

“Let us Hang Up the Dishpan and the Broom”: The Pursuit
of Culture in the Farmers Wives’ Reading-Course and The
Cornell Study Clubs.

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Introduction: Soil Culture and Soul Culture

Of all the struggles rural women faced at the start of the twentieth century, the “soul starvation” described in many of their letters was one of the most painful. Encountering endless work and often severe isolation, many women would concur with one member of the Farmers Wives’ Reading Course, who wrote: “I am one of the farmers’ wives who certainly needs some help. One’s soul certainly starves away out in the country.”¹ The tone of a great number of letters sent to Van Rensselaer, the supervisor of the Farmers Wives’ Reading Course, reflected a similar feeling of deprivation.

It was certainly appropriate for these women to address their letters to Van Rensselaer, as she devoted much of her home economics work at Cornell University to improving the quality of rural women’s lives. “I saw that great advances has been made in soil culture for the farmer,” Van Rensselaer said, “but that the soul culture of the farmer’s wife was at a dead standstill. Slow, cumbrous methods, dirt, and a sixteen-hour day told the story.”² To devote as much attention to “soul culture” as “soil culture” was one of Van Rensselaer’s primary goals. Writers who described Van Rensselaer’s work picked up on this prevalent theme, praising her for brushing aside “soul-smearing drudgery”³ (the phrase was her own) and devoting her life to lessening the “intellectual and soul starvation,” which “is the woman’s portion in a sadly large majority of the homes where the wife and mother is also cook, laundress, scrubwoman and maid, nurse,

¹ Compilation of unattributed letters to Martha Van Rensselaer, The New York State College of Home Economics Records, 1875-1979, Collection Number 23-2-749, Box 24, Folder 49, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York.

² “Miss Martha Van Renssealer, Home Economics Pioneer, Dies,” Herald Tribune, May 27, 1932, Box 48, The New York State College of Home Economics Records,

³ Emma H. de Zouche, “Educating the Kitchen,” Woman Citizen, Dec. 13, 1924, Clipping Concerning MVR 1901-1936, Box 48, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

teacher, seamstress, family bookkeeper and all the rest the man is not.”⁴ Outside observers, rural women, and Van Rensselaer herself all saw Van Rensselaer’s work as addressing a key problem in the lives of women in New York farms at the beginning of the twentieth century: a serious lack of intellectual stimulation and culture.

The Farmers Wives’ Reading Course was one of the most important and far-reaching ways Van Rensselaer set out to address the soul starvation of rural women. While there was no question that the bulletins were largely concerned with “practical” issues, such as dish washing, cooking, and cleaning, they were also deeply concerned with intellectual, cultural and quality of life issues. In her account of the formation of the reading course for women, Van Rensselaer described the way “by which scientific knowledge and methods in housework may be brought to her attention to relieve the monotony of farm life as it is found in some homes.”⁵ Nothing, Van Rensselaer believed, gave “zest and interest to housekeeping so much as the intelligent application of principles that save time and labor.”⁶

In addition to disseminating scientific knowledge that would itself relieve the great amount of work done in the farm home, Van Rensselaer wrote bulletins devoted exclusively to cultural and intellectual themes, most notably “Reading in the Farm Home” and “Programs for Evenings with Farmers Wives’ Reading Clubs.” The ability of intellectual and cultural activities to alleviate the monotony and drudgery of farm women’s lives served as a key element of Van Rensselaer’s philosophy. In “Reading in the Farm Home” Van Rensselaer declared: “Attention has been given in former issues of

⁴ Earl Harding, “Shall a Woman’s Soul be Starved: The Story of Martha Van Rensselaer and her Work,” *The Delineator*, April 1907, Box 48, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

⁵ “Reading Courses in the Farm Home,” *Ottawa Valley Journal*, Dec. 18, 1903, Clippings Concerning MVR 1901 to 1936, Box 48, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

⁶ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers’ Wives, Bulletin No. 3, “Practical Housekeeping,” Jan. 1903, p. 42.

