



*A daguerreotype of Esther Mendenhall with her baby, taken around 1850.
(SHSI)*

WOMEN AT HOME

by Mary Bennett

The role of women in our society today is a very complex one, but a common thread ran through the lives of the women who lived in Iowa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. No one generalization can be made about these women, but most were tied to the home, and the basics of family life often centered around women. The home was definitely in the feminine domain, and it was a place where a woman could excel and showcase her talents.

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With few opportunities for employment or participation in activities outside the home, many women focused their attention on marriage and family life. Most were economically dependent on men, and their destiny was a life of domestic labor and childbearing. Education was accessible to those women who chose it, but unlike education for men, most school curriculums focused primarily on preparing a woman for her role in the home. At home, families emphasized training their girls in practical skills necessary for the traditional roles of wife and mother. The popular notion of a

“proper sphere” for women meant that most women’s lives revolved around the duties of running a household.

The home was one place where a woman could exert considerable influence. She was largely responsible for raising children with acceptable moral attitudes. In fact, the potential to influence her children was often cited as a reason why a woman did not need political or economic power outside the home. A woman could contribute to the economic well-being of the family by managing its financial resources efficiently or by selling homemade goods and services. A farm wife might sell eggs and butter, and a woman in town might take in sewing or ironing.

Whatever her role, a woman drew her identity from her home life. The strength of the home as a social institution depended in large part on the presence of a woman. She tried to bring grace and refinement into the home, and these qualities helped to bring pleasure to family members and friends. Perhaps more than her male counterpart, she attempted to instill an appreciation for music, culture, and art. She demonstrated her elegance and good taste by stylishly decorating her home, but above all, she created a comfortable setting for family life.

