

Essay Exhibit Review

Exhibiting Women's History

Linda Shopes

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

"A Home Well Made." Lehigh County Historical Society, 501 Hamilton St., Allentown, Pa. 18105. Temporary exhibition, July 18, 1993 - March 6, 1994. Andree Mey, curator of collections; Sarah Nelson, curator of education; Sara Kelley, collections manager.

"A Woman's Work . . . Is Never Done." Lycoming County Historical Museum, 858 West Fourth St., Williamsport, Pa. 17701. Temporary exhibition, Sept. 10-Nov. 30, 1993. Sandra Rife, exhibition coordinator.

"Forging a New Deal: Johnstown and the Great Depression, 1929-1941." Johnstown Flood Museum, 304 Washington St., Johnstown, Pa. 15906. Temporary exhibition, Nov. 1993 - Summer 1995. Daniel Ingram, project manager; Curtis Miner, project historian; Marcia Kelly, designer.

Forging a New Deal: Johnstown and the Great Depression 1929-1941.

By Curtis Miner. Johnstown: Johnstown Area Heritage Association, 1993.

United by Right, Divided By Fear: Johnstown and the 1937 Steel Strike. Prod. by John Rice; Richard Burkert and Daniel Ingram, exec. prods.,

Paul McCollough, ed. Johnstown Area Heritage Association, 13 mins.

"Anthracite People: Immigration and Ethnicity in Pennsylvania's Hard Coal Region." Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum, McDade Park, Scranton, Pa. 18504. Permanent exhibition, opened May 22, 1992. Daniel Perry, project director; Chester Kulesa, curator; Maria Montoro-Quinn, educational coordinator; Mary Ann Landis, Janet Bassett, and Elizabeth Jewell, researchers; Dan Mayer, designer; Thomas Dublin and John Bodnar, consultants.

For generations women have played an important role in the preservation of local history as staff, board members, and volunteers at hundreds of museums and historical societies throughout the United States. Only recently, however, have women become the occasional subjects of the history presented at these institutions, the result, I believe, of the convergence of three developments: the drive towards professionalism within museums and historic sites, the growth of women's studies as an academic discipline, and the presence within communities of a broad-based feminist consciousness. Recently I surveyed new exhibitions at four institutions within Pennsylvania to assess how women's history is being presented. Two of these exhibits, mounted at county historical societies, focus specifically on women's roles and con-

tributions to the community. Two, at larger regional museums, are thematic exhibits that attempt to incorporate women within the story being told. Taken together, they provide a useful, if modest, set of comparative case studies that help us evaluate the penetration of a generation of scholarship on women's history into the museum world, the segregated versus mainstreaming approach to women's history, and, more generally, the challenges museums and historical societies face as they develop more sophisticated, intellectually rich programs.

"A Home Well Made," an exhibit at the Lehigh County Historical Society that documents women's various domestic roles, didn't begin as a women's history exhibit at all. Needing to focus on other institutional priorities while also creating a temporary exhibit at the society's headquarters, the staff decided to develop an object-based display that would feature the society's collection, rather than a concept-driven exhibition, which would have required both a collecting initiative and extensive research. Household artifacts comprise much of the collection; and the staff rather quickly concluded that an exhibit on women's roles in the home made considerable sense. Furthermore, the available display space, consisting of ten glass-enclosed cases, each approximately six feet by three-and-a-half feet, flanking a long corridor, conveniently lent itself to a role-per-case organizational scheme. And so the exhibit depicts women's work as farmer, seamstress, mother, nurse, housekeeper, cook (two cases), hostess, interior decorator, and educator.

Each case includes a coherent, visually balanced combination of artifacts, graphics, and text, which is largely quotations from prescriptive literature. The case on "housekeeper," for example, contains a kerosene lamp, laundry apparatus, a variety of irons, a rug beater, and a scrub brush; a 1915 photograph of a well-dressed, neatly coiffured local woman standing on her porch with bucket and broom; and descriptive labels dominated by a quotation from a 1906 home economics manual noting the "ten jobs that must be done every day." The exhibit's introductory label sets the specific displays in context by explaining that "the shift from a commercial to an industrial society, and the distinction between workplace and home that ensued, encouraged women's increased responsibility in all aspects of the domestic economy. . . . [W]ork and relaxation became separate; the home grew into a haven secure from outside pressure to which the father returned daily."