the Farmers Wives' Reading-Course to purely practical household topics. The saving of steps, of time and of strength has claimed attention; the house has been studied for greater convenience in doing work...But let us hang up the dishpan and the broom...The routine of housework has grown tiresome. It will grow more so unless relieved by intellectual stimulus...From this will grow culture."⁷ In this quote, we see the split between practical and cultural in the bulletins, and the pride of place Van Rensselaer often gave to cultural and intellectual concerns. Even in the most practically oriented bulletins, furthermore, Van Rensselaer frequently reminded her readers that the scientific principles and practical "helps" provided by the bulletins would not only add interest to farm home work, but would also give women more time "to add to [their] own leisure and means of self-improvement."⁸

The Cornell Study Clubs, built into the very fabric of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course project, served as Van Rensselaer's primary agent of purveying this culture. Certainly, the clubs helped facilitate the dissemination of the bulletins and helped to increase the return rate of the response papers, but Van Rensselaer's main motivation in encouraging the growth of these clubs seemed to be her desire to alleviate the loneliness of the farm women and to provide them with much needed intellectual and social stimulation. It was not only the content of the club meetings, but also the form, that led to rural women's self-development. By organizing and participating in the clubs, women were able to increase their self-confidence dramatically. Martha Van Rensselaer fought tirelessly against the fact that "for women, the farm meant drudgery, no society, neither

⁷ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers' Wives, Bulletin No. 8, "Reading in the Farm Home," Jan. 1904, pp. 141-142.

⁸ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers' Wives, Bulletin No. 14, "Food for the Farmer's Family," Feb. 1905.

opportunity nor time for self improvement”⁹ The practical advice in the bulletins addressed the issue of time; the study clubs provided the opportunity for society and for self improvement.

The Cornell study clubs, therefore, are important not only because they comprise a key element of Van Rensselaer’s vision for the Farmers Wives’ Reading Course. Examining Van Rensselaer’s development of the Cornell study clubs indicates just how much social, cultural, intellectual, and quality of life concerns determined Van Rensselaer’s work for the rural women of New York. Furthermore, examining the Cornell study clubs in the context of the larger women’s club movement of the time illuminates Van Rensselaer’s goals and how she responded to and addressed the specific needs of New York’s rural women.

Background on the Farmers Wives’ Reading-Course and the Cornell Study Clubs

The seeds for the Farmers Wives’ Reading Course were planted by Liberty Hyde Bailey in 1900, with a letter sent to “The Farmer’s Wife.” In January 1901, Martha Van Rensselaer, the editor and primary author of the reading course, sent out the first bulletin: “Saving Steps.” Starting in November 1902, she sent out one bulletin every winter month, from November to March, for four years. Each year Van Rensselaer created a different series, starting with Farmhouse and Garden in 1902-1903, The Farm Family in 1903-1904, Sanitation and Food in 1904-1905, and The Farm Table in 1905-1906. Van Rensselaer saw these twenty bulletins as a self-contained course, from which her readers could “graduate.” The course was part of the College of Agriculture’s extension work and

⁹ “The Farm Woman’s Friend,” *The Woman’s Magazine*, Jan. 1917, Clippings Concerning MVR 1901 to 1936, Box 48, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

all the expenses were paid by a state appropriation for university extension of agriculture. After 4 years, the reading course claimed a membership of over 18,000 women, mostly living on farms.¹⁰

After the last bulletin of the fourth series, Van Rensselaer continued to send supplementary material until, in 1908, she began the New Series and then, in Oct. 1911, the Farmers Wives' Reading Course became The Cornell Reading Courses: Lessons for the Farm Home. These lessons represented a streamlining of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course and the Farmers' Reading Course and were published year round. Although Van Rensselaer remained editor, many more authors contributed to the lesson bulletins than to the original Farmers Wives' Reading Course. Van Rensselaer's voice remained the strongest in the Rural Life series of the lessons, where she expanded and reprinted two of her key original bulletins from the Farmers Wives' Reading Course: "Reading in the Farm Home" and "Cornell Study Clubs."¹¹

