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A Queen of Homemakers

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Because of her pioneer spirit and zest for life, Ellen H. Richards well deserves the title—

A Queen of Homemakers

by Harriet Beyer

The early Home Economics movement resulted in a highly diversified program.

THE science-minded world of today, the world in which women are recognized on an equal status with men, can scarcely comprehend the significance of the life and deeds of Ellen H. Richards.

Recognized and honored as pioneer in the field of Home Economics, Ellen H. Richards spent her life in helping others to live more efficiently and happily through the advancement of scientific work in the improvement of living conditions. The contributions of this one woman to the advancement of science seem almost unbelievable, as do her untiring efforts in furthering the academic status of her sex. Her life is filled with accomplishments which have made her name live among those who have given their lives in service to others.

Ellen Swallow was one of the first women ever to graduate from college. In 1868 she left her New England home to enter Vassar, when the college had been in existence only three years. At that time there were few educational opportunities for women; New England had no colleges for them, and the fame of Vassar was only beginning to spread.

Her work at Vassar completed, Ellen Swallow determined to become a professional chemist. She applied for an apprenticeship in various firms in vain as prospective employers were skeptical of a woman's ability as a chemist. Defeated, she applied to be allowed to enter the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which up to that time had received no women students. After a long controversy, Ellen Swallow and the president of the Institute, who was her ally from the start, persuaded the board to allow her to enter. When she found herself admitted, she wrote to a friend, "You will know that one of my delights is to do something that no one else ever did." Her work at the Institute was a marked personal success, and she commanded the respect of her allies and also those who had formerly opposed her.

After her training as a student chemist, Ellen Swallow was appointed a laboratory assistant, singal evidence of the superior quality of her work. She came gradually to devote her time almost exclusively to the field of sanitary chemistry, in which she felt there was a great need. The desire which inspired all her deeds, to help others to better lives through the improvement of living conditions, found expression in this work.

In 1875, Ellen Swallow married Professor Robert H. Richards, head of the department of mining engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and began the difficult task of combining homemaking with a professional career. She continued her work at the Institute; at home she applied her scientific training in her homemaking.

Her housekeeping was a model of efficiency, her home a place of perfect cleanliness. And notwithstanding all of her duties, Mrs. Richards found time to entertain friends and students frequently. Her home was known throughout Boston for its gracious hospitality.

After her marriage, Mrs. Richards undertook to fulfill a desire which had been hers for several years. Seeing the financial burden which oppressed many young women, eager for an education, she set about to help them secure assistance. She was successful in securing several scholarship funds, as well as professional work for needy students. Many and varied were the projects which Ellen Richards undertook, giving unreservedly of her time and energy. One of her most far-reaching efforts was the part she took in the work of teaching by correspondence.

The crowning achievement in Mrs. Richards' life was her work in the organization of the home economics movement. The first conference on the movement was held at Lake Placid on September 19, 1899. This meeting served to unite the workers of all sections in home economics and laid the foundation for the organization of the American Home Economics Association ten years later. Mrs. Richards was chosen as its first president in 1908 and continued to hold the office until 1910, when she insisted on retiring and was made honorary president. She entered into the work of the association with great enthusiasm, giving careful attention to the details of organization, and laying a sound foundation for the future of the movement.

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