, the title of the section is “Here are the Vitamins and Minerals You Grow in Your Garden.”⁵⁰ But the references to a garden that the reader already has do not stop when this section ends. Small mentions are included throughout. For example, in the section about canning, the book asks “[c]aught short on essential food nutrients? Not you—with a well managed food garden to supply you abundantly with those vitamins and minerals.”⁵¹ This method seems almost more persuasive than outwardly trying to persuade women to launch a victory garden. Not a suggestion or even a command, but an assumption really makes it seem as though it is part of the culture to be a women and have one of these gardens.

By the 1940s, the knowledge had developed that in order to be healthy, one had to consume food that was more than just filling. This cookbook gives homemakers the sole responsibility of keeping America healthy by making sure that their families received an adequate amount

⁵⁰ BH&G, A.4.

⁵¹ BH&G, H.1.

of nutrition from their food. The book uses direct address like “Mother—serve those vitamins!”⁵² and “Let’s keep those lunchers of yours in tip-top shape,”⁵³ to reach its readers in an edifying but not overly didactic way.

Because many women now had to balance work outside of the home without missing the “second shift,” or traditional household duties, the book offers a few solutions for saving time in the evening. One way to combat time issues suggested by the book is to “make casseroles and one dish meals... ahead [and] finish when [one] arrive[s] home.”⁵⁴ There are four pages of “how to” photographs in this section, each page with about six to ten pictures. The pictures are remarkable because they do not focus on the woman’s face, figure, or clothing. In fact, the only part of her that is visible in each photo is from the top of the waist to the upper thigh. This places the focus directly on the processes being demonstrated. In other words, the only message that women receive from looking at the images is how to properly accomplish the tasks portrayed. In fact, when users read this section on war-time cooking and household management, they are not receiving any messages on how to look, dress or behave socially. They are only being taught to work hard and contribute efficiently.

⁵² BH&G, A.5.

⁵³ BH&G, A.8.

⁵⁴ BH&G, J.1.

After the war supplement, the regular cookbook, the one that publishers had planned before America joined the war, and the one that would be useful again once the war ended, follows. Sticking to the binder format, the book is organized by blue dividers, each with their chapter names written on easy to find tabs. The dividers contain an alphabetical index of the recipes contained in their chapter with extra lines included for owners to list the recipes that they have added themselves. Following each divider is a full page color photograph of some of the recipes, usually presented on tables decorated with flowers and candles. There are no images of people in these photographs. Some of them even have a theme. For example, the “Cakes, Cookies, Frostings and Fillings” section has a patriotic theme with Lord and Lady Baltimore cakes, a Lincoln log, Dolly Madison ice cream cake, Martha Washington cake, and a George Washington cake, all decorated in red white and blue with little American flags stuck all around. This theme relates ideas about American idealism to the reader.

What is particularly special about this copy of the book is its undeniable proof of use by its owner. Included in every month's issue of *Better Homes and Gardens Magazine* was a section called the Cooks' Roundtable of Endorsed Recipes. Dashed lines surround the recipes to encourage women to cut them out and put them into their book, thereby automatically updating their product and making sure that recipes were

always relevant. The recipes are on slick magazine paper and have the volume and date of the magazine printed on the bottom. The owner of this book added 110 of these recipes to her book between May of 1942 and September of 1964. She added at least one recipe from every single issue between 1942 and 1946. Fifteen of these recipes used little more than a Spam-like meat product called Treet by Armour and Company.

At the back of the book is a blue envelope with directions to readers telling them to put recipes in the envelope until they have a chance to punch holes and add them to the chapter that they belong. Inside this envelope are four recipes from four different sources: Hungarian Chocolate Frosting—cut from a Domino sugar box, New England Flat Cake—hand written in blue ink on unlined paper and stained with food, Baked Pork Chops and Vegetables—cut from a plastic back of Ore-Ida Country Style Dinner Fries, and Freezing Garden Surplus—cut from a newspaper article. Another recipe is too large to fit in the envelope and is tucked behind it; an entire page torn from a magazine article entitled “A Plantation Christmas.”

