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Using recreation to teach family and consumer science concepts: an historical case study with implications for today

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Abstract

In 1917, English instructor Mignon Quaw was hired as a recreation specialist and an assistant state leader of home economics for the Montana Cooperative Extension Service. Miss Quaw created a variety of curricula that had educational and legislative impact in her state. This historical study documents her career within Extension and challenges the reader to consider the value of recreation in the development of family and consumer sciences programs.

Keywords: domestic economy, history, display, film, play, recreation, Quaw

Introduction

Shortly after Congress passed the Smith Lever Act of 1914, the difficulty of instructing people in rural areas became obvious. Poor rural roads, long work days, and the lack of schools and churches prevented people from getting together even within communities.

In some rural locations, women would go months at a time "without seeing another woman's face." As one woman in Montana remarked about a visit from an Extension home economist, "Please … come again, just to have (her) around for a day is an inspiration, no matter what comes." But, a visit from a university specialist was rare because Extension meetings were often started in areas of greatest need rather than on a statewide basis.

To address this situation, local farm bureau organizations were created to help farm families discuss issues of interest and to provide support. The farm bureaus also needed to find a way to lighten the hearts of rural people, if not their work days.

In 1917, Mignon M. Quaw was hired as the state recreation specialist for the Montana Cooperative Extension Service in Bozeman. Soon thereafter, she was also appointed as an assistant state home economics leader. Reports of her efforts and publications still exist and provide ideas that may be of interest to Extension family and consumer science educators today.

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this historical study was to document the accomplishments of an early pioneer in family and consumer sciences and the value of recreation activities within an Extension program. The objectives of this study were to identify (1) who Mignon Quaw was and her role within Cooperative Extension, (2) the programs and curricula she developed and, (3) the impact of her programs.

Methods and procedure

The objectives guided the literature search, data collection, and subsequent content analysis (Fraenkel Sawin and Wallen 1999). Results and findings were reported in a case-oriented historical narrative format (Brundage 2002; McCulloch and Richardson 2000).

Primary and secondary sources of information were reviewed and analyzed. These included program reports written by Miss Quaw and her supervisors, films she created, letters of those benefiting from her programs, and her publications. Secondary sources studied were news clippings, abstracts written about the films obtained from the Archives II film library (College Park, Maryland), and a monograph about Montana Cooperative Extension programs (Burlingame and Bell 1984).

The information in each document was compared to the others for reliability. Any discrepancies that were found are reported in this paper. An historical study is conducted over a period of time in order to locate as many sources as possible. This study was conducted between 2001 and 2005.

The inquiry was initiated from a single credit noted in the film The Happier Way (USDA c1920). Documentation about the film was found in the Motion Picture and Sound Branch of Archives II (College Park, Maryland). Miss Quaw was credited as one of the directors. From there, a systematic search was conducted by e-mail and visits made to the Renne Library (Montana State University) and Pioneer Historical Society (Bozeman, Montana) in 2003. Further information

came to light in 2005 in an Internet reference. The author is grateful to the Magrath Library (St. Paul, Minnesota) for help locating publications obtained from this Internet reference.

It is usual in research papers to cite specific quotations. Most of the quotes came from the Montana Cooperative Extension Annual Reports (MCEAR), dated 1917–1921 (on microfilm). In all cases where specific page numbers were indicated, this information is provided. For other quotes, the acronym MCEAR, the date, and the word microfilm appear.

Findings

Who was Mignon Quaw? Little is known about Mignon Quaw's youth. Her father, Thomas B. Quaw, a Serbian capitalist, founded Belgrade, Montana, in south central Montana in honor of the Europeans who invested money to complete the railroad line. Belgrade, its namesake at that time, was the capital of Serbia.

Mignon graduated from Montana State College in 1902 and was a high school teacher. Her brother became an orchestra leader in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and her sister, who co-wrote A Love Affair in Wonderland (about Yellowstone Park) in 1906, died as a young woman. Mignon received a master's degree from Columbia University in 1911, and she worked at Montana State College from 1916 to 1918 as an English instructor before taking her Extension position.

Despite many efforts to locate a photograph of Miss Quaw, few were found. A photo in an early newspaper clipping shows Miss Quaw as a youngster. Another image shows her leading a song outdoors, but the photograph is small and she is wearing a hat to keep the sun out of her eyes. It is likely that she appeared in her plays and films, but the actors appear in costume and were not identified as they are today.

