

Janette Kelley

It was not a secret that Betty Crocker was a corporate invention rather than a real person, but Deer Lodge native Janette Kelley was the driving force behind the character. She worked with food producers to set up test kitchens, test recipes, find better ways to prepare food and to advise consumers,

Kelley was born in Deer Lodge in 1894, and grew up there, one of five children. She grew to love cooking, and went off to Montana State College (now Montana State University) in Bozeman to study home economics. After her graduation in 1917, she went to work with the state's Extension Service doing home demonstration work. She lived in Conrad and shared the latest home economics research results across the state. In 1921, she left the Extension Service to start working with the Washburn Crosby Company, the forerunner of General Mills.

Kelley was an eminent figure in the home economics profession. Over the course of her career, she planned, equipped and set up the first test kitchens for General Foods, Lever Brothers and General Mills. While working for the Gold Medal Flour Company, she wrote their cookbook for bread-making. She made the chocolate cake that was the first to be depicted in advertising using illustrations. She is credited with the popularization of the Chiffon Cake, a lighter cake that used oil rather than butter or shortening.

While working with General Mills, Kelley served as director of the Home Service department, and in that capacity she planned and set up test kitchens for the company. She also supervised the 50 staff who developed recipes and tested products. These women had chosen the name "Betty" because it sounded friendly, and "Crocker" to honor William G. Crocker, a former director of the company. Kelley also helped oversee a radio show and television advertising, as well as the Betty Crocker Cooking Schools. During World War II, the Home Service Department developed special recipes for use with wartime rationing. The most notable result of the department's work was the famous Betty Crocker Picture Cook Book, a classic in its field that was fondly referred to as "Big Red". Now in its twelfth edition, it is still a standard for home cooks.

At her most popular, Betty Crocker was one of the most recognized women in America, second only to Eleanor Roosevelt. A 1945 article made it widely known that Betty was a



Test Kitchen in Action

composite, but that made no difference to the women of the country. Betty – and Janette Kelley and her staff - soon received 10,000 letters from homemakers each month

Kelley and her work were profiled in women's magazines of the time, such as a *McCall's Magazine* feature about the design of her home kitchen in November 1949, and *The Woman's Home Companion* article in November 1954 entitled, "The Secret Life of Betty Crocker". When asked for an autograph, Kelley signed as Betty Crocker.

During the 1930's, Kelley had worked from the Massachusetts branch at General Mills. The 1681 home she bought in Norwell, MA is still known as the Betty Crocker House. Kelley retired from General Mills in 1958, due to ill health. She passed away a short time later. She is buried back home in Montana, in the Hillcrest Cemetery in Deer Lodge.

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