



# Beauty & Efficiency: The Modern Woman and Household Appliances in the REA Roadshow

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*“Women work particularly well in community organizations, and if they are used in the capacities mentioned here, and others, they can contribute notably toward making rural electrification a basic part of the pattern of community living, where its long-time influence will be felt socially and economically.”*

- Clara O. Nale, Annual Meeting of the American Society for Agricultural Engineers, St. Paul, MN, June 22, 1939

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by the Franklin Humanities Institute Story+ Program and the Duke Energy Access Project. The authors would like to thank Dr. Ashley Rose Young of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, Dr. Victoria Plutshack and Dr. Rob Fetter of the Duke University Energy Access Project, and Dr. Jonathon Free of the Duke University Energy Initiative, Dr. Ashton Merck, and Ms. Della Mol.

## Abstract

Living in the U.S., it is hard to imagine a life without access to electricity. It is something that is ingrained in daily life, from household activities, to transportation, to school and work life. A life with electricity, however, is not the reality for all people. In 2018, there were 860 million people globally without access to electricity—a significant drop from the previous year when over a billion people lacked access.<sup>2</sup> Purchasing electric appliances and establishing the infrastructure needed to provide electricity is an expensive process, which the World Bank has recently begun providing loans for in certain regions.<sup>3</sup> This assistance is reflective of the U.S.’s own process of rural electrification wherein the Rural Electrification Administration (R.E.A.) was established to subsidize electrification and convince farms in rural America that electricity and electric appliances were a necessary part of life. The efforts of the R.E.A. were hugely successful, with rural farm electrification increasing 230% between 1930 and 1940, and with only 3.2% of electrified farms in 1925, versus over 90% in 1950.<sup>4</sup> This success can certainly be attributed in part to the over \$227 million in loans provided to rural farms.<sup>5</sup> This report, however, looks at how both the unique structure of the R.E.A., operating both as a government administration and community organization, and the many roles that women played within the structure of the R.E.A., as community organizers and consumers of electricity, contributed to the success of U.S. electrification efforts. Although global contexts of current areas lacking electricity differ greatly from rural farm life of the 1930s, we believe looking at the unique ways in which the R.E.A. operated and the role of women in the program’s success can provide useful insights into how current electrification efforts can operate more efficiently and find more success.

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<sup>2</sup> Laura Cozzi et al., “Population without Access to Electricity Falls below 1 Billion – Analysis,” IEA, October 30, 2018, <https://www.iea.org/commentaries/population-without-access-to-electricity-falls-below-1-billion>.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Kitchens and Price Fishback, “Flip the Switch: The Impact of the Rural Electrification Administration 1935–1940,” *The Journal of Economic History* 75, no. 4 (December 2015): 1161, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050715001540>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1161.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1162.

## Background

Rural electrification in the United States was a notably community-driven process. Electricity was obtained for many rural areas through R.E.A.-sponsored cooperatives, which were groups of neighbors who united to advocate to bring electricity to their area, making electrification a communal effort at its very foundation. Appliances were also sold to people through group events, including traveling fairs and home demonstrations. The prominence of these types of marketing techniques was actually partly due to research that the R.E.A. conducted to evaluate the most powerful ways of promoting electricity usage. The results of this work broadly supported promotional practices that reached people collectively - for example, method demonstration meetings were found to be almost 40 times more effective than simple telephone calls.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, what they called “indirect influence” was found to be most successful in increasing electricity adoption.<sup>7</sup> This “indirect influence” refers to the simple effect of having a few community members obtain an electric appliance which subsequently results in other members of the community wanting that item - essentially, social bonds were the best way to spread electricity adoption, even without direct forms of covert advertising.

A key component of this communal aspect of the R.E.A. was the presence of women in the organizational structure. Female home economists played an important role in showing people the ways that electricity could improve their lives, and used their knowledge of what it meant to be a woman in early to mid 20th century America to ensure the accessibility and inclusivity of their events.<sup>8</sup> This was in keeping with the traditional conception of women as relationship-builders and experts in ‘soft skills.’ In its programming, the R.E.A. viewed women through the lens of their societally-expected roles, whether or not they were true to the women’s actual lives. Regardless, the women in the R.E.A. helped to promote whole-community involvement in the electrification process; they marketed products to women, leveraging their familial role, and acted as a model for what women could be and do. Some electrification efforts also touted a benefit of their appliance being how it would allow women to further involve themselves in group activities outside of the home.<sup>9</sup> Women were seen as the backbone of communities, which were in turn the backbone of the electrification effort.