Given the limits of time and space, and also money—the exhibit cost well under one thousand dollars to fabricate—"A Home Well Made" is a success. It represents the incorporation of central concepts of women's history into the mainstream of museum practice. And although the staff denies any hidden message, I suspect the placement of a chamberpot at the center of the woman-as-nurse display, coupled with the matter-of-fact, descriptive tone of the entire exhibit, is a subtle hint to the viewer not to engage in any romantic idealization of women in the home. Indeed, overall the exhibit communicates a respect for the very hard work women have often done in the domestic sphere.

Yet the advice literature the exhibit so liberally draws upon *did* idealize women as domestic angels. Nowhere, however, does "A Home Well Made" explore the tension

between cultural constructs and social realities. Moreover, though filled with local references including artifacts from local donors, it is not grounded in the lives of real women in the county. Admittedly, the exhibit does note that the sort of domesticity presented defined the experience of middle-class, as opposed to working-class, women; it also pays attention to differences between rural and urban women's work, notes a few German-American domestic practices that varied from the local Anglo-American mainstream, and includes a reference or two to the existence of servants. Nonetheless, the viewer never finds out which local women participated in this culture of domesticity or how they operated within it. The problem, let it be said, is not curatorial ignorance but rather the institutional limits within which the curators here, as in many similar organizations, must operate. Indeed, the curators of "A Home Well Made" searched their manuscript collections carefully but found almost nothing documenting the domestic experiences of local women. Moreover, other institutional priorities prevented them from compiling demographic data, conducting oral histories, or scouring the community for relevant manuscripts—research that would have enriched this exhibit considerably. Unfortunately, the result is a static construction of women's experience.

Given such institutional constraints, "A Woman's Work . . . Is Never Done" at the Lycoming County Historical Museum is especially notable because its organizers, well aware of the limits of the society's collections, collaborated with local women's groups to learn the story of women's experiences and locate artifacts and other relevant documentation. The result is a far more comprehensive overview of local women's history than "A Home Well Made," as well as an enriched collection and a new constituency. Organized chronologically, "A Woman's Work" moves from "The First Women" (Native Americans) and then in turn to "Frontier Women," "Republican Women," "The Age of Industry," "The Women's Rights Movement," "Education," and women's reform and club movements. It ends with "The 20th Century and the Modern Woman." This essentially linear mode of organization is reflected in the exhibit's design: text, documents, and art work run along some one hundred feet of wall space in the society's temporary exhibit gallery. Pedestals and narrow cases arranged along the walls display artifacts. Mannequins dressed in historic costume are interspersed throughout.

Two features distinguish "A Woman's Work." First, it attempts to link local history with broader patterns by defining the larger context and then illustrating it with local examples, often biographical vignettes of notable women. For example, the section on education tells the viewer that "the idea of republican motherhood encouraged the founding of female academies," that Pennsylvania enacted a common school law in 1834, and that among the first common school teachers in the county seat were Mrs. E. L. Harris, Mrs. E. L. Frisby, and Ann Heilman, who "agreed to teach for . . . \$5 per month less than two gentlemen also hired." The exhibit then moves into a section about professional women, which features two women physicians who practiced in the county in the late nineteenth century. The second notable feature is the exhibit's use of arts and crafts by contemporary women to illustrate historical



