

THE TRUE PIONEER OF TV FITNESS: PAIGE PALMER OF CLEVELAND'S WEWS TV

BY KRISTEN WILSON AND JAN TODD, PH.D.
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Nearly every biographical article on fitness icon Jack LaLanne describes him as the first person to have a regular television program dedicated to exercise. However, as Ben Pollack explained in his 2018 dissertation, James Paul Fogarty beat LaLanne to the small screen by more than a year, debuting *Your Figure, Ladies*, on channel WGN-TV in Chicago in 1950.¹ Had Pollack dug a bit deeper, he would have found an even earlier pioneer of TV fitness, Dorothy C. Rohrer—known professionally as Paige Palmer—who two years before Fogarty began rousing women to follow her through a routine of fanny bumps, twists, and leg lifts in the privacy of their living rooms while her show played on Channel WEWS in Cleveland.

Unlike LaLanne, who became an international celebrity through his nationally syndicated show and relentless self-promotion, Palmer's reach was limited mostly to TV viewers in Ohio and western Pennsylvania. Because of this, documenting Palmer's life with accuracy has proven challenging. And so, if our aims for this essay seem modest—we have focused primarily on verifying the facts of her life and discussing her ideas on exercise—there is a good reason. There are few reliable primary sources related to her early life, and those interviews that she gave after she was established as a TV celebrity, primarily reveal her “public biography.” Like the air-brushed stories told by many other celebrities, Palmer's stories about her personal life are a combination of truth, exaggeration, and dissimulation.² While this essay explores the gray areas in her personal narrative, we want to be clear that we do regard Palmer's contributions to exercise for women as significant. She played an important role in the lives of thousands of Midwestern women who tuned in to her morning show hoping to improve

their figures and their health. And, her linkage of exercise to fashion and beauty was important in the mid-century. As we will show, while not a feminist in the modern sense, Palmer was definitely an independent, ambitious woman, whose message was simple, exercise was transformative and could be the pathway to beauty, charm, and feminine success.³

Dorothy Rohrer's life began in Akron, Ohio, where she was born to Paul and Kathryn Rohrer on 17 January 1916.⁴ According to a 2000 interview, Rohrer (who shall be called Paige Palmer henceforth in this essay), was the oldest of four children and grew up in a comfortable home, thanks to her father's successful dental practice. From a young age, Palmer was not only physically active herself, but claimed she also led other children to become active. “It started when I was seven or eight years old. I was the one who taught kids in the neighborhood how to play games, put on shows,” she told an interviewer.⁵ According to Palmer, her unusual energy and physical skills led her to begin by age 13, “teaching at the YWCA in Akron: swimming, dancing, tennis,” a claim disputed by at least one of Palmer's chroniclers.⁶ Yet a photograph of Palmer preparing to ride a mechanical horse at a YWCA circus in 1933 supports the idea that she was involved with the Y in some capacity during her teenage years. Her description of how she came to the game of tennis, however, is harder to believe. “Shirley Fry, who went on to win Wimbledon, was a friend of mine.” Palmer claimed. “Her father had Shirley and me practice tennis every night of the week. She went to Wimbledon, and I taught tennis all through high school.”⁷ Again, Palmer's memories raise questions. Fry was born in 1927, making her 11 years younger than Palmer. It is just not logical that they trained together *as children* because of this age difference.⁸

Palmer maintained that she had also opened a dance and artistic expression school

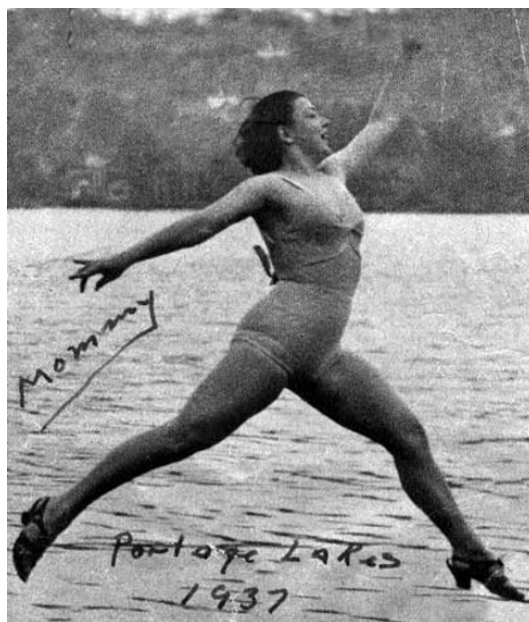
Correspondence to: Dr. Jan Todd, NEZ 5.700, Dept. of Kinesiology & Health Education, Stark Center, University of Texas at Austin, 78712. Email: jan@starkcenter.org.

