A Bit of Brightness: Colored Glassware and the Experience of Women During the Great Depression Claire J. Eagle

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October 29, 1929, otherwise known as Black Tuesday, marked the beginning of over ten years of economic depression in the United States. That day nearly all stocks collapsed, and major banks began calling in loans; by mid-November an estimated thirty billion dollars in stock value had disappeared. Struggling to stay open, companies all over the United States searched for any way to continue. This included companies like Federal Glass Company, Jeanette Glass Company, Hazel-Atlas Glass Company, and Hocking Glass Company.

These companies produced what is now known as "depression glass"—patterned glassware, made during the Depression years, that was produced in hundreds of patterns and a variety of colors all over the spectrum, including blue, black, green, pink, yellow, red, white, amber, and crystal clear.² Depression glass was inexpensively made, manufactured in bulk, and sold for pennies, or simply given away. Yet, it was more than just cheap glass. As one writer put it, "this glassware offered a bit of brightness and hope for the future, to the average housewife." It would be easy to say that

Depression glass was made for struggling housewives. Yet one might want to know exactly how this colorful glassware related to the experience of women during the Great Depression. This question can be answered by examining a Hocking Glass Company Coronation bowl (Figure 1), purchased at an Illinois antique store.

Little scholarly work exists about Depression glass. Yet, today collectors across the country covet the glassware. In fact, The National Depression Glass Association formed in 1974 as an organization dedicated to the preservation of American-made glassware, including



Figure 1. Picture taken by author.

¹ "Timeline of the Great Depression," Special Features, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/railstimeline/ (accessed November 6, 2016).

² Gene Florence, Collector's Encyclopedia of Depression Glass (Paducah, KY: Collector Books, 2002), 5.

³ Christine Nagy, "A Depression Glass Primer," *National Depression Glass Association*. http://www.ndga.net/articles/nagydgprimer.php (accessed November 6, 2016).

the history of the companies who made it, as well as the circulation of educational information regarding those topics. 4 However, neither scholars nor those that are a part of the National Depression Glass Association have written about what Depression glass and the companies that made the glassware, like Hocking Glass Company, might tell us about the experience of women during the Great Depression.

Hocking Glass Company

Hocking Glass Company was incorporated in 1905 by I.J. Collins and E.B. Good. Located in Lancaster, Ohio, the company was named for the nearby Hocking River. I.I Collins and E.B. Good worked to manufacture both plain and decorated glassworks including tableware, stemware, tumblers, and glass novelties.⁵ The company thrived for almost twenty years before a fire destroyed the first Hocking Glass Company plant. Five years later, in 1929, the stock market crashed and the company struggled, while a main competitor, Anchor Cap and Closure Corporation, thrived and acquired five other companies that could not stay afloat during the crash.⁶ Due to the fall of sales in crystal and quality colored glassware, companies had to be creative as "hard times curbed the purchase of luxury goods." ⁷ Sometime after 1927 Hocking developed a pressed glass machine. This allowed the company to produce cheap products, for instance a two tumbler set which sold for only 5 cents.8

The pressed glass machine kept Hocking open throughout the Great Depression allowing it to produce thousands of pieces of Depression glass. In 1937 Anchor Cap and Closure Corporation and Hocking Glass Company merged to become Anchor Hocking Glass Company. This company took the name Anchor Hocking Company after dropping the word "glass" from its title in 1969.9 Anchor Hocking Company now makes common glassware that can be found in many kitchens today, just as its depression glass can be found in antique stores across the nation with very little effort. The Coronation bowl around which this study is built was found in Persimmon Lane, an antique store in downtown Charleston, Illinois.

Methodology

Studying this pressed piece of glass and the narrative it fits into, one can learn much about the Great Depression and a woman's experience during this time. Jules David Prown defines the study of material culture as "the study through artifacts of the beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at any given time." To Prown material culture "provides a scholarly approach to artifacts that can be utilized by investigators in a variety of fields."10 In addition to Jules David Prown, other well-known methods for interpreting material culture have come from scholars including Thomas Schlereth, E. McClung Fleming, and Giorgio Riello. Understanding the methods proposed by these scholars helps us unlock valuable evidence from the material world.

⁴ National Depression Glass Association, "About Us," National Depression Glass Association. http://www.ndga.net/aboutus.php (accessed November 6, 2016).