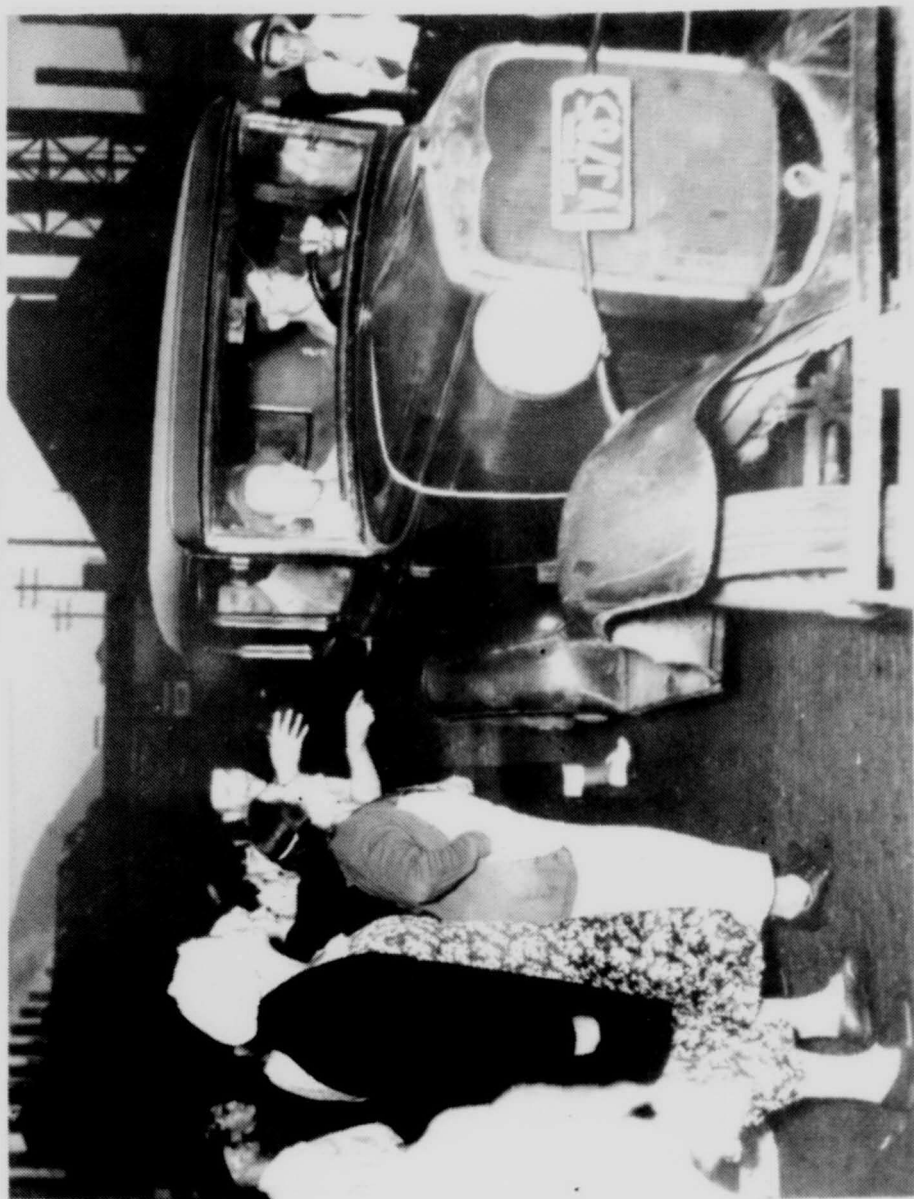
Suffragists marching in a World War I preparedness parade at Fourth and Hepburn Streets, Williamsport. From "A Woman's Work . . . Is Never Done," exhibit at the Lycoming County Historical Museum.

themes, or an attempt to suggest continuities in women's experience over time. For example, baskets and pottery created by current craftswomen are displayed along with archeological fragments in the section on Native American women. Both approaches have obvious advantages but raise additional questions: What distinguishes women's experiences in this particular locale, making them something more than an illustration of broad trends? How have these experiences changed over time?

Like "A Home Well Made," "A Woman's Work" demonstrates the movement of academic women's history off the campus. A quotation from Sara M. Evans's *Born for Liberty* (1989) introduces the exhibit; it is organized around periods and topics by now conventional in women's historiography; throughout it pays attention to both the constraints on and achievements of women. Yet overall it is an uneven effort, its ambitious scope not fully realized. While the exhibit is purportedly about "women's work," many sections only obliquely relate to that topic. More disappointing, we learn little about the everyday work of ordinary women in the county, in homes, factories, and business establishments. In choosing breadth over depth, exhibit organizers have perhaps left the more thoughtful visitor wondering what it all adds up to. Yet the scope of their vision is also commendable, and the enthusiasm and pride the exhibit generated among local women's groups imbues it with an unquestionably upbeat energy. Indeed, a condensed version of the exhibition that has travelled to women's conferences and other gatherings in the county continues to spark interest in women's history. What is now needed, I would suggest, is a more disciplined, thorough examination of a more limited topic.