at age 16. Called The School of Expression, several journalists suggest it was more likely that she was at least 18, and the first mention in the Akron newspaper appears in 1935 when Palmer was already 19.⁹ Painting herself as a maverick who set her own path, Palmer claimed that her parents learned of the school's existence only "when she sent them an invitation to the school's opening."¹⁰

Dance and audacity continued to play key roles in Palmer's career trajectory. In a 1951 interview, Palmer said her father refused to pay for dance lessons when she requested them at age 11. Her father, Paige explained, wanted her to learn to play the violin. Instead, in a move worthy of Tom Sawyer, she told her interviewer that she went behind her father's back and talked to the violin instructor on her own, negotiating a better price for the lessons. "I got the music lessons for half price," she explained, "and used the other half to pay for dancing school."¹¹ Unless pre-teen Palmer had almost no familial supervision it is difficult to know how this was possible since Akron had more than a quarter million residents by 1930 and it is not likely her parents would be happy for her to be roaming the city on her own.¹² Exactly when, where and how long she took dance lessons is not known. But dance was her favorite activity, and she believed, "I was gifted with dancing. I would see somebody dance and I could turn around and teach it. I feel all of us are given a special something and mine was the ability to teach from the time I was very young, and I knew it."¹³ Her "school," began in an old run-down house that, again, she reportedly rented on her own without parental help. Palmer later speculated that her landlord rented it to her at such a young age because of her father's solid reputation in the community, believing that "if she couldn't pay for it, [her] father would."¹⁴ According to Palmer, "the dance classes I held there were enormous. I taught ballroom dancing, ballet, toe, [and] tap."¹⁵ Nonetheless, the school seems to have closed in 1937, as advertisements for it stopped appearing in *The*

Akron Beacon Journal in January of that year.¹⁶

Palmer graduated from Akron's Buchtel High School in 1934 and generally told interviewers that she had attended the University of Akron and double majored in physical education and home economics and took a minor in nutrition.¹⁷ During the 1930s, the University of Akron (U of A) was organized into a variety of colleges, and the entry point for undergraduates was called "The General College" which offered two-year degree programs similar to junior colleges. Many students then did two more years of work in a higher college at U of A to get a regular bachelor's degree. In trying to



Palmer, shown here at approximately 21 years of age, at Portage Lakes, Ohio, participated in a variety of sports and activities as a girl and especially favored dance.

document Palmer's time and activities at the University, an examination of online yearbooks from the 1930s and early 1940s shows Rohrer as enrolled in the General College in 1937, along with her future husband Paul Roush.¹⁸ She does not appear in any club, intramural, or other activity photos in the 1937 yearbook. Rohrer did apparently belong to Delta Psi Kappa (a professional health and physical education society) in 1936 and went on to serve as president of the University of Akron chapter.¹⁹ Whether she graduated, however, is unclear. In the 1940 census, when she was then 24, Palmer answered the question about "highest grade completed," with "third year college." She does not show up in either the 1941 or 1942 yearbooks as a student at any level.²⁰

Palmer's other claims about her years at the University of Akron are also hard to verify. In addition to running the School of Expression during her first years in college, she claimed to have taught tap-dancing classes to other UA students because the physical education department lacked dance teachers.²¹ As she told it, she taught tap her freshman year, and the University of Akron then recommended her for a position as "the physical education director at Our Lady of the Elms, a private girls' school," a position she reportedly was serving in by May 1937.²² According to Palmer, she taught her charges how to play field hockey and would

“take the girls down to the YWCA for swimming. I would also choreograph dances, including ones to classical music. We got great reviews.”²³ In a different interview, Palmer claimed that it was 1934 when she started at Our Lady of the Elms and that “she was 18, but her 18-year-old students didn’t know it. They called her ‘Miss Dorothy.’”²⁴ The same article also indicates that around this same time Palmer “taught physical education . . . at St. Vincent and St. Mary,” two single-gender Catholic high schools in the area.²⁵ Additionally, Palmer spent her summers as an instructor at YWCA camps, eventually serving as camp director for the non-YWCA-affiliated Clearview Camp in 1939.²⁶

