

# Margaret Comstock Snell (1843–1923)

By Kathleen M. McHugh

Margaret Comstock Snell was a pioneering domestic scientist who in 1889 implemented the household economy program for women at Corvallis State Agricultural College (now Oregon State University), the first such college program in the western United States. She also created an early degree program in household economy and sanitation (later known as home economics) at the college. In designing a curriculum that emphasized both liberal and scientific education, Snell helped shape the field of home economics in the United States.

Snell was born in upstate New York on November 11, 1843, to Quaker parents, Richard Snell and Margaret Comstock. She graduated from Grinnell College in 1869 and took a teaching job in Iowa for a few years before moving with her sisters and a brother to Benecia, California, northeast of San Francisco. It was there that the siblings founded Snell Seminary, where Margaret taught classical literature. The seminary was later moved to Oakland. In 1883, Snell returned to Boston University to pursue a medical degree, which she received in 1886. After practicing medicine in Oakland, she found that she was more interested in preventing disease than in treating it. Medical knowledge about sanitation and hygiene, she believed, could be used to teach a “right way” of living grounded in scientific ideas.

In 1888, in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, the Board of Regents of Corvallis State Agricultural College resolved to hire a chair of household economics and hygiene, fulfilling a need to teach home management to women. The secretary of the college board, Wallis Nash, and his wife Louisa recruited Snell, who Louisa had met when she lived in Oakland, emphasizing that Snell’s “Christian nature” and medical background qualified her for the position. While some on the Board of Regents were skeptical of a “lady doctor” at a time when few women earned medical degrees, the Nashes’ insistence of her strong religious beliefs, which included women’s sacred role in the home, convinced the Board that Snell was an appropriate choice.

In June 1889, Snell was named professor of Household Economy and Hygiene and given the opportunity to implement the first household economy and sanitation curriculum west of the Rocky Mountains. During her first year, she had twenty-four students, a number that grew steadily as she developed the program. When she retired in 1908, more than two hundred students were enrolled in the home economics program at the college.

Snell’s educational background significantly influenced her teaching style and the curriculum she taught. In addition to teaching cooking and sewing, she promoted hygiene and an appreciation for art and literature. Known as the “apostle of fresh air,” she promoted long walks and open windows to create a hygienic environment and promote a healthy lifestyle. She also advocated that her students dress in loose clothing and wear low-heeled shoes. To encourage an appreciation of literature, she read works of Shakespeare and Lord Byron to her students while they cooked in the laboratory kitchens. She became a dedicated Episcopalian and believed that home economics could help create a Garden of Eden through vitalizing women in their work with their families and the outdoors, as she believed God was present in every growing thing. The department she created, the third largest school of home economics in the country by the mid-twentieth century, would become nationally known.

After her retirement from OSU (then known as Oregon Agricultural College) in 1908, Margaret Snell remained committed to civic affairs and to the promotion of art and literature in Corvallis. She died on August 23, 1923. Two buildings at Oregon State University were named for her: Margaret Snell Hall (now Ballard Extension Hall) in 1921 and Snell Hall in 1959.

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