⁵ Anchor Hocking Company, "Heritage," Anchor Hocking Company. http://www.anchorhocking.com/heritage.html (accessed November 6, 2016).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bradley P. Nutting P, "Selling Elegant Glassware during the Great Depression: A. H. Heisey & Company and the New Deal," The Business History Review 77, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 448. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30041186 (accessed November 6, 2016).

⁸ Phillip Hopper, Anchor Hocking Commemorative Bottles and Other Collectibles (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, 2000), 9. ⁹ Anchor Hocking Company, "Heritage."

¹⁰ Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," Winterthur Portfolio 17, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 1. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180761 (accessed November 6, 2016).

Thomas Schlereth defines three eras and nine approaches in his work "Material Culture Studies in America: 1876-1976." His three eras include the "age of collecting" from 1876-1948, the "age of description" from 1948-1965, and the "age of analysis" from 1965 onwards. We are currently in the age of analysis which leads to his nine approaches for analyzing material culture artifacts. Schlereth's approaches range from the "art history paradigm" to "the behavioristic concept" with a range in between. ¹¹ In regard to a piece of depression era glass, Schlereth's best method of analysis would be the "social history paradigm." This method focuses on artifacts that have historically been ignored by museums due to their association with more marginalized groups such as labor, African-Americans, or women—and hence having relevance to labor history, black history, and women's history. ¹²

E. McClung Fleming presents a slightly different model for artifact study. His method aims to identify many different approaches to analysis. In turn he provides a framework that relates each method together to "suggest the outlines of a program of collaborative research for all who are engaged in study of the artifact." His model contains four steps which begin with the identification of the five basic properties of the artifact: history, material, construction, design, and function. The next operation is evaluation. Of the two forms of evaluation, the first centers around the judgement of the aesthetic quality of the artifact and is therefore very subjective. The second form of evaluation is based more in factual comparisons in quantifiable terms like cost, rarity, and size. Next is the operation of cultural analysis, which establishes the artifact in relation to its own time and culture. Finally, there is interpretation. This operation in turn relates the artifact to our modern culture and its importance today.

Giorgio Riello states that "historians have survived, even thrived, during the last two centuries with little or no engagement with objects." Yet we understand from earlier discussion that studying artifacts can provide new insight to history. Particularly the beliefs of any community at any given time. Riello approaches material culture methodology with three categories in mind: history *from* things, history *of* things, and history *and* things. Each method focuses on the object a different way. In this instance, we have history "from things." Next, we would work to identify a narrative: The Great Depression and the experience of women. Then one introduces the artifact: a piece of Hocking Glass Company pressed glass. This method can unlock creative ideas about how to convey the past that are not dictated by professional historians. Introducing the object separately can strengthen the narrative being told. These next sections will develop the narrative of women in the Great Depression completely separate from the object of this study. The Coronation bowl and the narrative come together in the conclusion.

Through these three methods of analysis, we form a plan to approach Depression glass. In studying a piece of Hocking Glass Company pressed glass, a combination of two approaches will work best. Using E. McClung Fleming's first step of his artifact study, identification, as well as the five basic properties he identifies, will produce a better understanding of the artifact. Riello's history and things will work to bring to light the narrative of the experience of women during the Great

¹¹ Thomas J. Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America, 1876-1976," in *Material Culture Studies in America*, ed., Thomas J. Schlereth (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982), 1-75.

¹² Ibid, 59.

¹³ E. McClung Fleming, "An Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 154. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180572 (accessed November 6, 2016).

¹⁴ Ibid, 157.

¹⁵ Giorgio Riello, "Things That Shape History: Material Culture and Historical Narratives," in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed., Karen Harvey (New York: Routledge Press, 2009), 25.

¹⁶ Prown, 1.

¹⁷ Riello, 26.

Depression. The combination will present an analysis that promises to expand our understanding of the relation of Depression glass to the experience of women during the Great Depression.

The first step of Fleming's artifact model, operation identification, is to outline the history of the object. However, to further our understanding, we will first identify the design of the artifact. Undertaking this step first helps immensely in the four remaining steps under the identification operation. Identifying the design shows the structure, style, form, and ornament of the object. Due to the nature of Depression glass and the hundreds of patterns and colors produced, identifying the design of a piece can be tricky. Collectors of Depression glass have worked for years to produce comprehensive collector guides. Consulting these guides is the best way to identify the glassware. Through Gene Florence's *Collector's Encyclopedia of Depression Glass* this piece was visually identified as Hocking Glass Company's Coronation pattern using images shown in Figure 2.