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<sup>6</sup> Gladys Gallup, “Some Results of Extension Studies.” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, June 1947), Box 4 Folder 5, Mamer Papers. 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Oneta Liter, “Kitchen Parties,” December 31, 1948, Mamer Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Frow, “Electric ‘Coolinary’ School,” 3 (Tennessee Valley Authority, June 24, 1937), Box 26 Folder 6, Mamer Papers.

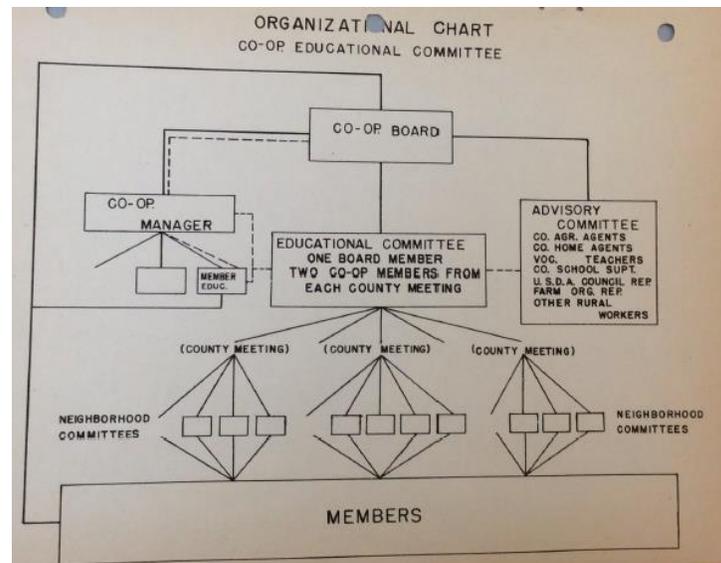


Figure 1. Co-Op Educational Committee Organizational Chart. Louisan E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

## Where Were Women?

The many roles that women played in electrification— from planning events to being consumers of appliances— were integral to the success of the R.E.A., and the role of women employed by the R.E.A. was no exception. Although overseen by men, home economists helped plan road show demonstrations and local educational programs and ensured that the R.E.A. was running a program that appealed to the actual practical needs and desires of rural farm women, not just what R.E.A. officials may have thought those needs and desires were. Louisan Mamer, referred to as the “First Lady of the R.E.A.” by her colleagues, was one of the many women who worked for the R.E.A. as a home electrification specialist and demonstrator.<sup>10</sup> One of Mamer’s documents from 1968 describing her “Plan of Work” provides a clear picture of the work that was expected of the R.E.A.’s home economists. Mamer’s primary jobs included to “encourage women’s participation in their electric co-ops,” to “involve youths in rural electrification,” and to “assist with... member relations, working with youth or women, [and] home electrification.”<sup>11</sup> The women, as the perceived more community and family oriented gender,<sup>12</sup> who worked for the R.E.A., had the role of integrating local women and youths into the process of electrification and building community around local cooperatives through, among other initiatives, local educational efforts. This education came in the form of larger appliance demonstrations at road shows, local weeks-long classes on the importance and uses of home electricity, and the more communal

<sup>10</sup> Connie Holland, “Now You’re Cooking with Electricity!,” National Museum of American History, August 24, 2017, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/cooking-electricity>.

<sup>11</sup> Louisan E. Mamer, “Plan of Work -- Louisan Mamer,” 1, August 1967, Mamer Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine Jellison, “The Man Operating the Farm and the Wife Operating the Household and the Garden’ Technology and Gender Roles, 1940,” in *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 108.

Kitchen Parties.<sup>13</sup> Besides leading these classes, home economists often wrote the lesson plans,<sup>14</sup> and provided feedback to ensure that male-written curricula and party outlines still appealed to and were applicable to the women they were attempting to reach.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond leading demonstrations, home economists presented a vision of the “modern woman” and evidenced the ease, efficiency and beauty that came with home electrification. Demonstrations were not designed purely to explain how appliances worked, but to “arouse interest in the immediate practice” of a life with electricity and to present electric appliances as “clean, cool dependable, healthful, safe and economical.”<sup>16</sup> While the uses of electrical appliances could be articulated through a pamphlet or in a store, and this was also done, these home economist demonstrations were essential in drawing rural women into the vision of a new lifestyle with electricity. In order to accomplish this, each demonstration was carefully scripted, with the ability to seamlessly fit every location at which it was presented, and its timing was “as carefully planned as a radio program.”<sup>17</sup> When leading such demonstrations, home economists were expected to “work with ease. Make the work appear simple and natural, and show that [they were] enjoying it,” “keep all work spaces clean” and “work quickly, but not hurriedly.”<sup>18</sup> The ease and effortlessness of the home economists in demonstrating innovative new appliances provided a stark contrast to the gruelling and time-consuming housework of rural life without electricity, and sparked the initial interest in women which could then develop into wider interest and consumption.<sup>19</sup>