All of these recipe additions prove that not only did this book reach out to women in a way that encouraged hard work to help their country, but that the book was actually used by a real woman and that it was a major part of her life during the war and still something that she used often for the next twenty years.

IX. CLOSE READING OF CHOSEN 1950s COOKBOOK
NUMBER ONE: *BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS NEW
COOKBOOK* (1953)

While visiting a friend's grandparents in the small South Texas town of Cuero, I noticed his grandmother's shelf of cookbooks. Always looking for a good specimen to add to my research, I thumbed through her collection and came across her original copy of *Better Homes and Garden's New Cookbook*. When I asked if I could borrow it for about a year the woman obliged and told me that this had been her very first cookbook, given to her when she was around twenty years old. Because the book has spent its entire life in direct service to a home cook, it shows much more wear and tear than the books I obtained from libraries.

Analogous to the Better Homes and Gardens cookbooks published in the 1930s all the way to the present, this particular version is also a binder covered in the classic red and white picnic pattern. The binding on this book is dreadfully loose and the pages are quite stained and torn in some places up to two inches. Most of the holes have been torn so that the pages are no longer attached to the binder, though many have been reinforced over the years. The paper is very thin and fragile, much like magazine paper. The frayed pages and presence of enumerable

water and food stains says a lot about the amount that the owner has used this book over the years; it certainly did not sit on a shelf collecting dust.

The front cover is a simple layout with the title laid on top of the dark blue silhouettes of a large pot, gravy boat and frying pan, while the back cover is just the checkered pattern. The inside of the cover has the same quick reference guide that was included in the 1943 version but is accompanied in this text by a color photograph of two pies, some eggs, a rolling pin, wooden spoons and some flour.

The first three pages of the book are advertisements for the book. Again, the red and white pattern on the outside of the book was usually enough to catch a consumer's attention enough to lure them into picking up the book. As a result, the publisher was able to place the advertisements inside. The main features that are stressed in this section are nutritional information, kitchen techniques for fast efficient cooking, tips for thrifty meals and "color photographs [to show one] how a dish should look."⁵⁵ Similar to the 1943 version, the publisher guarantees that "every recipe [has been] triple tested in Better Homes and Gardens kitchens for perfect results," however, this version goes on to list the areas of excellence that are being promised, "ease and

⁵⁵ Better Homes and Gardens, *Better Homes and Gardens New Cookbook*. (Des Moines: Meredith Publishing Company, 1953), 3.

economy of preparation...taste and appearance.”⁵⁶ Twice already the importance of the appearance of food has been stressed, a characteristic not at all present in the 1943 version.

In place of a forward from an author, a letter to the reader is printed from Myrna Johnston, Director of the Better Foods and Equipment Department. Many booksellers credit Johnston as the author of this book and many others. However, it is the result of a truly collaborative effort amongst her entire department, though she may have overseen the project. The letter begins with a direct address—“Dear Homemaker.” This address both personalizes the information delivered and specifies the target audience for the book. She goes on to make the book even more personal by assuring users that the book is “really [their] very own as it is made up of recipes from [the reader] and [the reader’s] friends.”⁵⁷ This same information was listed in the advertising section of the 1943 version, but the letter format adds a warmer touch and goes even further to establish a trust relationship with the reader. Later, Johnston boasts that “[n]ow [the collaborators] are happy to present dozens of color photographs to give [the reader] ideas for arranging meals attractively.”⁵⁸ This statement, in addition to the ones prior discussed concerning the attractiveness of food, sets a

⁵⁶ *Better Homes and Gardens*, 3.

⁵⁷ *BH&G.*, 4.

⁵⁸ *BH&G.*, 4.

tone that a new requirement for being a good homemaker has arisen. The value of a cook would no longer be based on whether or not she could provide her family with sufficient nourishment or produce food pleasing to the palate—now she was expected to make the food look pretty too.