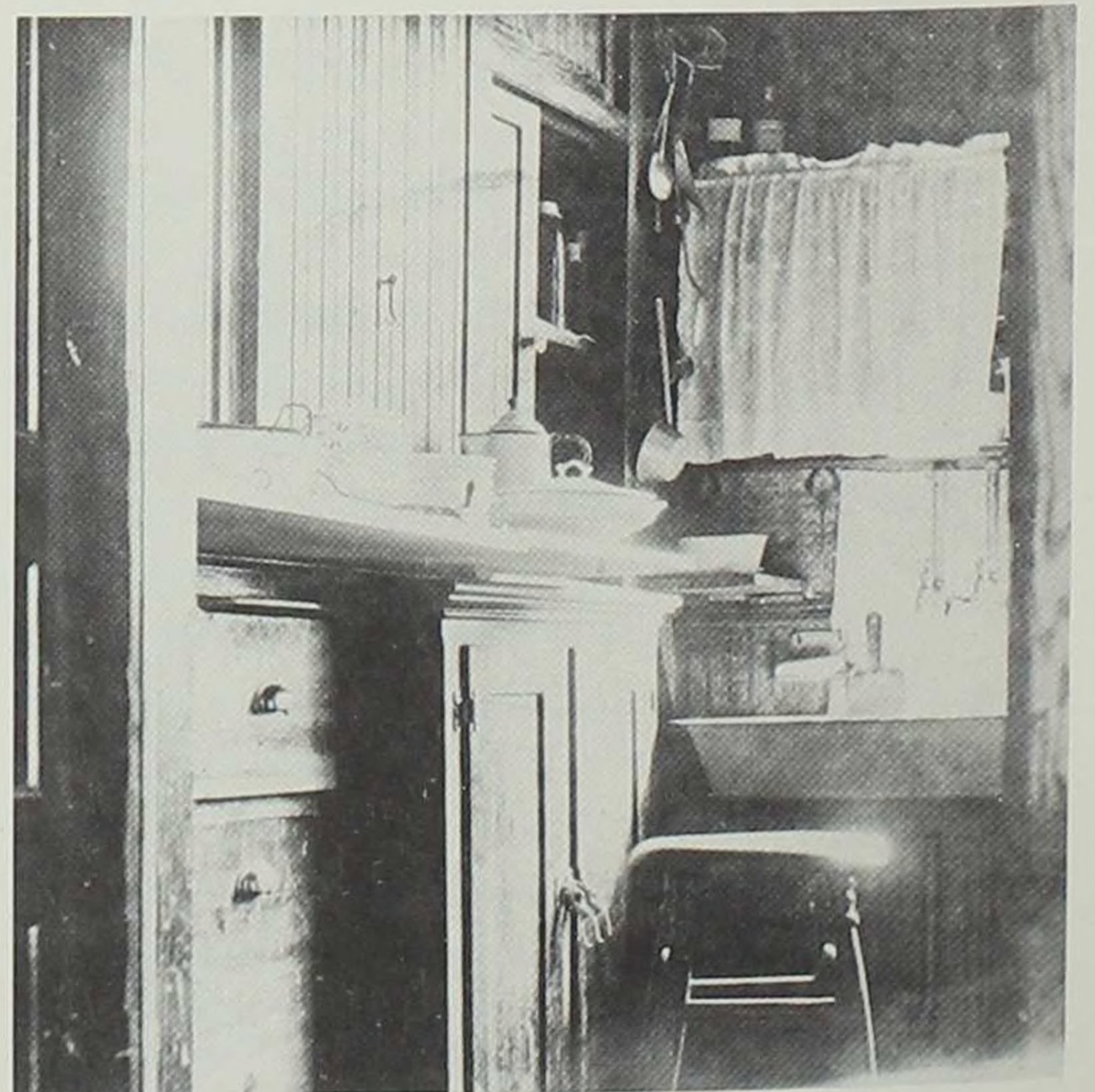
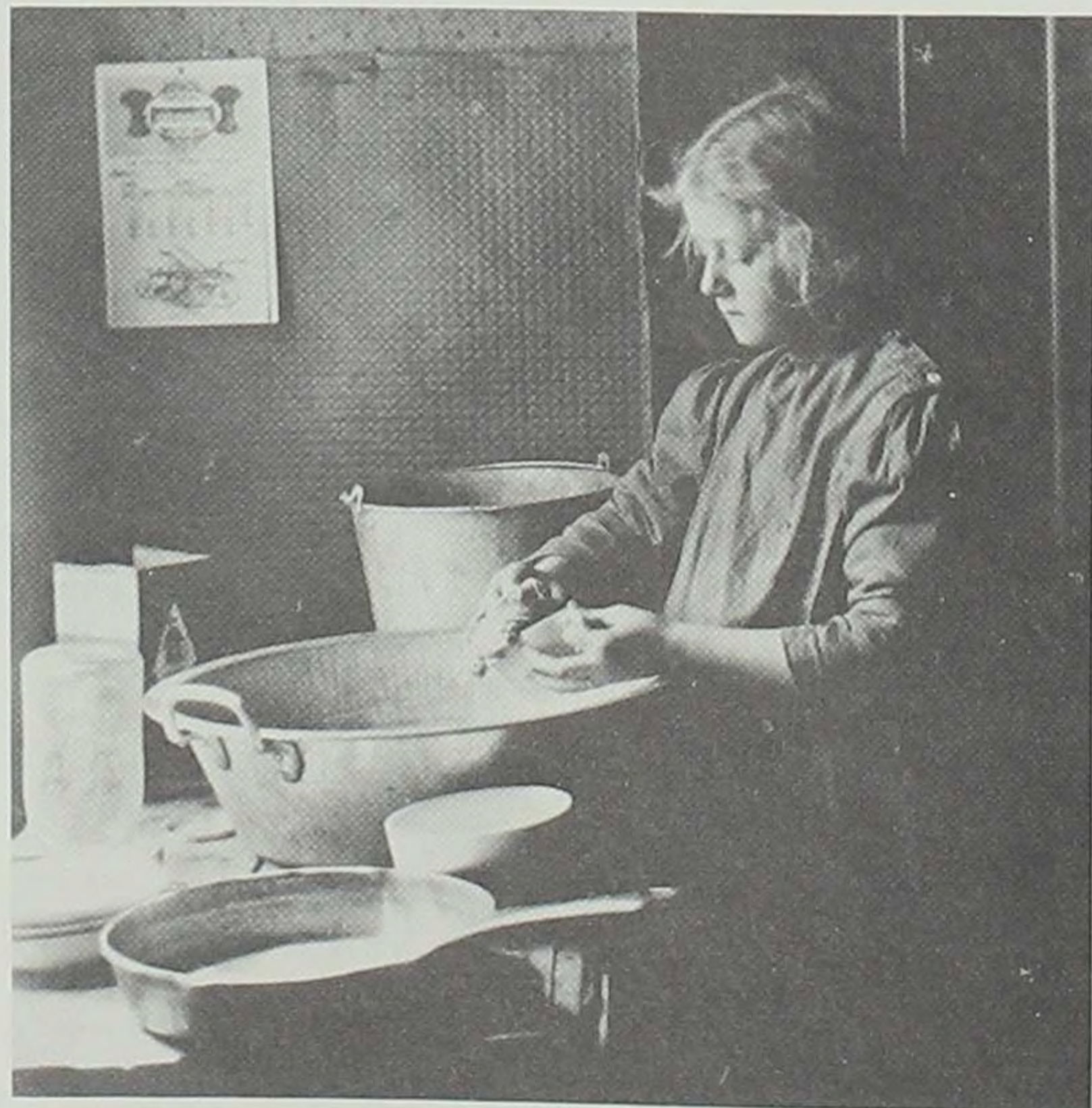
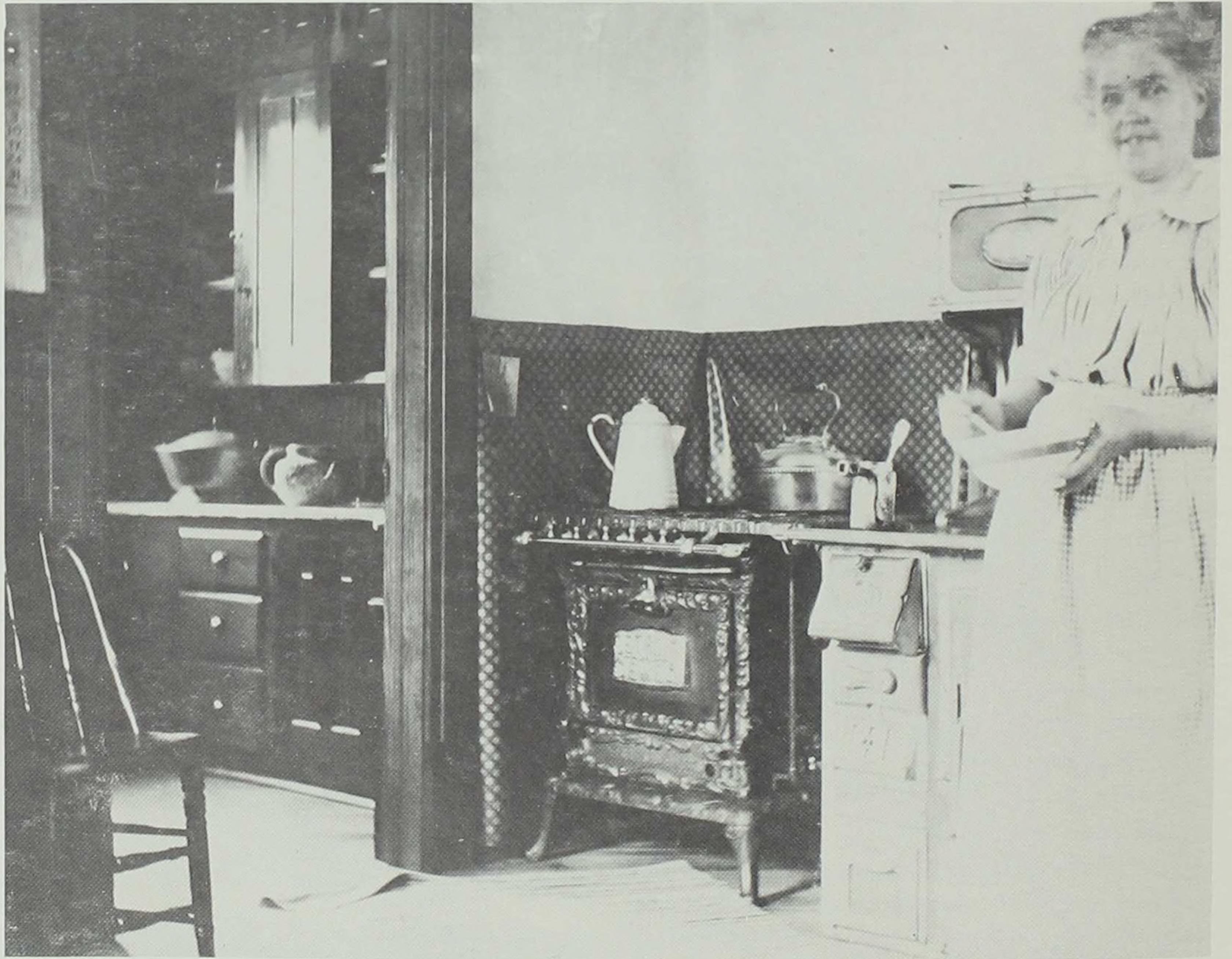
The modern life of the twentieth century modified the place of women in society, but the vast majority of women still found their rewards in homemaking. Women assumed new roles in public life by participating in more diverse occupations, by voting, and by joining organizations, but they still had primary responsibility for the household. Even today, many women who combine the careers of an outside job and homemaking find that much of their identity and fulfillment generates from the home.

