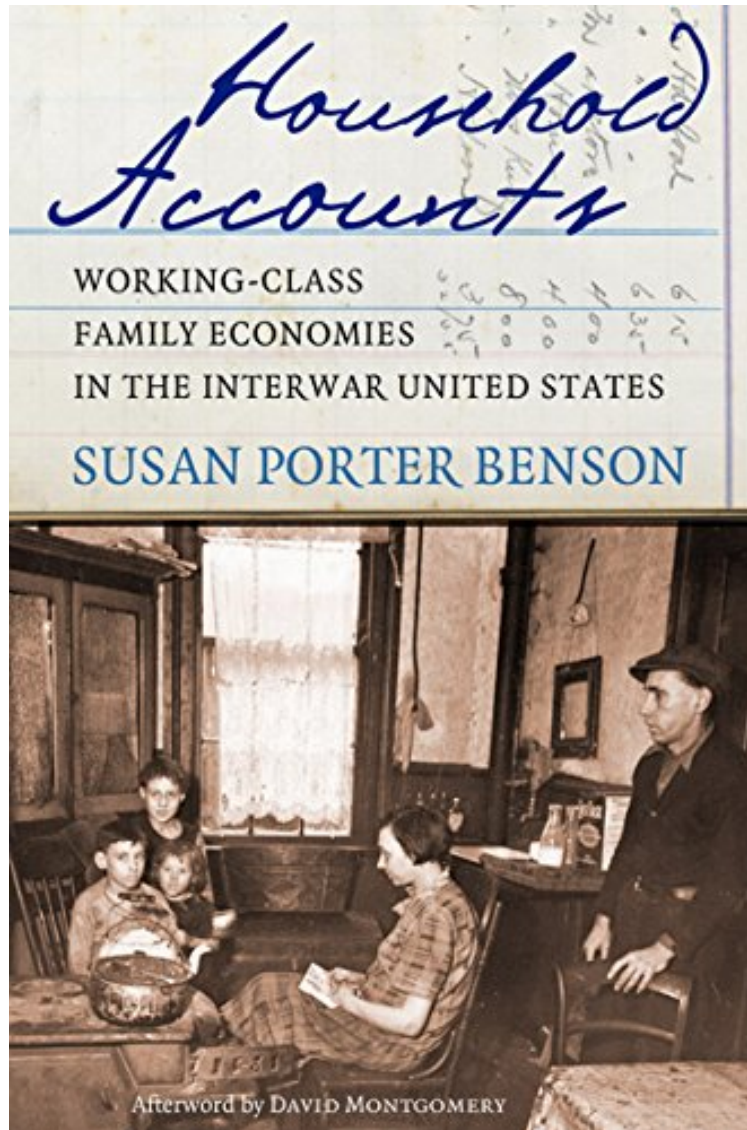


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# Household Accounts: Working-Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States

*Susan Porter Benson*

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**Susan Porter Benson : Household Accounts: Working-Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Household Accounts: Working-Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States:

With unprecedented subtlety, compassion and richness of detail, Susan Porter Benson takes readers into the budgets

and the lives of working-class families in the United States between the two world wars. Focusing on families from regions across America and of differing races and ethnicities, she argues that working-class families of the time were not on the verge of entering the middle class and embracing mass culture. Rather, she contends that during the interwar period such families lived in a context of scarcity and limited resources, not plenty. Their consumption, Benson argues, revolved around hard choices about basic needs and provided therapeutic satisfactions only secondarily, if at all. *Household Accounts* is rich with details Benson gathered from previously untapped sources, particularly interviews with women wage earners conducted by field agents of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor. She provides a vivid picture of a working-class culture of family consumption: how working-class families negotiated funds; how they made qualitative decisions about what they wanted; how they determined financial strategies and individual goals; and how, in short, families made ends meet during this period. Topics usually central to the histories of consumption—the development of mass consumer culture, the hegemony of middle-class versions of consumption, and the expanded offerings of the marketplace—contributed to but did not control the lives of working-class people. Ultimately, *Household Accounts* seriously calls into question the usual narrative of a rising and inclusive tide of twentieth-century consumption.