*Figure 2. A Westinghouse deep-well cooker used by Louisan Mamer. National Museum of American History.*

<sup>13</sup> Liter, “Kitchen Parties.”

<sup>14</sup> Louisan Mamer, “Mamer Letter,” October 10, 1941, Mamer Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Liter, “Kitchen Parties.”

<sup>16</sup> Morrow County Rural Electrification Festival, “The Use of Electricity in the Farm Home: Demonstration Methods and Techniques,” March 17, 1938, Box 7 Folder 9, Mamer Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Louisan E. Mamer, “Five Parts of a Demonstration,” Mamer Papers.

<sup>18</sup> Morrow County Rural Electrification Festival, “The Use of Electricity in the Farm Home: Demonstration Methods and Techniques,” March 17, 1938, Box 7 Folder 9, Mamer Papers.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite a financial reliance on their husbands, women as homekeepers also played a central role in consuming electrical appliances and more generally in supporting the work of the R.E.A. and local cooperatives. As the homekeepers and the people who spent the most time there, ads for electrification targeted directly at women appealed to both the practical considerations of how electricity could improve rural farm homekeeping and the desires of women to be better mothers and keep a more perfect and beautiful home.<sup>20</sup> By 1950, 58.4% of rural farm homes had a washing machine, while only 14.9% had a chick brooder and only 1.2% had a feed grinder.<sup>21</sup> Not only were women the targets of many advertisements for electricity, but a farm was more likely to have an appliance that eased the burden of housework for women than an electric appliance to aid in farm work. Women in rural areas also played the social role in the family, organizing and attending community events. This position in the community made women more apt to encourage and be influenced by their neighbors to invest in electricity. A study done by The U.S. Department of Agriculture on the “relative effectiveness of extension methods” for convincing people to buy electricity and electric appliances found that “indirect influence” and “method demonstration meetings” were the most effective.<sup>22</sup> Both of these forms of extension we can imagine would have more directly reached women, who attended educational meetings and home appliances demonstrations and were more involved in social life. Women were also seen as pivotal in adopting farm appliances. In a presentation to the American Society of Agricultural Engineers in 1939, Chief Home Electrification Specialist Clara O. Nale explains that “the homemaker has a very keen insight into all the farm problems” and that “much could be accomplished in getting more... farm equipment into use, if women were brought into this part of the program.”<sup>23</sup> Although women were perceived and advertised to as homemakers and mothers, Nale suggests that these rural farm women may have had important roles beyond the home and a more astute sense of farm work and needs than was generally assumed at the time.

## How was the program designed around women?

Although rarely the leaders of the household or financially independent, much of the R.E.A.’s programming revolved around women, appealing to the many ways women specifically, as homemakers and mothers, could benefit from electrification. Advertisements for electric home lighting operated around a “better light – better sight” campaign, highlighting the importance of good home lighting for good and lasting eyesight.<sup>24</sup> These advertisements also often specifically addressed the ways that electric home lighting is better for children’s long term eye health than other forms of home lighting. A pamphlet on the “Whys and Hows” of home lighting articulates

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<sup>20</sup> Westinghouse Electric Corporation, “The Whys and Hows of Lighting a Home,” *The Magazine of Light*, December 1939, Box 3 Folder 2, Mamer Papers.