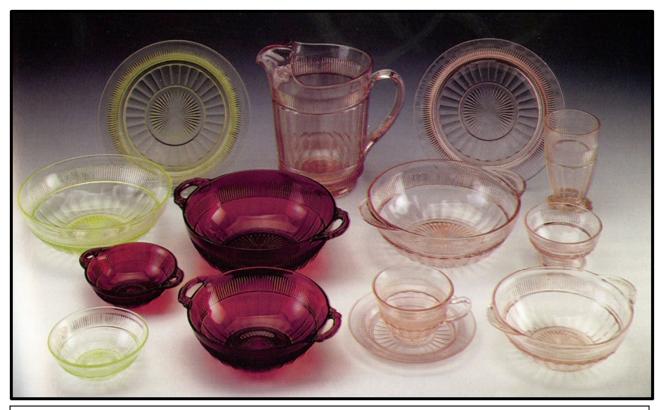


Figure 2. "Collection of Coronation Pattern Glassware," in *Collector's Encyclopedia of Depression Glass*, by Gene Florence (Paducah, KY: Collector Books, 2002), 47.

This pink closed handled bowl measures four inches across the bottom whereas the outer top rim from edge of handle across measures at nine and three quarters of an inch. The bottom of the bowl shows a ray pattern radiating from the center point of the bowl. Upon the end of the rays a band of large and wide ribs circle the curve of the bowl. When those end, a final band of pointed and thin ribs encircle the top of the bowl. These ribs are also repeated on the handles. Florence identifies the top ribs as a crown pointing to the Coronation name. Now that the design of this piece has been identified, the four other properties of Fleming's operation will be more easily identified.

¹⁸ Fleming, 156.

¹⁹ Ibid, 46.

The history of an artifact includes both when and where the artifact was made, as well as by whom and for whom it was made.²⁰ Otherwise known as provenance, this part of identification is important in any material culture study. We know through visual identification that this piece is a part of the Coronation pattern produced by Hocking Glass Company. This pattern was also known as Banded Rib and Saxon. Additionally, it was only produced from 1936-1940.²¹ Although we know Hocking made it, there is no evidence of the exact plant and location where it was produced. Any conclusion is made more difficult by the fact that a year after the Coronation pattern was introduced, the Anchor Cap Corporation and the Hocking Glass Company merged, bringing the total number of manufacturing plants to more than ten.²²

When it comes to the question of for whom the artifact was made, we are left with few answers. The broadest answer is that it was made for consumers. This helps little in identifying shops where the bowl was sold or any products it might have been given away with. Furthermore, there is no knowledge of how the product ended up at its previous location: the Persimmon Lane antique store. In a brief conversation, the owner of Persimmon Lane could not remember how the artifact came to be at her store. Her only comment was on the fact that she sells several pieces of Depression glass a month, and this one was in very good condition.²³

Material, construction, and function

round out Fleming's five properties. As Duska Cornwell, owner of Persimmon Lane stated, this piece is in relatively good condition considering its age. There are a few nicks on the outside of the bowl shown in Figures 3 and 4, but those are expected considering its material makeup, glass. The glass has been colored pink, done before construction. Construction would have taken place using a pressed glass machine. Molten pink colored glass would have been pressed into an engraved mold by a plunger to create the bowl. While it is widely



Figure 3. Picture taken by author.

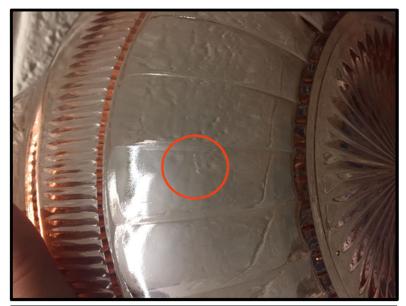


Figure 4. Picture taken by author.

²⁰ Fleming, 156.

²¹ Florence, 46.

²² Anchor Hocking Company, "Heritage."

²³ Duska Cornwell, telephone interview by author, September 28, 2017.

