

Black and White Films Show Extension's Early Years

Jan Scholl

Abstract

Nearly 30 black and white silent films about Extension family and consumer science topics still exist from the 1910s, '20s and '30s. This article shares topics of concern to Extension during those years and points out some of the similarities and differences that still exist within Extension programs.

As the phone rings, stacks of paper mount, and a "living dangerously" message looms on your computer screen, it is difficult to imagine what it must have been like in the early days of Extension. Archives II makes this time travel possible!

Archives II, a government documents repository nestled in College Park, Maryland holds collections of government documents, Extension photographs, and other memorabilia. You can view, for example, the portrait of the first "home demonstration" agent, Ella Agnew, who was employed from 1917 to 1936.

Another fascinating part of this National Archives collection is the Motion Picture, Sound and Video Branch, which contains over 400 black and white, silent Cooperative Extension films made roughly between 1917 and 1931. (Later films include sound and color.) So, at the same time Mary Pickford, Buster Keaton, Lionel Barrymore, and Charlie Chaplin were in the movies, the Extension Service was producing films with the help of land grant colleges and rural communities.

A content analysis of the films shows, as one might expect, many agriculturally related films about commodities, forests, insects, diseases, and world crop explorations. Even information on **Suppressing Hoof and Mouth Disease** (1925) is captured. A good deal of footage also exists on 4-H camps and conferences and of young people shaking hands and listening to presidents and other dignitaries. Many of the youth are portrayed in "beanie" hats or headbands with large 4-H clovers.

The collection of "home demonstration" films, though significantly smaller, is just as varied. One of the first food demonstrations captured on film was a cottage cheese and nut loaf in **Why Eat Cottage Cheese?** (1920). The agent presents the demonstration at a community center and, several hours later, the homemaker prepares the same recipe for her family, who happily eat the result. The nut loaf is not a quick bread but a meat loaf substitute bound with dry cereal, bread crumbs, a little oil, spices, and topped with tomato sauce.

The "Got Milk"TM advertising of today has nothing on film sequences of baseball's Nick Altrock and Hall of Fame pitcher Walter Johnson drinking milk in the 1925 film, **Milk For You and Me**. This film also incorporates early animation as chubby protein, mineral, vitamin, sugar, and fat molecules hop into the milk bottle at the tap of a wand.

Films show girls practicing good posture (**Good Posture Wins** 1931) and wardrobe planning (**Teen Togs** 1944, sound/color) so teens "won't be staying home on a shelf." In **The Club, College, Farm and Home** (1927), 4-H members make a garment for a child out of a recycled adult coat. The weight of the hat, garments and undergarments of a Victorian era model (14 pounds) is compared to a flapper who wears only 2 pounds of clothing in **The Family Goes to College** (1927).

Films for women show butter making, sewing (**The Short Course** 1925 and **The Club, College, Farm and Home** 1927), home beautification (**Helping Negroes Become Better Farmers And Homemakers** 1921), textile production (**From Wool to Cloth** (c 1916), and child development (**You and Your Child** 1938).

Garden Gold (1921) dramatizes the benefits of exercise and good food choices. Dancing, singing, and calisthenics are featured in many films. Some of the posture exercises demonstrated in **Good Posture Wins** (1931) are still used in physical therapy today.

Early nutrition experiments with rats compare a meat and potatoes diet with one containing vegetables and milk in **Food Makes a Difference** (1931). Food purchasing for consumers is explained in **To Market! To Market!** (c 1924) and a 4-H camp mess hall chant illustrates just how much food recommendations have changed:

"Soupie, soupie, soupie without a string bean
Coffee, coffee, coffee, the worst I've ever seen
Meatie, meatie, meatie without a streak of lean."
(**Club Champions at Camp Vail**, 1920)

A visual tour of the famous homes of Henry Clay, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Henry W. Longfellow, Thomas Edison, John Paul Jones, George Mason, and Francis Scott Key can be

found in **Home** (1926). More practical renovations to colonial homes are demonstrated in **Home Is What You Make it** (1929). Don't miss the before and after scenes of a "shed" that turns into a "villa" in two years' time!

In **The Club, College, Farm and Home** (1927), 4-H members furnish a bedroom. A panorama of refinishing and upholstery projects are shared at the end of a busy day in **Home Demonstration Work Western States** (1927). In this film, men hold babies while women wield hammers and brushes. A self-help wardrobe for children and wooden storage chest for sewing equipment are some of the more unusual projects shown. "Rugs" are also painted on worn linoleum kitchen floors.