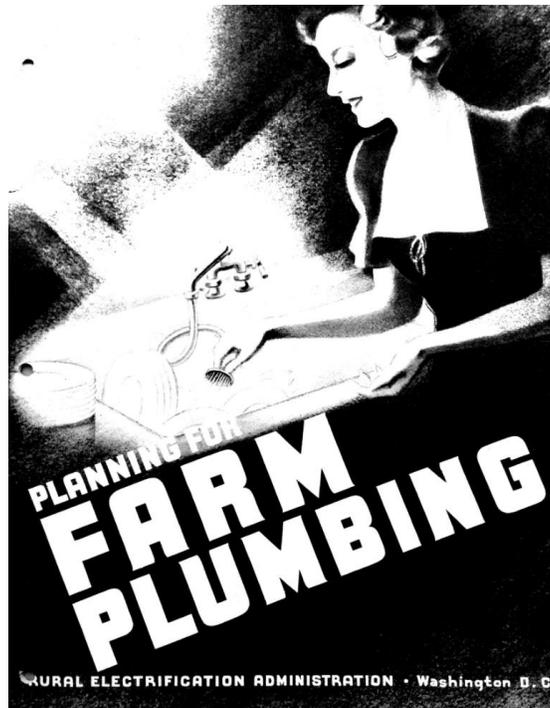
<sup>21</sup> “Electrical Appliance Data,” April 3, 1952, Mamer Papers.

<sup>22</sup> Gladys Gallup, “Some Results of Extension Studies.” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, June 1947), Box 4 Folder 5, Mamer Papers.

<sup>23</sup> Clara O. Nale, “Interesting Farm Women in Rural Electrification” (paper, American Society of Agricultural Engineers, St. Paul, MN, June 22, 1939).

<sup>24</sup> “Better Sight, Better Light for the Farm Home,” Box 23 Folder 2, Mamer Papers.

that “it is so vital to the proper care of eyes that homemakers provide each part of eyes with adequate lighting... to keep eyes ‘young and bright.’”<sup>25</sup> Advertising electric appliances to women as a means of creating a safer home for children was resonant across a number of industries. A pamphlet advertising electric home plumbing systems describes the ability of electric plumbing to act as “health insurance for the farm family,” to “aid in fire protection” and to “build farm income.”<sup>26</sup> Although mothers and fathers alike care about their own health and the health of their children, this marketing was extensively aimed at women, suggesting that purchasing these appliances would have the benefit of making them more perfect and caring mothers.



*Figure 3. Planning for Farm Plumbing. Louisan E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.*

Beyond helping women to become better mothers and home keepers, the R.E.A. advertised electrification as something that would allow women to complete their daily tasks more efficiently, which in turn would afford them the leisure time to engage in activities outside of the home. A study from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics found that the average rural farm (both electrified and not) homemaker spent 52 hours a week on homemaking, a number that increased to 63 hours for a completely unelectrified home.<sup>27</sup> In a Southern Oral History interview of a North Carolina farm family that lived through rural electrification, Oral Yates, describing his life before electrification, says that for his mother,

<sup>25</sup> Westinghouse Electric Corporation, “The Whys and Hows of Lighting a Home.”

<sup>26</sup> Rural Electrification Administration, “Planning for Farm Plumbing,” [n.d.]. Box 6, Folder 4, Mamer Papers.

<sup>27</sup> Louisan E. Mamer, “Electrification Pays Its Way” (EWRT Workshop: Rural Electrification Administration, March 11, 1952), Mamer Papers.

laundry could take up to three days to complete. Between needing to “wash and... hang [clothes] on the line” and “iron [the clothes] by an old iron that was heated... on the fire,”<sup>28</sup> the housework expected of women was a gruelling and time consuming process. Innovative electric appliances introduced in the 1930s and 40s completely restructured the everyday lives of rural farm women, allowing them to complete tasks that had previously taken several days in only a matter of hours.

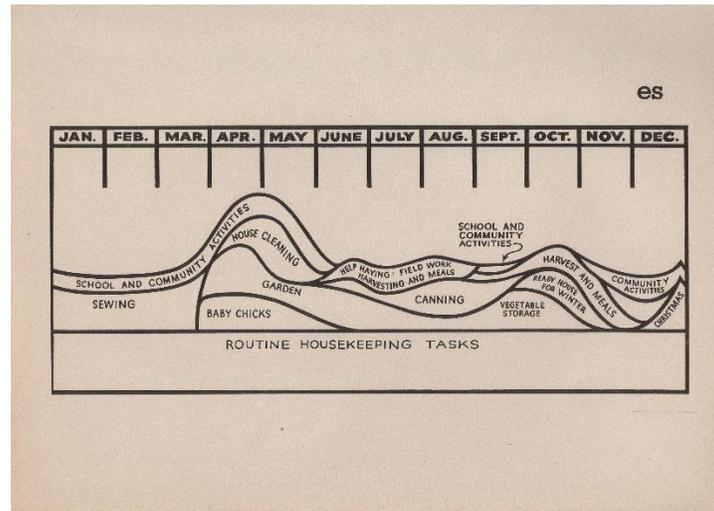


Figure 4. Routine housekeeping tasks chart, 1950s. Louisan E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

