

Provisioning the City: American Rural and Urban Landscapes Contrasted: Cooperative Extension Films 1917-1931

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This paper explores how spirituality and food structured the American rural environment during the early twentieth century through the study of a series of "home demonstration films" for food production made by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A) between 1917 and 1931. Cooperative Extension Service distributed them for farm women and their daughters. While the focus of this study will be on rural women, the cultural meaning and social relationship of rural women's food production sites to their urban sisters will also be a primary consideration. The gendered American rural landscape lies somewhere between a symbolic (mythic) ideal garden and scientific location where women carried out timed specific operations. The separation of work activities reinforced in the films underlines the distinct spatial relationship between females and males within the agricultural landscape - women in the home and kitchen gardens and men in the barns and cultivated fields. Through the proper growing, preparation, and consumption of food these films illustrate the multiple ways in which the U.S. government viewed the rural landscape - as a commodity or economic resource for women, as a place to be sanitized of dirt and filth and as a location for application of the latest scientific methods and labor saving techniques. While the government aspired to give national identity to a landscape viewed by many outsiders as solitary, backward, and isolated, they also saw the potential for using food to renew and strengthen communal ties amongst rural women. Through the establishment of tomato clubs, garden clubs, and poultry clubs but also community-canning clubs, the government shows women how their spiritual connection to the land could be strengthened with other neighboring women through the socially unifying spiritual rituals of producing, celebrating, and sharing of food. Cultivated working landscapes were part of knowing and getting closer to neighbors and the Creator's work but the garden as a site for scientific and social study could be part of the improvement of Woman herself. Socially and culturally, the U.S.D.A. films uplifted the lives of rural women by reinforcing their positive role in the community. By imparting a sense of community, responsibility and self-confidence the government additionally hoped to stem the tide of young women like "Poor Mrs. Jones" from leaving the farms for better-paid work in cities.