Ava Milam, for whom Milam Hall is named, was Dean of the School of Domestic Science and Art at Oregon Agricultural College in 1913 when she packed up her pots and pans, mixing bowls, and egg beaters and joined a train traveling about the state to hold Farmer’s Institutes. While the agricultural specialist talked to farmers, Dean Milam gave demonstrations of proper vegetable cookery and taught the farmers’ wives how to make that mystical mixture—mayonnaise. Her reasoning was not to encourage the consumption of mayonnaise, but to encourage the eating of more raw vegetables by dressing them up with the mayonnaise.

When Anna Turley was appointed State Leader for the Extension Home Economics in 1914 she too traveled about the state any means of transportation available, spending a lot of time on food and nutrition demonstrations. One-half of a homemaker’s work time in those years was spent on food preparation, and there was a great need for information on safe and efficient methods to ease that workload. Besides giving 150 lectures and demonstrations in her first year, Miss Turley organized eight school lunch programs and arranged for home economics classes to be started in six high schools.

During those earliest years there were a few homemakers groups started, but it was the war years of World War I that brought more home economics agents, more homemakers into the program; and the dedicated volunteerism that is a special attribute of Extension Homemakers first began to develop. Extension Homemakers volunteered in everything from setting up school lunch programs to setting up a community kitchen for flu victims in Umatilla County during the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1919.

Funding for home economics was inadequate to maintain much of a program following the first world war, but was restored with the onslaught of the Great Depression. When Claribel Nye took over Extension Home Economics in 1929, the growth of the study group concept and agent-trained volunteer teachers became the accepted way to efficiently educate hundreds of homemakers in need of help during the depression.

What did they study in those dark days long ago when they were not as knowledgeable and enlightened as we are today? The things that bothered them then still bother us today. How to stretch too few dollars to meet too many needs occupied much of their lesson time. Low Cost Meals lessons appear again and again; they not only studied about them, they ate them! Food Preservation was a much-needed demonstration as homemakers canned most of what their families ate. In recent years there has been a great interest in food drying and building dryers, but as long ago as 1931 a project taught how to make and use a “food evaporator.” Nutrition was an emerging science and was taught in a number of ways. A Square Deal in Every Meal was an imaginative title. Many of you may be involved in parenting classes as you struggled to raise your children to be happy, responsible citizens, but parenting classes are not new either. Child development and parenting classes including The Changing World and the Family in 1932, Adolescence and Sex Education in 1934, and the “I’m OK, You’re OK” of 1935—Understanding Ourselves.

One parenting class was specifically aimed at fathers. From these parenting classes came a classic quote by Buena Maris, a specialist at OSU, who said, “Never judge a parent until the child is 30 years old.” Parents of teenagers should find comfort in that statement.

Maude Purvine of Columbia County gave a very practical lesson: How to Tow a Car. Homemakers traveling about on country roads with less-than-dependable cars had need of that lesson. However, a class on how to make invisible patches on jeans is gone forever. Now patches on jeans must be visible to have any class.

*Adapted from Golden Anniversary speech by Mary Sorber, June 24, 1982.
During World War II, Extension Homemakers rallied to the cause of always, learning home nursing and first aid, learning substitutes in food preparation as butter, meat, and sugar were rationed. They learned home repair of household appliances, since men were gone to war and added civil defense duties to their already busy lives, since they were the only ones to do the duty. They saved fat and scrap metal for the war effort and did many other volunteer activities during those years of the 40’s.

One project that made a lasting impression on the minds—and—backs of early day members was the project of mattress making. Bales of surplus cotton were shipped to centers in Oregon for families to make their own mattresses. Faced with a bale of cotton and several yards of ticking, some instructions seemed in order and Extension coordinated that effort. Cotton mats were made by actually beating the cotton into a solid, flat rectangular shape with a bat. The whole family became involved in this project, and 8,639 mattresses were made in Oregon. Some of them are still in Oregon homes.