The introduction of appliances like electric irons, washing machines, ranges and dishwashers had the potential each to save over 80 hours of work per year.<sup>29</sup> With this new found free time, R.E.A. cooperative members argued, women would be able to engage more widely in community events and pursue interests outside of the home. Many R.E.A. sponsored advertisements and informational pamphlets appealed to this potential increase in leisure time, spurred by electrification. One pamphlet on the benefits and uses of electric kitchen appliances articulated that “the wife and mother of 1937 is no less a homemaker than her grandmother, but she has learned that real living demands activities and interest outside the four walls of the home.”<sup>30</sup> Despite the advertised benefits of electrification, many women were hesitant to fully adopt the new technology, making the R.E.A.’s mission as much about providing electricity as it was convincing women and homes that it was an essential amenity.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Oral and Pearl Yates, interview by Bonnie Bishop, May 29, 1984, D-0044, Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/sohp/id/10603>.

<sup>29</sup> Louisan Mamer, “Electrification Pays Its Way.”

<sup>30</sup> Frow, “Electric ‘Coolinary’ School.”

## How did REA incentivize women's participation?

The REA employed multiple tactics to incentivize women's participation in electrification, and one was the rhetoric of the "modern woman" as an electrified woman. Electricity was hailed at the "dawn of a new electrical era" in R.E.A. publications and demonstrations claiming electricity as essential for the "modern home."<sup>31</sup> Electricity was used by the most highly respected women in the United States; First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt conveyed her great interest in the technology in a letter to the R.E.A. thanking them for her copy of the R.E.A. News.<sup>32</sup> She was idolized in newspapers across the United States when the White House kitchen was outfitted with new electric appliances.<sup>33</sup> In publicizing how the most admired women of the era used electric appliances, the R.E.A. attempted to make electric appliances a staple of the female image.

The Members will be the judges as to the beauty and efficiency of the electric ranges, refrigerators, washing machines, home freezers, and radios. The exhibits will tell them the story. Good salesmanship and follow-up is next.



Figure 5. In this cartoon from promotional materials for the 1950 Alabama REA Electric Fair, a parade of electric appliances are judged on their "beauty and efficiency" in a highly unusual beauty pageant. Louisan E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Electricity extended to the world of women's fashion when beauty pageants were brought into the R.E.A. Roadshow. Beauty pageants were already a well-established tradition within many rural areas and the R.E.A. often capitalized on this "sure crowd pleaser" in order to draw out the masses to sell their electrified fare.<sup>34</sup> In Alabama, winners from various local cooperative meetings

<sup>31</sup> Shelby County Rural Electric Membership Corporation, "Demonstrations of Electrical Equipment," January 10, 1938, Box 26 Folder 8, Mamer Papers.

<sup>32</sup> Marcruia Thompson to Harry Slattery, "My Dear Mr. Slattery," November 24, 1939, Mamer Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Winifred Mallon Washington, "The White House Table: In the New Kitchen, Shining and Electrical, Equipment Is Adapted to Preparing Any Meal, from Family Breakfast to State Dinner.," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), December 29, 1935, 101265108, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

<sup>34</sup> Kimberly A. Hamlin, "Beauty Pageants and American Politics | Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective," September 9, 2016, <https://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/beauty-pageants-and-american-politics>.

would go on to compete for “Miss Alabama R.E.A.,” “Miss Region 3,” and “Miss Rural Electrification 1950.”<sup>35</sup> These pageants emphasized the women’s traditional responsibility for beauty-- both of herself and of her home. They commodified the value of women’s beauty as an incentive to attract consumers to the fairs, and through an effort to associate their electric appliances with the image of a beautiful woman. This commodification becomes apparent in one particular advertisement used in the Alabama R.E.A. newsletter, where electric appliances are depicted as beautiful women participating in a pageant, with a panel of white male judges scrutinizing the “beauty and efficiency” personified merchandise (Figure 1).<sup>36</sup> The male gaze and stereotypes of women’s beauty thus became powerful commercial tools for the R.E.A.

The importance of women creating beauty within the home was further cemented through the demonstrations of R.E.A. home economists to local women. Beautifying the home had already been a traditional female role, as shown by its own curriculum within the female-dominated field of home economics.<sup>37</sup> Home economist demonstrators made sure to emphasize the importance of an “attractive” home and table, and that modern electric appliances could “add a dash of glamour” to their homes.<sup>38</sup> By associating the value of beauty with the use of electric appliances, the R.E.A. manipulated and capitalized on the traditional image of the “ideal woman.” The terms “beauty and efficiency” became not just terms used by the R.E.A. to describe electric appliances, but adjectives to define the ideal and modern woman.

