



## Who Killed Susie Homemaker: What Really Happened To Home Economics

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Keywords: Consumerism, History

Home economics was once a vibrant women's movement in America, on a level with the women's suffrage or temperance movements. A tendency exists for modern women to disregard the study of home economics as useless, old-fashioned, or anti feminist. The purpose of this study is to examine commonly-held perceptions of the decline of home economics as a social and scholarly phenomenon exploring the potential to re-elevate home economics by demonstrating its continued relevance in modern America.

A significant decline in popular interest in the concept of home economics over the past 100 years is witnessed by membership numbers. The American Home Economics Association (AHEA) was founded in 1908 by Ellen Richards. Starting with about 800 members, AHEA had over 50,000 members by the mid-1960s. By the time it changed its name to the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) in 1994, membership had dropped below 25,000. The size of AAFCS has continued to decline over the past 20 years to 13,000 in 2001, 7,000 in 2008, and 5000 at the current time.<sup>1</sup>

This research was guided by the following two overarching research questions: “What events led to the decline of home economics in America?” and “What have others proposed as the cause, and does the data support their conclusions?” Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, from the first Lake Placid conferences in the 1890s to the present day, this study attempts to uncover and discover the social history of home economics.

Several factors ultimately influenced the trajectory of home economics, but the one with the greatest impact was the sharp increase in consumerism following World War Two. The influence of consumer culture on home economics can actually be traced back to the 1930s, but the post-war economy increased the already rapid shift from the household functioning as a

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<sup>1</sup> Ballard, Patricia Tsune (ed.) (2001) "Home Economics, "10956" American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences" *Encyclopedia of Associations* (37th ed.) Gale, Detroit, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 1272; Frey, Colleen (1995) "American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS)" pp. 16-20 in Slavin, Sarah (1995) *U.S. Women's Interest Groups: Institutional Profiles* Greenwood, p. 18 ; "A Brief History of AAFCS" AAFCS website, archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080515111912/http://www.aafcs.org/about/history.html> by [Internet Archive](http://www.archive.org) on 15 May 2008; <http://us1.campaign-archive2.com/?u=bee11993ef54296c205934b97&id=d267c11ab2#member>

production economy to the household as a consumption economy.<sup>2</sup> By 1960, the majority of products worn, used, or eaten by a typical American family had been produced by corporate entities. This transition usurped the homemaker's power, once based on her mastery of household science, and handed that power over to corporations.

In analyzing the sources, three main attributions to the decline of home economics became apparent; obsolescence, entry into the workplace, and second wave feminism/women's liberation. The data does not fully support any of these conclusions. Obsolescence is easily discredited by the sheer number and quality of DIY/how to blogs present today, and the success of corporate offerings such as the Food Network and Martha Stewart Living. Women's entry into the workplace was a long held goal of the home economics movement, and one in which they were actually very successful, thus it does not follow that outside employment would have been detrimental to the cause. Finally, women's liberation was a phenomenon of the 1960s, nearly twenty years after the Bureau of Home Economics and the Division of Protein and Nutrition research of the Department of Agriculture were joined, marking the beginning of the decline period.<sup>3</sup> In fact, by the 1960s many college home economics programs had already been dismantled and/or renamed, demonstrating a clear change in perception of the study of home economics.<sup>4</sup>

This study reveals that the basic tenants and concepts put forth by home economics continue to be present and relevant in contemporary society. Initiatives designed to improve the lives and well-being of individuals, families, and communities first championed by home economists thrive and grow. There is little desire to link with the derogatory stereotype of Susie Homemaker, yet when re-fashioned to modern sensibilities, her ideas persist. In it's core, the phenomenon of home economics remains important to the present day.

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<sup>2</sup> Elias, Megan J, *Stir It Up*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 137

<sup>3</sup> Elias, *Stir It Up* 126

<sup>4</sup> Rossiter, Margaret W, "The Men Move In", *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession*, Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti editors (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997)