From the beginning, Van Rensselaer built the study club into the fabric of the Farmers' Wives Reading Course. The first bulletin, "Saving Steps," ended with "Plans for Club Study," information on a travelling library, and "Subjects to be used for Discussion in Connection with a Club of Grange."¹² Almost every following Farmers Wives' Reading Course Bulletin mentioned club work in some regard, whether it was enumerating the benefits of club work, providing discussion subjects and questions for clubs based on the bulletin, giving advice on organizing a club, or discussing existing

¹⁰ Untitled history of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course, Box 24 Folder 30, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

¹¹ The Cornell Reading-Courses: Lessons for the Farm Home, I.9, "Reading in the Farm Home," Feb. 1912, Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition and History (HEARTH). Ithaca, NY: Albert R. Mann Library, Cornell University. <http://hearth.library.cornell.edu> (Version January 2005); The Cornell Reading-Courses: Lessons for the Farm Home, I.13, "Cornell Study Clubs," Apr. 1912, Home Economics Archive.

¹² Cornell Reading Course for Farmers' Wives, Bulletin No. 1, "Saving Steps," Nov. 1902.

clubs. In bulletin 13, Van Rensselaer described in detail how she envisioned the organization of the Cornell Study Clubs. She suggested having two meetings per bulletin, which translated into two a month, and encouraged a very strong connection between the clubs and the College. The prevalence of references to study clubs in the bulletins indicated how integral the study clubs were to the larger Farmers Wives' Reading Course project. Van Rensselaer used the bulletins to encourage the organization of clubs and to serve as the basis for club study.

Van Rensselaer's formal links to the larger Woman's Club Movement likely influenced her desire to organize the Cornell Study Clubs. In the early years of the twentieth century, Van Rensselaer served as the chairman of the department of Home Economics of the Western New York Federation of Women's Clubs. In 1903, she was elected president of the Federation of Women's Literary and Educational Organizations of Western New York and, in August 1904, she held the Western New York Federation convention in Ithaca.¹³ Her formal alignment with the club movement became less strong as time went on, primarily due to a lack of time. In 1912, the Committee of Household Economics of the General Federation of Women's Clubs elected Van Rensselaer to be a member. Van Rensselaer, however, declined the invitation - "not because of indifference, but because with the growing amount of work here [at the College] it is presumptuous for me to try to work on so important a committee."¹⁴ Van Rensselaer was able to contribute more to the New York State Federation of Woman's

¹³ "Dark Horse Wins: Miss MVR of Ithaca was elected President of Western New York Federation - How the Battle Was Fought," *The Buffalo Express*, June 4, 1903, Box 14, Folder 1, The New York State College of Home Economics Records; "Annual Meeting of the Western New York Federation," *The Club Woman: Woman's World* XI: 12, August 1904, Box 14, Folder 1, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

¹⁴ Letter from MVR to Mrs. Olaf Guldin, Sept. 21, 1912, Box 12, Folder 56, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

Clubs because it overlapped more directly with her work for the Cornell and she served as chairman of the home economics department for a number of years. However, when the state Federation asked her to be chairman of the department again in 1914 she had to decline, volunteering to remain on the committee but suggesting someone else be made chairman.¹⁵

Despite Van Rensselaer's inability to devote a significant amount of her time to the General Federation of Women's Clubs or the New York State Federation of Women's Clubs, she made sure that the Cornell study clubs affiliated with a larger federation. Van Rensselaer used state money to pay the Cornell study clubs' dues to the New York Federation of Women's Clubs, until the state comptroller decided state money could not be used for such purposes. In response, Van Rensselaer encouraged each club to raise money for the dues and offered to advance money, if necessary.¹⁶ Van Rensselaer's personal connection and commitment to the club movement, therefore, went back to the time when she was first forming the Farmers Wives' Reading Course and persisted, in varying degrees, well into the second decade of the twentieth century. This connection to the larger club movement indicated one likely source for Van Rensselaer's decision to make the study clubs such an integral part of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course.

