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Distinguished Alumnus Credits Home

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Distinguished Alumnus

Credits Home

Marjorie Shuler tells about the home economics training of Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt in a reprint from What’s New in Home Economics

The name of Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt is on many achievement lists, and rightly so, since the veteran woman suffrage and peace leader has given a lifetime of service to world causes. But there is one list on which her name might have appeared and does not, one thing she has done which never has been mentioned in print before—that Mrs. Catt had home economics training.

She, herself, does not brag about it. She is certain that she deserves no credit, and it only came to the surface when she was questioned about why she places so much emphasis on the importance of the home. Even then Mrs. Catt mentioned the study casually as something that was compulsory when she studied at Iowa State College.

“I really was not interested at all,” she said reflectively, “that is, when I began the course. I believed that anything that I needed to know about housekeeping I could learn from my own mother. But I wanted to go to Ames. I had argued to convince my father that a girl should be allowed to go to college. I had taught school to earn the money with which to go. And at Ames 60 years ago every girl had to take home economics no matter what her other subjects were. It was a primary effort. The classes were taught by the wife of the president. But I had not been in them long before I was glad to be enrolled. And today I am proud to have had even as little training as that, just as I am proud to call myself an Iowa State graduate.”

Mrs. Catt added that she believes “home economics training is one of the most valuable acquisitions any woman can have. You learn how to keep your own home. You are able to enter a widely expanding field just crammed with opportunities for successful careers—and then I hear that home economists are the most popular brides...”

“I had the first home of my own when I was 25 years old,” said Mrs. Catt. “In the years since then I always have had a home.”

Mrs. Catt looked around the beautiful big study of her house. The chintz, she thought, should be replaced. As a matter of fact, she would like to get entirely new furniture. If it were not for the war, she would do so. Her eyes strayed over the brick paths leading into the garden and came back again to the room. She leaned forward and confided, “I hope that I will live long enough to get a whole new supply of house furnishings.”

Mrs. Catt would be the last person in the world to think that this sentence revealed anything about her philosophy of life. But I believe that in those words she summed up an attitude which has had much to do with the success of her leadership.

Her alert mind is always ready to accept new impressions and never satisfied with things as they are. No sentimental attachments keep her from an objective weighing of opportunities for betterment. She always has wanted to improve herself and being the kind of person she is, she has wanted improvement for everyone else.

It is not only her own personal friends who know Mrs. Catt’s feeling for home. The women of more than twenty countries won the right to vote while Mrs. Catt was the president of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship. She still is honorary president of the alliance. When the women of the world wanted to make her a gift for her eightieth birthday, it was a cookbook they chose, a cookbook made up of recipes carefully selected from each country and written by women whose desire for the ballot was supposed to be an indication of their desire to forsake their homes.

“I believe that a home is necessary for everybody. A family, however desirable it may be, is not vital, but a home is. A single woman can make a home. It gratifies an innate human craving to possess something of one’s very own, to know where it is, to have an outward expression of one’s own personality. A book means more to you if you read it in your own chair by your own window. Somehow anything seems more precious if it is linked with your own home.

“That is where home economics comes in. You learn in the courses not merely how to care for your home, how to cook, and what to cook, but the plain everyday philosophy of how to relate your home to other homes, of how to get on with other people. It is the philosophy behind home economics which makes it so extremely important to the world.

“Why, one of the first things which happens in nature is a home. The angleworms have homes. The wrens have homes. Animals have homes. Human homes may be more elegant, more enjoyable, but they are part of a great cosmic movement. And human homes should be the place from which influence and intelligence eminate to make a better nation.”