

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the Fourth F of the Women’s Pages: Furnishings in the 1950s and 1960s

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Abstract

For decades, the women’s pages of American newspapers were the only places for women journalists to work. These sections focused soft news including furnishings. While other aspects of the women’s pages have been examined, furnishings have been largely overlooked. This scholarship adds to the journalism history record about women’s journalism in the post-World War II years.

1. Introduction

Prior to the 1970s, most female journalists were restricted to the women’s pages of newspapers. The content of the sections was largely based on women’s roles as wives and mothers and was typically defined as the four Fs: family, fashion, food, and furnishings. These F-topics were also often thought to be synonymous with fluff, or what is referred to as soft news. However, recent research has shown that the soft news content of the women’s pages was more complex than previously thought.[1] The sections reflected social change, technological developments, and consumer issues.

Recent studies of two of the four Fs of the women’s pages—fashion and food—have shown that the women’s pages gave considerable attention to treating those topics as more than trivial pursuits of idle women. [2] They addressed both traditional and progressive material. The topic of furnishings also deserves examination, and this initial look at furnishings summarizes the content of three newspapers in order to create a foundation for further research. It seeks to establish how furnishings were represented in the women’s pages in the post-World War II years.

The coverage of home furnishing news in the women’s pages especially began to gain popularity after World War II when suburban communities across the country

rapidly expanded, and all those new homes were soon filling up with appliances. In the five years following the end of the war, not only did consumer spending increase by 60 percent, but the amount spent on household furnishings and appliances rose more than 200 percent. Central to that growth were the women’s sections of newspapers, which were made thick with advertisements for the appliances and furnishings that filled suburban homes.

While serving as the women’s page editor at the *Miami Herald*, Dorothy Journey said readers wanted to read more news about home furnishings. “We assigned one of our best women writers to that field – to write about Miami homes and to report the news of home furnishings available in Miami stories,” she said. “We sent this reporter to the home furnishings market to write about the coming trends in furniture. It is now one of the biggest sections of the paper.”[3] An example of the types of stories that made their way into the women’s section is a 1965 *Miami Herald* story addressing how to prepare a house for fumigation. Next to a photo of a house under a nylon tent that had been invaded by termites, the story listed the preparation needed before fumigation began. According to the article, this was a problem for thousands of Dade County families each year[4].

In some ways this consumer growth was also a political issue. According to historian Elaine Tyler

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May, this approach was a part of America winning the Cold War. President Richard Nixon had a particular expectation about the American family. "The family home would be the place where a man could display his success through the accumulation of consumer goods," she wrote of Nixon's vision. "Women, in turn, would reap rewards for domesticity by surrounding themselves with commodities.[5]"

2. Materials and Methods

In order to examine the coverage of furnishings, the women's pages of three newspapers in different cities were analyzed Dallas, Miami and Milwaukee. Materials from these publications in the 1950s and 1960s were collected. In addition, documents from the Penney-Missouri Awards regarding furnishings were looked at.

2.1 Dallas

Longtime women's page editor Vivian Castleberry began her career at the *Dallas Times Herald* in the 1950s as the home furnishings editor. She had earned a journalism degree from Southern Methodist University, although she had no training in the specific subject area. This meant that she did a lot of studying and interviewing of local experts. It was a significant topic in the city because Trammel Crow had just built the Dallas Market Center. At the time, Dallas was the second city in furnishing sales in the nation. As the furnishings editor, she went on her first business trip. With several children at home, she traveled to cover an event at the Chicago Merchandise Mart. At the event's conclusion, Castleberry had no access to a press room to file her story, thus began a search to find a Western Union office. It was not an easy task for someone completely unfamiliar with Chicago's layout.

Her early stories quickly established the tone of Castleberry's reporting. She knew that at the heart of any story were the people. As an example, she wrote a multi-part series in 1957 called "Homemaking Heroes." It focused on men and women who overcame physical challenges to be successful homemakers. It was really a matter of examining different kinds of families and the impact on the households.

