

EDNA WESTBROOK TRIGG IN DENTON COUNTY 1868-1946

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I. CONTEXT

Edna Westbrook Trigg's career as Texas' first county home demonstration agent (appointed 1916) began December 1911, when she received a letter from the United States Department of Agriculture asking her to accept supervision of the "Girls Tomato Clubs" in Milam County. After first declining the offer because she thought her first duty was to her position as principal at the Rural High School in the county, she reluctantly accepted and began her appointment as "Collaborator" in January 1912, working only on Saturdays and evenings.¹ By that summer, Trigg had organized eleven clubs with an average of ten girls aged ten to eighteen who "must cultivate one-tenth an acre in tomatoes. She must keep a report and sell fresh as many as she could, not to interfere with the supply to can."² A joint exhibit with the boys' corn club at Milano in August 1913 was the first exhibit of the girls' finished products of tomatoes and peaches; later that year, they second took place at the State Fair of Texas held in Dallas. From there the girls went to the Cotton Palace in Waco and won over \$100 in prizes for their products. Home demonstration and Girls Tomato Clubs were on their way into the archives of Texas history, and Edna Trigg led the way.

Agricultural demonstrations began in Texas in 1903, when the United States Cooperative Extension introduced the idea of demonstration farms across the state and the Farmers' Congress at College Station organized the Farm Boys' and Girls' Progressive League. These successful endeavors were soon followed by the first Boys' Corn Club in Texas in Jack County, the first

Girls' Tomato Club in Milam County, home demonstrations of homemaking skills, farmers' institutes, and the establishment of what came to be the Department of Extension at Texas A&M.³ In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, uniting the demonstration work of the USDA with that of the land-grant colleges in each of the states, forming the Extension Service. On January 29, 1915, the Texas legislature accepted the provisions of the Smith-Lever Act, which sanctioned demonstration work and allowed programs to be funded by matching local money with state and local funds; from 1915, Texas county commissioners courts provided and funded offices to conduct extension work in agriculture and home economics.⁴ With the Smith-Lever Act, Extension Work in Texas became a division of Texas A&M College and counties across the state gradually introduced extension agents who offered a better planned and more systematic program of work to build up and conserve the land, encourage better farming and food production, and improve the lives of the farmers and their families across the state.⁵

Even before the state or federal government officially accepted responsibility for funding cooperative Extension work, Trigg became the first woman agent in the state when she accepted the position of Milam County "Collaborator" for the United States Department of Agriculture on January 16, 1912. Originally holding both her position as Principal of Rural High School in Liberty community and the appointment as "Collaborator" of Milam County from the USDA, she eventually became so absorbed in working with the rural community, teaching herself about canning and holding community councils for the farm women in the county, that she quit her teaching job.⁶ The Collaborator position ended in early 1915, however, when the Milam County Commissioners Court no longer provided financial support for her salary.⁷ After spending two months in Childress, Texas, conducting a canning school at the behest of the Childress Chamber of Commerce, she returned to Milam County intending to take up a position at the Rural School

again. Offered the position in Denton County as Home Demonstration Agent in February, however, she began working in Denton County on February 23, 1916.⁸ Trigg was the Denton County Home Demonstration Agent from February 1916 through December 1937 and served as Denton County Home Demonstration Emeritus from January 1, 1938 to July 31, 1945, when she retired.⁹

II. OVERVIEW

Trigg had grown up in Milam County, leading what her grandson, Dr. W. Cone Johnson, described as a “hard scrabble existence” from an early age and knew tomato culture, having what Trigg called “a speaking acquaintance” with the tomato.¹⁰ The daughter of Ervin and Rachel (Walker) Westbrook of Milam County, Trigg was born between the towns of Milano and Cameron on December 30, 1868. She attended community school in Liberty and earned her teaching certificate in Cameron by taking summer normal school courses offered there. She married Charles Letman Trigg in 1892 at Yoakum, Texas, and they had two children: Charles Westbrook Trigg (born in 1894) and Minnie Eloise Trigg Johnson (born in 1882). Lucy Edna Trigg, called Edna by her family and all who knew her, lived in Milam or Denton counties all of her life. Dying from what her grandson described as cancer but her death certificate indicated was “gallbladder, stomach” issues on November 15, 1946, Trigg is buried in Denton, Texas, at the I.O.O.F Cemetery.¹¹

