It would be difficult to find a piece of American furniture with more historical significance than the Hoosier cabinet. The cabinet’s built-in sifters, ant-proof casters, slide-out countertop, tin-lined bread drawer and homemaker’s “Daily Reminder” to-do list (just to name a few noteworthy features) hold clues to many details of domestic American life, especially female life, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Hoosier was initially developed to take the place of servants, common in households of the middle and upper classes until industrialization lured them into factories. The disappearance of domestic help left housewives with an overwhelming workload, and (to make matters worse) a distressing ignorance of basic baking, meal preparation, and kitchen management tasks.

Though the heyday of the Hoosier cabinet occurred during the first 20 years of the 20th century, the origins of its design can be traced back to Catharine Beecher (1800-1878), a noted author, educator, and social reformer who belonged to a family of luminaries. Determined to do her part to save middle-class American families from divorce, sickness, and other increasingly common perils, Beecher lectured and wrote books about all aspects of what she and her fellow reformers called domestic science. As part of this project she rethought the fundamental layout of the kitchen. Previously, middle-class kitchens were sprawling areas furnished primarily with a work table, sink, stove, and open shelves. A separate...
Beecher advised reducing the kitchen’s size and compressing all tasks into a single room furnished with a built-in cupboard that would keep everything handy and also provide preparation space.

The Hoosier cabinet performed all the roles that Beecher recommended, packing an impressive array of functions into a typical footprint just 24” deep and 48” wide. Totally self-contained and portable, it could be made in a factory, then shipped across the nation. Sold on credit for $50, with payments of a dollar a week, Hoosier cabinets quickly became the standard in American homes. Good design wasn’t the only reason for this success. Hoosier cabinets (and similar versions made by other manufacturers) benefitted from a national marketing campaign that is impressive even by today’s standards. “The Hoosier Cabinet Saves Steps,” and “The Hoosier will help me to stay young” were popular tag lines used in magazine ads. What housewife wouldn’t want a labor-saving device that would leave more time in every day for socializing, family fun, and marital bliss?

Built-in cabinetry brought an end to the Hoosier’s dominance in the kitchen. But the cabinet’s nostalgia value, combined with its novel features, continue to prolong its popularity. It’s a good bet that every family has a Hoosier cabinet somewhere in its history. If you’re a woodworker, as I am, you’ll find valuable design lessons in the functionality, durable construction, and pleasing proportions of this classic piece.

Hoosier cabinets haven’t been manufactured for many years, but the restoration of antique versions is hugely popular. You can count on Kennedy Hardware (kennedyhardware.com) for a complete selection of restoration parts. For a fascinating look at the history of Hoosier cabinets, get your hands on two great books—one by Phillip Kennedy, the other by Nancy Hiller.

Marvelous marketing. Magazine ads like this Ladies’ Home Journal example were immensely successful in selling Hoosier cabinets. The sales pitch always focused on the cabinet’s many labor-saving features.

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