From her evaluations, Miss Quaw was "well-liked" even when she reported conditions as she saw them. To the director of Extension, she wrote,

> the consensus of opinion that rural audiences were made of stouter stuff than any others — that they could stand sessions where a speaker harangued them for three hours while they sat on uncomfortable benches and listened half-asleep. Meetings not carefully planned have no snap, no diversity, need elements that will keep it (them) from monotony. Meetings are too long. Speakers should watch the audience and spur up when somebody is losing interest — one of the best and fastest way(s) is to explain the principle on which it (the information) is based (MCEAR 1918, microfilm).

Viewed as a possible chastisement of the director, a handwritten note follows the letter:

The above suggestions sound, in reading, dogmatic and arrogant. It is not the intention of the writer to make them so. She was just intensely interested in this most fascinating work — the most engrossing she has had anything to do with. Please do not mistake her interest or criticism.

(It is unknown, but these are possibly her own words.)

What were the programs and curricula she developed?

The Long Trail

Montana county agent F.M. Hillman suggested a dramatization as a way of introducing the concept of the farm bureau organization. Miss Quaw's reports show that she first wrote The Long Trail play (1930) in early October 1918.

After conferences with Director F.S. Cooley and State Leader W.L. Wilson about the material that should go into the play, she was

> armed with some twelve or fifteen pages of foolscap paper on which was assembled the propaganda to be injected into this 'sugar coated pill.' Surrounded by books on agriculture, rural sociology and Montana history — all of which were warranted to produce a profound impression of scholasticism and, which, the author is bound to confess, were seldom opened (Quaw 1919).

By October 15 of that year, the play was finished and ready for rehearsal, but an influenza epidemic broke out. Her supervisor reported that Quaw assisted at the local hospital for two weeks, but by her account, all activity on the play was "checked 'till after Christmas." The World War I Armistice had just been signed, making the third act "distinctly passé" (Quaw 1919). Both second and third acts were rewritten and the play was not performed within the state until January 1919.

The Long Trail in its final form was a three-hour, three-act play for seven characters. Extension specialists (agronomy, farm management, 4-H, and home economics) were the actors who combined their instruction during the day (sometimes speaking both morning and afternoon) with this evening performance. Three acts represented three time intervals: 1868, 1893, and 1918. The idea of three episodes twenty-five years apart was borrowed from Arnold Bennett's Milestones (Bennett and Knoblock 1912).

Each act began with lantern slides to set the theme. The first act illustrated man's march to civilization, with agriculture being the oldest and the most traveled road. Act II emphasized education, the establishment of the Montana agricultural college and the experiment station. Act

III focused on the war years, the farmer assisted by Extension and the role of the farm bureau. Local orchestras played music to coincide and separate each time period.

Extension annual reports note that the play was performed thirty-three times in thirty different locations over a three-month period (January 7 to March 29, 1919), to a combined audience total of 14,692 (Quaw 1919). The department provided $1,000 seed money, and the local farm bureaus each paid $15 to ship six large trunks of props. A small admission charge was collected, and the proceeds were used to establish farm bureau sites at each location in which the play was shown. These reports also show the schedule of performances and the breakdown of profits. Farm bureaus of Montana received $3,830 dollars from the play proceeds and the department seed money was not only reimbursed, but an additional $75 deposited for future programs (MCEAR 1918, microfilm).

In a gentle, effective, and consistent manner, the play was said to have "urged" the close cooperation of all farmers in improving farm conditions, creating strong support for educational and social programs in the state. Director Cooley reported that The Long Trail "enabled us (Cooperative Extension) to put out our message more strongly than would have been possible in any other way. It had dramatic merit and enough human interest to hold an audience through a long performance" (Cooley 1933).

Recreation work

In 1918, Miss Quaw spent six weeks during the summer in Berkeley, California, at a rural recreation training (MCEAR 1918, microfilm). During following summer, she prepared music, games, and programs for a series of farm bureaus picnics held across the state.

State specialists were also provided ideas to lend interest to their subject matter programs. When the state clothing specialist, Mary Ann Greber, for example, went to the northern part of the state to present a series of meetings, a number of parodies to popular songs introduced the educational concepts. In one place, these songs were so popular the women insisted on singing them over and over again.

Miss Quaw's plan was to provide a short, well-rounded program for each specialist that would include songs, original recitations, and perhaps two or three dialogues that the local people presented, giving them the feeling that this was "their meeting" (MCEAR 1918, microfilm).

