

The Blue Plate Special: A Female Entrepreneur and Her Food Service Niche

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Key Words

Female entrepreneur, tea room, women's history

In the early-to-mid 20th century, women had few opportunities to become entrepreneurs. Establishing a food service enterprise offered an acceptable avenue for achieving their employment goals and it also provided a needed service to their communities.

Southern social customs of the times dictated that women could not eat in public restaurants unless escorted by a man. On the other hand, female-operated tea rooms were considered acceptable venues for women's dining. Given that forty percent of Atlanta women worked for wages in the 1930's (Catron-Sullivan & Neill, 2005), and that eating out was a popular social activity, there was a need for acceptable public dining facilities. Tea rooms also provided employment opportunities for African American and white women.

This poster recounts the history of a Georgia woman, Frances Virginia Wikle Whitaker, and her food service enterprises. It adds not only to women's history, but also to the history of home economics.

Personal Background

Born in Cartersville, Georgia, Frances Virginia Wikle Whitaker (1895-1962) earned a collegiate industrial diploma in home economics in 1917 from the Georgia Normal and Industrial College. (The college was later called the Georgia State College for Women, and today it is the Georgia College and State University.) Frances Virginia completed a dietetic internship at City College of New York in 1918. During the early 1920s, at Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta, she supervised the food service operations, worked with physicians on diabetic research, and established the first dietetic internship program in the city.

The Frances Virginia Tea Room

Frances Virginia designed and opened her tea room (1928-1962) on Atlanta's bustling Peachtree Street. As the principal entrepreneur, she partnered with her two sisters and widowed mother in the Frances Virginia Tea Room's management and operations. Using her home economics education, she developed nutritious and appealing breakfast, lunch, and dinner menus. Over 1,000 meals were served per day. During the Depression of the 1930s, the Frances Virginia Tea Room gave free meals valued at over \$48,000 to Atlanta's needy citizens. Frances Virginia provided her African American and white female workers with fair wages, insurance and uniforms.

Conclusion

Frances Virginia Wikle Whitaker adopted the application of science and the philosophy of "municipal housekeeping" espoused by Ellen Richards and other early home economics leaders (Stage & Vincenti, 1997). The Frances Virginia Tea Room became an Atlanta legend. Frances Virginia earned the respect of Atlanta's hospital and medical personnel, leaders of the emerging hospitality industry, and citizens during her four decades of food service entrepreneurship.

References

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