The first section of the book covers the topic of nutrition, emphasizing that “no matter how mouth-watering the recipe turns out, it is the wise selection and combination of foods [one] put[s] on the table that will help [one’s] children, [one’s] husband and [oneself] to enjoy the blessings of bodies that are smoothly functioning.”⁵⁹ This statement gives the reader the responsibility for maintaining the health of her children and spouse while simultaneously assuming that the reader has both children and a spouse. In addition to the three pages of information on the caloric content of common foods, this section provides advice on how to lose weight—a surprising element in a cookbook. Later in the section, a recommended daily allowances chart states that the goal weight for women (no height range included) is 123 pounds. Assuming that the average height of the American woman has not changed too drastically since 1953, the body mass index for a woman of only 123 pounds would have been around 19—the number that separates the normal weight range from underweight status. Today

⁵⁹ BH&G., 9.

the average American woman is 63.8 inches tall and 163 pounds.⁶⁰ Because of the prescriptive nature of a cookbook, this suggested weight, disregarding height and bone structure/density, sends a message to the reader that in addition to worrying about feeding her family, she must also strive to attain a tiny figure.

The first chapter of the main part of the book is on meal planning. The cover pages that separate each chapter feature a black on pink drawing of an exquisitely dressed woman demonstrating some aspect of the current topic. The women are all wearing high heels, make-up, jewelry, and aprons, and all possess an impossibly small waist and slender arms and legs. The image on the cover of this chapter portrays a woman sitting at a desk and planning meals with her cookbook. The artist could have chosen to draw her sitting at the kitchen table performing this same task, but the desk gives the image a professional air and the viewer gets a sense that the subject is performing a form of work.

This chapter has a very didactic tone. The instructions are not given as suggestions; phrases such as, “if you want,” “you might” and even “you should” are completely omitted. The book gives an extensive list, spelling out exactly how a housewife must plan her meals. In agreement with the image, the list also lends an air of job instructions.

⁶⁰ National Center for Health Statistics. Oct. 1, 2007. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/bodymeas.htm>.

The book commands that the reader must not “repeat the same food or flavor in on meal.”⁶¹ While refraining from the repetition of foods and flavors in a meal may have nutritional implications, it is listed because triumph over boredom within family meals is championed in this section. Later, the book states that the reader must “[t]ry a new food occasionally” not because trying new things might be a personally rewarding experience for her or help her to break up the monotony, but rather “to see if [her] family approves.”⁶²

The importance of aesthetics and formality is again a major theme of the directions given in this chapter. Housewives are urged to “[r]emember that the eye eats first,” so she must both “visualize how specific foods will look when combined” and “arrange food attractively at serving time.”⁶³ The book even goes as far as to bid its readers “[k]eep a few simple garnishes on hand” because the “family will appreciate these touches as much as company.”⁶⁴ The concept of company is repeated again as women are told to “[p]lan each dinner with as much thought and care as a company meal.”⁶⁵

Packing a lunch is also serious business—the book declares that “[e]very lunch box, whether it’s bound for school, office, or factory,

⁶¹ BH&G., 17.

⁶² BH&G., 17.

⁶³ BH&G., 17.

⁶⁴ BH&G., 17.

⁶⁵ BH&G., 17.

should contain a well balanced meal that is as attractive as a meal at the table.”⁶⁶ Not even breakfast, modern day’s most casual meal, escapes this high expectation of extreme formalities as the book commands its readers to “[m]ake [their] breakfast table[s] as attractive as possible... a bowl of flowers or fresh fruit helps to perk up an early morning appetite” and to “serve each member of [their] famil[ies] the foods [they] particularly like” .⁶⁷ The notion that a woman must treat her family like company for every meal puts a whole new spin on the role of the wife and mother in the 1950s. She is no longer simply taking care of her family and making sure that they are well fed and healthy. Now expectations have risen to such a level that the homemaker is nearly removed from the family entirely and placed into the high pressure role of a restaurant chef—even catering to individual whims.