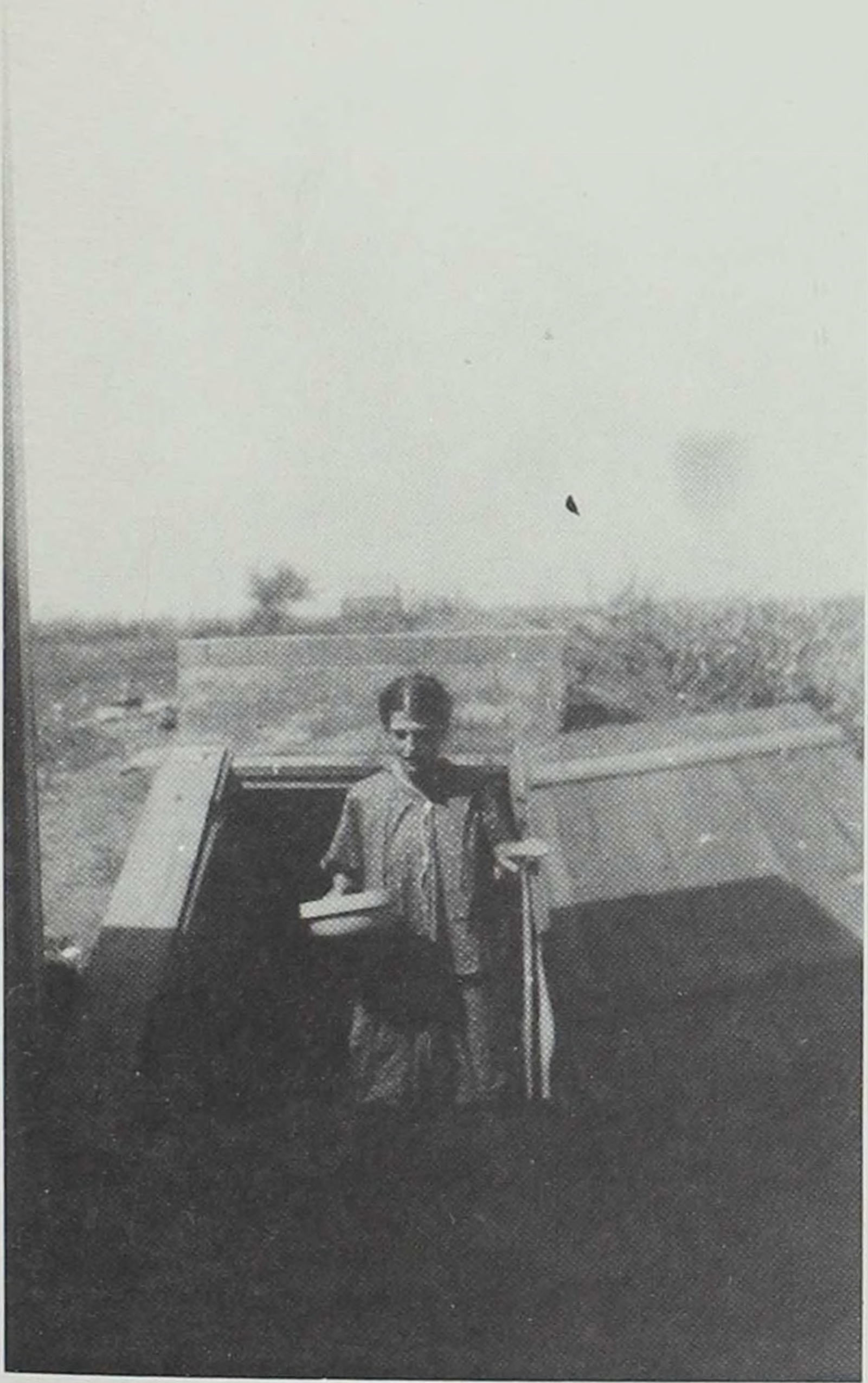
Photographs of women in the intimate surroundings of their homes are very rare. These photographs illustrate how the home life of women in Iowa has changed and how it has remained the same.