¹⁵ Letter from MVR to Mrs. M.W. Lay, Nov. 24, 1914, Box 14, Folder 3, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

¹⁶ Letter from MVR to Mrs. Hall, October 1, 1915, Box 14, Folder 3, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

Martha Van Rensselaer's Bulletins on Club Study

Van Rensselaer's project of cultivating her own women's club movement among the rural women of New York culminated in bulletin sixteen of the Farmers' Wives Reading Course. In this bulletin, Van Rensselaer provided detailed information on how women could form their own study clubs and provided a sample constitutions and a full program for one year. The constitution formalized the relationship between the club and the Bureau of Extension of the College of Agriculture at Cornell University. The club, it mandated, "shall have as a basis of work the Bulletins of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course...At least half of the members shall answer the questions of the discussion papers in the Farmers Wives' Reading-Course, and they shall be forwarded regularly to the department."¹⁷ Van Rensselaer also urged the clubs to register with the reading course and to appoint a secretary to keep the club in close touch with the University. Van Rensselaer's mandating of this connection indicated the strong relationship she wished to forge between the clubs and the University and her desire to personally be involved in their affairs.

Bulletin sixteen of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course was successful in encouraging women to organize clubs and in providing them the tools to do so. In the months following the distribution of the bulletin, Van Rensselaer reported the creation of six new clubs in November, six new clubs in December, eight new clubs and five reorganized in January, eight new clubs and one reorganized in February, and five new

¹⁷ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers' Wives, Bulletin No. 16, "Programs for Evenings with Farmers Wives' Reading Clubs," Oct. 1905, p. 300.

clubs and two reorganized in March. By April the total number of Cornell study clubs had climbed to forty-three.¹⁸

In addition to providing information on how organize a club, bulletin sixteen devoted the bulk of its content to program outlines, two every month for November to March. All of these programs followed the same general format. The programs began with preliminary or introductory exercises, which centered on the study of a literary work or a historical figure – with readings, a paper presented by a club member, and a discussion. Van Rensselaer chose prominent Americans to be the subject of these introductory exercises: Whittier in November, Hawthorne in December, and Lincoln in January. These choices likely reflected both the projected interests of the club members and the lack of available books on more obscure subjects. In February and March, Van Rensselaer suggested a focus on nature study, directing her clubs to poems and books on nature. The main part of the meeting, devoted to a discussion of one of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course bulletins, followed the introductory exercises. For each bulletin, Van Rensselaer provided an outline and suggested topics of discussion. Finally, Van Rensselaer devoted the concluding program to current events and a discussion of “the most important news items of the month.”¹⁹

Though in the early months Van Rensselaer left the specific focus of the concluding program up to the club leaders, for the last three months she provided more guidance. In her outline for the first January meeting, Van Rensselaer instructed: “Discuss what the State and National Government are doing for the farmer; for the woman in her relations to her family; for education in legislation in the present winter.”

¹⁸ F.W.R.C. Scrapbook, Box 48, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

¹⁹ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers' Wives, Bulletin No. 16, “Programs for Evenings with Farmers Wives' Reading Clubs,” Oct. 1905.

The second February meeting asked the club to address the question: “What is the government and what are individuals doing to make a more honest administration of affairs of state and public and private commercial interests?” The first March meeting narrowed the lens to “How can we best improve the management of our local government.”²⁰ The clubs, therefore, not only engaged in cultural and home economics topics, but also encouraged political engagement.

The introductory and concluding sections of Van Rensselaer’s club programs, therefore, had little to do with home economics and getting women to run their home on more scientific lines. They were concerned, rather, with the club members’ personal enjoyment and self-development. Whether it was through the examination of literature, history, nature, or politics, Van Rensselaer wanted the club to not only be a way of absorbing bulletin content, but also an agent of women’s cultural education and development.

The “Cornell Reading Courses: Lessons for the Farm Home” bulletin on Cornell Study Clubs, updated and expanded from the original and distributed April 1912, maintained a similar overall program structure. Van Rensselaer suggested that the meeting be divided into two parts, with the first hour devoted to the study of the Cornell Lesson for the Farm Home and the second hour devoted to travel, the study of music, literature, history, art or current events. Van Rensselaer, instead of providing direct suggestions for the culture section, left its particular composition up to the club leader. She did, however, provide one example of a “literary or domestic” program with twenty

²⁰ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers’ Wives, Bulletin No. 16, “Programs for Evenings with Farmers Wives’ Reading Clubs,” Oct. 1905, pp. 313, 325, 330.