Early canning clubs with training for both mothers and daughters are illustrated in the 1920 film, **Cured by Canning**. National home demonstration workers also share their steam canning methods with students at the National College of Agriculture in Grignon, France (**American Home Canning** 1919). A home agent demonstrates canning hens culled from a flock in **Layers and Liars** (c1920).

Agency collaborations with Extension are evidently not new. In **Food for Reflection** (1921) the agent instructs a mother in proper dietary habits for children while the county nurse weighs them. Spanish-speaking interpreters describe Extension practices to Hispanic audiences as the agents demonstrate food preparation in **Home Demonstration Work Western States** (1927). Collaborations with agricultural agents are also noted in this film and in **a Happier Way** (c1920).

Sad consequences sometimes result in films designed to encourage viewers to change their practices or improve their situation. A little girl, diagnosed with tuberculosis, is sent to a sanitarium after drinking milk from an infected cow in **Out of the Shadows** (1920s). People on relief are shown manufacturing furniture, tanning hides, renovating cotton mattresses, and canning peanut butter and jam in **the Rural Community Work Center** (1934). Reminiscent of Molly Pitcher in the Revolutionary War, **Mollie from Pine Grove Vat** (1922) continues cattle dipping practices (to remove ticks) when her husband is shot (by a hired hit man). The grocer "who thinks he runs the whole county" is unwilling to adapt to new Extension practices! The county commissioner receives threats and fist fights occur! The grocer's son falls into the vat! Mollie, however, uses home visits to share her interest in quality family life and her goal of sending children to college with the money raised from healthy cattle. Convinced, prominent citizens put pressure on the grocer, and Mollie Sawyer single-handedly rounds up all the cattle and wins a community award.

The plight of farm women is echoed repeatedly in the film themes. One film noted that nine out of ten homes had no indoor plumbing and that the distance a typical woman spent carrying water

was equivalent to travel from Chicago to Omaha each year. Outside pumps were also hazardous when dirty water was tossed outside, rodents died in wells, and manure was deposited by farmers boots through cracks in the pump or well cover (**Turn on The Water** 1926).

After experiencing exhaustion from carrying water, **Poor Mrs. Jones** (1925) takes a "vacation" in a crowded city. But, confronted with traffic, hazards to children, a "tug of war" at a department store bargain counter, and the lack of fresh food, she returns home confident that she has a "rich" life on the farm. Popular summer encampment programs for farm women are shown in **The Family Goes to College** (1927), **Mother Takes a Vacation** (1928), and **Home Demonstration Work Western States** (1934).

In **A Happier Way** (1920), Louisa Little works her way to an early grave (a short clip of the local graveyard is actually shown!) carrying water from outside the house. The film tells us that she "keeps a cheerful disposition except during wash day." When exhaustion sets in, the doctor orders her to bed and the rest of the family takes over her chores. The farmer, who has the latest field equipment, realizes just how hard she is working without modern conveniences. While he tends the chores, Grandpa and son go to the Extension office to acquire information on plumbing and other labor-saving devices. Later, Grandpa carries out a "scientific" study -- measuring just how much water Louisa has been lifting and the distance from the water source to the house (54 tons of water and 62 miles a year). With calculations in hand, Louisa's concerned relatives purchase the needed supplies at W. W. Reeder Tin Shoppe. When she recovers, the neighborhood women are invited to see her new kitchen. In the closing scene, Louisa rocks peacefully outside the home in the evening.

Little is known about why so many silent black and white feature films were made and in such a short time. Perhaps much like the Internet, motion pictures may have been considered the trend of the future though the average Extension office of the time probably did not have the equipment to show these films. Maybe some of the footage found its way into news reels or was shown at conferences or in theaters accompanied by lively piano tunes. In one film, a "moving picture" was advertised (by flyer) to the community and shown in a community hall. In this instance, a projectionist may have traveled from place to place with the projector and film or, perhaps, the film was mailed from the national sound and film library to the Extension office and a projectionist was hired to show it.

Watching without sound, the movies take on a very dull, "home movie" quality though humor and conflict are carefully woven into the scripts. In the film, **A Happier Way** (c 1920), the secretary actually "zips" around the Extension office securing bulletins for the agents in a very fashionable, floppy hat (especially odd since no one else in the office is wearing one). Sophisticated graphics and animation help illustrate scientific principles, and practical projects

are featured with directions on how they may be constructed at home. An array of Extension bulletins are often shown with a message to contact the Extension office for further information.