While it has proven impossible to verify the details, Palmer did work as a physical educator in both schools and the YWCA in the 1930s and saw it as part of her job to “model” proper femininity for her students. She often disparaged other female physical educators in her later years for being, “. . . so masculine. I decided I was going to prove that a feminine woman could be a good athlete.”²⁷ Whether Palmer imparted those ideals to her students at Our Lady of the Elms, is not known, but seems likely. The faith-based schools at which she taught would no doubt have agreed with Palmer’s gendered approach to exercise that aimed at creating feminine bodies within the beauty norms of her era.

On 12 June 1937, Palmer married Paul Roush, who worked for B.F. Goodrich in Akron.²⁸ If, as we suspect, Palmer did not complete a four-year degree, her marriage to Roush helps to explain why she closed her School of Expression and took a job at Our Lady of the Elms in May of that year.²⁹ The couple had two sons, Richard Roush, born in 1941, and Paul Roush, Jr., born in 1942.³⁰ However, the marriage did not last. Perhaps Paul’s stint in the Navy during World War II precipitated some of the problems—or perhaps Palmer’s own ambition created too much stress for the relationship to survive. We can only speculate, as the dissolution of their



In 1942, while husband Paul Rousch served in the Navy, Paige submitted photos of herself to a beauty/perfect figure contest and won a trip to New York City.

marriage (and exactly when it happened) is not discussed in any of the articles on Palmer. In any case, by January of 1946, Paul was married to 22-year-old Renee Zanetti, and Palmer was on her way to building a new life in New York City.³¹

THE BIRTH OF PAIGE PALMER

While the timeline is not clear, the transformation of dark-haired Dorothy Rohrer to the glamorous blonde known as Paige Palmer began in the early 1940s.³² In one interview Palmer claims the changes began when “somebody sent my picture to New York,” and she won “a national ‘perfect figure contest.’”³³ In another interview, she suggests that it was 1942, the same year she had her second child.³⁴ Again, we have been unable to find an exact date, or the name of the contest. However, Palmer likely did win something, and, if she is to be believed, her prize

was “a complete wardrobe, luggage and a trip to New York City.”³⁵

The contest Palmer won was almost certainly put on by the Richard Hudnut Cosmetics Company that produced the DuBarry line of cosmetics. The contest was part of a mail-order “school” that in reality was nothing more than a training course and marketing scheme to sell more cosmetics. The course consisted of six weekly lessons on how to apply makeup, eat, exercise, and dress. It encouraged women to think about coordinating makeup colors with what they were wearing, as the makeup industry dramatically expanded shades and color offerings in the 1940s.³⁶ Palmer, who had taken a class in textiles at the University of Akron, found this particularly interesting.³⁷ In 1941, the year before Palmer was supposed to have won, 21,000 women across the nation participated in the “DuBarry Success School” and followed its strategies from home.³⁸ The members took “before and after” photos that were submitted to judges who then decided who to invite to New York.³⁹

In New York, the Hudnut company also ran a women’s studio called the School of Charm that offered six-week courses in etiquette, beauty, fashion, and exercise. Hudnut’s

School of Charm was not the first to include exercise as part of its offerings. Elizabeth Arden began including exercise at her New York salon in 1930. Arden's spacious facility located on Fifth Avenue in New York had an entire floor dedicated to exercise and diet advice.⁴⁰ It was run by Ann Delafield who later left Arden and helped develop the DuBarry mail order courses and worked at Hudnut's New York studio. Delafield became Palmer's role model and mentor: "[Delafield] told [Palmer that] I had the ability, the training, all it took. She taught me I could be a star."⁴¹

Palmer stayed in New York City for the next several years and began working for Cohn-Hall-Marx, one of the largest textile companies in America. Her job "was to find out what the fabric colors would be for the upcoming year, then go to the cosmetic houses and show the girls the fabrics so they'd know what colors would sell. The company used to send me all over the country to promote fabrics and fashion."⁴² In addition, Palmer was asked by her bosses to begin making some short television spots that played on televisions inside New York department stores as part of a plan to sell television sets to the public and to sell more fabric and clothing.⁴³ Her time in New York allowed her to become friends with fashion designers and models and she adopted an aura of fashion sophistication that helped make her TV show a success when it launched in Cleveland in 1948.