Chapter Two: “Special Helps” contains dozens of special guides for homemaking reference including a glossary of cooking terms, measuring methods, how to use spices, stain removal, and a food pronunciation guide. By including this section in their book, the publishers are making sure that readers have a reason to pick up the book even when they are not using a recipe from it, making it a part of their daily lives.

⁶⁶ BH&G., 34.

⁶⁷ BH&G., 17.

The image on the cover page of Chapter Four: “Breads” depicts a living room scene in which two nicely dressed women sit on a sofa, each with their cups and saucers on individual lap trays, are served a basket of hot bread by their apron clad friend. Even among friends, these women are being encouraged to be at their formal best whether they are visiting or hostessing.

In Chapter Fourteen: “Outdoor Cooking,” the delivery of information shifts as men are finally included. The front image is a man wearing an apron and a chef’s hat grilling steaks, while his wife stands behind clapping and his son stands ready with the serving dish. This is the first time that we see the lady of the house without her apron, but her apron has not simply been reassigned to her husband—when he cooks, he gets a chef’s hat. A chef’s hat symbolizes the difference between an ordinary home cook and a culinary master. The section on general barbeque advice at the beginning of the chapter is not gendered and keeps with the tone of the rest of the book, seemingly aiming its information toward women, discussing subjects such as side dishes, drinks, table placement and decorations. In the section regarding meat however, the book directly addresses the man of the house saying “[t]ie on your aprons, men. You can be the boss at the barbeque—and

nothing's better than sizzling hot steak you've cooked out in the open!"⁶⁸

The step by step instructions are illustrated with pictures of a man tackling each stage and all of the pronouns are male. This is the only time in the book that either of these two events occurs.

The main idea of Chapter Nineteen: "Table Settings and Entertainment" is that formality has become the norm and should be striven for at all times. The following passage is the opening of this chapter:

Back in the days when you used to play hopscotch and jump rope, setting the table was a chore—just the same, day after day. If guests were invited in for a meal, out came your prize linen and china which were reserved for only 10 or 12 special occasions each year. That's not the case today...a pretty table makes the food taste better. You don't have to serve a formal dinner to set a striking table, in fact, you can do it for every meal.⁶⁹

Apparently after the war, one of the requirements for being a socially acceptable homemaker became the ability to redecorate her dining room three times a day... to make her food taste better!

Different table cloths and place settings as well as center pieces and dish patterns are discussed in great detail, hashing out the

⁶⁸ BH&G, 294.

⁶⁹ BH&G, 372.

appropriateness of each as they are related to the three meals of the day. The book creates rules for every minute detail—if you have candles, they must be lit; if you have a centerpiece, it must only be so high; and so forth. This method of providing information seems almost dogmatic.

When the book finally discusses how to behave while actually playing hostess to company, the bar is of course raised exponentially. The homemaker need not worry herself about how she ought to handle any single aspect of her event, for the book kindly covers every possible situation. Guests must be arranged so that husbands and wives never sit next to each other, the host must sit on one end of the table with the lady guest of honor to his right, while the hostess must sit at the end of the table nearest the kitchen door with the gentlemen guest of honor on her right, and everyone must sit from the left sides of their chairs.⁷⁰ Even the proper way to clear dishes is spelled out as if these women were learning to waitress in a fine dining establishment, requiring them to “remove one [dish] at a time with [their] left hand, transfer it to [their] right hand, and then pick up a second with [their] left hand.”⁷¹ As impossible as it may seem, this whole technique was supposed to be done without stacking. As if the technical aspects are not enough to be responsible for mastering, the book instructs women to “[t]hroughout

⁷⁰ BH&G, 375.

⁷¹ BH&G, 376.

the meal, watch to see that everyone is having a good time,” implying that the responsibility for their contentedness sits squarely on the reader’s shoulders.⁷² Here, a party is not something that a woman might throw because she likes to enjoy herself and have a good time; instead she throws a party to prove to people that entertaining is something that she can do well, so that society will value her. At the end of the chapter, the book discusses possible menus for forty-two different occasions including the big game night, after the symphony, a Lenten luncheon, a terrace buffet, after skating, Halloween in the open, and even three o’clock in the morning.