suggested program outlines on the early history of New York State and home economics, spanning from colonial times to the results of the Civil War.²¹

Van Rensselaer's correspondence with club leaders suggest that she developed this program in response to specific requests from clubs, such as the Round Table Reading Club (also called the Round Table History Club), the Bridgewater Cornell Club, and the Book and Study Club of Unadilla Forks, New York.²² The program on New York State history, developed around 1910 and ultimately printed in the Club lesson, demonstrated club women's and Van Rensselaer's abiding interest in using the club as a medium of historical and cultural education. The perpetuation of this theme in the Cornell clubs, despite a national trend in the club movement away from literary and cultural clubs and towards clubs solely devoted to social service, deserves closer attention.²³ Examining the records and experiences of particular clubs will help illuminate the specific goals and problems animating the rural clubs cultivated by Van Rensselaer.

Examples of Cornell Study Clubs

As Van Rensselaer requested, a number of clubs reported to her on their activities and came to her with the challenges they faced. Some, like The Sunshine Farmers Wives' Reading-Club, related to Van Rensselaer the details of every meeting, including dates,

²¹ The Cornell Reading-Courses: Lessons for the Farm Home, I.13, Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition and History (HEARTH), pp. 166-171.

²² Letter from MVR to Elizabeth Blake, October 18, 1910, Box 24, Folder 35, The New York State College of Home Economics Records; Letter from MVR to Miss Brown, February, 1911, Box 24, Folder 35, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

²³ For more on this, see Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women's Study Clubs 1860-1910* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1987), 4.

location, and attendance.²⁴ This correspondence serves as a good source on the nature and variety of Van Rensselaer's study clubs.

One, the Civic Club of Binghamton, New York, exemplified the social reform ethos becoming more and more popular in the club movement in general. The corresponding secretary of the club wrote with pride about "the many things instituted for betterment in this municipality by one small club of earnest women," including constructing a new school building with a complete kitchen, to replace the old schoolhouse. Although it unclear if the Civic Club of Binghamton was an official Cornell Study Club, they clearly followed Van Rensselaer's instructions on clubs and went to her for advice.²⁵

The reform-minded goals of the Civic Club of Binghamton contrasted with the goals of clubs, such as the Round Table Reading Club, the Bridgewater Cornell Club, and the Book and Study Club of Unadilla Forks, which asked Van Rensselaer to help them develop a history program. A report from Mrs. E.P. Ellinwood of The Brinnfield St. Home Club demonstrated yet another potential driving force behind Cornell study clubs: the social element. After describing the importance of the practical ideas presented in the bulletins (especially attractive, she claimed, to the younger members of the club), Ellinwood remarked on how the club had "done much" for the neighborhood women, by encouraging them to visit each other. Ellinwood focused, specifically, on a "silver haired

²⁴ Letters on Clubs, Box 24, Folder 49, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

²⁵ Letter from Mrs. Edward F. Jones to MVR, October 28, 1912, Box 12, Folder 57, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

little woman” who gets away from home the least and who sees the meeting as “the one bright spot in her life.”²⁶

The Auld Lang Syne Club of Williamsville, New York, provides an example of the variety of focus that could exist within one club. Van Rensselaer chose the Auld Lang Syne Club as a model and described it in detail in two of her Farmers Wives’ Reading Course bulletins. In bulletin fifteen, Van Rensselaer shared their history, activities, and programs with her readers. The club, organized in 1899, began as a social club and later introduced the Cornell Reading-Course bulletins and “subjects of historical interest” into their programs as a basis for club study.²⁷ In addition, Van Rensselaer reprinted the entire program from their last yearbook, to serve as an example for other clubs. The programs covered a seemingly random assortment of topics, including literary and historical subjects, for example “Peter the Great” and “Literature of Japan,” and home-related topics, for example “The Value of Food” and “Insect Pests of the House.” Instead of studying one subject in depth, as the Round Table Reading Club would later do, the Auld Lang Syne Club dabbled in a wide variety of subjects. In bulletin 21, Van Rensselaer again put this club of “uncommon interest” on display and printed their latest formal program, with Longfellow and Shakespeare taking their place alongside “How and When to Rest” and “Canning and Preserving.”²⁸ The presence of a large number of historical and literary topics, placed next to topics based on the reading course bulletins, again indicated Van Rensselaer’s openness to clubs not based solely around the study of home economics and the accomplishment of reform goals.