The emphasis Palmer would place on "figure" throughout her career (and the various aides that could be used to attain it) was driven by an understanding of appearance as one of the few means women had to improve their self-esteem, their home lives, and their career prospects. Many of the mantras and strategies that Palmer employed first in her School of Charm and Fashion Modeling in Cleveland (first advertised in 1947), and later on her television program were derived from the life changing lessons of the DuBarry Success School. Palmer would tell the women who came on her show to "make the best of what you've got."⁴⁴ The quest for the "perfect figure" was less about achieving an abstract ideal than maximizing the appeal one already had with a combination of fitness, nutrition, fashion, and beauty products.⁴⁵ As much as her methods focused on "reducing," Palmer also offered advice on gaining weight; Palmer's "perfect figure" was not dangerously thin.⁴⁶

When Palmer swept back into Akron for Christmas in 1945, fresh from three years in


YOU are to BLAME

if you don't have a beautiful figure

Many women excuse their ugly, overweight figure as an act of Providence, while it is due wholly to neglect. Every woman was born with a beautiful figure and she can regain that figure without effort or discomfort at a very small cost.

Month's Membership
\$75.00 Value
25 Treatments \$24.50

- *Take off inches where you wish.*
- *Free figure analysis and trial treatment.*
- *Guaranteed dimension reduction.*



Silhouette Salon now under personal supervision of Miss Paige Palmer, figure and fashion authority of New York and Hollywood.

Silhouette Salon

166 S. MAIN ST. HE-9181
OVER NOBIL'S
Dorothy Mallaire, Director

Advertisements such as this one appearing in *The Akron Beacon Journal* in 1947 show Paige working for the Silhouette Salon." Proclaiming herself as the "figure and fashion authority of New York and Hollywood," Paige chided women into believing their less-than-beautiful looks were due to neglect.

the Big Apple working at Cohn-Hall-Marx, *The Akron Beacon Journal* reintroduced her to the community: "Paige Palmer, New York fashion designer, has returned [from the] east . . . she is the former Dorothy Rohrer Rousch."⁴⁷ Despite the publicity, Palmer did not stay in Akron and instead headed west, to California, where she later claimed she earned an MA in physical education from the University of California at Berkeley, ran several modeling schools, and edited a women's fashion magazine called *Milady*.⁴⁸

In July 1947, Palmer resurfaced in the pages of *The Akron Beacon Journal*, advertising her own "School of Charm and Fashion Modeling" that offered women the opportunity to cultivate "Charm, Poise, Personality" and asking, "Why miss a chance to insure [sic] your future success?"⁴⁹ This emphasis on "success,"

particularly of the professional variety, is common in these advertisements. A few advertisements for the school did urge women to employ “charm” to “win your man,” but most focused on “charm” as a means to improve one’s career prospects, pitching Palmer’s services primarily to the young, single women of Akron (who likely would have been in a better position to attempt modeling work), than the housewives that would serve as her steadfast television audience.⁵⁰ Palmer described herself as “Paige Palmer of Hollywood & New York” in these advertisements, positioning herself as the sophisticated insider of the two hubs of fashion, beauty, and health in the United States.⁵¹ Whether Palmer included exercise in her charm school sessions is unknown, but it is not mentioned in any of the ads examined for this essay.⁵²

BREAKING THE TV BARRIER

It will come as no surprise that there are also several versions of how Palmer got her start on WEWS in Cleveland. Channel 5 was the first television station in the State of Ohio and it went on the air for the first time in December of 1947. When it began broadcasting it had very little in the way of programming ready to go, but the station did have a small, dedicated crew that included several highly competent women. In Palmer’s version of the origin story, she happened to meet Jim Hanrahan, the director of WEWS while she was home on a visit from New York. He saw her as a celebrity and immediately asked her, “When can you start your show here?” At that time, she explained in an interview from 2000, “I had no intention of coming back to Ohio. I had become a New Yorker,” but the idea of having her own show



Paige Palmer occasionally took her show on the road or to the seas, as this 1957 image indicates.

