


• January 6, 2020 

## Remembering the heyday of home economics class

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For the News-Register

The paper report's cover is yellowed with age. Its corners are curled.

It bears the inscription "My Home Economics Notebook" in loopy seventh-grade writing preserved in blue ink.

Opening the folder, the distinct smell of must rises from within. On the first page, in the upper right-hand corner, there is a small, red, perfectly formed letter "B."

The notebook sat forgotten, boxed in storage for more than 50 years, until Becky Fisher Daley came across it during a move to Amity two years ago. She treasures the tattered notebook and the memories it holds.

Over the course of time, some of the pages' blue lines have dissolved into the white background. But the text is still mostly readable.

Daley, a retired emergency room nurse, said her teenage granddaughter, Angelique, was amazed as she thumbed through the pages. She couldn't help but notice her grandmother's "really good writing."

Today, students rarely have the opportunity to take home economics, or as it was more commonly called, home ec. But for many years, the course was a curricular mainstay.

Its public school debut came in Boston in 1835. Initially, it only covered sewing — a high-value skill at a time when people sewed their own clothes.

In 1885, cooking was added, primarily to teach food safety. And other school districts across the country gradually began to follow suit.

Oregon began adding home ec to its curriculum in 1911. Many school districts went on to make it a graduation requirement for girls, on the assumption they would eventually become the primary caretakers of homes and families.

The course came to cover sewing, cooking and housekeeping, along with etiquette, home management, health and hygiene, budgeting, nutrition, child care, interior design and family relationships. It continued to flourish for 60 years before its popularity began to wane in the face of societal and economic changes.

Eventually, home ec went the way of yellow Pee-Chees. There are still a few around, but they have largely fallen out of fashion.

But home ec still stirs fond memories for women of Daley's generation. One of her fondest is a cooking project.

"It was one of the first things we made," Daley said. "It was called Rainbow Dessert."

The recipe called for assorted flavors of Jell-O. "We made a thin custard, let it cool, then cut the gelatin into cubes and poured the chilled custard over it," she said.

It was typical of recipes in the '60s, she said.

"Someday, I might serve it to my family and see what they think," she said. "Maybe I'll bring it to a potluck."

Carlton resident Sarah Osterhoudt recalls making zucchini bread in her home ec class. She had already started baking at home under the direction of her mother, but it was her first time baking a loaf without help.

"I remember not mixing it up enough," she said, "so there were little clumps of cream of tartar in the bites of bread."

While the first year of Daley's classes focused mostly on cooking, the second year was devoted to teaching the girls to sew.

"I remember making a lovely dress," she said. "It had lines that curved down the front area over the bustline."

She picked a troublesome pattern, though, so had to rip out the front seams seven or eight times.

It was an A-line, princess-style, short-sleeved dress, she said. "It was cute, but a difficult one for an eighth-grader to pull off."

The dress fell just above the knee. Miniskirts were all the rage at the time, but students weren't allowed to make their dresses that short.

Due to the longer style, and the effects of having remove the front seams so many times, she rarely wore the garment.

Fifth-grade teacher Michelle MacFarlane of McMinnville recalls learning how to sew as well. Her first project was an over-the-shoulder bag made of heavy curtain material.

The girls learned to embroider by embellishing their bags. The next project was to make a skirt and jacket to go with the bag.

"It was my favorite colors, burgundy, dusty rose and off-white," she recalled. She was pleased with the way it turned out and wore it often.

She still has it, she said.

McMinnville resident Barbara Lee, who started sewing at home when she was 10, enjoyed her class projects.

"We had a fashion show at the end of each year," she said. "You got to model what you made."

It was so much fun, she took home ec all four years of high school. She was often assigned to help struggling seamstresses

with their projects.

Carol Bottchen, a Midwest transplant, was one of the strugglers. And there was no one like Lee around to lend her a hand in her class.

She remembers learning to sew flannel pajama bottoms without elastic.

“The pants had a loop of trim that was to be the buttonhole,” she said. “Well, when I got it all done and handed it into the teacher, I had it on the wrong side.”

Bottchen received a poor grade on her sewing project, but enjoyed the class so much she even considered becoming a home economics teacher.

MacFarlane was equally enthusiastic, if not more so. Sewing, cooking, etiquette — she loved it all and strived to do well.

“When I graduated eighth grade, I received the Home Ec Student of the Year award,” she said.

Her teacher, Kathleen Hendrix, was the author of several books. One of her Student of the Year prizes was a copy of Hendrix’s book, “The Mixing Bowl Sampler,” and she still has it.

The red comb binding is breaking loose from the cover, which features splotches of food stain here and there. It appears well-used, with dog-eared pages festooned with yellow sticky notes.

The notes mark recipes with names like “Dorothy’s Cake,” “Kids’ Finger Gelatin Sticks,” “Chocolate Dumplings” and “Tater Tot Casserole.”

MacFarlane has become a champion of an updated version of home ec being taught in the schools today. She believes it should be a required class for boys and girls alike.

It teaches skills like feeding a family and keeping a budget, which top her list. As a teacher, she sees that need firsthand every day.

“Children eat the chips and throw away the apple and the broccoli,” she said. “They need to know how to choose, cook and prepare food.”

If students learned to measure, make and eat their own creations, that could make a difference in the health of an entire generation, she said.

Osterhoudt feels the same way.

“There are some things learned in school that people don’t use after high school,” she said. “But the things learned in home ec — they are very valuable.”

She acquired many of the skills needed to care for a home from her mother. But some of what she learned in class was new to her.

“So how much more for people who did not have a mother to teach them those things?” Osterhoudt said. “I feel like home ec is a really valuable tool for both boys and girls.”

Daley also sees a need for a home management course in today's classrooms. Students need to learn basic skills like shopping and bill paying to equip them for living on their own, she said.

While parents can teach these things at home, she said, children sometimes pay better attention when they're learning it from a teacher at school.