Diet Culture During the Gibson Girl Era in America

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Diet fads and trends have gone in and out of style as much as a pair of Nike shoes, and are as "American as apple pie". Diet culture is something that has silently plagued societies and the human psyche for decades. The Gibson girl² era spanned from the 1890's up until the First World War and during this time period, Americans had become much more conscious of what they consumed and how to live a healthier and happier lifestyle. A lot of this slowly became a form of gendered rhetoric by advertising diets specifically catered to women under the guise of a "lifestyle change". This rhetoric was most popularly conveyed through magazines and newspaper articles. These articles were written in a manner that seemed much more personable and intimate - as if the writer was speaking directly to the reader/consumer. The following essay will discuss the historical context behind the "Gibson Girl" and how it ushered in a new era for diet culture in America.

In the early 20th century, caricatures of women and girl icons became an adequate tool used for political and consumerist propaganda (this can be seen with the Yankee Girl, the Flapper Girl, the Brinkley Girl, and the Allender Girl⁴). In the 1890's, American artist Charles Dana Gibson drew the Gibson Girl who was intended to represent the archetype of the young American woman. The New York Times published an article in 1905 wherein they interviewed Charles Dana Gibson and referred to Gibson and his drawing of the ideal American woman as "practical views of a practical man". 5 In 1910, Edward Marshall interviewed Charles Dana

¹ Lavin, Chad. 2013. *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Accessed December 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, 1.

² Kuspit, Donald B. "Charles Dana Gibson's Girl." *Jahrbuch Für Amerikastudien* 7 (1962): 183–87. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41155010, 183.

³ Jovanovski, Natalie. 2017. *Digesting Femininities: The Feminist Politics of Contemporary Food Culture*. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG. Accessed November 19, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, 1.

⁴ Rebecca McCarron (2021) The politicization of girlhood: from the Gibson girl to the National Woman's Party, 1895–1920, Women's History Review, 30:3, 401-425, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2020.1744844, 402.

⁵ ""Gibson Girl's" Creator and American Girl Types." 1905. *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Apr 30, 1. http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gibson-girls-creator-american-girl-types/docview/96506361/se-2?accountid=13631.

Gibson for the New York Times and Edward Marshall questioned the origins of his design to which Gibson replied by saying:

"I'll tell you how I got what you have called the 'Gibson Girl'. I saw her on the streets, I saw her at the theatres, I saw her in the churches, I saw her everywhere and doing everything. I saw her idling on Fifth Avenue and at work behind the counters of the stores. From hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, I formed *my* ideal. In stating out in life, each man worthwhile has his ideal of womanhood. A poet may, perhaps, create his wholly from his fancy. I guess I'm not a poet. I got mine from the crowd".⁶

The Gibson girl was initially drawn with a "wasp waist" and slender features and was the epitome of a leisure lifestyle and encouraged "'personal indulgence' rather than Victorian 'self-control'".⁷ The Gibson girl became an American cultural icon and is one of the most famous art creations of all time⁸; she was the product who sold a lifestyle⁹ and her image was printed on handkerchiefs, books, magazines, cartoons, and so on.¹⁰

Research has suggested that media and imagery content during the early 20th century has substantially contributed to the "construction of thinness as requisite for ideal female attractiveness in the 1920s". ¹¹ During this Gibson girl era emerged a seemingly new found obsession amongst Americans: nutritional knowledge and diet trends. While the relationship between food and health dates back hundreds of thousands of years ago, it wasn't until the late

⁶ By EDWARD MARSHALL. 1910. "THE GIBSON GIRL ANALYZED BY HER ORIGINATOR: ARTIST

WHOSE DELINEATION OF THE YOUNG AMERICAN WOMAN MADE HIM FAMOUS TELLS HOW THE TYPE CAME INTO EXISTENCE AND WHAT HER MISSION IS." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Nov 20, 1. http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gibson-girl-analyzed-her-originator/docview/97017162/se-2?accountid=13631.

⁷ Rebecca McCarron (2021) The politicization of girlhood: from the Gibson girl to the National Woman's Party, 1895–1920, Women's History Review, 30:3, 401-425, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2020.1744844, 404.