on TV was intriguing and so she agreed to a 15-week contract and claimed that she had “complete authority on producing and planning the program.”⁵³ The show proved popular, and so she signed for 26 more weeks. “When 26 weeks came up, they asked me to stay,” she explained. “They just took it for granted I was never going to leave.” She nearly did not, her show ran for the next 25 years.⁵⁴

Historians Mike and Janice Olszewski, author of *Cleveland TV Tales*, tell a different story of Palmer’s start at the station. “We all remember Paige Palmer,” they wrote:

She was able to get her foot in the door, but it wasn’t easy. Paige was running a charm school out of a broken down house in Akron, and she was so down and out that her friends had to chip in and get it repaired. Some time back she had won a beauty contest and posed for “naughty but nice” calendar paintings, but those didn’t pay that well. Paige had a few other fashion-related jobs, and then the call came . . . they offered her a ladies show with fashion tips and exercises that were pretty much a waste of time. Most of them centered on bumping your butt up and down on an exercise mat. Or, you could pull huge rubber bands to tone up flabby arms. . . . all available by mail order through ‘Paige Palmer’s Exercise Equipment.’ For many years, Paige also smoked four packs of cigarettes a day.⁵⁵

However the initial contact was made, The Paige Palmer Show debuted on 13 January 1948.⁵⁶ The station initially juggled the daily program around various time slots to accommodate the addition of new WEWS programs that came on line and to fit Palmer’s schedule, which soon included her flying to Pittsburgh every Monday to record “Poise and Personality” for WDTV (later renamed KDKA) TV’s audiences.⁵⁷

Palmer’s show evolved over time, gradually incorporating more segments to supplement the central exercise component of the program.⁵⁸ By 1965, Palmer’s show included a “Beauty Clinic” in which “Clinic Gals” followed Palmer’s exercise regimen and then regularly received “individual advice on diet, grooming



WEWS was the first TV station in Cleveland and it began broadcasting in December 1947. Palmer began her show in January 1948 and it ran for the next 25 years. As seen here, her two-year-old son, Perry Brown, helped her demonstrate exercises in the mid 1950s.

and figure improvement.” Chosen from among Palmer’s viewers, the “Clinic Gals” returned on a regular basis to show their progress and thereby demonstrate Palmer’s expertise.⁵⁹ Palmer also attempted to foster community among her audience in other ways, running segments like “Share Time” to “recogni[ze] . . . women in the Greater Cleveland community who do outstanding welfare work.”⁶⁰

Palmer’s abiding concern was not to “liberate” Cleveland women from the home, but to point women to the types of self-transformation that were already in reach and that did not fundamentally disrupt their lives or perceived femininity—a set of exercises in front of the television set, a new dress or hat, or a volunteer position in the community. Other segments similarly sought to educate children and homemakers. “Art Forms” was a segment that aimed to bring “art and the appreciation of art right to the homemaker.” “Who Pays” featured a justice panel of attorneys, bar association members, and “Court Judges from Probate, Juvenile, and Domestic benches.” And, for a time she also ran a feature called “Sex Education for the Pre-Schooler.”⁶¹

Palmer’s show was broadcast live, as

was nearly all early television, and we were unable to find full recordings of any of her shows. One very short clip of Palmer watching a young woman walk across a marked floor exists as part of a 2007 commemorative broadcast made for the station’s sixtieth anniversary.⁶² You can hear her voice on her two instructional records, the 45 RPM “Stretch Rope Exercises in Hi Fi” that contains nine exercises, and the LP “Exercise to Music with Paige Palmer.” She also wrote two exercise books—*Fitness is a Family Affair* (1966) and the much less substantial *The Senior Citizen’s 10-Minutes-A-Day Fitness Plan* (1984).⁶³

Palmer begins the “Exercise to Music” LP by describing herself as the “physical director for millions of beautiful women.”⁶⁴ The record includes forty-five minutes of stretching and exercises, all with an organ playing in tune with Palmer’s prescribed movements. Palmer guides her listeners through bodyweight exercises that focus on repetitive, dynamic movement. One sequence, for example, involves jumping from a squat to a lunge first forward and backward and then side to side.⁶⁵ Most exercises last no longer than a minute and a half and she rests about ten to twenty seconds between exercises.⁶⁶ Throughout the record, Palmer inspires her listeners with the promise of weight loss, claiming, “And girls, be sure and keep your shoulders on the floor because this helps to slim the waistline at the same time, you’re taking the excess inches off the hips.”⁶⁷