The first story featured the married mother of two children who used a wheelchair. "I knew right away that with the help of my family I could keep better house than my maid was doing," Castleberry quoted the woman.[6] A second story focused on a family of three children, and one of the children had physical and mental disabilities. "It is a story of physical and

financial fatigue for young parents, a story many times of misunderstanding, emotional turmoil and misguided advice," Castleberry wrote. "But it is also a triumphant story because now these parents can openly share their experiences in hopes that it may help parents of similar children and the public to understand that a handicapped child is part of and not apart from, the world." [7]

A third story in the series examined the life of a single father and his three children and began, "Making a home without a mother is not an easy task, but Charlie Davis, with the help of his son, Paul, has done it." [8] The final story featured a mother who worked outside the home in non-traditional field for a woman: management at a construction company. Castleberry began her story: "Making a success of a 'man's job' while managing her home has been the dual role of Mrs. Harry Tyrrell. This role includes mother and homemaker, a position not so unusual for a woman, and management, of Watson Pile Driving Contracting Co., a position so far as can be determined, is the only one of its kind in the U.S. held by a woman.[9]"

2.2 Milwaukee

Dorothy Dawe was hired as the first furnishings editor at the *Milwaukee Journal* after earning a journalism degree from Marquette University. She was hired after women's page editor Aileen Ryan convinced her managing editor that furnishings were news. According to Ryan, "Dorothy Dawe had a completely advanced perspective. She was a real pioneer.[10]"

She worked at the newspaper for 19 years at a time when homes were changing. Dawe reported on new developments in technology that impacted lighting and electrical sockets in houses.[11] She wrote stories about unique homes, such as a 1928-built brick bungalow on the South side of Milwaukee that was updated with a wood-burning fireplace in 1946.[12] She also wrote about the scarcity of available furniture in the immediate post-World War II years – before the consumerism of the 1950s increased [13].

Dawe died in 1947 at age 42 from cancer.[14] Her obituary noted that Dawe had "done much to build interest in homes and changing periods of decoration." Upon hearing of her death, the American Furniture Mart named its annual, national award for best furnishing writing in her honor, as the Dawes Award. And an industry spokesperson noted, "Dorothy's reports in the home furnishing field set the pace for the basic judging requirements of the greatest good for the greatest number." [15] Many of her stories focused on technology in the home.

Following in Dawes' footsteps at the Milwaukee newspaper was Lois Hagen, a University of Wisconsin graduate. Hagen was born in 1918 and put herself through the state university. After graduation, she worked as a journalist at *Time* and the Associated Press. Ultimately, she spent most of her career at the *Milwaukee Journal*, which she joined in 1947. Initially, she covered fashion before taking on the furnishing beat which included carpets, fabrics, and tableware[16].

She wrote about new kinds of furniture introduced at the semi-annual "Good Design" exhibit at the nearby Chicago's Merchandise Mart.[17] She wrote about trends in design such as the overuse of the term "contemporary" in 1950s furniture descriptions. She quoted one expert who declared, "I like my milk homogenized but I don't know about my furniture." [18] She also often interviewed people about their homes and how the rooms were decorated.

Hagen won a Penney-Missouri Award for writing and reporting in 1965 – one of the top recognitions for the women's pages. It was for a 12-part series on historic houses in Virginia. The series contained rich descriptions and detailed histories of homes that went back for generations. In one article, she wrote about the Shirley mansion near Richmond. The mansion had been the home of the Carter family since 1723. Ann Hill Carter, mother of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, was married in the building to Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee. [19] Her stories demonstrated the role of history in furnishings reporting.

2.3 Miami

Jo Werne was a longtime reporter of furnishings in South Florida. She earned a journalism degree from Kent State University, and she was the editor of the school's student newspaper in 1961. [20] While she covered general news and features at the *Miami Herald*, she was best known for her coverage of furnishings. She took a broad approach to her reporting. She wrote about the paint and furniture in local boutique hotels. She predicted that guests at the colorful Les Hotel must have felt that they had been in the middle of a rainbow gone haywire.[21] She wrote about local designers. [22] In another example, she wrote about unique pianos that readers had in their homes[23].

She was a regular reporter at industry events and shared the story of furniture trends with her readers. Many of her stories looked at furnishings from a consumer perspective, noting that people complained to her that furniture cost too much. She explained that the price

tag on furniture contains more than the cost of the frame, fabric, and manufacturing. She wrote: "The tag conceals many hidden costs. The dealer may overprice the sofa in order to offer a 'discount' later at a 'stupendous' sale. It's all legal. It's called retailing.[24]"

3. Conclusion

Women's page content is worthy of study. Specifically, scholarship about furnishings news reveals journalism, social, and economic histories. This is especially true in the post-World War II years. Too often, soft news is overlooked in place of hard news on the frontpages of newspapers. The difference had big implications in the industry. As media historian Kay Mills wrote, "hard news and soft news were by no means gender-free terms. Instead, they evoked rich gender implications." [25] Scholarship about soft news – including furnishings – deserves exploration and analysis. So much of what readers wanted in the newspaper ran in sections that journalism historians have not studied. Future research regarding furnishings should include Martha Espedahl of the *Charleston* (South Carolina) *Evening Post*, Clara Hieronymus of the *Nashville Tennessean*, and Ghita Cary of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. [26]

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