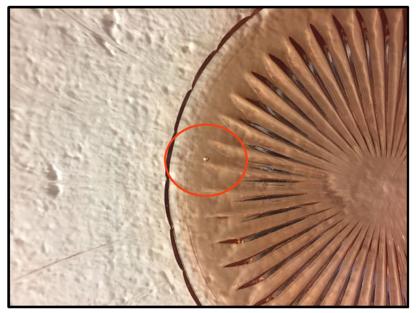
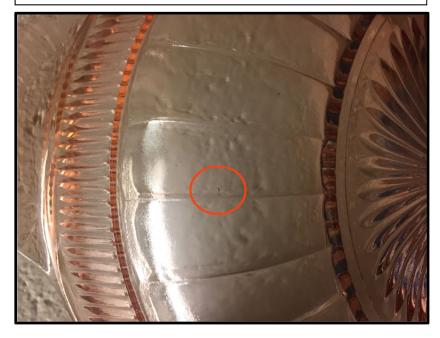


Figure 5, above. Figure 6, below. Both pictures taken by author.



known that this process is how Depression glass was made, other signs point to this method of construction. This includes the blunt edges on the ribs and the bubbles both inside the bottom of the bowl and on the outside curve (Figures 5 and 6). When it comes to the function of this piece, one can only conjecture. There is no evidence regarding exactly how this piece was used as there is no provenance. However, based on the common function of a bowl we can safely assume that this piece was used in serving or prepping food.

Women in the Great Depression

Having established basic information about the artifact including history, material, function, and design, the next step in our combined method is to focus on the narrative outside of the artifact. The Great Depression as well as the experience of women during this era should be at the center of the narrative.

Women are suspiciously missing from many stories told about the Great Depression. Movies like *Cinderella Man* (2005) and *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000) all focus on male characters. In literature, stories that do include women are about their family as a whole, the most

popular being *The Grapes of Wrath*. Leading to the simple, and erroneous, conclusion, that the experience of women during the Great Depression is unimportant.

Greater understanding of the experience of women can come by first examining the period before the Great Depression. World War I was over and the United States had been transformed. The country was now a world power built on a consumer economy that relied on consumer spending to keep it going by borrowing more and more to buy more homes, automobiles, and other durable products. Finally, the 1920's conjure up images of women in flapper dresses and pin curls while doing the crazed Charleston.

Those images of women are both true and false. Gail Collins writes that the ethos of consumption ran supreme. This included everything deemed immoral, including drinking and sex.²⁴ These ideas were a part of the new form of feminism, but many women of the time denounced the word feminism claiming it was "opprobrium to the modern young women." Collins cites these words and more in an essay written by Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, a birth control activist and writer about women's rights. In 1927, when describing what feminism meant to the women of this time, Bromley wrote: "the word suggests either the old school of fighting feminist who wore flat heels and had very little feminine charm, or the current species who antagonize men with their constant clamor about maiden names, equal rights, woman's place in the world and many another cause."²⁵ These women were fighting for a different kind of liberation than those before World War I. Instead, these women just wanted the right to have the same lifestyles—including consumption—as their male counterparts.

Furthering the understanding of these women, Gail Collins writes:

The underlying impulse was freedom- from the mores of the past that required women to keep themselves in check, physically and emotionally. The woman of the twenties was supposed to be a 'pal' to her male friends and later husband. She was not going to keep the hearth warm while her mate was out carousing. She was out there with him. She needed to be physically free to dance the wild, flapping dances of the moment, play golf, drive a car, and leap up and down at football games... It was intended, in part, to drive the older generation crazy, and it succeeded.²⁶

On the other end of the spectrum, women were dealing with both the good and bad ramifications of the Nineteenth Amendment which extended the franchise to women. While the amendment had past, there was no time to rest. Questions still remained as to the effects of coverture on a married women's citizenship as well as how this affected poor women, African American women, and Latina women, all groups that were, typically, left out of the conversation. The National Women's Party emerged with a suffragist victory. This group—a small, well-educated group of white feminists wanted to re-energize those that had fought for the right to vote and continued to campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment.²⁷ These women were a stark contrast to the unrestrained, energetic, daring, and self-absorbed flapper idea many associated with the word feminist in the 1920's. In addition, the expanded franchise in 1920 failed to meet the hopes of many activists. Women made up an estimated one third of all voters in the presidential election of 1920. They elected Warren Harding on the premise that he had promised equal pay for equal work, no more child labor, and more women in government.²⁸ None of these promises were fulfilled, and it seemed the suffragists had failed. Failure was not complete, however. These two strands of competing "feminist" women did accomplish several things together. Significant changes came in both the workforce and at home.