²⁶ Letter from Mrs. E.P. Ellinwood to MR, March 1, 1909, Box 24, Folder 33, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

²⁷ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers’ Wives, Bulletin No. 15, “Saving Strength,” March 1905.

²⁸ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers’ Wives, Bulletin No. 21, “Suggestions to Readers,” Nov. 1906, pp. 423-424.

The Unique Problems of Rural Women and the Construction of Rural Clubs

Taken together, these clubs point to the many different models encompassed under the large banner of the Cornell Study Club. Although varied in content, focus, and form, these clubs together point to some of the unique problems rural women faced, which led to the development of certain kinds of clubs. Van Rensselaer was very aware of the specific needs of her audience. In a letter describing the kinds of clubs she was trying to organize, Van Rensselaer wrote: “We find that we can give to women in the country a basis for their work and urge them to add to it a literary program for general culture. The problems of the farm women are different from those in village and city.”²⁹

Lack of experience and exposure was one problem that Van Rensselaer thought particularly plagued rural women. When Mrs. Clora Eigenbrodt wrote to Van Rensselaer to ask her for bulletin 16, because her club wanted to take up the topic of home economics, Van Rensselaer responded: “I am sending you No. 16. I think it will not be very helpful to you because it is written for rural districts where women have never organized a club.”³⁰ This letter indicates that Van Rensselaer adjusted the level of the club bulletin to reflect her estimation of their education and their capabilities as organizers.

Van Rensselaer’s low estimation of the rural women’s organizational abilities led to her very active involvement in club formation and operation, which led, in turn, to club members’ deep attachment to and dependence on Van Rensselaer.³¹ Over time, Van

²⁹ Letter from MVR to Mrs. Helm, Dec. 29, 1908, Box 14, Folder 12, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

³⁰ Letter from MVR to Mrs. Clora Eigenbrodt, May 8, 1908, Box 14, Folder 12, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

³¹ For examples, see letter from E.P. Ellinwood to MVR, March 1909, Box 24, Folder 33, The New York State College of Home Economics Records and letter from Elizabeth Blake to MVR, October 22, 1910, Box 24, Folder 35, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

Rensselaer adopted a more independence-oriented model for her study clubs, perhaps as a result of greater faith in the women she was addressing. Where Van Rensselaer gave very precise instructions in bulletin 16 of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course, she took a more open-ended approach in the Lessons for the Farm Home club bulletin, encouraging a greater degree of independence and involvement on the part of her readers. Van Rensselaer strongly encouraged each member to be involved and provided advice and tools for officers designing their own program. Van Rensselaer's approach in the later bulletin underscored the very strong grip she held over the early Cornell study clubs.

Another problem rural women faced was extreme isolation. Flora Rose identified the farmers' wives' isolation as a driving force behind the creation of the Farmers Wives' Reading Course. Rose, in her history of the College of Home Economics, noted how the responses to Liberty Hyde Bailey's letter about the start of the reading course showed "the hunger felt by farm women for help and for contact with the outside world."³² A collection of letters written in response to the United States Department of Agriculture's poll on farm life also displayed this palpable feeling of isolation that plagued New York farmwomen. One woman from New York wrote: "The hardest phase of country life in my neighborhood is the monotony, with no means or opportunity for any social life whatsoever. The country men...meet among themselves at work more than women can, and life is dreary indeed with never an afternoon or evening spent away from home."³³

The Psychological effects of this extreme isolation led Van Rensselaer and the farmers' wives to focus on the social benefits and the social aspects of their clubs. E.P. Ellinwood emphasized the social benefits of the Brinnfield St. Home Club, even though,

³² Flora Rose, *A Growing College* (Ithaca: New York State College of Human Ecology, 1969), 21-22.