## Assumptions about Women

In marketing to women, the emphasis from the R.E.A. was on how electric appliances would allow women to take care of their families both better and faster. Campaigns frequently concerned themselves with how appliances would allow women to improve the health of their families (which thereby implied that by not owning the appliances, the women were actively ignoring the safety of their loved ones).<sup>39</sup> Documents that mentioned how new appliances would allow women increased freedom did so in a way that allowed that freedom only after regular household duties had been completed. Many of what the materials posit appliances will allow women to do had to do with new and more social and community engagement - not on time for themselves or on other jobs.<sup>40</sup> Just as the marketing was done in a way that assumed the individual lives and desires of women were in accordance with what society expected them to be, the merits of the products were presented as how they could help women actually succeed at those ideas of

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<sup>35</sup> Alabama Rural Electric Association of Cooperatives, “Alabama Rural Electric Co-Ops Annual Meeting: Electric Fair” (121 1/2 Lee St. Montgomery, Alabama, 1950), Box 7 Folder 6, Mamer Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Nancy Unger, *Beyond Nature’s Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Ruth Graham, “Add a Dash of Glamour,” *Just Between Us Girls*, October 10, 1941, Box 4 Folder 3, Mamer Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Westinghouse Electric Corporation, “The Whys and Hows of Lighting a Home.”

<sup>40</sup> Frow, “Electric ‘Coolinary’ School.”

what society thought they should be.<sup>41</sup> The R.E.A. sold to the archetypal woman by presenting ways they could help individual, ordinary, rural farm women become successful versions of that ideal.<sup>42</sup>



Figure 6. *How to Choose and Use Your Refrigerator*. Louisan E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Electric appliances were generally marketed through a strict farm/home, and thereby male/female, divide. This demarcation can be found in everything from survey questions to product promotions to descriptions of events at electric fairs.<sup>43</sup> The degree to which these were actually separate realms actually seems to have varied though. In many ways, women had been involved in work outside the home long before the advent of the R.E.A.. The traditional understanding of gender roles, as women in the home and men out working, has existed “throughout the upheavals of urbanization, industrialization and war—over 95% of married women [in the early 20th century] remained, like their mothers before them, at home.”<sup>44</sup> Despite the perseverance of perceived gender roles, the actual delineation between what it meant to work on the farm or in the home may not have been so clear on the farm homes that the R.E.A. sought to electrify. Discussing the importance of women in electrification, Nale articulates that “jobs on the farm and home are so closely interrelated that there is no sharp line of demarcation,”<sup>45</sup> meaning that in some regions, women would be called to assist with farm work. Despite the blurry distinction between home and farm work, publicly perceived gender roles remained firmly in place because “in deference to traditional notions... women characterized such [farm] work not as ‘real work’ but as ‘helping’ their husbands.”<sup>46</sup> Not only was there a societal view of the type of work

<sup>41</sup> Rural Electrification Administration, “Planning for Farm Plumbing.”

<sup>42</sup> Alabama Rural Electric Association of Cooperatives, “Alabama Rural Electric Co-Ops Annual Meeting: Electric Fair.”

<sup>43</sup> Harry Slattery, “REA Electric Farm Equipment Show” (Rural Electrification Administration, 1938-1941) Mamer Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Deirdre English Barbara Ehrenreich, “Microbes and the Manufacture of Housework,” in *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978), 155–200.

<sup>45</sup> Nale, “Interesting Farm Women in Rural Electrification,” 1939.

<sup>46</sup> Jellison, “The Man Operating the Farm and the Wife Operating the Household and the Garden”.

men and women were expected to do, but women appear also to have internalized the notion that any work that they performed outside of the home was not “real” work.