While a woman had been appointed as a farm agent five years earlier and the first state home demonstration agent in Texas was appointed in 1914, Trigg became the first county home demonstration agent appointed in Texas when she accepted the position in Denton County in 1915. Trigg’s work with Texas farm women “led to better farm homes” and it is this work that serves as her lasting monument.¹² Trigg was the forerunner of the home demonstration agents

who, through the first half of the twentieth century, “went to homes throughout rural Texas and provided practical demonstration and advice on vegetable gardening, canning, sewing, cooking, household management, family health, poultry-raising, and other aspects of daily life,” according to Nancy Granovsky, AgriLife Extension family economics specialist in the family and consumer sciences program. Trigg’s work was significant within the greater context of the development of a national Agricultural Extension program as home demonstrations led to greater interest and acceptance of the extension office in general. While Edna Trigg served as the state’s first home demonstration agent in the early decades of the twentieth-century, now, with AgriLife Extension serving as an educational outreach agency of the Texas A&M University System, there are hundreds of professionals following in the footsteps of these early agents, serving “hundreds of thousands of Texas residents each year.”¹³

But such influence did not occur overnight. According to Dr. Kate Adele Hill, who wrote *Home Demonstration Work in Texas*, “In a short space of time after Mrs. Trigg’s appointment, and after only three years of work with the girls’ canning clubs, prejudices were largely overcome by those with whom the women pioneers were working, and the farm home aspects of the embryonic Extension Service began to be recognized as an integral part of the over-all movement.”¹⁴ While later biographers may have described the period as “a short space of time,” she considered her first year in Denton County as her hardest as Trigg had to overcome prejudices of being “the government woman” and had to gain the confidence of the women and men on the farms.¹⁵ These uncomplimentary views were some of the biggest challenges Trigg experienced during her early days as Denton County Home Demonstration Agent, combining as they did prejudices against government’s interference in farming and a woman’s interference in a man’s work and home life. In addition, it was difficult for Trigg as a newcomer to complete her

job, not only because many people did not recognize the Extension Service's usefulness for their lives but because Denton County was not her home county. The situation had been different in Milam County where she had grown up with many of the older people and had taught many of the younger generation, even though cooperative Extension work on a national basis started after she began her work in Milam. Denton County presented other challenges, as well, including the sheer expanse of territory she was expected to cover, the primitive transportation and accommodation available during those early years, and the lack of materials and financing available to her even with county and local business support.

Women during the early twentieth century had a difficult time traveling alone across North Texas and had an even more difficult time finding a place to stay. As Edna Trigg was married, an educator, and mother of grown children, she was more readily accepted into peoples' homes, travelling throughout the week first by horse and buggy and later by car. Still, some of the homes she encountered were little more than "shebangs," which was what many locals called dugouts.¹⁶

Labeled a "government woman" by many people, she encountered skepticism and distrust in Denton County that she had not dealt with in Milam County, both on the administrative level (as the county judge and county commissioners were being criticized for accepting her and paying her salary) and in the minds of those financing the project.¹⁷ The farmers were dubious of anyone trying to tell their wives and children how to improve the home, trying to encourage their allowing the women to use the egg or other money to beautify the home or garden, or trying to introduce new procedures for keeping food. At one home visit in 1912, the owner addressed Trigg in a querulous tone, saying: "Lady, I know the government is sending

you here to help folks, and don't think I don't appreciate it. But I've got \$5 here and I'll give it to you not to come back to this farm anymore!"¹⁸