³³ The New York Times, "Farm Women Find Life Hard," 5/30/1915.

she claimed, “we are not so isolated as are some other country districts.” The club, Ellinwood related to Van Rensselaer, “brought together women who seldom visit each other not from any unfriendliness, but because many of them are not in the habit of getting out to visits.”³⁴ The social aspects of the club were emphasized in many other letters describing Cornell study club activities, including one published in bulletin three. “We are all delighted with the help,” one club woman reported, “and also with the social part. Each hostess in turn provides tea, coffee, sugar, cream, butter, and potatoes.”³⁵

Van Rensselaer herself embraced this social mission and claimed the club could be made “a very pleasant social feature.”³⁶ Van Rensselaer’s description of her visit to the Auld Lang Syne Club focused on this social element: “The Supervisor of the Reading-Course for Farmers’ Wives had the pleasure of visiting the club last summer, listening to an entertaining program, engaging with the members in a delightful social hour, and repast brought and prepared by the members.”³⁷ With her talk of a summer visit, entertainment, and food, Van Rensselaer tried to draw women into clubs by emphasizing the social benefits they could provide to isolated farm women.

Finally, the all-consuming work and drudgery that defined farmwomen’s lives lent extra potency to the opportunity for leisure and for self-development which the club could provide. Van Rensselaer’s introduction to bulletin sixteen addressed the question of city versus rural clubs and strongly argued for the necessity of the latter: “The farmer’s wife has the same need of study to keep abreast of the times, to keep up with her children,

³⁴ Letter from Mrs. E.P. Ellinwood to MVR, March 1, 1909, Box 24, Folder 33, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

³⁵ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers’ Wives, Bulletin No. 3, “Practical Housekeeping,” Jan. 1903.

³⁶ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers’ Wives, Bulletin No. 13, “Brief Discussion on Human Nutrition,” Jan. 1905.

³⁷ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers’ Wives, Bulletin No. 21, “Suggestions to Readers,” Nov. 1906, p. 422.

and to preserve joyous spirit, as does the woman living in the midst of libraries, picture galleries, and lecture bureaus. Her early education, like that of her city sister, needs constant polishing to keep it bright, and her sympathies need to expand rather than to grow narrow and insignificant. The very practical nature of the farmer's wife's occupation makes it desirable to base that occupation on scientific principles as well as to relieve it with thoughts of poetry, history, or fiction."³⁸ Van Rensselaer used both the lack of other cultural and educational opportunities and the nature of the farmers' wives' work to argue for the importance of specifically rural clubs: clubs that would educate rural women and provide them with cultural and intellectual outlets.

Together, these rural problems of inexperience, isolation, and hard work led to the particular structure of the Cornell study clubs. Although these clubs shared many crucial features of the standard club of the time, including parliamentary procedure, roll calls, and papers on a specific topic written and presented by a club member, there were a number of interesting differences.

First, the emphasis on social life differentiated Cornell clubs from many contemporary clubs, which purposefully detached themselves from any social connotation. T.P. Martin brings one example in the Ebell Society of Oakland, California, which claimed: "the purpose of the club is not even secondarily social; it is seriously studious."³⁹ Many clubs sedulously excluded the social element in order to signal the formality and dignity of their mission. To exclude the social element of the club in isolated farm communities, however, would have been a serious blow to Van

³⁸ Cornell Reading Course for Farmers' Wives, Bulletin No. 16, "Programs for Evenings with Farmers Wives' Reading Clubs," Oct. 1905, pp. 297-298.

³⁹ Martin, *Sound of Our Own Voices*, 69.

Rensselaer's project and would have undermined a key feature of her goal: to brighten the lives of rural women. In addition to the social element, the strong role of Van Rensselaer as organizer also differentiated the Cornell study club from other contemporary clubs. Although some contemporary clubs examined by Martin did turn to professors for help, most designed their own programs and were able to operate in a more independent manner.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the Cornell study clubs, however, was the persistence of "culture" and self-development as an important element of the course. This persistence goes against the prevailing trend of the time in the woman's club movement, which experienced a shift, at the turn of the century, "from the realm of abstract thought to the arena of practical action, from education for self to education for service."⁴⁰