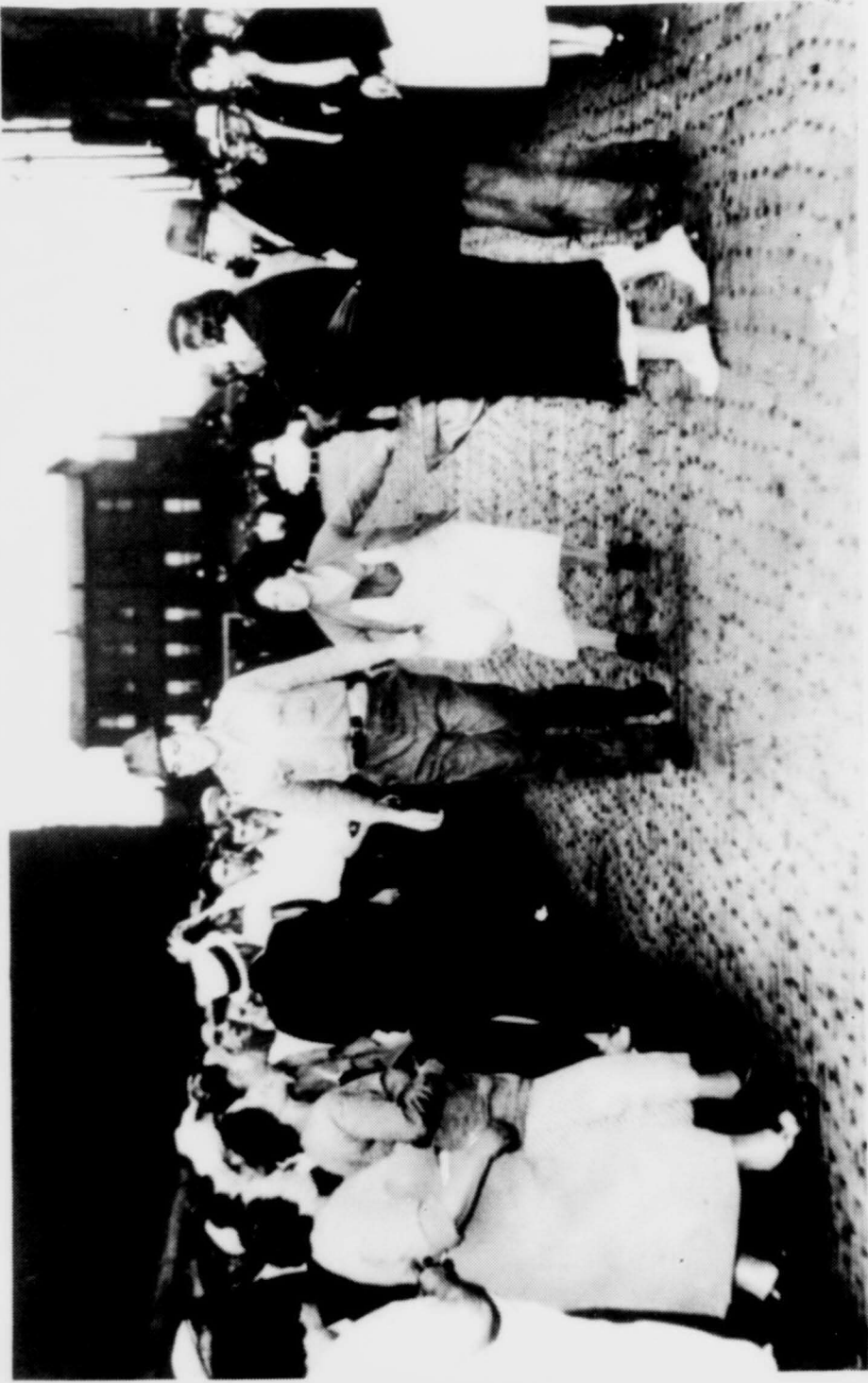
"Forging A New Deal: Johnstown and the Great Depression 1929-1941," a temporary exhibition of the Johnstown Area Heritage Association, is not "about women" in any direct way. Organized in twelve modules of several panels each located in the center and along the periphery of a three thousand-square-foot gallery, the exhibit surveys the impact of both the Depression and New Deal on political alignments and labor relations in this heavily ethnic, mid-sized industrial city by depicting the emergence of the progressive, if demagogic Democratic mayor Edward McCloskey during the early 1930s and the campaign to organize the labor force at the local Bethlehem Steel plant during the latter part of the decade. It also focuses on people's efforts to "make do" during hard times and on New Deal work relief programs in the region, especially the arts projects of the Works Progress Administration.