Palmer’s book, *Fitness is a Family Affair* (1966) also makes use of the “stretch rope” and what she called the beauty bar, a rigid bar that could be attached to the stretch rope to make it work somewhat like a barbell.⁶⁸ Many of the exercises could be completed, however, without equipment or with household items such as a broom and a chair.⁶⁹ Palmer’s prevailing concern in the book seems to be convincing her reader that exercise is not a complicated, arduous process, but an easy, pleasant means to keep oneself and one’s family happy and fit. “Attractive families are active, healthy families,” she writes.⁷⁰ There are several exercise plans to choose from, including a ten-minute plan of seven basic exercises designed for the whole family:

1. Run in Place or Jump Rope;
2. Deep Knee Bends [modified squat];
3. “Row Boat” [row with stretch band];
4. Bicycle Exercise [legs perpendicular to the floor];
5. Sit Ups or Tummy Tights;

6. Leg Lifts [with pillow];
7. Push-ups for Men & Modified Push-ups for Women [on knees].⁷¹

Palmer's "Daily Seven" are still routinely performed in many calisthenic-based fitness classes today and were not original to her.⁷² There are no promises of miraculous weight loss or health improvements to be had by ten minutes of exercise a day; these are maintenance exercises to be used in conjunction with some of Palmer's basic advice on nutrition: "Most of us eat too much. We have to learn to cut down and eat the right foods."⁷³ The "right foods" included whole wheat and whole grains as well as two to four daily servings of fruits and vegetables and limiting starches and sugars.⁷⁴

The longer exercise plans in *Fitness is a Family Affair* are geared directly to the members of normative heterosexual nuclear families, with exercises designated for father, mother, and children. A third of the book is dedicated to exercises for women, and considering the chapters on nutrition, the outdoors, and the general benefits of exercise that take up another third of the book, it is safe to say that Palmer considered women the primary readers for her book and therefore tailored more chapters to them. Palmer begins by pointing out all of the "exercises" women already do on a regular ba-

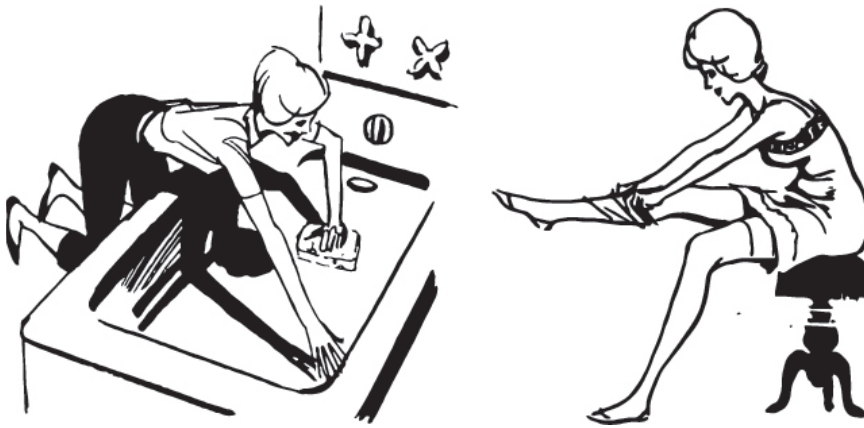
sis—"making beds . . . put[ting] your nylons on . . . planting the garden . . . carrying home the groceries," and suggested that women can modify their housework to make them even better exercises, "conditioning" arms while making the bed, "slimming" legs while putting on nylons, and practicing proper posture while driving, sitting at a desk, and performing other chores.⁷⁵ This reframing of normal physical activities as appropriate exercise for women is worth noting, as is the fact that no men appear in any of the illustrations for housework or other kinds of normal household activity. This is the same gender binary that Palmer herself navigated throughout her career, maintaining her identity as a working professional while also mothering three boys.