Still, these prejudices were not insurmountable. She worked closely with the Denton County agent, Dr. Craddock, who gave her a list of people in surrounding communities who were friendly to "government people." He often encouraged her to "try to make it to this place to spend the night and don't stop at that place," according to her own memories. In reality, though, Dr. Craddock's advice was not as helpful as he thought, as "it so happened that the people whom he advised me to stop with could not or would [not] keep me over night and those whom he said "Don't," did."¹⁹ Mrs. Trigg slowly succeeded in overcoming prejudices and gained confidence in her position and within the community. In one instance she convinced a farm family to accept the work promoted by the Extension Office by continuing to visit, exchanging recipes with the wife, and spending the night at their house. The girls of the family joined the Tomato Club and the entire family became enthusiastic advocates of the Extension Service.²⁰

By 1917, campaigns around the country encouraged everyone to plant a garden. Trigg worked with the landlords and tenant farmers to plant gardens, as a means of conserving products. The major handicap with growing their own food, though, was lack of equipment to preserve what they grew. One of the first group of women organized into a demonstration club in Denton County bought a pressure canner and soldering iron, with Trigg showing them how to use the equipment.²¹ In order to get more equipment, Trigg convinced the Denton County Commissioners Court and the Denton Chamber of Commerce to loan her \$350 to purchase 20 steam canners, placing the large, steel canners in communities selected by the commissioners, five in each of the precincts.²² The Hawkeye Demonstration Club owned the first of these

community canners.²³ She also ordered 1,000 tin cans from Chicago, each costing 5 cents. When the equipment came in, she held canning schools in the various communities, giving explicit instructions to two or three representatives from each community across the county and then supervising the use of the equipment as often as she could. While the communities that received these canners and cans were to reimburse the Extension Office for the initial outlay, not every one may have done so. According to her own memoir, Trigg collected the money owed for the canners, capping steels, and tipping coppers within six weeks.²⁴ According to others, however, some of the communities that received the equipment did not pay for the equipment and Trigg reimbursed the loan out of her own salary.²⁵

Some of Trigg's most important work in Denton County took place during World War One, when she played a key role in helping make the county agriculturally self-sufficient by working with area farmers to grow more vegetables. She worked every day of the week, she attended patriotic meetings at least three nights a week urging people to purchase Liberty Bonds, and she had canning schools every Saturday afternoon in one of the city schools, to audiences of 200-300 people from all across the county.²⁶ She also performed in-home demonstrations and held canning schools to show rural residents how to properly preserve and protect the food they had grown. Demonstration agents taught vegetable-growing and canning but also bread-making, animal husbandry, sewing, home improvement and management, and something called "family living" which may have had to do with hygiene and family planning.²⁷ Trigg's emphasis during World War One primarily encouraged canning and preserving in order for each county to be self-sufficient, or in Trigg's words "to make Denton County feed herself."²⁸ In addition, she held weekly canning meetings, served on the staff of the College of Industrial Arts (now Texas Woman's University) overseeing courses in methods of home demonstrations, and started the

Hawkeye Demonstration Club in the spring of 1919 in the now extinct town of Hawkeye, which was located north of Krum, near the FM 2450 & Hawkeye Road area.²⁹ Throughout these years, she continued to travel the county, helping farm families of every race and circumstance.³⁰

During the 1920s and 1930s, Trigg added nutritional education to her efforts to promote county agricultural self-sufficiency. She developed a fill-in card that allowed women with limited resources to schedule the food they planned to serve to ensure their children received adequate nutrition from the products they produced. During the early part of the twentieth century “proper nutrition was a problem for many rural families,” according to Dr. Jennie Kitching, who retired as AgriLife Extension’s associate director for human sciences in 1998. “By the mid-1930s, home demonstration agents also started providing information and instruction on parenting, family resource management, child development and family life. As society and conditions changed, Mrs. Trigg and other home demonstration agents adapted and taught the knowledge and skills needed to help families function more effectively and efficiently using their own resources and strengths.”³¹ AgriLife agents continue performing many of the same functions Trigg pioneered for the Extension Service. As Cheryl Walker, the current AgriLife Extension family and consumer sciences agent for Milam County, said, “Edna Trigg set the pattern for other home demonstration agents and those of us in the family and consumer sciences profession who came after them, setting the bar pretty high for the rest of us.”³²