Mignon also wrote a nutrition play, The Vegetables Entertain, for the nutrition specialist, Georgia Roosevelt. The play was given in both rural and urban communities and presented daily at the Montana State Fair. The play was said to have "the most dynamite of anything that had been previously produced" (MCEAR 1922, 40). Later published by the The Farmer's Wife in St.

Paul, Minnesota (Quaw c1921), The Vegetables Entertain included directions for vegetable costumes and songs, as well as a script. An excerpt of the play contains this poem to be recited for a baby by an adult hidden behind a draped highchair:

> You men know how to balance well A ration for a calf, To make it grow, get big and strong — Now don't you go and laugh, We babies are small human calves, We need the same fine care, So we can travel o'er life's road, And stand the wear and tear (Quaw 1921, 25-6).

Besides educating at farm bureau picnics and supporting specialists, Miss Quaw prepared other plays (Quaw 1922a, 1922b, 1922c) and supported child welfare programs, school dedications, and organizational meetings of the farm bureau. She provided information and entertainment for Victory Day, Decoration Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and she gave presentations to boys and girls club (early 4-H) meetings, at potato shows and about home conveniences.

Home convenience exhibit

In 1918, the topic of home conveniences was not new. At the turn of the century, Martha Van Rensselaer had published a series of correspondence courses to help farm wives save steps and ease their cooking and cleaning tasks (Percival 1957).

But dissatisfaction with the farm kitchen mounted rapidly during World War I. Farm women were urged to assist the war effort with farm gardens, to preserve large quantities of food, undertake extensive sewing efforts, coordinate community projects, and take on more of the farm work. The farm kitchen was the family dining room and usually the family living room. The room was large with no real thought given to the arrangement for convenient working conditions. At that time, water had to be carried in and out of most homes.

Unfortunately for the farm woman, the priority on the farm was its animals, buildings, and implements. One farmer said, "I have built a good set of barns and shed for my stock, now I expect them to build a house for me" (MCEAR 1918, microfilm). Thus, every effort was made to present topics to both men and women. The entire family needed to be interested in change before results could be expected.

Though war prices brought larger incomes, women themselves were skeptical of new labor saving devices. As they had "gotten along" with the old things, most were unwilling to try new ones. Testing circles were established in some areas; home tools (large and small) were circulated on an approval basis within the circles.

By 1919, efforts were under way to encourage improvements, not only on the inside the home, but outside as well. The agricultural engineer, for example, prepared drawings for a home improvement bulletin, keeping in mind that the recommendations should be equally applicable to the "homestead shack and the elaborate city home."

To assist in this effort, Miss Quaw designed an exhibit addressing conveniences for farm women. The exhibit consisted of three parts. One part featured a miniature cemetery (3-foot-by-3-foot dimension). Surrounded by a pretty hedge, an imposing funeral gate and many funeral trees, the "well kept" plot had many graves. The fabricated tombstones included the usual conventional tributes (crosses and floral wreaths), but the inscriptions read as follows:

> "Mother walked to death in her kitchen" "Grandma washed herself away" "Cousin Ethel, gone where there are no more dull butcher knives" "Susie swept out of life by too heavy a broom" "Sacred to the memory of [your name] scrubbed herself into eternity" "Priscilla, this is the first time she ever lay down to rest" "Aunt Martha too tired to twang a harp"

On the back panel of the entire exhibit was this inscription: "Oh death, where is thy sting? A good washing machine costs about one fifth the price of a first class funeral" (MCEAR 1919, 78).

Comments from the exhibit were many. Some visitors laughed, and many noted that "there is a world of truth in that" (MCEAR 1919, microfilm). Miss Quaw reported, "We have learned from this exhibit that the public "…likes fun. They don't want to read much or be lectured to, and above all, they like something different" (MCEAR 1919, microfilm).

Miss Quaw kept her usual pace presenting at "every short course and meeting held that year," and followed each talk with a demonstration of just what laughter could do for an audience's retention and spirit. She also wrote materials for community leaders to order by mail.

Films

In the early '20s, black and white films were all the rage, and Director Cooley recognized the need for visual education. County agents, however, complained of the lack of suitable films and what they cost to rent. A committee advised the director that any money obtained would best be spent in the production of relevant educational films.

Because The Long Trail had received accolades as far away as the nation's capital (recognized as "the first truly Extension play to be produced in the country"), the USDA film unit asked Miss

Quaw to make a trip to Washington in April 1919. The unit was filming motion pictures at land grant institutions, and the women's role in the farm bureau was a topic of interest.