One of the most popular activities of those hard depression years was the Homemaker Camp. The purpose of the camps was to give rural women the opportunity to make contacts with other women of mutual interest. Today we hear of women in administrative and management positions who are forming “Old Girls Networks.” Men have always had “Old Boys Networks” to keep each other informed of how to get things done, where the jobs are, and what is going on behind the scenes. Since women are not included in that network, they must form their own support group. I believe that the Extension Homemakers had the first “Old Girls Network.” They kept each other informed, supported each other, and learned from each other how to get things done. But to do this they needed to meet other women outside their communities, and the Homemakers Camp was one way to make these contacts. The camps were also to give a few days rest and enjoyment for women burdened with the heavy workloads of farm and family. The camps were open to all women and cost $1 or $2 for three or four days, plus some food to be contributed to the camp kitchen. The schedule allowed lots of time for swimming, sunbathing, rest and reading; but classes on first aid, etiquette, nature study, and crafts were also included. Dramatics, reading, and singing around the campfire were enjoyed by these women whose life were often one of loneliness and little pleasures. The days at Homemaker Camp were happy memories these homemakers have carried with them for a lifetime.

In the 30’s Miss Claribel Nye started the annual Conference for the Study of Home Interest held in February or March on the OSU campus. I live to think of these early conferences as an early-day Mini-College. Participants lived in dorms on campus. Prices listed in the 1933 brochure were as follows: Women’s Dormitory—50¢ a night or three nights for $1. Meals at the Dormitory—breakfast, 20¢; lunch, 30¢; dinner, 40¢. If you could afford to live a little extravagantly, you could eat at the Memorial Union for 35¢ for lunch and 45¢ for dinner. If you could not afford either, Room 322 in the Home Economics Building was reserved for the use of those women who brought their own food to prepare. Dorothy Klock said her mother’s group assigned members to bring certain foods, which were then prepared together in the modern facilities of the Home Economics kitchen. Like mother, like daughter—Dorothy said she was bringing food and a coffeepot to Mini-College to prepare breakfast for her executive committee meeting Monday morning. In those days public transportation in Corvallis was excellent. Buses ran every 15 minutes for 5¢ a ride.

Evaluations were done then as they are now for our Mini-College. The Clackamas County women who attended the 1935 session wrote a critique. While they had enjoyed the conference and learned much, they did have some complaints. They felt there were too many PhD’s on the program. A session devoted to Oregon women authors and their books drew their complaint that men authors should have had equal time. They felt they were too closely scheduled with not enough free time—a common complaint about Mini-College. But their biggest complaint was about the muddy walking conditions on campus. With the heavy rains of February, the campus was a quagmire. The Clackamas County women
were determined to do something about it. They earned money to sponsor and pay for a trip by Claribel Nye to Salem to convince the legislature of the need for extra funds to put sidewalks in the well-walked areas of the campus. Apparently she was successful, as sidewalks were built shortly thereafter, and the Clackamas County women seemed well pleased with the walking conditions thereafter.

The programs of the conference were varied and again had emphasis on coping with the depression, child development and parenting, food preservation, and clothing makeovers. But by 1933 the economic situation was so bad that time was spent in trying to understand it as well as cope with it. The Chancellor of Higher Education substituted for Governor Julius L. Meier to deliver a talk on higher education in Oregon: Understanding Oregon’s Problems. We could use that explanation today. A session was given on understanding the present economic conditions and another lecture was entitled, What Women Can Do to Make a Better State.

Later there was emphasis on home and community recreation as an attempt to build morale. Extension Homemakers made informative talks in Radio KOAC. Drama contests were held and a Home Interest Conference Chorus was formed just as we had a Mini-College Chorus in past years.

As long ago as 1935 women had sessions on The Uses of Oregon Land and New Factors on Developing Oregon’s Resources. Even then their concerns were not limited to cooking, cleaning, clothing, and canning, but in the development of their state.

Just to make certain the women didn’t lose sight on things of real importance, one early conference featured a lecture on What Constitutes a Good Family Man.

Foods and nutrition have always been a major concern of Extension home economics and homemakers. Miss Lucy Case was an early foods and nutrition specialist. She traveled about giving lessons on proper diet. Miss Case was noted for her firm belief in rest after every meal. She would come to all-day meetings armed with a stack of newspapers to spread out on the floor so she might lie down on them after lunch for her rest. I have noticed quite a few of us practicing Lucy’s teachings in our 1:30 classes!

Miss Lucy Case was a featured speaker at the first Conference for the Study of Home Interest and gave her version of the future state of family health and well being in 100 years. Owing to the advanced state of nutrition science in 100 years, she saw vastly improved health with some diseases wiped out entirely. False teeth could only be found as museum pieces, and dentists no longer had cavities to fill and worked only at the beautification of natural teeth. Lucy could not foresee the advent of sweet carbonated beverages, sweet treats, and sugared cereals, nor the television to advertise them. I think she would be disappointed in us. But don’t give up Lucy—we have 50 years to go yet and I think we are doing better!!