⁸ By EDWARD MARSHALL. 1910. "THE GIBSON GIRL ANALYZED BY HER ORIGINATOR: ARTIST WHOSE DELINEATION OF THE YOUNG AMERICAN WOMAN MADE HIM FAMOUS TELLS HOW THE TYPE CAME INTO EXISTENCE AND WHAT HER MISSION IS." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Nov 20, 1. http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gibson-girl-analyzed-her-originator/docview/97017162/se-2?accountid=13631.

⁹ Rebecca McCarron (2021) The politicization of girlhood: from the Gibson girl to the National Woman's Party, 1895–1920, Women's History Review, 30:3, 401-425, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2020.1744844, 404.

¹⁰ Rebecca McCarron (2021) The politicization of girlhood: from the Gibson girl to the National Woman's Party, 1895–1920, Women's History Review, 30:3, 401-425, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2020.1744844, 404.

¹¹ Fangman, T.D., Ogle, J.P., Bickle, M.C. and Rouner, D. (2004), Promoting Female Weight Management in 1920s Print Media: an Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 32: 213-253. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1177/1077727X03261177, 219.

19th and early 20th centuries that scientists began to get a more knowledgeable understanding of health and nutrition. ¹² Various fad diets based on quasi-scientific evidence were introduced mainly through print media and quickly became the universal experience for a number of American women. ¹³ In 1926, a popular women's magazine titled *The Delineator* received over 20,000 letters related to dieting. ¹⁴ Historian Frank Mott referred to this era of print media as the "Golden Age of Magazines" and saw general interest magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* on the coffee table of virtually every American home. ¹⁵ National magazine advertisements increased by 600% from 1916 and 1926 with women's magazines spurting the most growth. ¹⁶

What made these magazines so unique and engaging is that they operated from a lens of advice and guidance. Magazine articles would be written under the guise of health and wellness and would exploit women's insecurities and advertise ways to change them in order to be happier, healthier, and more sexually appealing. These articles would often include celebrity testimonials in order to seem more legitimate. In 1913, an article was published in the Harper's Bazaar from the Countess of Warwick and was titled "A Successful Diet Plan" and features a photograph of herself in the center looking very slender and beautiful - much akin to the Gibson girl sketches. The opening line is "to the three D's which women of the *beau monde* are credited

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¹² Fangman, T.D., Ogle, J.P., Bickle, M.C. and Rouner, D. (2004), Promoting Female Weight Management in 1920s Print Media: an Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 32: 213-253. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1177/1077727X03261177, 220.

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¹⁴ Jou, Chin. "The Progressive Era Body Project: Calorie-Counting and 'Disciplining the Stomach' in 1920s America." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 4 (2019): 422–40. doi:10.1017/S1537781418000348.

¹⁵ Fangman, T.D., Ogle, J.P., Bickle, M.C. and Rouner, D. (2004), Promoting Female Weight Management in 1920s Print Media: an Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 32: 213-253. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1177/1077727X03261177, **221**.

¹⁶ Fangman, T.D., Ogle, J.P., Bickle, M.C. and Rouner, D. (2004), Promoting Female Weight Management in 1920s Print Media: an Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 32: 213-253. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1177/1077727X03261177, 222.

¹⁷ Fangman, T.D., Ogle, J.P., Bickle, M.C. and Rouner, D. (2004), Promoting Female Weight Management in 1920s Print Media: an Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 32: 213-253. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1177/1077727X03261177, **222**.

with much liking to discuss - dress, domestics and diseased - are added to other congenial subject - dancing and dieting, - so that the D's are increased to five". The Countess suggests various methods like eliminating starch and sugar consumption, early rising, long walks and hot water between meals. The Countess finishes the article by stating that a diet becomes successful based on how well one can train their systems to "become accustomed to the more wholesome and sensible method". The Countess finishes the article by stating that a diet becomes successful based on how well one can train their systems to "become accustomed to the more wholesome and sensible method".

