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On a Newspaper Staff - "We Do Everything"

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On a Newspaper Staff—  

“We Do Everything”  

Betty Burbank, ’39, tells of her activity in demonstrations, testing and writing for a daily newspaper

_COPY writing, proof reading, recipe testing, cooking schools and helping women with everything from making coffee to how to remove the spots from the middle of their new rug are only a few of the many different duties involved in my job. It’s one of those positions that is exciting in the very fact that no two days are ever the same, and no two problems seem to require the same solution. It’s an interesting job for the contacts we make and the women whose problems we help solve become our friends throughout the city.

I am one of a staff of seven in the Home Economics Department of the Chicago Herald-American. Three of us are Iowa State graduates with home economics training, and we all are able to step into one another’s shoes if necessary.

Let me give you just a sample of one of our days. We scarcely get our coats off in the morning before one of our six telephones begins to ring and from then until the door is locked at night we have one question after another on all sorts of problems. Women call for cake recipes they can’t find, recipes for pies like grandmother used to make, or information on removing ink from little Johnnie’s new suit. We hear from men, too, who are cooking on their wife’s day out or who want to know if turkeys have wishbones.

Though mainly a foods department, we try to give them the help they want or suggest where they might find such information.

We help them cook their moose or dumplings, give them recipes and plan their meals from soup to nuts, often starting with nothing but a few leftovers. We are all sure as I write this that we have just finished cooking all of the Christmas turkeys and ducks in Chicago.

Between telephone calls we are busy writing copy for our four to six food pages published every Thursday. Beside these, our department is responsible for a Sunday story, a daily column Monday through Friday and a story for our Saturday magazine section. Writing the copy is only a small part for after it is written it must be carefully checked. It is then sent to the composing room where it is set in type and before long the proof comes back to us to be reread and re-checked. Sometimes we read the same proof as many as four times before it appears in the paper.

Our readers, those who telephone and those who write, furnish a constant source of ideas for future copy. Since our mail count is often 300 to 500 letters a day, there is considerable technical correspondence to handle. This is answered by trained home economists.

Much of the material which we publish are recipes which we have developed in our own kitchens. We have two and they are constantly in use by members of the staff while testing or developing new recipes. By the time all seven of us and a few others we call in from nearby offices have agreed on one dish, we feel that it has passed a fairly rigid test.

Between times we are busy writing special leaflets which we mail out to our readers on request. Such topics as breads, cookies, apples, dinner menus and quantity charts are only a few of the many leaflets in our files. These are made up of recipes used and approved in our test kitchens before they are printed for distribution.

Twice yearly we use a part of the material we’ve tested and written for a special section called the cookbook. This appears in magazine form and contains from 40 to 60 pages of food information, recipes and cooking hints. It takes several months for each to be written, compiled and printed and these are always particularly busy times for the Home Economics Department.

When our demonstration kitchen is not in use for testing it is filled with club women who come by appointment for food demonstrations. Part of my job is to assist with these demonstrations, which are given three afternoons a week.

My big problem now is to complete two big theater cooking schools. There are twelve in each fall and spring series, nine church cooking schools and three theater schools, one in each part of the city. Each week when we leave our office for these, we have boxes and baskets, bags and packages—all of them full of food to use in preparing for our demonstrations. Most of our equipment—and we take everything from can openers to ranges and refrigerators—go out by professional movers. We follow with the molded salads and the eggs which we are a little afraid to trust to the men. A complete kitchen, with cupboards, refrigerator and a range is set up and we move right in.

I am responsible for the organization of these demonstrations from ordering the groceries to setting up the trays of food to be prepared, then assisting on the stage. Each tray must be complete right down to the last teaspoon or wooden spoon which will be used in preparing the dish. Not a pan or measuring cup must be missing, for we present from 25 to 30 different dishes in less than two hours and it takes some rapid mixing and stirring, baking and broiling to complete our program in that time.

The recipes used are printed on file cards and will fit into file boxes. They are developed, tested, written and printed before the schools start and because of the time limit they must be worked out with an eye to oven space, temperature and time as well as color, season and cost.