Pressure to be absolutely perfect every minute of the day is threaded throughout this book, uniting all of the information as it relentlessly piles expectations into the laps of unsuspecting readers. The drawings insist that they be primly dressed, with high heels, pearls, and an apron even when alone and not actively cooking. The photographs of the recipes coupled with directions on how to arrange food demand that they not only prepare food that is nourishing and delectable, but attractive as well, even in a lunch box. Breakfast instructions require that they become short order cooks every morning so that each family member is individually satiated. Decorating directions stipulate that they must formally decorate for every meal and

⁷² BH&G, 380.

the entertainment lecture commands that become professional dinner service robots. It seems nearly impossible for a woman to have entirely followed the instructions in this book without suffering from a complete loss of her humanity. If a woman cannot be comfortable to be herself around not only her close friends that she might invite over for a dinner party, but also her family, then when was she allowed to relax, and in what situation was it allowable to let her guard down? Insisting upon such effort and attention to detail seems to assume that none of the readers might have a job outside the home that demands their time in addition to their home duties. Aside from the comment about casseroles being an item that a woman could prepare ahead of time so that she could simply pop it in the oven just before dinner, the book does not acknowledge the possibility that some of the readers addressed might be responsible for work other than in the home. Perhaps because modern conveniences had cut down the average amount of weekly hours spent doing housework nearly in half, extra work was created to keep women in the home and out of the work world.

X. CLOSE READING OF CHOSEN 1950S COOKBOOK NUMBER TWO: HOME INSTITUTE COOKBOOK (1947)

Enormous in both stature and breadth of coverage, this 1947 edition is a completely revised and renamed publication of The New York Herald Tribune's *America's Cookbook*. The New York Herald Tribune began publishing cookbooks through its Home Institute department in 1930, but by 1966, the company had gone defunct.⁷³

This copy has unfortunately been library bound, so any original cover details have been lost. Inside the book, the first and last few pages are a much brighter white than the rest of the paper and seem to have been added when the book was rebound. These pages cover generic cooking information for quick reference and the uneven page borders suggest that they were not very carefully produced. The last of these pages has 1965 stamped on it which could possibly be the year that these modifications were made to the book. With 1,107 numbered pages and over 3,000 recipes this text has some definite heft. The book is also in remarkably good condition, indicative of the fact that it was probably a library book for most of its existence. As a library book, it seems to have enjoyed far more popularity than many, having been checked out nineteen times since its earliest stamp in 1984. The newspaper

⁷³ Richard Kluger, *The paper : the life and death of the New York Herald Tribune*. (New York : Knopf, 1986),1.

company's demise was certainly not related to the popularity of its Home Institute. According to the foreword, in the ten years between the first and current edition of the cookbook, the company sold 260,000 copies and received "more than a million and a half questions [from their] readers."⁷⁴ Not only were women buying these books, but they developed an invested enough interest in them to write letters in the considerable amount of an average of 5.8 per cookbook sold.

The foreword serves as an advertisement, explaining the new additions and the usefulness of the text. Self proclaimed a "handbook for daily living,"⁷⁵ readers are encouraged to use the text as a reference for general behavior and not just as a collection of recipes. In order to connect the kitchen with the rest of a woman's life even further, the book asserts that "[b]eing up-to-date in the kitchen is as important as being up-to-date in one's clothes."⁷⁶ The implied importance of being abreast of the newest trends in cooking is to impress people in a similar manner that a woman might control what she wears, a consciousness already well established as a gender expectation. The book describes the many stages of life and experience levels of the different homemakers targeted for readership. For the youngest age group described, the text claims that in the book, a "young housekeeper finds

⁷⁴ The Home Institute of the New York Herald Tribune, *Home Institute Cook Book*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), v.

⁷⁵ Home Institute, vi.