"The late Susan Porter Benson has left us with a fascinating account of the consumption patterns of working class women and their families in the interwar United States."—Marianne Ward, EH.net, February 2008 "Benson's untimely death prevented the author's imprimatur from appearing on every page, but she substantially completed the book, and it is vintage Benson. Her love of and care with women's economic and personal lives leap from every page. The result is a work bursting with insights on how women negotiated constraints on their economic and family lives and altered those constraints by means of negotiation, redefining obligations both within the immediate family and its extended kinship counterpart, and by facing the marketplace on their own unique terms. Highly recommended."—D. J. Conger, *Choice*, February 2008 "In this outstanding book, Susan Porter Benson goes home with women like the bargain basement shoppers and saleswomen she described in her pathbreaking *Counter Cultures*. Her close reading and passionate interpretation of primary sources yield straight talk about the meanings of class in twentieth-century America, and challenge the conventional account of the 1920s as an era of mass consumption. *Household Accounts* is wise about how families work and alive with the voices of women who have never before been heard from except as aggregate statistics."—Susan Strasser, University of Delaware, author of *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*, and *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* "Just as Susan Porter Benson's first book, *Counter Cultures*, changed the way historians looked at the work-culture of consumerism, so her last book, *Household Accounts*, will change the way we understand the 'consumerism' of working-class families in the interwar era. By bringing to light the intimate and often conflicted negotiations over expenditures within working-class families, this extraordinary book shows how far working men and women compromised with conventional gender rules in their efforts to survive at the narrow, short-credit margins of the American way of life."—Jean-Christophe Agnew, Yale University "In her life and in her scholarship, Susan Porter Benson exemplified the heroic struggle, dignity, reciprocity, and mutuality of Americans embedded in networks of family, kin, and friends. She understood how ordinary people lived their lives not as individuals freely engaged in market exchanges but as connected people who took things one day at a time. It is that understanding that makes this book so powerful. In original and compelling ways, she reveals that the worlds of the working class in the U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s show us lives of struggle of people deeply embedded in complex webs of human relationships as they daily came up against hard material reality."—Daniel Horowitz, *Smith College* From the Back Cover "In this outstanding book, Susan Porter Benson goes home with women like the bargain basement shoppers and saleswomen she described in her pathbreaking *Counter Cultures*. Her close reading and passionate interpretation of primary sources yield straight talk about the meanings of class in twentieth century America, and challenge the conventional account of the 1920s as an era of mass consumption. *Household Accounts* is wise about how families work and alive with the voices of women who have never before been heard from except as aggregate statistics."—Susan Strasser, University of Delaware, author of *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*, and *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* "Just as Susan Porter Benson's first book, *Counter Cultures*, changed the way historians looked at the work-culture of consumerism, so her last book, *Household Accounts*, will change the way we understand the 'consumerism' of working-class families in the interwar era. By bringing to light the intimate and often conflicted negotiations over expenditures within working-class families, this extraordinary book shows how far working men and women compromised with conventional gender rules in their efforts to survive at the narrow, short-credit margins of the American way of life."—Jean-Christophe Agnew, Yale University "In her life and in her scholarship, Susan Porter Benson exemplified the heroic struggle, dignity, reciprocity, and mutuality of Americans embedded in networks of family, kin, and friends. She understood how ordinary people lived their lives not as individuals freely engaged in market exchanges but as connected people who took things one day at a time. It is that understanding that makes this book so powerful. In original and compelling ways, she reveals that the worlds of the working class in the U.S. in the

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About the Author  
The late Susan Porter Benson was Director of Women's Studies at the University of Connecticut and the author of *Counter Cultures: Saleswoman, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*. David Montgomery is Farnam Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University and the author of several books, including *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*.