There became a new obsession within the average American home: the infamous calorie. It was almost used as a form of fear mongering which warned Americans that an overconsumption of calories and unhealthy foods would lead to obesity²⁰. Obesity would come to represent "a failure of morality resulting from a lack of self-discipline". In 1920, an article was published in *Ladies' Home Journal* and was titled "Why we get fat and what to do about it: the reducing dietary". The article discusses various foods and caloric defect that obese individuals should remain in in order to lose weight and states that if one is struggling with satiating their hunger on the "food allowance designated" they should opt for the monotonous diet which consists of only consuming two or three food items daily. The article discusses permitted versus

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¹⁸ The Countess, of Warwick. 1913. "A Successful Diet Plan." *Harper's Bazaar*, 11, 32. http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/successful-diet-plan/docview/1914179723/se-2?accountid=13631.

¹⁹ The Countess, of Warwick. 1913. "A Successful Diet Plan." *Harper's Bazaar*, 11, 32. http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/successful-diet-plan/docview/1914179723/se-2?accountid=13631.

²⁰ Biltekoff, Charlotte. 2013. *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health*. Durham: Duke University Press. Accessed December 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, 6.

²¹ Fangman, T.D., Ogle, J.P., Bickle, M.C. and Rouner, D. (2004), Promoting Female Weight Management in 1920s Print Media: an Analysis of *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue* Magazines. Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 32: 213-253. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/10.1177/1077727X03261177, 233.

²² Sadler, William S. and Lena K. Sadler. 1920. "WHY WE GET FAT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT: THE REDUCING DIETARY." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 07, 39-39, 84, 87.

http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/why-we-get-fat-what-do-about/docvie w/1934116124/se-2?accountid=13631.

²³ Sadler, William S. and Lena K. Sadler. 1920. "WHY WE GET FAT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT: THE REDUCING DIETARY." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 07, 39-39, 84, 87.

http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/why-we-get-fat-what-do-about/docvie w/1934116124/se-2?accountid=13631.

forbidden foods - permitted being foods like berries, pears, beets, spinach, dried legumes, skim milk and forbidden being foods like bananas, persimmons, fried vegetables, starch foods, butter, pork, chocolate, and mayonnaise.²⁴ The article also provides several meal schedules to follow through the changing seasons and even while on vacation. On the side of every food item provided is also its respective calorie count.²⁵

The obsession with calorie counting became unprecedented. By 1927, home economist Lydia J. Roberts observed that "in this country the calorie is a familiar word in the vocabulary of practically every adult, and anyone who doubts the possibility of popularizing it should observe a group of ten-year-old children counting their calories". ²⁶ Smith's college (which is a prestigious women's college in Massachusetts) reported having to alter their purchases for their school cafeteria as students avoided items like potatoes but the demand for vegetables like lettuce, tomatoes, and celery skyrocketed. ²⁷ Along with calorie counting came the phenomenon of scales and weighing. By the 1910's there were public and private scales made to use in just about any American drugstore, retail store, railroad stations, movie theaters, banks, and offices. ²⁸ Bathroom scales became known as penny scales²⁹ and in 1925 the *New York Times* reported that "penny

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²⁴ Sadler, William S. and Lena K. Sadler. 1920. "WHY WE GET FAT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT: THE REDUCING DIETARY." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 07, 39-39, 84, 87.

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²⁵ Sadler, William S. and Lena K. Sadler. 1920. "WHY WE GET FAT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT: THE REDUCING DIETARY." *Ladies' Home Journal*, 07, 39-39, 84, 87.

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²⁶ Jou, Chin. "The Progressive Era Body Project: Calorie-Counting and 'Disciplining the Stomach' in 1920s America." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 4 (2019): 422–40. doi:10.1017/S1537781418000348.

²⁷ Jou, Chin. "The Progressive Era Body Project: Calorie-Counting and 'Disciplining the Stomach' in 1920s America." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 4 (2019): 422–40. doi:10.1017/S1537781418000348.

²⁸ Jou, Chin. "The Progressive Era Body Project: Calorie-Counting and 'Disciplining the Stomach' in 1920s America." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 4 (2019): 422–40. doi:10.1017/S1537781418000348.