⁷⁶ Home Institute, vi.

simple, understandable answers to questions she may have been too shy to ask older housewives.”⁷⁷ By suggesting the information found in the book as a possible replacement for the advice of individual experienced homemakers, the text is again trying to step outside its boundaries as printed material and come into the lives of its readers to encourage modified behavior through guidance.

Having established this intimate relationship with the reader in the foreword, the first chapter, “What it Means to Feed Today’s Family Well,” does an interesting job of empowering women with amplified claims, but only so far as their realm of influence can reach from the kitchen door. The chapter begins by weighing in on the issue of women and work arguing that a homemaker who does her job well is “having a career as exciting and interesting as any offered by the outside world.”⁷⁸ In order to back up this sentiment, this chapter treats the job of homemaking as one that is significantly consequential to society as a whole. The book alleges that “[f]amily security as well as national security, results from good management of meals.”⁷⁹ Family security is affected by a woman’s meal preparation because of the connection between coming together at meal times and the intimate connectivity of the relationships among family members. National security, as asserted

⁷⁷ Home Institute, vi.

⁷⁸ Home Institute, 1

⁷⁹ Home Institue, 2.

by the book is damaged when a woman does not provide her family with enough nutrition, for “such families cannot add much, except trouble, to the nation’s affairs.”⁸⁰ In making these claims, the book is essentially asserting that through food women gain the power of influence over their own lives and families, as well as the fate of their culture.

The chapter goes on to further enumerate the different aspects of empowerment through food. In a brief acknowledgement of the recently commenced war, women are given great power through food as they are told that by creating traditions with their food, “such memories did much to give strength and courage to our boys, as they spent difficult and lonely hours thousands of miles away from home...it is something to fight for in time of war and to work for in times of peace.”⁸¹ This excerpt appeals to a woman’s sense of patriotism but in a more anthropocentric manner than seen in the World War II cookbooks. Instead of explaining how a reader might help her country’s economy and military advancement, this book explains her participation’s effect on the soldiers on an intimate level. Perhaps this change is related to the connection between women and being especially adept in the area of interpersonal relations.

⁸⁰ Home Institute, 1.

⁸¹ Home Institute, 3.

According to the book, food also gives women power in their personal relationships. The book states that “[f]or the young bride, food is a tool with which to create happiness and contentment.”⁸² Here, food is referred to as a tool, which almost separates it entirely from its function of nourishment. This tool, as suggested in this excerpt, has the power not only to influence happiness, but to create it in a situation where it might not have naturally occurred. In addition, the book suggests that a “homemaker may be of great help to her husband in his business dealings through hospitality to his business associates... and if he is happier at work, he will likely be happier at home.”⁸³ Again, although giving power to women, this book seems to be sending them messages that they are solely responsible for the health of their relationship.

Food is also bestowed the power to influence a woman’s value on a social level and affect the way that she is perceived by those around her. As stated by the book “[f]ood reveals the personality of the homemaker as much as do the way she acts, her manner of dressing, and how she talks.”⁸⁴ Again, the book relates food preparation to clothing but expands the thought into the territories of speech and overall behavior. The book even advises the reader that “[d]eveloping a skill in the

⁸² Home Institute, 3.

⁸³ Home Institute, 5.

⁸⁴ Home Institute, 3.

preparation of a particular dish is one way of securing attention and approval.”⁸⁵ This statement suggests that attaining attention and approval either is or ought to be the goal of the book’s readers, reinforcing an idea that a woman’s self worth must come from the endorsement of other people instead of an internal place.

The chapter ends with the notion that “the measure of [a homemaker’s] success is the health and happiness of [her] family.”⁸⁶ The quote does not indicate what area of a woman’s life they are measuring for success. Although one might assume that they mean her success in the kitchen because this is a cookbook. However, I don’t think that that can be so easily taken for granted. In the foreword, the book declared that it did not want to be considered just a cookbook, but rather a handbook for daily living. In which case, it is possible to read this statement as saying that the health and happiness of her family is indeed a measure of a homemaker’s success as a human being.