In 1935, Edna Trigg supervised local canneries in Denton County as a relief project for local farmers and truck farmers. Area towns provided material, equipment, and the cost of utilities for the cannery while various relief agencies provided labor and the actual cans. When farmers made appointments to bring in their produce, Edna Trigg supervised the individuals’ use of the equipment. The relief program was run on a 40-60 split, with the individuals bringing in

vegetables, fruits, or meat receiving 40 percent of the canned products and the relief association receiving the remaining 60 percent to distribute as needed across the community.³³

While the Tomato Girls won scholarships and attended the woman's university (now TWU), the first recognition of the importance of the Home Extension agent in Denton County came about in Trigg's first year in Denton County during a Harvest Home exhibit sponsored by City Federation. After Mrs. Trigg secured permission for her 75 girls to exhibit their work, their goods proved to be much superior to the work submitted by the women. The women of the City Federation began to recognize Mrs. Trigg's ability.³⁴ Trigg's influence continued for decades, as she convinced county farmers to give their wives and daughters permission to paint the house from the egg and butter money or to cover an unsightly dry well with a flower bed. Her ability to convince the farmers and their families of the importance of planting flowers and shrubs, repairing outbuildings, and setting out screen plantings to hide them was apparent when seventy-five homes enrolled in the Texas Centennial farm and home demonstration contest just two years after she began the yard improvement program for rural homes. The contest was limited to homes on the highway but neither that nor the difficulty of growing shrubs and plantings quickly in order to make a showing in the time allowed for the contest derailed contestants.³⁵ After three years of competing, the home of Mr. and Mrs. A.B. Whitlock on Highway 10 near Green Valley won first place in the Texas Garden Club's statewide beautification contest in 1937.³⁶

III. SIGNIFICANCE

In 1936, the County Council of Home Demonstration Clubs named Edna Trigg as the national delegate to the meeting to be held in Washington DC in recognition of her 20th anniversary as the Denton County Home Demonstration agent. Elected by the members to attend the triennial conference of the Associated County Women of the World, held in

Washington DC, Trigg was nominated to follow the international organization's program, including attendance at a garden party with President and Mrs. Roosevelt.³⁷ Since Trigg did not care for the Roosevelts, she "turned down the trip" to Washington.³⁸ Refusing such an honor was typical of a woman who never desired receiving recognition for her work; she was never happy having people fuss over her "but down deep, she would be immensely pleased."³⁹

Edna Trigg was a strong proponent of education, frequently encouraging Girls' Tomato Club members to start college savings funds and to look for scholarship opportunities at colleges and university, according to Dr. Kitching.⁴⁰ In Trigg's first year of working with these clubs in Milam County, four members started bank accounts and began saving for their education. All four received their degrees and became teachers, and two held important positions at Texas universities. Trigg's daughter also took her advice about education and Eloise Trigg Johnson followed in her mother's footsteps by becoming a home demonstration agent in Eastland County.⁴¹ Trigg taught classes at the College of Industrial Arts (now Texas Woman's University) in Denton, overseeing courses in methods for home demonstration work and assuring the professionalism of future agents.⁴² Her enthusiasm for education was honored when the fifth named scholarship awarded by the Texas Extension Education Association, Inc. 4-H in 1971 was named for Mrs. Edna W. Trigg.⁴³

Other awards included posthumous recognition of her extraordinary efforts. In 1970, the State of Texas approved a Subject Marker placed in Cameron, Milam County to honor Trigg as a "pioneer leader of Texas women in rural club work."⁴⁴ In October 18, 1991, Edna Westbrook Trigg was entered into the National Agricultural Center & Hall of Fame "to honor individuals who have made outstanding national or international contributions to the establishment, development, advancement, or improvement of agriculture."⁴⁵