²⁹ Crawford, Kate, Jessa Lingel, and Tero Karppi. "Our Metrics, Ourselves: A Hundred Years of Self-Tracking from the Weight Scale to the Wrist Wearable Device." European Journal of Cultural Studies 18, no. 4–5 (August 2015): 479–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415584857.

scales in department store bathrooms received so much traffic that they were more profitable than gumball machines". The common rhetoric that is being pushed throughout this time period in regards to dieting is restriction, regulation, and discipline and in other words; the mantra of "mind over body", all of which is most evident in *Diet and Health with Key to the Calories* written by Lulu Hunt Peters.

In 1918, Lulu Hunt Peters wrote *Diet and Health with Key to the Calories* and it became America's first best-selling diet guide and sold two million copies.³² According to Peters, the knowledge of calories was the key to prevent weight gain and/or weight loss (followed by discipline of the stomach). Peters states "the reason that so many of our adult population are overnourished, hence overfat and diseased...is due to the fact that the knowledge of the calorie value of foods has not been known".³³ The book features various drawings and scribbles of stick figures - an obvious mockery of overweight individuals as she even says herself that "fat individuals have always been considered a joke".³⁴ Peters even goes as far as intertwining wartime propaganda as a means to guilt overweight individuals and claims that during the war it is a crime to hoard food and yet overweight individuals are hoarding it within their own anatomy: "...you are now viewed with distrust, suspicion, and even aversion! How dare you hoard fat when our nation needs it?" ³⁵

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³⁰ Jou, Chin. "The Progressive Era Body Project: Calorie-Counting and 'Disciplining the Stomach' in 1920s America." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 4 (2019): 422–40. doi:10.1017/S1537781418000348.

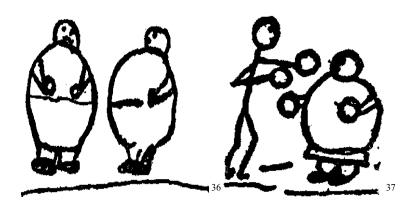
³¹ Jou, Chin. "The Progressive Era Body Project: Calorie-Counting and 'Disciplining the Stomach' in 1920s America." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 4 (2019): 422–40. doi:10.1017/S1537781418000348.

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³⁴ Peters, Lulu Hunt. *Diet and Health: With Key to the Calories*. 1918.

³⁵ Peters, Lulu Hunt. *Diet and Health: With Key to the Calories*. 1918.



Peters' word choice is intentional and dramatic as she uses words like "diseased people", "normal individuals", and "forbidden foods". Peters offers daily caloric intakes for different age groups as well as mathematical equations that calculate how many calories one would need to consume daily to achieve weight loss. She lectures that:

"You should know and also use the word calorie as frequently, or more frequently, than you use the words foot, yard, quart, gallon, and so forth, as measures of length and liquids. Hereafter you are going to eat calories of food. Instead of saying one slice of bread, or a piece of pie, you will say 100 calories of bread, 350 calories of pie." 38

Peters also includes various testimonials in which readers wrote in to share their success stories by following her dieting advice. They write that they are "cured" and on their way back to "normal" despite struggling for years with their illnesses that even specialists could not find a way to fix³⁹. If that isn't convincing I don't know what is! Even girls as young as eleven years old wrote to Peters asking for dieting advice and saying "I am 11 years old, and weigh 136 lbs., which was too much" and triumphantly announced that thanks to Peters book she lost 11 ½ in seven weeks by keeping a strict count of her daily caloric intake.⁴⁰ A fourteen year old girl under

³⁶ Peters, Lulu Hunt. Diet and Health: With Key to the Calories. 1918.

³⁷ Peters, Lulu Hunt. *Diet and Health: With Key to the Calories*. 1918.

³⁸ Peters, Lulu Hunt. *Diet and Health: With Key to the Calories*. 1918.

³⁹ Peters, Lulu Hunt. Diet and Health: With Key to the Calories. 1918.

