

**Linoleum, Better Babies, and the Modern Farm Woman,
1890-1930**

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a vanished world, and into an American Jewish experience that was a bit out of the ordinary.

Although I very much liked the book's format, I was disappointed by the inadequate index, which did not capture all of the references to a particular geographic locale. This would seem essential in a regional history.

Linoleum, Better Babies, and the Modern Farm Woman, 1890–1930, by Marilyn Irvin Holt. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. 250 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$34.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY NANCY K. BERLAGE, THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Marilyn Holt has written a highly readable and enjoyable account of how the "domestic economy movement" affected many central plains farm women between 1890 and 1930. She illustrates how ideals about progress and science came together in experts' ideas about improving home management and efficiency, health and sanitation, and education in domestic matters. Through her detailed descriptions of the various programmatic efforts to put reform ideals into practice, as well as through the well-chosen reproductions of photographs, we can imagine and envision what this movement might have meant to many farm people. Holt also describes the unique mediums used to disseminate scientific ideas to women—clubs, fairs, contests, and other organizational forms. Evoking a nostalgic charm at times, she conveys the movement's sincerity and naiveté without ignoring its darker overtones of racism.

Historians have usually made scientific farming and men the focus of their studies of Progressive-era rural reform. This volume, however, provides a sorely needed account of its domestic science aspects. Holt shows that domestic science played an important role, initiating rural change and empowering female populations. Holt surely intended to—and ably does—portray farm women not as mere subordinates, but as rational actors whose experiences both paralleled and differed from men's. She accomplishes less well her goal of showing that women were not only passive receptors of advice but accepted or rejected ideas to fit their own needs. It is a difficult task to sort out farm women's voices from the multitude advocating improvements—a problem exacerbated by the diffuseness of sources available for this sort of "bottom-up" history. The author has relied primarily on experts' writings and assessments of farm women's re-

sponses, making it difficult to see just how and why individuals made decisions other than to willingly accept scientific knowledge.

Significantly, the author addresses long neglected — but extremely interesting — aspects of rural domestic science reform: health, child-care, and the growing influence of social science. While important, the chapter on “Better Babies and Rural Health” could have better explained the timing of health reforms and the manner in which they were constructed if the author had gone beyond a functionalist explanation and considered more explicitly the roles of class and status, professionalization, and self-interest.

Those interested in questions about gender will be disappointed in this volume, unfortunately. Refuting “women” as a monolithic category, Holt states that gender was not the only or even the determining factor in many farm women’s experiences (17–18). Despite her ahistorical usage of gender as an analytical tool, she still successfully shows that farm women were not confined by a separate sphere ideology and that they fully participated in the marketplace of ideas and scientific reform. Holt does not dispel this reader’s sense that the notion of separate spheres retained a changeable, yet powerful, rhetorical function through this period, nor that gender was firmly embedded in domestic science; the “better babies” movement, for example, prescribed particular gender-specific roles for farm women as wives and mothers — not merely better health — but the author does not really deal with this issue.

Holt focuses on the women of the central plains and Texas, perhaps understating their uniqueness, but the depth of description gives the book value for comparative research. As farm women in other states certainly faced similar challenges, and the scope of domestic science reform was national, her account will be useful for the study of other localized history, especially of Iowa and the Midwest, given the strength of rural reform there.

The domestic economy movement affected Native American and Hispanic groups, but as Holt points out, racist assumptions and assimilationist attitudes found among some experts made its influence problematic. She raises the issue of how domestic science promoted standardized ideals about “modern” farm life that certainly were not apt for everyone. A fascinating topic for a period when scientific categories of race still predominated, I wanted more analysis of how race-thinking affected domestic science education, how racial constructions were enfolded within domestic science itself, and of the particular challenges that ethnic women faced.

Although Holt’s book does not break any new ground theoretically — despite its potential to do so — anyone interested in this period,

not only rural historians, should read it. It contributes to our understanding of exactly how change, in the name of science and progress, affected many rural women and, as such, would be useful for introductory courses on the history of women, agriculture, the West, or the central plains. To be sure, it will incite interest in the "modern farm woman."

Fevered Lives: Tuberculosis in American Culture since 1870, by Katherine Ott. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. vii, 242 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix, annotated bibliography, index. \$27.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW T. SCHAEFER, IOWA CITY

Katherine Ott's *Fevered Lives* is an ambitious history of tuberculosis in America from 1870 to the present. She begins with the premise that "the meaning of disease evolves from the interrelationship of people, technology, medical doctrines, and state affairs" and concludes, "it is the material substance of society that ultimately shapes, locates, and creates disease" (1). This approach to history demands analysis on multiple levels. For the most part, Ott succeeds in meeting the difficult task of melding cultural, intellectual, and social history. She is especially strong in her assessment of the objects of material culture that measure and give shape to the disease: the spirometer, the microscopist's slide, the chest x-ray, and the tuberculin antibody test. Ott notes the cultural resonance of the sickroom, the sanitarium, and the sleeping porch among the many figurative places that help form our idea of tuberculosis.

Ott demonstrates convincingly that consumption of the 1870s and the tuberculosis of the twentieth century were not the same disease. Each was perceived and defined according to prevailing medical thinking and cultural mores. Consumption consisted of disparate signs and symptoms and included many diseases not linked to the tuberculosis bacillus. By definition, tuberculosis entailed the presence of a parasitic bacillus disrupting systems and resulting in clear pathological changes. Ott aptly observes that this precision of definition owed as much to the rise of a modern public health bureaucracy as to the advances made in understanding the disease. She also addresses the more amorphous issue of the cultural conception of the disease. In 1870 many felt that the consumptive visage betokened genius; by 1900 a diagnosis of tuberculosis stigmatized a person and resulted in shunning.

Fevered Lives covers the impact of tuberculosis on American culture as a whole. There is little attention given to regional differences in dealing with the disease aside from discussion of the various cli-

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