It was at the 1932 Conference for the Study of Home Interest that the Extension Homemakers formed their organization. Their name has changed, their constitution and bylaws have been amended, but their basic objective has remained essentially the same: To cooperate with Extension staff in encouraging adult education in home economics and to cooperate in promoting other educational programs which have as their purpose the development of home and community life.

Under the early advisory leadership of Claribel Nye and Azalea Sager a solid organization was founded and immediately set about tackling problems. Perhaps you have heard of the man who explained his harmonious and lasting marriage with this explanation. “We share the decision-making task. I make the big decisions and my wife makes the small ones. I decide whether we should allow Red China into the U.N. or send supplies to El Salvador. My wife decides what house to buy, whether we need a new car, and what insurance we need.” Like that wife, the women in the Homemakers Council had the ability to zero in on the problems that counted—the things that affected their families and communities.
One of the first things they did, though they had only $27.50 in the treasury, was to establish an annual scholarship of $25 to be awarded to a deserving home economics student. It was hoped money for the scholarship would be donated by homemakers around the state. Ruby Dunn of Lane County started the fund with the first donation of 50¢. Since that time 45 scholarships have come from that fund, which is now called the OEHC-Ethel Lathrop Scholarship. Other memorial scholarships and county scholarships have helped nearly 100 other students to complete their educations.

Always supportive of 4-H programs, study groups have sent literally hundreds of children to 4-H summer camps or to OSU summer school on scholarships.

Early legislative committees worked at state and national levels on such issues as improving sanitary requirements in hospitals, on women’s labor laws, on requirements for high school teachers, and worked for funding for the state library. They asked for and got money from the legislature to fund an OSU research study on the dental caries problem in Oregon. They studied their county governments and monitored their activities. They worked on county and state fair boards to improve their quality. They sponsored programs on rural road safety, farm safety, home safety, and bike safety, and in recent years, coordinated Defensive Driving courses statewide, with Extension Homemakers teaching many of the courses. And now the Extension Homemakers are launching a campaign to get drunk drivers off the roads all over the state of Oregon. Extension Homemakers have helped coordinate and assist diabetic screening clinics, in cancer awareness programs, and in drug abuse education before most people recognized drug abuse was a problem. They have worked with other agencies to hold community meetings on child abuse and family violence – problems that are even yet to be fully realized as widespread. But probably the most remarkable thing the Extension Homemakers ever did was to build a house. They did not know it was impossible to scrape up enough money during a post-war recession to finance a house, so they did it. Azalea Sager was upset with the lack of adequate housing for women students following the war. She proposed to the Extension Homemakers executive board that they build a cooperative house for women students. That sounded like a worthwhile project and they agreed. From 1946 until 1953 they worked as individuals, as study groups, as county committees, and as state officers to earn money to build that house. A total of $57,760 had been earned by early 1953 and the house was built. It was named Azalea House in honor of Mrs. Sager. But the dedication of the house was “To the rural women of Oregon whose vision and determination made this house possible.”

Or consider the impossible efforts of the Sprague River Study Group of Klamath County. Without adequate fire protection, they spearheaded a community fund drive to buy a fire engine and then built a firehouse to put it in. Without adequate emergency medical care, they then worked on a fund drive to buy an ambulance. Without trained emergency medical technicians to man the ambulance, the women took EMT training and they man-or-woman the ambulance. And they have earned additional funds to buy very sophisticated equipment for their ambulance. Didn’t they know you can’t raise that kind of money in a small rural community?

The list of accomplishments of current plans could go on and on. But my very practical husband has a test he applies to projects, groups, or agencies. He asks, “What is it good for?” When that test applied to Oregon Extension Homemakers Council, I could list any or all of its accomplishments. But I would sum it up by saying it has been good for Oregon women who have found they not only can learn, they can teach. They not only can be leaders, they can make things happen in their homes, communities, their state, their nation and even their world. And they are working today, as they have for 50 years, for healthier, happier families, better communities, a better state and nation and a better world. The last lines of the Extension Homemakers song sums up the philosophy of the organization: The more we know, the more we grow in grace and love and power.

We salute these gracious, loving, and powerful women who started us on our way, 50 years ago.
REFERENCES


Unpublished sources include Clackamas County Program of Work – 1929-1943; Clackamas County Committee Minutes 1935; Home Economics Extension Council Minutes, 1935; Conference for Study of Home Interest brochures 1933, 1935; Ceder Study Group Scrapbook (in possession of Dorothy Klock); other clippings, notes, minutes, etc.