Women are incorporated seamlessly in the exhibit within this overall framework. Their militant support for the 1937 steel strike, for example, is illustrated by a marvelous photograph of Anastasia Chamiok, whose husband had been killed years earlier in an industrial accident, harassing a scab entering the plant gate. A picture of a vegetable garden is juxtaposed with a quote noting women's role in making ends meet: "We didn't have money but we managed. Mother used to say as long as we had potatoes and cabbage . . . and beans . . . we'd be alright." And the WPA-sponsored paintings of African-American artist Ann Sawyer Berkley are prominently featured.



Little Steel Strike, Bethlehem Steel Corporation. Franklin Gate Protests, Johnstown, PA, 1937

Courtesy of the Johnstown Area Heritage Association Archives



Little Steel Strike, Bethlehem Steel Corporation. Anastasia Chamiok, widow of a worker killed in an industrial accident, restrains a strike-breaker. Johnstown, 1937.

But "Forging a New Deal" does not actively engage questions of gender. We do not learn the different effects the depression had on women's and men's employment, nor how unionization of the steel industry supported a gendered division of labor in the plant and in the home that has only recently begun to break down, nor how local politics in the 1930s was largely a man's game. So the question becomes: *Should* the exhibit have paid more attention to gender? The planners suggest that to do so would have strained the evidence, that "class" emerged from their research as the significant social variable. Perhaps this is so. Certainly issues of gender are not necessarily central to all exhibits. And certainly the needs and expectations of audiences like those served by the Johnstown Area Heritage Association—older, rather conservative in their social values, not especially cosmopolitan in their outlook, disconnected from the sometimes fashionable currents of academic feminism—are to be respected when developing exhibitions. Yet, it is also true that the questions asked in large measure shape what research reveals: interpretations do not simply emerge from the data without the active engagement of the historian's mind. Furthermore, work like that included in the Spring/Summer 1993 issue of *Labor History* (vol. 34, no. 2-3), which seeks to relate scholarly discussions of gender to the study of labor history, and Barbara Melosh's *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theatre* (1991) is mapping out the terrain where class and gender intersect. "Forging a New Deal" could have been a bit more risky and stretched its audience to consider how women and men experienced the Depression differently, how assumptions about gender shaped the experience and the legacy of the 1930s.

Similar concerns can be raised about "Anthracite People: Immigration and Ethnicity in Pennsylvania's Hard Coal Region," the permanent exhibit currently under development at the Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum in Scranton. The exhibit itself occupies a cavernous gallery—some seventeen thousand square feet—and attempts no less than a comprehensive presentation of the industry and the people who have dominated the culture of the northeastern part of the state for the past century and a half. It is loosely organized into three sections: the first outlines the confluence of economic, technological, and social factors that established the hard coal industry in the region; the second presents a detailed picture of work in the area's two major industries—coal mining and the silk mills; the third focuses on domestic and community life and summarizes reasons for the decline of the industry in the twentieth century. It is a work-in-progress; though the text and major artifacts are in place, it will be filled in and refined as funds and staffing permit.