The following chapter covers basic cooking information. Over the course of 44 pages, glossaries, baking time tables, and many other instructive and fundamental items are included. These fundamentals help to turn the cookbook into a book of reference that readers might turn to even when they are not using a recipe from the book, thus

⁸⁵ Home Institute, 4.

⁸⁶ Home Institute, 15.

further incorporating the text into their daily lives. One section even explains in six step by step directions how to follow a recipe from “assemble ingredients” to “cook as directed.”⁸⁷ This inclusion seems humorous and ironic. If a woman cannot properly follow the step by step instructions in a recipe, then why should she be able to follow these?

While present, images are not very prominent in this text. All in black and white and printed directly on the page, the pictures are of a poorer quality than many observed in other cookbooks from this time. The images are generally a representation of what certain recipes ought to look like when properly prepared, garnished, and plated. There are a few pictures that demonstrate processes and in which case they do feature the hands of the model. It is interesting to note that all of the demonstrations are made by women’s hands with the exclusion of those involving meat carving which feature a male model’s hands. In fact, the caption below the picture exhibiting the proper way to carve a standing rib roast states that “the carver cuts a thin or thicker slice beginning at the outside of the large end.”⁸⁸ Here, the book refers to “the carver,” instead of speaking directly to the reader in the same manner used throughout, insinuating that the person to carve the meats ought not to

⁸⁷ Home Institute, 62.

⁸⁸ Home Institute, 285.

be the reader but instead some “other” should handle the task. This “other”, decidedly masculine based on the image of male hands, sets gender specifications for the task of meat carving.

In a section on feeding children during the different stages of their development a few suggestions are made for persuaded children between two and six to eat. The number one suggestion is to “make meals as attractive as possible,”⁸⁹ which connects to the common element of the importance of aesthetics during the 1950s.

The chapter titled “Table Settings and Service” focuses on the formality element of the reader’s expected behavior. The social protocol for serving food is discussed in some detail and a table explaining what silverware, china, and glassware must be used for 21 different categories of food. These regulations are justified by asserting that “table customs, like social customs are nothing more than convenient and expedient rules to facilitate finer living and entertaining and to maintain beauty and orderliness.”⁹⁰ By defining these guidelines as convenient and expedient, the book assumes that its readers goals are to attain fine living and entertaining, beauty, and orderliness and generalizes its audience into one group of a single mind.

⁸⁹ Home Institute, 997.

⁹⁰ Home Institute, 998.

Many elements of this book are very similar to other books within this study. What makes this book unique is its self labeling of handbook for daily living which gives it the power to influence its reader's life in ways that extend far away from recipes. The book also spends a great deal of energy using food to empower its readers, even if it limits their reach to changes they can affect from the kitchen.

XI. CONCLUSIONS

By conducting this study on the relationship between cookbooks and gender roles, I have ascertained that during the 1940s and 1950s, cookbooks were presenting themselves as life manuals and not just recipe collections.

The societal roles prevalently expected for women are commonly reflected within these texts. The messages are embedded in nearly every aspect of the books, from advertising to images to author advice. In the 1940s, the cookbooks treat women in a utilitarian manner; women are instructed to work hard and be useful for the benefit of their warring country and aesthetics are not important. In the 1950s, the cookbooks preach a dogma that encourages a serious focus on aesthetics and formality, and take women back down from their wartime national importance and into the realm of the home.

My thesis also confirms that these cookbooks were not only published, but that real American women integrated these texts into their daily lives. This is evidenced by added recipes which show that women were ever updating their cookbooks to yield them continually relevant. Torn and food stained pages help also to illustrate the amount of use that some cookbooks received. Library books demonstrate their use on their check out card, and the dates of use convey the vast time period that people felt the book to be relevant. Finally, fan mail displays

that communication between author and reader was indeed full circle. Not only did the cookbooks of the 1940s and 1950s relay messages regarding gender roles to their readers—those readers also received the messages. Therefore, these cookbooks did indeed serve as prescriptive literature, affecting the formation of the societal roles of the women who owned them.

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