After the brief period of World War I, women found themselves barred again from the workforce. However, expanding political opportunities and the ever changing definition of the "new woman" brought new acceptance in the workforce. Statistics cited in Through Women's Eyes show how women's participation grew four percent, from twenty-one to twenty-five, by 1930. Additionally, the percentage of married women in the workforce rose over five percent as well.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid, 330.

²⁴ Gail Collins, America's Women (New York: Harper Collins Publisher Inc., 2003), 327-328.

²⁵ Ibid, 328.

²⁷ Anne M. Boylan, Women's Rights in the United States: A History in Documents (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 159.

²⁹ Ellen Carol Dubois and Lynn Dumenil, Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 530-531.

Briefly looking at these statistics it could be concluded that the role of a woman was changing. The entrance of more and more women in the workforce was what this era of feminists wanted. They sought in many cases to do the same things as men. Yet, in reality jobs for most women amounted to merely a "brief interlude between school and marriage." Only ten percent of women in the workforce were actually married. While numbers were rising, the fact of the matter is, with numbers so low in the first place, the number of both single and married women in the workforce looked far more impressive than they really were.

In the home, things were changing as well. Consumerism brought new appliances. Changing ideas about female sexuality brought new respect and availability of birth control. The 11.7 percent of married women in the workforce had new ways to be able to fulfil their duties at home while still working. Changes in both the political sphere and the workforce brought together a trifecta for the "new woman." This "new woman" did not achieve "full economic and political equality or personal autonomy, but new opportunities infused lives with a modern contour, putting in motion trends that would characterize women's lives for the rest of the twentieth century."³² These women saw no reason why these trends would not continue in the decade to come. Many believed that even more progress would be made after the 1920's. Unfortunately, before the decade was over, it became apparent that the lives of both male and female Americans were going to change drastically—for the worse.

After the crash of 1929, life for nearly every American transformed. Economic devastation set in and began a series of events that effectively halted any progress that occurred during the 1920's. In just a year, the number of unemployed Americans more than doubled to 3.2 million.³³ Elite and middle class families experienced downward mobility as well as emotional and material hardship. Even worse fated were the middle-class and farm families. These people had fewer resources to draw on and a greater chance of losing their jobs or farms.³⁴ Men, women, and their families all suffered. Family suffering was made worse by the fact that the small population of women working outside the home were often the first to lose their jobs. A Gallup poll in 1936 found that eighty-two percent of people opposed married women working.³⁵

This popular sentiment led to the introduction of legislation in a few states restricting the right of women to work. These included the simple act of refusal to hire married women, dismissal of women upon marriage, demotion, temporary or permanent dismissal when pregnant, and delay in promotion.³⁶ This state legislation was only the beginning. The National Economy Act (1933), applying to federal workers, led to the firing of thousands of women. It stated that when any workforce reduction was to take place those who already had a family member (male family member) working for the government would be the first to go.³⁷ Women were increasingly told to stay home, that their place was not at work, and they were the ones making the economy worse.

Many Americans still believed that a woman's place was only in the home; however, even those women at home were greatly affected by the Great Depression. Historians Ellen Dubois and Lynne Dumenil cite several issues women at home faced: "unemployment for men often strained marriages, especially ones that had been patriarchal. Desertion rates rose, but rates for divorce, an expensive proposition, did not." Furthermore, the depression brought changes and challenges in

31 Dubois and Dumenil, 533.

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³⁰ Collins, 348.

³² Ibid, 537.

^{33 &}quot;Timeline of the Great Depression."

³⁴ Dubois and Dumenil, 538.

³⁵ Boylan, 185.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Dubois and Dumenil, 539.

³⁸ Ibid.

terms of raising children and fertility. The fertility rate dropped significantly in the three years after 1930. The trend of smaller families spread across the nation and social classes, as "fewer children became an economic necessity." Women at home had just as much hardship as any man. In an effort to address the challenges facing women in their current plight, and make money in the process, companies began producing new products like the piece of Depression glass in this study.

The most well-known aid to a women's happiness were the soap operas. Perhaps it was the idea of escaping the turmoil of their own lives or the very important *free* aspect of the radio shows that garnered them so much popularity. No matter what it was, the soap operas aired during the daytime hours were devoted to women and they could not get enough. By 1936 over half of daytime programming at NBC was comprised of fifteen-minute serials focused on long running melodramas. The characters women grew to love wrestled with common domestic woes just like them, while occasionally promoting the sponsor of the show and their laundry detergent. While these women listened to their soaps and perhaps dreaded their duties now that they were not in the workforce, companies had to find new ways to ensure that their products were still bought.