Palmer rarely mentions her children, or her three husbands, in the surviving interviews and so little is known about the nature of her own family life. Although one source suggested that Palmer's decision to return to Akron in 1947 was to "give her sons a home," there are no other hints about who cares for the children while she is at work, or whether they stay with her, her parents, or her ex-husband.⁷⁶ Palmer did reveal in a 2000 interview that she hired a couple who helped keep the house and look after her three boys in the early 1950s: "I never would have been able to have had a television show without them."⁷⁷

This certainly does not invalidate Palmer as a mother or caregiver, but it does illuminate the gap between her life and the lives of the women who were her primary audience. Palmer could have imagined a different future for her audience in the pages of *Fitness is a Family Affair*—a future closer to her lived experience and one in which mothers were not both the sole caregivers for their children and also the only adults who performed housework. Instead, Palmer's support of women's professional labor seems to have been largely conditional, for in her eyes,



Female sporting celebrities such as pro golfers Mickey Wright (left), Betsy Rawls, and Patty Berg, joined Paige Palmer (right) in 1961 at the Sleepy Hollow Country Club to film championship golf lessons. The instructional films aired in eight-minute segments over three weeks on WEWS.



Palmer's definition of exercise for women was not particularly strenuous. In *Fitness is a Family Affair*, she included tasks such as cleaning the bathtub or putting on stockings among her list of beneficial exercises, and showed no arm-strengthening exercises using weights. She did include exercises to create "kissable" lips.

motherhood came before all else. "Get yourself a hobby," she wrote, "which someday can turn into a vocation when your children leave the nest."⁷⁸

The other exercises recommended for women in *Fitness is a Family Affair* promoted a similarly reductive view of the world available to them. A chapter called "Romantic Magic," directs women to perform exercises that were meant to make them more attractive to men and implies that women should take a passive role in their romantic relationships.⁷⁹ There are exercises for "kissable lips," such as Baby Talk: "Blow into your lips and make a bll-bll sound just like a baby does," and Lip Stretch: "Put your little finger in the corner of your mouth and stretch the lips first to the right and then to the left. Repeat 6-10 times."⁸⁰ The chapter also contains advice on "Remove the Hump . . . Prevent Facial Sag . . . [Develop] Eye Appeal . . . and "Beautiful Bosoms" as well as leg and waist exercises and a skin care routine.⁸¹ It seems almost too obvious to state, but there are no comparable chapters for men. Instead, men are given a near monopoly on arm exercises in *Fitness is a Family Affair*, further reifying the gender stereotypes. Men should be muscular while women should be kissable.

Palmer was quick to understand the power of television to sell products just as Jack LaLanne was doing on the West Coast. She began selling self-branded exercise equipment, as well as leotards and exercise clothing like she wore on the show, along with other "Paige Palmer" products. When faced with criticism that she used her own products continuously in her shows, Palmer responded, "I'm just interested in people's health," and that "she resent[ed] people who t[ook] advantage of health-minded

folks."⁸² But a show like Palmer's required outside sponsorships, and so she also delivered live advertisements for department stores, cosmetics companies, appliances, and other items targeted at women with impressive panache. The funding model of live television in the 1950s demanded someone who could act as an entertainer and as a saleswoman, and Palmer was eminently equipped to be both. In 1960, *Women's Wear Daily* wrote that in Cleveland, "TV personality Paige Palmer has sold more

hats, nightgowns, furs and swimming suits this year than any other person in their city."⁸³

CONCLUSION

Palmer was forced to end her show in 1973 after 25 years on the air. She stopped because she developed Meniere's disease, a disorder of the inner ear that affected her balance and made her susceptible to vertigo and hearing loss. Following her retirement, she did a radio show for WELW until 1983, and then as her vertigo eased, she began traveling internationally and writing travel books filled with advice for her readers.⁸⁴

During her 25 years on the air, however, Palmer entered the homes of thousands of women as her show reached throughout Ohio, western Pennsylvania, and even into Southern Ontario.⁸⁵ Palmer's appeal was that she filled her hour of airtime with much more than just exercise and healthful tips. She loved fashion and makeup and hats and jewelry, and so brought in New York fashion designers to talk to her audience and brought local women to the studio for makeovers. Although she was not coaching women to be good athletes, she succeeded in her goal to become a physical educator while still being a feminine role model, instilling in her viewers the same appreciation for "the feminine" that she herself embraced.