⁴⁰ Jou, Chin. "The Progressive Era Body Project: Calorie-Counting and 'Disciplining the Stomach' in 1920s America." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 4 (2019): 422–40. doi:10.1017/S1537781418000348.

the alias of B.N wrote to Peters about her weight loss success by limiting herself to 1,000 calories a day and refuting offers of cake and candy at school. Peters replied by saying "I just love to get letters from you. And it makes me happy to know you are following my advice and getting out of the fat girl type". 41 The rhetoric being pushed from dieting and calorie counting from various magazine articles and Lulu Hunt Peters is that it can be empowering. Achieving bodily discipline and seeing physical results is rewarding. Resisting the urge to indulge in a slice of pie that succeeds one's appropriate caloric intake is a triumph - ignoring uncomfortable pangs of hunger in one's stomach and opting for hot water with lemon is something to be proud of. 42 In the 1920's, beauty editor of the Ladies' Home Journal Dorothy Cocks "associated the mid-Victorian body ideal with dependence, weakness, and poor education" which was in stark contrast to "the modern slender woman of the 1920's" who is "able to achieve everything". 43 American industries and public spaces began to mold themselves and accommodate thin body types. This is seen in dimensions used to manufacture furniture, movie theater chairs, and clothing - further perpetuating the inconvenience of being outside of this body type. One who exists outside of it would literally not fit in. 44 Various American film companies began to include weight limits on their contracts and "reserved the right to terminate the contract at any time after the weight of the artist shall exceed 130 pounds". 45

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⁴¹ Jou, Chin. "The Progressive Era Body Project: Calorie-Counting and 'Disciplining the Stomach' in 1920s America." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18, no. 4 (2019): 422–40. doi:10.1017/S1537781418000348.

⁴² Vester, Katharina. "REGIME CHANGE: GENDER, CLASS, AND THE INVENTION OF DIETING IN POST-BELLUM AMERICA." *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (2010): 39–70. http://www.istor.org/stable/40802108, 44.

⁴³ Vester, Katharina. "REGIME CHANGE: GENDER, CLASS, AND THE INVENTION OF DIETING IN POST-BELLUM AMERICA." *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (2010): 39–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40802108, 57.

⁴⁴ Lavin, Chad. 2013. *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Accessed December 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, 10.

⁴⁵ Veit, Helen Zoe. 2013. *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Accessed December 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, 174.

In conclusion, the early twentieth century (and so called Gibson girl era) was a period of social and economic growth as well as modernization. Dieting became associated with class status, privilege and social ambition. 46 What came part and parcel with this progressive era was the critiques on how modern life has affected American diets. 47 "Nutrition writers lamented that modern life had contributed to a state in which many Americans' food choices were driven by convenience, custom, and immediate gratification". 48 This was also during a period of transition from "old-fashioned" to commercialized and industrial ways of operation. For example, nutritionists of the early twentieth century were not impressed by the introduction of white flour and white loaves of bread that were heavily processed. "To them, bread in its whole-wheat, homespun form meant 'natural', while its white-flour counterpart was processed and 'industrial'". ⁴⁹ American government administrators urged fellow Americans to avoid red meat, white flour, butter, and sugar (forbidden foods), and to eat more lean meat, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.⁵⁰ Diet culture during this era was a method of "population management, promoting ideals of nationalism and self-discipline that are essential to producing subjects willing and able to aid the national interest both militarily and economically".⁵¹

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⁴⁶ Vester, Katharina. "REGIME CHANGE: GENDER, CLASS, AND THE INVENTION OF DIETING IN POST-BELLUM AMERICA." *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 1 (2010): 39–70. http://www.istor.org/stable/40802108. **57**.

⁴⁷ Jou, Chin. "Make America's (Foodways) Great Again: Nostalgia, Early Twentieth-Century Dietary Critiques, and the Specter of Obesity in Contemporary Food Commentary." *Gastronomica* 17, no. 1 (2017): 20–32. https://www.istor.org/stable/26362416, 22.

⁴⁸ Jou, Chin. "Make America's (Foodways) Great Again: Nostalgia, Early Twentieth-Century Dietary Critiques, and the Specter of Obesity in Contemporary Food Commentary." *Gastronomica* 17, no. 1 (2017): 20–32. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26362416, 22.

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⁵⁰ Veit, Helen Zoe. 2013. *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Accessed December 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, 159.

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