May, June, and July of that year were "given up" by Miss Quaw to write the scenarios, train the actors, and assemble the properties for The Farm Bureau Comes to Pleasant View (1919). The actual filming took ten days and six reels of film. Creation of captions and the editing followed in August. It was a landmark film as extreme close ups of both men and women's faces were used to communicate depth of feeling about community issues. There was comic relief as two people literally run into each other on the courthouse steps. The "project took a long time, but results may show that it is worthwhile" (MCEAR 1921, microfilm).

The Happier Way (c1920), another film Miss Quaw directed with the USDA film unit, contrasted the access to conveniences on the farm with those in the farm home. The cemetery exhibit was recreated in an actual cemetery, and the consequences of heavy work were demonstrated by illness and the disruption of a household. Images of the family consulting with agents at the Extension Office and community women touring a remodeled kitchen show the use of result demonstrations typical of early Extension efforts.

The Ancient and Abnormal Order of the Buffalo

In 1922, Miss Quaw married Elmo H. Lott, an agricultural specialist. She published many of her writings (Quaw 1922a, 1922b, 1922c) that year, but her days as recreation specialist were largely over. However, she was yet to make another significant contribution to Montana Cooperative Extension.

In January of that year, a number of agricultural agents rushed up four flights of stairs in Montana Hall on the campus during an annual conference. Because of the building's acoustics, the racket interrupted an important address given by the chancellor, Edward C. Elliott. Dr. Elliott intimated at the close of his lecture that the Extension agents resembled charging bison with very thick heads — "that even a cold chisel or a crowbar would have to be used in order to allow any knowledge to penetrate their skulls" (Burlingame and Bell 1984, 322).

Offended, the agents engaged the writing ability of Mignon and several colleagues to create the "Ancient and Abnormal Order of the Buffalo." Dr. Elliott was the first initiate. Since this time, except during the war years, this ceremony for new Extension educators has been held at every Montana annual conference.

The impact of her programs

Miss Quaw was interested in evaluating the impact of her programs. She noted that the quality of the feedback that she received concerning her programs was "pitifully poor" and relegated to a few letters and the gossip of specialists who traveled in the state. She reported that "We must devise some sort of blank to be filled out by community leaders with data regarding the after effects (of programs)." In one of her films, however, a busy homemaker who receives a questionnaire by mail, exclaims, "it is the limit to receive one of these" (USDA, c1920).

The Long Trail

Evaluative comments were certainly part of the production of The Long Trail play. At the end of a long day of instruction and the evening performance, audience members often stayed to talk with the cast as the props were being secured for shipping. T.C. Power, a pioneer and prominent businessman, said he relived several of the scenes, including the "breaking of the bank in the second act."

Some identified with characters and others with what they wore. "I had a dress exactly like that," said a teacher about the dreary 1893 costume. One of the performers was flattered as a small boy leaned over the footlights. That is, until he whispered loudly, "Do you know it is fifteen minutes to eleven?" (MCEAR 1919, 3)

The farm bureau gave complimentary tickets to the senators and representatives to a performance held in Helena, the state's capital. The next day, the Montana House of Representatives drew up this resolution:

> Whereas, through the courtesy of the farm bureau, the members of this assembly had the pleasure of seeing the very wholesome play of "The Long Trail," and
>
> Whereas, to many of its members, it revived dear memories of long ago, and at the same time brought them face-to-face with the problems of the present day; therefore,
>
> Be it resolved, that this assembly extend to the farm bureau its appreciation not only of the consideration shown its members, but of the splendid service it has rendered the state and nation during the war; and
>
> Be it further resolved, that this assembly pledges itself to co-operate to the fullest extent in carrying forward the splendid work already started by the bureau, and which, in the end should be of immense value to all the people of this state (MCEAR 1919, credited to Demel, a state legislator at the time).

It appears that the play spurred the passage of two significant laws in the Montana legislature that year: (1) an act enabling farm bureaus to incorporate and (2) a county enabling act, affecting the appropriation of county funds for local Extension work. Prior to this time, counties had been permitted to appropriate county funds for "county agent work" in amounts not exceeding $1200 per year. The new law did not limit the amount that could be appropriated or funds for home economics work—"thus quadrupling the amount that could now be collected" (MCEAR 1919, 11).

Extension specialists also agreed that, because of the play, farm women recognized a new role for themselves:

> When the workers first went into the counties, the general idea was that the home demonstration agent was sort of a county lyceum bureau—that it was her function to give talks and demonstrations on every possible occasion. It has not been easy task to re-educate the women … to help them see and solve problems (MCEAR 1919, 18.).