A Bit of Brightness

This context of economic desolation and the gender challenges posed by the upheaval establishes our central narrative. We can now return to our piece of Hocking Glass Company Depression glass. This piece will "provide a direct way for people to relate to the past." No matter what was happening in the economy, food and food preparation were still a center of a woman's day all across the United States. Rebecca Sharpless writes about dining practices on the Blackland Prairie, a community is southwestern Texas. Here women waited for special occasions to showcase their most decadent food and their fanciest dishware to try to outdo one another. Clearly these practices were tied closely to women's identities.

Providing some pleasure for a woman, who perhaps had to return home after a period of slight freedom, could dispel more unrest in an already uneasy time. Depression glass was that bit of "brightness and hope" that Christine Nagy describes, and it was marketed that way as well. Advertisements for Depression glass catered to women, especially those who no longer had access to the plethora of consumer good of the 1920's. Since most pieces were



Figure 7. "Pink two-handled bowl-1939 Giveaway by Philips Milk of Magnesia Toothpaste", National Depression Glass Association collection. http://www.ndga.net/advertising/giveaway1.1939.jpg (accessed Nov. 24, 2016).

given away for next to nothing, it was used as a marketing tactic for other products like flour, toothpaste, and detergent. The ad shown in Figure 7 depicts a free hostess dish, with purchase of a

⁴⁰ Collins, 350.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹ Riello, 26.

⁴² Rebecca Sharpless, Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 151.

twenty-five cent tube of Philips' toothpaste. It promotes "101 Gay Uses!" including candy, relishes, and mayonnaise.⁴³ The free dish is advertised more than the toothpaste. Looking at the ad for more than a few seconds one can notice the small area of the lower right corner that actually advertises the brand of the toothpaste one would be purchasing. A page from a 1937 Sego Milk Coupon Book (Figure 8) lists pieces of "beautiful crystal clear dishes for baking." These would be yours for just a number of coupons.44 These companies, both the glass companies like Hocking Glass Company and Philips alike, knew that appealing to women would not only keep their business afloat but keep women happy and continuing to buy their products.

Therefore, this piece of Hocking Glass Company, Coronation pattern, depressed glass absolutely relates to the experience of

REPRINTED FROM A 1937 SEGO MILK COUPON BOOK GLASBAKE OVEN WARE THESE beautiful crystal clear dishes are very popular for baking. With the California Poppy Wreath design and the addition of new attractive handles, they are now ideal for serving. The "heat-quick" bottom saves oven fuel and bakes evenly and quickly. (Tested and Approved by the Good House-keeping Institute.) Catalog No. B15140—Utility Tray Catalog No. *Co B16930—Round Baking Dish 2 Qt. *Coupons 150 A5130—Custard Cups (Set of 6)... L20340—Casserole with Cover 11/2 B20150-Oval Platter 200 135 B13885-Oblong Baking Dish Qt. (Cover is a Pie Plate 200 B20890-Partition Vegetable Dish A14310-Round Baker 11/2 Qt. 145 B14925-Oval Baker 11/2 Qt. A8215-Pie Plate 9" *Small coupons count one-half value. A8215 A 20340 B 16930 B 15140 B 13885 B 20150 B 20890

Figure 8. "Glassbake Oven Ware-1937 Giveaway by Sego Milk Company via coupons," National Depression Glass Association collection. http://www.ndga.net/advertising/segomilk1.1937.jpg (accessed November 24, 2016).

women during the Great Depression. Through first understanding the role and experience of

⁴³ This ad is a part of a collection by the National Depression Glass Association. Upon request they were not able to produce the exact source of the ad, only commenting that many members send them the ads already cut out from their original source.

⁴⁴ This ad was also a part of the National Depression Glass Association's collection. All that is known about this one is that it was reprinted from a 1937 Sego Milk coupon book.

women socially, politically, and in the workforce before the crash of 1929, we better understand just how much changed. Furthermore, we see how women at home coped with being there, as well as with other hardships caused by the depression. Whether Depression glass really "offered a bit of brightness and hope for the future, to the average housewife" or not, certainly it cannot be excluded from the narrative of women during the Great Depression.