

Voices of American Homemakers, edited by Eleanor Arnold. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. 304 pp. Illustrations. \$25.00 cloth, \$10.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY VIRGINIA SCHARFF, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

The early 1980s was a boom time for oral history. Professional historians, activists, and history buffs went into their communities armed with tape recorders in the hopes of capturing a common people's experience they believed to be quickly disappearing. State governments and federal agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) often subsidized these efforts, which generated products varying in scale and quality. Among the most successful of these projects was a five-year effort sponsored by the National Extension Homemakers Council, a group with some five hundred thousand members in the mid-1980s, mostly rural and small-town women. With substantial NEH support, the Extension Homemakers trained interviewers from forty-four states who collected and transcribed 219 interviews, mostly with women between the ages of 60 and 80.

Voices of American Homemakers is a richly textured collection of memorable quotations from those interviews, along with many evocative photographs.* Organized around four themes—"The Homemaker and Her Life," "The Homemaker and Her Work," "The Homemaker and Her Organization," and "The Homemaker and Herself"—*Voices* uses women's own words to depict a rural women's world before consumerism, a world of hard work and few luxuries only recently transformed by technological innovation. The project originated in Indiana, where editor Eleanor Arnold had directed a statewide precursor to the national effort. The larger project retained a focus on the American heartland; there are, for example, no interviews from New York, Massachusetts, or California.

The vignettes and anecdotes collected here support the idea of a women's experience that transcends, in many regards, ethnicity and region. Regional and ethnic distinctions do appear in a Hawaiian homemaker's descriptions of how to make poi, a Ukrainian woman's explanation of dyeing Easter eggs, and a Louisiana housewife's memory of hanging up laundry at night while mosquitoes made a feast of her. Nonetheless, from Hawaii to North Carolina, women recalled similar, and to today's reader, exotic experi-

*The State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City; is one of the repositories for the complete collection of taped interviews and transcripts.—Ed.

ences: hauling water and chopping wood, canning meat, making clothing out of feed sacks. Margaret Lien, age 68, from North Dakota, recalled, "The first things I had was bloomers and slips out of flour sacks that they bleached the names off of. Mom was good at that. She didn't leave parts of the name. Some people had Pillsbury on their seat" (154).

There are, of course, some caveats to keep in mind while marveling at the ingenuity and determination of the women who tell their stories in *Voices*. Oral history has become more sophisticated, and scholars have grown wary of memory as a trustworthy source of historical data. As these women aged and seemingly fulfilled community expectations, they tended to downplay the ways they may have resisted or sabotaged conventional expectations in earlier stages of their lives.

But just as importantly, *Voices* preserves the materiality of everyday life in a world far less mechanized, more localized, more laborious. Some observations help to explain the lack of appeal middle-class urban feminism may have had for rural working women. As 73-year-old Ozetta Sullivan of Indiana remarked, "Well, I've had my equal rights all of my life, and I don't think much of it. I said if a woman wants to get out and work like a man, that's all right, but I had to do it whether I wanted to or not. I worked in the fields. I plowed. I cultivated. I disked. I done everything a man does, and I wasn't enjoying it one bit."

Social Housekeepers: Women Shaping Public Policy in New Mexico, 1920-1940, by Sandra Schackel. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992. ix, 213 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MARGARET DORSEY PHELPS, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Sandra Schackel's account of the role women played in social welfare during the interwar years appropriately opens with a geographic and demographic profile of the state of New Mexico. Schackel describes a very rural, very poor, sparsely populated, culturally diverse, and recently organized western state. In many respects, these conditions present a stark contrast to the rest of the nation. Nationwide in 1920 the population was for the first time slightly less rural (49%) than urban, while New Mexico was overwhelmingly rural (82%), and had been a state for only eight years. By comparison, Iowa was 57% rural and 74 years old.

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