The bulk of the black and white silent films were shot by just a handful of photographers and directors, yet very few of the films credit any of the actors, many of whom may have been actual Extension agents and volunteers. **The Family Goes to College** (1927), produced in Utah, shows state and national home demonstration leaders, the governor, the president of the University, a president of the Board of Trustees, and the Extension director. But no names are given. Sometimes a credit is given to a person for the information that was provided in the film or to a 4-H member's family who contributed in some way. Some later films appear to be conglomerates of film sequences shot years earlier. The goal may have been to provide generic films that would appeal to audiences across the country.

Watching these films may not be your idea of Saturday night entertainment or relieve your stress level permanently, but they do give some perspective of the early work of Extension. You can see actual homes and Extension offices, and reflect on how little Extension work has changed as questionnaires are sent out in one scene and family members are exasperated at receiving yet another survey in the next scene! Witness what was known at the time as a "result demonstration," created when neighborhood people toured the resulting improvements made to homes, crops and cattle and were encouraged to apply the recommended practices themselves. Finally, contemplate our history from home demonstration, home economics, human ecology to family and consumer sciences.

By contacting the National Archives (8601 Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20740-6001) you can obtain information on the films, how copies can be made, and secure hotel information in order to visit and view these films. A list and short abstracts of each film are available, too. Log on to the NAIL (Information Locator of the National Archives) at: <http://www.nara.gov/nara/nail.html>. (Evenings and weekends are the best times to gain access to the database.) The Extension films are all located in record group number thirty-three.

With media attention focused on the deteriorating black and white films of early Hollywood, it is amazing that so many of the Extension black and white films still exist. This is a credit to Archives II who designed facilities and made intermediate and preservation copies in other formats so they can be viewed for years to come.

Film Listings by Date with NARA Item Numbers

Extension Service (1916c). From Wool to Cloth, No. 33, 16 minutes.

Extension Service (1919). American Home Canning in France, No. 52, 15 minutes.

Extension Service (1920). Club Champions at Camp Vail, No. 44, 12 minutes

- Extension Service (1920). Cured by Canning, No. 50, 13 minutes.
- Extension Service (1920). Out of the Shadows, No. 148, 29 minutes
- Extension Service (1920). Why Eat Cottage Cheese? No. 72, 11 minutes.
- Extension Service (1920c). The Happier Way, No.145, 17 minutes.
- Extension Service (1920c). Layers and Liars, No. 144, 13 minutes.
- Extension Service (1921). Food for Reflection, No. 146, 31 minutes.
- Extension Service (1921). Garden Gold, No. 147, 14 minutes.
- Extension Service (1921). Helping Negroes Become Better Farmers and Homemakers, No. 156, 33 min.
- Extension Service (1921). Mollie of Pine Grove Vat, No. 198, 48 minutes.
- Extension Service (1924c). To Market, To Market, No. 79, 12 minutes.
- Extension Service (1925). Milk for You and Me, No. 268, 4 minutes.
- Extension Service (1925). Poor Mrs. Jones, No. 272. 57 minutes.
- Extension Service (1925). Suppressing Hoof and Mouth Disease, No. 244, 27 minutes.
- Extension Service (1925). The Short Course, No. 269, 15 minutes.
- Extension Service (1926). Home, No. 292, 15 minutes.
- Extension Service (1926). Turn on the Water, No. 276, 16 minutes
- Extension Service (1927). The Club, College, Farm and Home, No. 298, 5 minutes.
- Extension Service (1927). The Family Goes to College, No. 297, 24 minutes.
- Extension Service (1928c). Mother Takes a Vacation, No. 294, 20 minutes.
- Extension Service (1929). Home is What You Make It, No. 343, 41 minutes
- Extension Service (1931). Food Makes a Difference, No. 388.
- Extension Service (1931). Good Posture Wins, No. 399, 30 minutes
- Extension Service (1934). Home Demonstration Work Western States, No. 483, 33 min.
- Extension Service (1934). The Rural Community Work Center, No. 494, 25 minutes.
- Extension Service (1938). You and Your Child, No. 562.10 minutes.
- Extension Service (1943c). Teen Togs, No. 19, 10 minutes

Author

Jan Scholl, Associate Professor, Ag and Extension Education, Penn State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

Cite this article:

Scholl, Jan. 2001. Black and white films show Extension's early years. *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 6(3).