Women at the time were very aware of this shift, as an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* demonstrated: "Outwardly, for twenty years [from the founding of the New England Woman's Club of Boston and Sorosis of New York City in 1868], the women's club remained an institution for the culture and pleasure of its members; but within, the desire for a larger opportunity was gradually strengthening," leading the leaders of the club movement to "a conception of social service."⁴¹ A dichotomy, therefore, developed between "association as a means of personal development" and association as a means of "accomplishing definite work."⁴² Van Rensselaer continued to blend the two well into the twentieth century, largely in response to the particular needs and desires of rural communities. On the one hand, Van Rensselaer fit her clubs into the new narrative of the

⁴⁰ Martin, *Sound of Our Own Voices*, 4.

⁴¹ Martha E.D. White, "The Work of the Woman's Club," *The Atlantic Monthly* Volume XCIII (1904), 614.

⁴² Dr. Julia Holmes Smith, "The Woman's Club as an Agent of Philanthropy," in "Women's Clubs – A Symposium," *The Arena*, Aug. 1892, No. XXXIII, p. 382.

Woman's Club, focusing her attention on practical work in the home and the reform movement of home economics. However, the cultural and self-focused elements of the club remained because of a continuing need for this feature among New York's "soul starved" rural women.

Conclusion

As a result of Van Rensselaer's extraordinary sensitivity to the skills, problems, and needs of the rural women she addressed in the Farmers Wives' Reading-Course, her plans for the Cornell study clubs proved highly successful. "At their height," Rose recounted, "there were scattered throughout the state three hundred Cornell study clubs, with an average membership of twenty-five rural women, the majority of whom lived on Farms."⁴³ Rose also noted, with a measure of regret, that the clubs eventually yielded to a new program of extension work initiated by the home bureau.

Van Rensselaer also attributed the demise of her study clubs to the rise of the home bureau. In her history of the Reading Course, Van Rensselaer noted the stunning strength and persistence of the clubs, but also lamented the fact that "the development of the home bureau in the state of New York was the death knell of the club." Instead of ending on a dreary note, however, Van Rensselaer went on to claim that "Phoenix like" the home bureau "rose from the ashes of the predecessor to which it had set fire. Like any movement the study club did not yield without a struggle to this younger sister, it is only fair to the study clubs to say that the strength of the home bureau in this state was

⁴³ Rose, *A Growing College*, 27.

dependent on the previous strength of the study clubs.”⁴⁴ The Extension Service Review agreed with Van Rensselaer’s assessment: “The clubs showed a surprising vigor and vitality. Later on they gave way to the activities of the home bureaus the present day, which owe much of their strength and virility to Miss Van Rensselaer’s helpful influence.”⁴⁵

This notion that the study clubs contributed directly to home bureau work was doubtless a large comfort to Van Rensselaer, as she watched the collapse of the movement she had worked so hard and long to create. Whether or not the clubs influenced later extension work, however, they certainly influenced the many women who participated in them. Van Rensselaer’s focus on the rural clubwoman’s intellectual and social development likely had a large effect on the woman’s sense of self and her quality of life. The self development, self improvement, and increasing self-confidence these women experienced as club members certainly went a long way to accomplishing Van Rensselaer’s ultimate mission of bringing zest, interest, brightness, and beauty to the lives of farm women. This “zest” came from scientific principles and also from exposure to history, literature, music, nature and politics. The quote with which Van Rensselaer ended bulletin sixteen of the Farmers Wives’ Reading Course and began the Lessons for the Farm Home bulletin on the Cornell Study Clubs - “We have reached the point where no woman dares say that her education is finished” – highlighted the very broad nature of Van Rensselaer’s reading courses and clubs. By emphasizing broad education and

⁴⁴ Untitled History of the Reading Course for Farmers’ Wives, Box 24, Folder 30, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

⁴⁵ “Martha Van Rensselaer,” Extension Service Review Vol. 5 No. 7, July 1932, Box 48, The New York State College of Home Economics Records.

culture, these undertakings brought their members far beyond the confines of the “farm home.”

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*Note: For the Farmers Wives' Reading Course bulletins my source was a bound compilation of these bulletins in a book held by Mann library. However, I can no longer find the listing or citation in the Cornell library catalogue.