Remembered by her grandson as “a stern figure,” someone who seemed grim, abrupt, and not one to suffer fools easily, “when she got out in the country where people were depending on her, she would charm the people. She could help them with anything as she had been there and done that. If they were in some kind of straits she could tell them how to get out of it. ... Never happy in any other place, when she got [to the farms] she would blossom. When she got out among people, she was smart, educated. She told the people what they needed to know. ... Whatever she could do to make peoples’ environment better she would do. When the ladies invited ‘Nana to an event to try to honor her, she would get embarrassed and wouldn’t talk. She was there for one purpose. Get after it.”⁴⁶ There can be no more fitting tribute to the first county home demonstration agent in Texas.

IV: DOCUMENTATION

¹ Texas Historical Commission Atlas List, “Mrs. Edna Westbrook Trigg,” Official Texas Historical Marker #3138, Texas Historical Commission files, Austin, Texas, 1970.

² THC Atlas list “Mrs. Edna Westbrook Trigg,” Marker #3138.

³ According to *The Handbook of Texas Online*, “Texas Agricultural Extension Service,” http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/TT/amtpw_print.html, accessed April 3, 2010 Texas A&M joined the Extension Service on May 8, 1914. The United States Cooperative Extension had begun in Texas in 1903, with various clubs starting and activities occurring between 1906 and 1914; Edna Trigg became the first woman agent in the state in 1912 and by 1913 “demonstrations, shows, and fairs were common throughout Texas.”

⁴ Luke Warm, “Home Demonstration in Texas: From Tomatoes to Environmental Issues: The Evolution of the Texas Association for Family and Community Education,” *Texas Escapes Online Magazine: Travel and History*, <http://www.texasescapes.com/They-Shoe-Horses-Dont-They/Home-Demonstration>, pp. 1-4, accessed 7/24/2014.

⁵ THC Atlas list “Mrs. Edna Westbrook Trigg,” Marker #3138.

⁶ *The Handbook of Texas Online*, “Texas Agricultural Extension Service,” <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/amtpw>, pp. 1-4, accessed 7/12/2014; and, Kate Adele Hill, *Home Demonstration Work in Texas*, San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1958, p. 16. *The Handbook of Texas Online* notes that Edna Trigg became the first woman agent in the state on January 16, 1912.

⁷ Hill, p. 19.

⁸ From Edna Trigg’s oral history taken in 1928, quoted in Hill, pp. 21-22; *The Handbook of Texas: A Supplement Volume III*, edited by Eldon Stephen Branda, Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1976, indicates that

she was appointed home demonstration agent in Denton County in 1915 and became the first official county home demonstration agent in Texas in 1916, p 1026.

⁹ Employment Record from Mrs. Edna W. Trigg, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, 1912-1946, indicates Trigg's employment history as being appointed Denton County Home Demonstration Agent on 2/25/16, resigning on 12/31/37, being appointed Denton CHDA Emerita on 1/1/38, and retiring on 7/31/45.

¹⁰ From Trigg's oral history taken in 1928 as related in THC Atlas list "Mrs. Edna Westbrook Trigg," Marker #3138; and, as related by W. Cone Johnson during an oral history interview with Peggy Riddle, September 2014, as transcribed by Dr. Kate Lynass for the Denton County Historical Commission Research Room, Denton, TX.

¹¹ THC Atlas list "Mrs. Edna Westbrook Trigg," Marker #3138; Cone Johnson oral history transcription September 2014; Edna Westbrook Trigg death certificate; and The Handbook of Texas, Vol III, pp. 1026-1027. The records found for "Lucy Edna Westbrook Trigg," www.findagravememorial.com, accessed 8/2/2014, may not be correct as to her name, her daughter's name, her husband's name, and other facts.

¹² Hill, p. 15.