One woman in East Helena made a motion to buy one pint of milk for each child in school every day. She reported, "I can't thank you enough for the wonderful work you have done for us here. For eight years I've dreamed and hoped to accomplish this for the poor children in East Helena. This has been a wonderful achievement that only (Extension) could put across" (MCEAR 1920, 36).

Home convenience (cemetery) exhibit

The cemetery exhibit (described above) was so successful that a bidding war ensued as several businesses and fairs vied to own it. The Delco Light Company wanted to buy the cemetery to use for advertising purposes over the state and also to purchase the idea. The Billings fair sent in a request for the cemetery, but the Missoula fair got it first. The Agricultural College at North Dakota wrote for it and the Home Demonstration Leader in Idaho (wanted) the cemetery for the Idaho State Fair. So the little cemetery secured our department some good publicity" (MCEAR 1920, microfilm).

Films

The direct impact of the films Miss Quaw produced is not known. The Happier Way (USDA 1920) was shown in 1991 at Cornell University's Re-thinking Home Economics Conference and was described and photographed in a chapter by Blumberg (1997) and in articles by Scholl (2000; 2001).

In The Farm Bureau Comes to Pleasant View (USDA 1919), Miss Quaw not only demonstrated how a farm bureau could be created in a community, but also how women could participate freely in discussions. One woman also noted, "I have always boasted of being a real farm woman. I have discovered that in one way I was and in another way I wasn't. I had the spirit, but lacked the 'know-how.' To me it was like trying to cut out a garment with only a knife and fork. But, since I have attended a farm bureau meeting, I have found a pair of scissors. That scissors is to bring the 'know how' to our very doors" (MCEAR 1920, 36).

Discussion and implications for practice

Though Miss Quaw's employment with Extension was short in duration (1917-1921), she was unique in using recreation as a vehicle to disseminate Extension information. This has implications for today in that Extension educators can be creative in their work so as to engage the audience. For example, we can use songs, parodies, and rhyme, where appropriate, to assist our clientele in learning and retaining information or to help audiences focus on an upcoming topic. I use the song "My Bonnie" as a way to allow the audience to get exercise built into their Expanded Foods and Nutrition training. The participants stand up and sit down sequentially to every "B" in the song.

She also supported the work of other specialists and added a "little fun" to the instruction of both adults and youth. Involved in "cutting edge" film technology, she traveled to other states and brought back information and expertise. She wrote detailed program reports and descriptions of her work that were published and archived. Her accomplishments are rare even in 21st century Extension work.

But, Miss Quaw's greatest strength may have been in her spirit and her philosophy of education. It was the process she felt should be considered, not just the subject matter. She promoted recreation so that rural people could remember the content and refresh their spirit. Her techniques are simple enough to employ today. Granted, not everyone can be a filmmaker or playwright, or have the funds to hire a recreation specialist, but exhibits and motion pictures (through video and digital technology) can have great impact today, especially as they can be transmitted to locations near and far.

We can learn from our predecessors! Miss Quaw was willing to use every technology available. She was involved in scholarship as her reports are carefully detailed and her efforts were published so others could benefit. But, most of all, she made education interesting to the audience and relevant to their situation – something that is still within our grasp.

Conclusion

As the movement to form farm bureau units began in the spring of 1918, there was a need to bring people together. Recreation – through songs, skits, plays, recitations, films, and exhibits – seemed to be appropriate then, and perhaps the time has come to emphasize its importance again. As Hoffman (1949) would comment years later:

> I don't believe that I have ever found a person who received so much from Extension as a lady I met last Friday. We haven't saved a farm for her. We haven't told her how to raise a family. But, we have made it possible for her to join a county chorus. Her choral group was selected to go down to Texas to sing. She said this was the greatest event of her life. There you have it. We put less than $2000 a year into this (recreation) project. They do the rest of it themselves. The program has done more for that woman than anything the Extension Service has ever offered along production lines (p. 30).

Mignon Quaw would have remarked how much more could have been gained using recreation as an approach to teaching. Why not teach someone how to raise a family or save the farm and have an enjoyable, meaningful time doing it? Her supervisor once wrote, "The college ... believes there is a future for work along this line ...." (MCEAR 1921, microfilm).

Finally, we should think "out of the box" as Miss Quaw did so that we do things that matter so much to our constituency that our work causes our state legislators to actually stop and take notice. This is an especially critical challenge in an age of conflicting information, competing agencies, and multi-media.

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