As in "Forging a New Deal," the exhibit team has been conscientious in incorporating women as they fit within the overall framework of the exhibition. The visitor learns that men often immigrated first, women and children later; that women participated in the family economy by caring for borders and making rag carpets; that the labor force in the silk mills was primarily female. However, a marvelous recreation of a c.1935 kitchen curiously makes no mention of women's domestic role. And some might find that "Anthracite People" renders the lives it seeks to present rather devoid of vitality, creativity, and wit. The text, verbal and visual, creates a pow-

erful sense of the oppressive conditions of life in the region, of people acted upon rather than actively fashioning lives for themselves. Admittedly, this is not an entirely inaccurate rendering. Nor is it limited to the portrayal of women—but at least men's efforts to fight back through organized labor are depicted. Also similar to "Forging a New Deal," issues of gender are ignored. The most obvious place to raise them would have been in the middle, the mine and mill section. While it is evident that work in the anthracite region was, and continues to be, highly segregated by sex, the causes and implications of this gendered division of labor are not addressed. What were the wage differentials, for example? The differences in work culture? Or in the meanings attached to work?

Several reasons perhaps account for this conceptual gap. Typically, the impressive size of many artifacts in industrial history museums and exhibits, coupled with traditional curatorial interests in how these machines work, tends to overwhelm any consideration of the social relations in which they are embedded. "Anthracite People," for example, includes a forty foot long shaker shoot, an actual coal car and battery locomotive, eight mechanized looms, and several other very large objects. Furthermore, the bias of industrial history exhibits is frequently an unspoken, unquestioned maleness. Most industrial work has been done by men; so obvious a fact goes unexamined, with the result that issues of gender, even when women are part of the story on the job or in the community, are ignored. I can suggest two possible ways of bringing women and a consideration of gender more fully into this and similar exhibitions: by including strategically throughout the exhibit well-done videotaped oral histories with real women and men who tell powerful human stories and so effectively compete with the scale of the artifacts; and by developing small, focused exhibits, either within the main space or in a temporary gallery, that focus on aspects of women's experience such as childbirth and midwifery, or on gendered experiences, like differences and similarities in childhood among girls and boys.

Taken together, these four exhibits suggest that a generation of women's studies scholarship, coupled with a grassroots awareness of women as a social group, has made the inclusion of women in local history exhibits an obvious and acceptable practice. Indeed exhibits like those reviewed here are being mounted with increasing regularity elsewhere in the nation. It is, therefore, appropriate to conclude by summarizing the issues these exhibitions have raised and suggest those that deserve further reflection if current work is to mature. Exhibits that focus exclusively on women are an appropriate response to past silences and a way to raise local historical consciousness about the richness of women's experiences. However, as "A Home Well Made" illustrates, because local collections are replete with domestic—and hence women's—artifacts, it is all too easy to present a generic women's history, disconnected from the real lives of women in the community; or alternatively, in the blush of embarking on a new direction, to create a breathless celebration of what women have done, a tendency found in "A Woman's Work." Exhibits that integrate women into an overall story are preferable if a more inclusive history is the goal; they also beg the question: why *wouldn't* women be included? Yet here the danger is that women's

experiences will remain muted, outshouted by the male, public voice frequently adopted by exhibits, including "Forging a New Deal" and "Anthracite People." Interestingly, the two exhibits reviewed here that focus exclusively on women were developed in institutions run by women; the two that attempt a more integrated approach, in museums run by men. Whether exclusive or inclusive, a focus on women in any exhibit doesn't necessarily ensure that attention will be paid to more complex questions of gender relations. And so, finally, the challenge facing public history professionals and their allies within both the academy and the community is to commit to a developing sophistication in both understanding and presenting women's history. There's no magic bullet here: as these four exhibitions have made abundantly clear, it involves the scholarly practice of reading extant literature and conducting primary research; it also means rethinking existing collections, perhaps documenting them anew with an eye to their connection to women's—or gendered—experiences, as well as collecting previously ignored artifacts and supporting documents that reflect these experiences; it means cultivating links with local women's organizations; it means taking some risks. Finally, it means hanging in for the long haul, committing to a more inclusive history in all aspects of institutional work.