¹³ Paul Schattenberg, *AgriLife Today*, "Women agents demonstrated their importance to Texas history," published March 8, 2012, pp. 1-11, found at <http://today.agrilife.org>, accessed 7/24/2014.

¹⁴ Hill, p. 7.

¹⁵ Hill, p. 23.

¹⁶ Cone Johnson Oral History, September 2014. Cone Johnson described a dugout in Krum in this way during his oral history; he further described the dirt and filth he and his grandmother found in the one home. He said that his grandmother would not let him show his disgust though and that they ate dinner and spent the night with the family in the "shebang."

¹⁷ Hill, p. 22.

¹⁸ Edna Trigg's memoirs in Hill, p. 25 tell the most complete story about the farmer and the \$5, even though the bare facts were related in a number of sources, including Cone Johnson's oral history, September 2014. According to Trigg, she held canning schools and gave explicit directions to those who attended so that the process would work. One day as she was planning her community visits, she met a peddler on the road with a wagon load of fruit. He told her that he would have paid her \$5 if she had not visited his house. Trigg was naturally curious so told him "Just leave the five dollars at the door and I shall pass you up. However, I would like to know the reason for this seeming generosity." His reply was, "I like green beans better than anything and my wife followed your instructions and lost every jar." After further conversation, the man told Trigg he thought his wife probably hadn't followed her instructions so she was free to "stop at our house" when she was in their community. According to Trigg the farmer and his wife became "very enthusiastic workers."

¹⁹ Edna Trigg, as quoted in Hill, p. 23. The County Agent named "Dr. Craddock" was never described in any other way in any of the references.

²⁰ Kathryn Kahler, "First Home Demonstration Agent," *The Texas Historian*, Vol XXII, Number 2, November 1971, p. 21; also quoted in Hill, p. 23.

²¹ Mrs. A. G. Hardin, "Spring Hill: Home Demonstration Club Collection," found in *Towns & Communities of Denton County, Texas*, compiled by Emily Fowler and Alma Lain Chambers, n.d, page 97.

²² Hill, p. 25.

²³ *Denton Record-Chronicle*, May 2, 1948, page 16.

²⁴ Hill, p. 26.

²⁵ *The Post Signal* article published June 19, 1986, written by staff writer Nancy Franke.

²⁶ Hill, p. 26; also relayed in *Texas Historian*, p. 22.

²⁷ Warm, <http://www.texasescapes.com> and Cone Johnson oral history, September 2014.

²⁸ Hill, p. 26.

²⁹ *TX Handbook Vol III*, p. 1026; also in *Denton Record Chronicle*, May 2, 1948.

³⁰ Cone Johnson oral history, September 2014.

³¹ Schattenberg, p. 7.

³² Schattenberg, p. 8.

³³ "Local Cannery Progresses, To Be Opened Soon," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, May 13, 1935.

³⁴ *Texas Historian*, p. 21; and Hill p. 24.

³⁵ "Denton Contest Winners Chosen," *Dallas Morning News*, May 31, 1936.

³⁶ *Denton Record-Chronicle*, January 16, 1937, page 4.

³⁷ *Denton Record-Chronicle*, May 4, 1936, page 1.

³⁸ Cone Johnson oral history, September 2014.

³⁹ Cone Johnson oral history, September 2014; and, W. Cone Johnson, MD, Denton, Texas, September 20, 2012, "Foreword: At Home with Edna Westbrook Trigg," unknown publication, 2012.

⁴⁰ Schattenberg, p. 6.

⁴¹ Schattenberg, p. 6; and, Cone Johnson oral history, September 2014.

⁴² THC Atlas list "Mrs. Edna Westbrook Trigg," Marker #3138.

⁴³ TEEA 4-H Scholarship application for 2014.

⁴⁴ THC Atlas list "Mrs. Edna Westbrook Trigg," Marker #3138.

⁴⁵ National Agricultural Center & Hall of Fame, <http://aghalloffame.com/hall.asp>, accessed 12/12/ 2005.

⁴⁶ Cone Johnson oral history, September 2014.