

ChLA 2019 Proposal

“Domestic Labor, Community Service, and the Girl Scouts”

Girl Scout handbooks, issued annually since 1913, outline the ethos of the organization and instruct Scouts in how to implement its values in their own lives and their communities. The values themselves have changed – early handbooks emphasize thrift, courtesy, and obedience, and today’s girl scouts learn leadership, self-esteem, and courage – yet the joint emphasis on personal growth and civic contribution has remained constant. The ambit of female citizenship has been the site of intense political debate, however, especially within the early years of the organization, when some states allowed full or partial female suffrage and others did not. As a result, early handbooks tread carefully in their descriptions of adult civic participation, in particular hedging their language about whether or not the Scout’s future will include a right to vote.

Despite this uncertainty, Girl Scouts claimed the young girl’s right to the public sphere from the very beginning, primarily by characterizing civic participation as an extension of what was understood as the natural province for female industry: domestic labor. The 1920 handbook, published only months before the 19th amendment, urges readers to engage in service work and advocacy centered on community health and well being, arguing that “Public Health is simply good housekeeping applied to the community.” Such statements, coupled with instructions on everything from how to set the perfect table to how to lobby the Town Board, reveal how Girl Scouts used the language and concerns of domestic labor to shape effective guardians of the home and the nation. My paper works with the archival materials at the Girl Scouts’ headquarters in New York to explore the bridges the organization built between domestic labor and civic duty in their handbooks, magazines, and other publications between 1910 and 1930; I will further explore the writings, projects, and images of Girl Scouts themselves to examine how they interpreted, enacted, and altered this rhetoric.