Domestic chores occupied the majority of women’s time at home. Above, a woman hangs up laundry on an outside line at the turn of the century (from the Marsh Family Collection, SHSI); below, three women pose with common nineteenth-century household items: a broom, a water basin, and embroidered cloth. (SHSI)

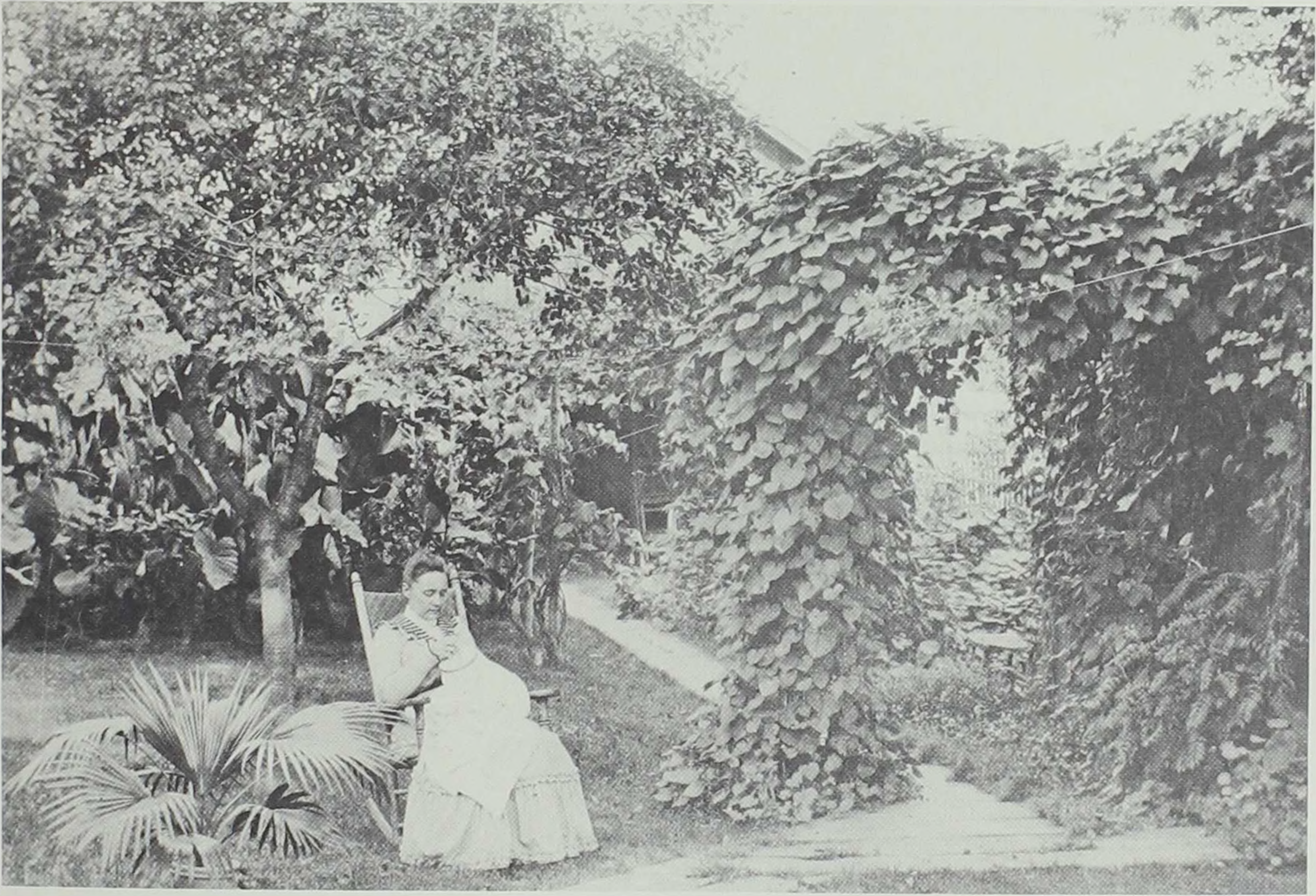






Opposite page: top, a photograph from the Pratt Family Collection provides a detailed look at a turn-of-the-century Iowa kitchen (SHSI); lower left, young Frances Edith Babcock undertakes the dishwashing chores, circa 1910 (SHSI); lower right, the pantry of Rachel Mather Bush's apartment on North Linn Street in Iowa City, about 1910. This page: above, a woman emerges from the family fruit cellar, which provided storage for much of the family's food supply (Henrietta Harris Collection, SHSI); top right, a rural Kensett woman continues her laundry chores without regard for the weather (Nels L. Roslien Collection, SHSI); bottom right, working in the family garden, largely a woman's responsibility at the time this photograph was taken, circa 1910 (SHSI)





Opposite page: top, Karoline Gabelmann works with the cold frames for her garden in Clarksville, circa 1925 (SHSI); bottom, a Kensett homemaker feeds her chickens. (Nels L. Roslien Collection, SHSI) This page: right, Ellen Mather reads in the parlor of her West Liberty home, 1895. Mrs. Mather was the mother of Rachel Mather Bush, pictured on page 48. A photo of Mrs. Katharine Mosnat Horack taken around 1905, above, shows another pastime popular among Iowa women earlier in this century—embroidery. Mrs. Horack, pictured in the garden of her home in Iowa City, was the mother of Bertha Horack Shambaugh, pioneer Iowa photographer and the subject of an article featured in the March/April 1980 issue of *The Palimpsest*. (SHSI)





As many of the photographs on these pages show, there was much that we would consider elegant about life at home in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Queenie Hortense Cox of Pella relaxes on a chaise lounge with a book, right, and with her embroidery, below (both photos SHSI), while left, Rachel Mather plays the piano in the parlor of her family's home in West Liberty, circa 1905. (SHSI) Below right, another Iowa woman arranges flowers in a photograph taken in 1917. (SHSI)







The Ben Katz family enjoys the warm weather in the backyard of their Iowa City home, circa 1915, left. Helen Katz Robeson, seated third from the left, was an accomplished concert violinist and had performed on the Chautauqua circuit in 1913 and taught at the State University of Iowa. In 1918, however, she abandoned her professional career following her marriage to Professor George Robeson, a native of Lohrville. Again in this photograph are the ubiquitous sewing projects so common among women in this period. (SHSI) The photograph on the lower left depicts a sewing project of much larger scope, a quilting party held in the parlor of the Lutheran Church in North Liberty in 1915. (SHSI) On this page are two portraits of domestic life in turn-of-the-century Iowa. Right, the family of Dr. Love enjoys some time together in their richly furnished parlor, circa 1895. (SHSI) Another doctor, R.J. Vigers of Merville, took the photo below using a shutter release cable in 1912. Dr. Vigers is seated at the extreme right. (SHSI)



Images of women performing domestic chores or enjoying their leisure moments are difficult to find. The Society encourages donations or loans of photographs depicting the lives of women in Iowa.