Still, the discrepancies between perceived and actual gender roles did not manifest in different tactics for different locations. The work of the R.E.A. followed the more uniform model of who women were supposed to be in public, not who they actually were in private. This is in accordance with how much of the electrification effort was community-centered and done within a community environment. They worked within a framework that told women that they could not only be the ideal society told them to be - they could be better than it. They could do all they were supposed to, and still have time left over for more. This also treated women with a degree of agency over what was thought of as their domain. The effort told women that their realm was valuable and then acted as though it was unconscionable that they would truly leave it. Women workers were notably involved in this claiming of a (bounded) space. They were key to the functioning of the R.E.A., especially in regards to female consumers, and advocated for women to be able to access the resources appropriate to their work.<sup>47</sup>

Although women’s work within the R.E.A. was primarily confined within the scope of traditional gender roles of the era, the work lay the groundwork for women’s empowerment. The role of women in the R.E.A. resulted in women’s increased ability to work outside the home, the beginning of a recognition of the validity of women’s work as equal to men’s, a demand for advancement within the workplace, and an expansion of the fields of knowledge deemed “appropriate” for women. This sentiment was in line with the growing movement of the field of home economics in general-- as it was developed as a method to legitimize homemaking as a scientific practice, all while maintaining the “separate sphere” of women within the home.<sup>48</sup> This progress for women’s rights was described by Nale as a “peaceful revolution--” expanding women’s rights in the home and in the workplace, but without making too much of a commotion.<sup>49</sup>

As mentioned earlier in this article, the advent of electrical appliances in rural America freed women from the “drudgery” of home labor and allowed free time for women to expand their personal pursuits or to enter the workforce.<sup>50</sup> This freedom allowed women to expand their activities beyond the home and family and to prove the importance of their employment. Women also began to advocate for change of gender roles from within the R.E.A.. The home economists of the R.E.A. spoke out in their publications and demonstrations about the merit of their work and to demand recognition. In a joint letter to the male leadership of the R.E.A., four working home economists pointed out the “professional value” of the home economist and the “increasing demands for this type of service” while the R.E.A. assigned one home economist “to do the work formerly done by two.”<sup>51</sup> On par with the professional value of their work, these women decried

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<sup>47</sup> Oneta, “Kitchen Parties,” 1948.

<sup>48</sup> Matly, Michel. “Women’s Electrification.” France: Collaborative Research Group on Gender and Energy, n.d.

<sup>49</sup> Clara O. Nale. “Interesting Farm Women in Rural Electrification 062239,” June 22, 1939.

<sup>50</sup> Bose, Gautam, Tarun Jain, and Sarah Walker. “Women’s Labor Force Participation and Household Technology Adoption.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3520613>.

<sup>51</sup> L. Anlauf et al., “Suggestions by Western and Southwest Area Home Economists at Denver Conference,” Memorandum, June 27, 1952, Mamer Papers.

that “both the headquarters and field home economists are not being given equal consideration with men in similar positions in grade promotions, although doing comparable work.”<sup>52</sup> In a conference presentation in front of a predominantly male audience of agricultural engineers in Minnesota, Nale publicly attested to the value of women’s work in the REA and in the home, stating that farm wives’ work often discredited as “‘pin money’ enterprises will grow to the extent that they become a very important part of the farm-income program.”<sup>53</sup> She demanded that women “should share the responsibility of getting certain definite things done, such as serving on boards of directors of the cooperatives and on the various committees.”<sup>54</sup> Farming women also spoke out on the importance of their work. During WWII when women remained behind to grow food and support the troops, the National Wartime Women’s Platform asked “that the producer of food have the same recognition as was accorded to those in the Armed Forces” and demanded uniforms and insignia for women and boys and girls at home who were participating in “equally important work.”<sup>55</sup> Thus while continuing within the traditional boundaries of women’s work, home economists and farm women began to openly confront the systems of patriarchy to validate their work and gain power within their roles.



*Figure 7. Thirty-Two Members of the REA Staff Receive Within Grade Awards for Sustained High Quality Performance. ~1943-1952. Louisan E. Mamer Rural Electrification Administration Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.*

Electrification also expanded the boundaries of knowledge that was traditionally available to women. Working with electric appliances within the home meant that women had to have a basic understanding of electricity and machinery-- fields that had originally been restricted to men.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Clara O. Nale, “Interesting Farm Women in Rural Electrification.”

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “National War-Time Platform of American Farm Women” (Springfield, IL: REA Program, 1942), Mamer Papers.

Within the field of home economics, the introduction of home technologies such as electricity and plumbing allowed women to study physics and chemistry in order to operate and improve these machines.<sup>56</sup> Nale's presentation included an urge to her male listeners: "women must acquire a fair knowledge of the functions of the entire electric service, if they are to help plan the wiring, from the standpoints of convenient use and of safety. . . . Let us not say that this part of the program is too technical, too mechanical, and the like, for women to understand."<sup>57</sup> Women began to take on the roles of determining the wiring schemes of their homes, and guides were written for their use.<sup>58</sup> Louisan Mamer's personal papers contain many such guides of electrical usage, as well as scientific reports about equipment efficiency, including an electric trap built to kill farm pests.<sup>59</sup> By the inclusion of electric appliances within the women's traditional role, the traditional knowledge barriers began to expand for women to include more scientific and mechanical fields.

