

Uplift: The Bra in America. By Jane Farrell-Beck and Colleen Gau. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. xv + 243 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-812-23643-2.

Reviewed by Gabriella M. Petrick

Ninety-five-year-old Selma Koch still fits women with brassieres at the Town Shop in New York City. The store has been in business since 1888, and Mrs. Koch has worked there for more than seventy years. Since she began her employment at the shop in the 1930s, Koch has seen brassieres change from “undergarments [that] were stiff and hard and boned and zipped and even hooked” into softer garments that fit a wider variety of women. She has also seen cup sizes expand with the advent of breast implants. As one of the few remaining professional brassiere fitters, Selma Koch has followed a career that reflects the changes described by Jane Farrell-Beck and Colleen Gau in their book, *Uplift: The Bra in America*.

The authors tell the story of the brassiere in the United States from the last quarter of the nineteenth century until now, chronicling its transformation from a welcome and healthful substitute for a corset to a sensual item of underwear adorning buxom Victoria’s Secret models. Farrell-Beck and Gau write about the companies and individuals who promoted, designed, produced, and marketed brassieres in the United States: Warner, Vanity Fair, Maidenform, Olga, and G. M. Poix, to name a few. In their view, the role of women, not only in designing brassieres but also in managing firms and promoting and merchandizing women’s undergarments, was critical to the industry’s development: “As consumers who actually wore brassieres, women designers and manufacturers brought a dual perspective to their roles and were able to critique the product more perceptively than their male colleagues . . .” (p. xii).

By using patent records, trade journals, prescriptive literature, and secondary sources, Farrell-Beck and Gau reconstruct the rise of the modern brassiere, arguing that its evolution paralleled that of the textile and fashion industries. They make the point that as fashions changed, so did women’s underwear. Early breast supporters and proto-brassieres, although more comfortable than corsets, did not immediately supplant older foundation garments. In order to accentuate a fashion line, brassiere manufacturers changed their designs either to accentuate or to de-emphasize the bust line, depending on the fashion of the moment. Although Farrell-Beck and Gau point out the relation between clothing fashion and brassiere design, they do not examine how the two industries might have been interdependent at the design or the economic level.

Instead, they suggest that lingerie manufacturers responded to trends rather than creating their own.

Brassiere design did undergo considerable change with the introduction of new fibers, particularly those that stretched. Foundation manufacturers were quick to incorporate fibers like rubber, Lastex, rayon, acetate, Nylon, and Lycra into their products to improve comfort, fit, and durability. They introduced smoother lines and cheaper, more ornate, lace work and promoted the advantages of easier care. The authors do not, however, examine the economic impact of the new fibers on the industry, nor do they analyze the relations between fiber manufacturers, such as Du Pont and U.S. Rubber Company, and the brassiere companies. The book also describes aspects of the business of making women's breast supports. Like many other industries, brassiere manufacturers were originally regional companies that expanded into national firms by mid-century. One interesting revelation is that, by the 1930s, brassiere manufacturers had become savvy marketers. For example, in the 1930s, they began to direct their advertising to young girls in order to build customer loyalty early on. They also recruited department-store lingerie fitters to convince women to buy a particular line of brassieres. This strategy was more successful than that of relying on self-service displays, at least through the 1950s. Companies discovered that once a woman found a line of brassieres that fit her, she generally remained a loyal customer. The firms collected feedback from fitters and conducted marketing research to identify which groups of women purchased their brassieres. They began to segment the market, producing cheaper brassieres for younger women and marketing their more expensive lines to older women. As competition increased, companies attempted to create niche markets and differentiate their products; for example, a few firms specialized in prosthetic and nursing brassieres. Farrell-Beck and Gau's arguments about industry trends, although persuasive, would have been more convincing had they been supplemented by industry statistics to place these manufacturers within the context of the larger economy.

Uplift is less about the place of the brassiere in the history of business, technology, or gender, than it is about the design history of the brassiere and its commercialization from the late nineteenth century to the present. Clearly the adoption of the brassiere by millions of American women was a complex process that was influenced by cultural mores, technological capabilities, and aesthetics. Through their scholarship, Farrell-Beck and Gau show that this article of clothing not only merits historical analysis but also warrants more research.

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between consumers and producers in the food industry during the first half of the twentieth century. Her article on women in the restaurant industry, "Lonely at the Top: Women Food-Service Executives," appeared in the Cornell Quarterly in June 1998.