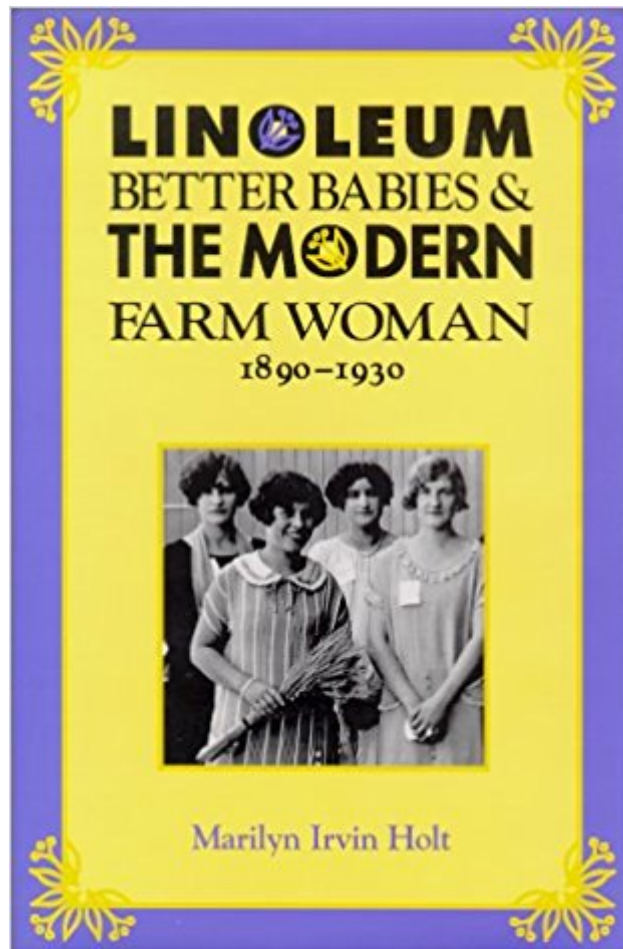




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Linoleum, Better Babies & The Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930



Synopsis

The Progressive Era promoted a vision of America united by an emphasis on science and progressive reform. During the years under this study, every facet of American life came under scrutiny for the possibility of reform. Both experts and laymen believed better management would benefit everyone. Women, as well as men, could be managers. For women in agriculture, reform messages, experts, and science came together to preach a new form of education in domestic economy. In *Linoleum, Better Babies, and the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930*, Holt argues that women in agriculture were not passive receptors of this advice. Reformers generally agreed that farm women were the glue that held the rural world together, and farm women saw their place in agriculture as multifaceted and important, so they eagerly accepted improved education. At the same time, they rejected suggestions that conflicted with their own views of the rewards and values of farm life. Holt also offers a better understanding of the role of women in agriculture from the period where farm women were seen as beasts of burden until they developed their own view of themselves as equal contributors to the success of the farm. She writes with wit and clarity about an important time in the lives of women farmers, "Lines of labor blurred, with couples 'working in harness'--side by side, heading for the same goal--just as plow horses worked together to get the job done."

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Customer Reviews

Holt (*The Orphan Trains*, LJ 8/92) examines the impact of progressive reformers on the lives of rural

women at the turn of the century. Progress, according to outside "experts," often included a vision of women as domestic managers. It presumed an optimistic belief in science-based strategies for homemaking. The legacy of this movement remains today in such institutions as home extension and 4-H. Holt shows that while the use of linoleum in farm kitchens didn't necessarily create better babies, the optimistic outlook of progressive reformers did emphasize the partnership of farm women with their farmer husbands and stabilized rural families. This well-documented work will appeal to those interested in women's studies and sociology but is most appropriate for research collections supporting study in agricultural history and the progressive movement. ?Susan E. Parker, Harvard Law Sch. Lib. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Marilyn Irvin Holt is also the author of *The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*. She lives in Abilene, Kansas. She is adjunct professor of history at the University of Kansas and also works as a writer, consultant, and researcher. The Irvin farm has been in the family 165 years and some of Holt's fondest memories come from living on the farm with her brothers and sisters, working in the garden, gathering eggs, and terrifying each other with the black snakes that hung in the eaves of an old, vine-covered outhouse.

1890-1930 sets the stage for this book. Holt specifically explores the domestic economic movement which evolved out of "the era's push for progress and reform. it centered on rural women and their education. . . . the push for rural change was as likely to come from outside agricultural districts as from inside" (pp. 3, 5). Holt provides a unique perspective in specifically discussing the domestic economic movement and largely portraying this movement as a positive thing for rural contexts and for rural women. Other authors have criticized the domestic economic movement due to the underlying biases and assumptions about the urban ideal as being superior to rurality, rural culture, and the dailiness of rural working women. I would have liked to have read a pros/cons discussion about the domestic economic movement generally and a discussion about urban/rural policies and ideals. Even so, Holt's research, discussion, and bibliographic notes informed my understanding of the domestic economic movement.

In this work, Holt makes a strong case for women's agency in the domestic economy movement. Focusing on the rural midwest, Holt looks at how women accepted and participated in educational programs run through the Children's Bureau and the Department of Agriculture, which served to make rural farm life more attractive to women. Her examples provide insight into early twentieth

century life for rural women and the challenges they faced.

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