While the R.E.A. widely publicized the idea of separation between men's and women's roles in the farm, home, and community, there is evidence that not all women in rural US fell into the R.E.A.'s strict gender norms. Some women, such as North Carolinian R.E.A. cooperative director Rebekah Evans, never married and ran a farm and estate single-handedly.<sup>60</sup> She was responsible for bringing electricity into her community in 1940 (as well as a community telephone system) by traveling door-to-door to garner support and establish her local cooperative in the Cedar Creek Township, Fayetteville, NC. Her three sisters also never married.<sup>61</sup> The Evans family was only one example of rural US women who contradicted the R.E.A.'s image of the woman as the man's helper in the home.

## Applications to Today's Electrification Efforts

The Rural Electrification Administration and the Electric Farm Equipment roadshow employed more long term tactics in their efforts than we see in many areas of rural electrification today. This includes a level of outreach to children (whether in anticipation of their future consumptive power or to prepare them for a rapidly changing world) that would be difficult to accomplish in contemporary efforts due to structural difference in the avenues necessary used to execute this goal. The R.E.A. was able to reach out to vocational teachers and, especially, to 4H club leaders, and outsource this project by providing materials, but not taking on the burden of the direct instructional efforts.<sup>62</sup> This was only possible because of the existing infrastructure of

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<sup>56</sup> Matly, "Women's Electrification."

<sup>57</sup> Nale, "Interesting Farm Women in Rural Electrification."

<sup>58</sup> "In the Farm Home," Rural Electrification Administration, n.d., Mamer Papers.

<sup>59</sup> "Your Wiring Check List," Rural Electrification Administration, August 1945, Mamer Papers.

<sup>60</sup> "Charter Director Retires After Serving 25 Years," *Rural Electrification News*, October 1965, Property of Della Mol.

<sup>61</sup> Della Mol, Rural Life in the 1940's: Fayetteville, NC, interview by Madeline Fowler, Zoom video call, June 5, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Claude Wiekard, "4-H Club Electrification Program" (Rural Electrification Administration, February 18, 1947), Mamer Papers.

childhood education, something that does not exist everywhere electrification efforts are now being made.

Additionally, the specific structure that the R.E.A. took, combining government administration and funding with local community organization, contributed widely to its success and it potentially applicable to modern electrification efforts. This community-centric effort was largely accomplished by focusing on rural women. As revealed through this report, women's traditional role as social community builders placed them at the unique position of being able to influence the lifestyle of the community, and imbue this new lifestyle into their children. Today's efforts for rural electrification in developing countries often focus on bringing the technology to male community leaders through a top-down intervention. Yet, the method of generating electricity is increasingly localized, done through local community solar panels and power grids rather than integration into large-scale power networks. Thus, the bottom-up intervention at the community level through integrating electricity into the lives of women may be a more effective way to foster the adoption of electricity into the lifestyle of developing communities. As shown in this report, the integration of electricity of women's lives also led to benefits in women's lives including more free time to increase a home's productive power, as well as by expanding the women's role outside of the home. Some developing regions in need to electrification may also share cultural aspects of the traditional role of women with the rural United States of the mid-1900's. In some such areas, modern efforts for rural electrification may do well to focus electrification efforts on women.

The success of the R.E.A. can be attributed to a number of unique internal and external contributing factors, but the specific focus of the administration on community organizing and the important role of women in that sphere set the R.E.A. apart from other similar initiatives of the time and is an approach that would potentially find success in modern electrification efforts. The rural electrification would not have been possible without the millions of dollars that the R.E.A. provided in loans for electrification, the drastic change— an over 90% increase in rural electrification in just 25 years— is the result of more than just financial incentive.<sup>63</sup> The R.E.A. not only made it possible for rural farms to access electricity, but aggressively advertised its various uses not as luxury home additions, but necessities of modern life. This report focuses specifically on the important role that gender played in electrification, but as we went deeper into the research, it became clear that race is also important to this story, and omitted in much of the source material. From this research, we have found that, beyond loans and financial support, social contexts, particularly gender, play an important role in the success of electrification efforts and are important factors to understand and consider when devising strategies for modern rural electrification.

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<sup>63</sup> Matly, "Women's Electrification."

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