Palmer's message was essentially that beauty coupled with fitness empowered women. In an interview with Debbie Hanson in 2008, Palmer explained that while she supported the idea of equal rights for women she did not believe in "burning bras," and that she had walked out of a meeting in Washington at which Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan were speaking. Her basic attitudes fit well in the zeitgeist of

what historians call the Long Fifties (1947-1963), when American women were encouraged to once again become stay at home mothers and leave America's labor force.⁸⁶ The reassertion of femininity as a crucial part of American womanhood, coupled with the new medium of television and its daytime programming aimed at housewives, gave Palmer both the message and medium she needed to build a midwestern empire.⁸⁷

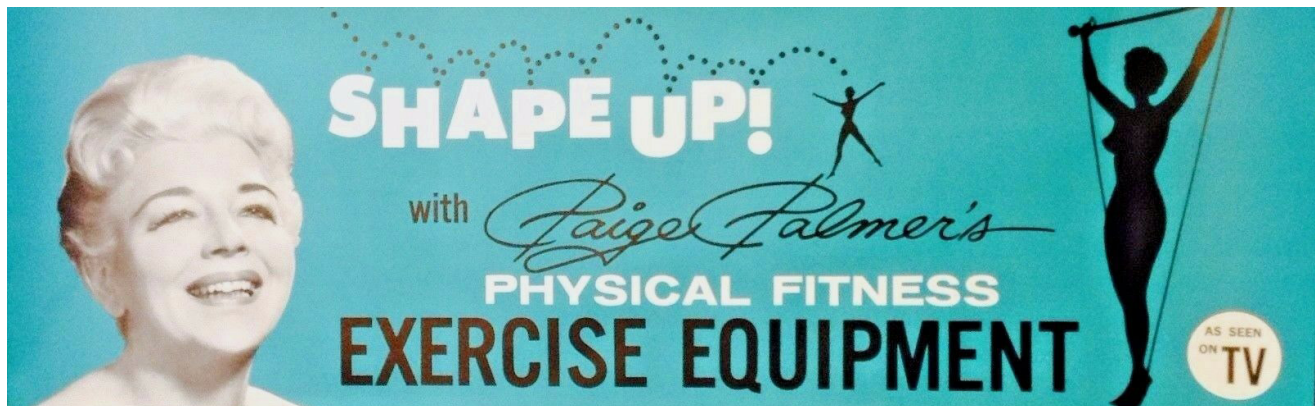
Fashion also played a key role in both Palmer's show and the larger national conversation about the ideal postwar American woman. Designer Christian Dior's 1947 show introduced "The New Look," and the world quickly embraced his hyper-feminized silhouette glorifying large breasts, small waists, and extremely full skirts.⁸⁸ As historian Elizabeth Matelski described it, the New Look "reflected the combination of social repression and sexual exploitation. Hemlines fell to mid-calf length and flared skirts were held out by starched crinoline petticoats. . . . Young women compared their tiny waists and exulted in their measurements, which had now become the most important numbers in a woman's life."⁸⁹ Palmer was undoubtedly happy to tell her viewers and the members of her charm school how to work toward these socially supported goals.

Palmer won multiple awards for "The Paige Palmer Show," including a Cleveland chapter of American Federation of Television, Radio Artists award for beauty instruction; a Golden Slipper from the National Shoe Institute for her work as the director of WEWS's women's programming; and an award for television fashion reporting from the New York Couture Business Council, among other honors.⁹⁰ If awards for her work as a fitness icon seem lacking, it is important to consider that TV was regional un-



American women could exercise along with the self-proclaimed "physical director for millions of beautiful women" using their own record players and this LP, *Exercise to Music with Paige Palmer*. It contained 45 minutes of exercises and stretches coordinated to organ music. The back of the jacket contained illustrations of the various body positions used in the routines: stride position, deep knee bends, lunge, leg flex, torso lift, fanny scoots, fanny bumps, shoulder stands, and "perfect position" body alignment on the floor.

til well into the 1950s. Palmer's show never had a national reach, and it is impossible for us to suggest why Palmer's television show was not picked up and syndicated nationally when we are not able to view even a single episode. If we had to guess, however, one thought would be that Palmer's views on beauty, fitness, and femininity had begun to fall out of fashion by the early 1960s when TV was becoming more nationalized. Her local Cleveland guests and fashion tips may have also begun to feel a bit out of



Palmer was an excellent pitchwoman and sold a variety of products bearing her name. Her rubber "stretch" rope could also be connected to a bar or wand, as shown on the right side of this label, for additional exercises.

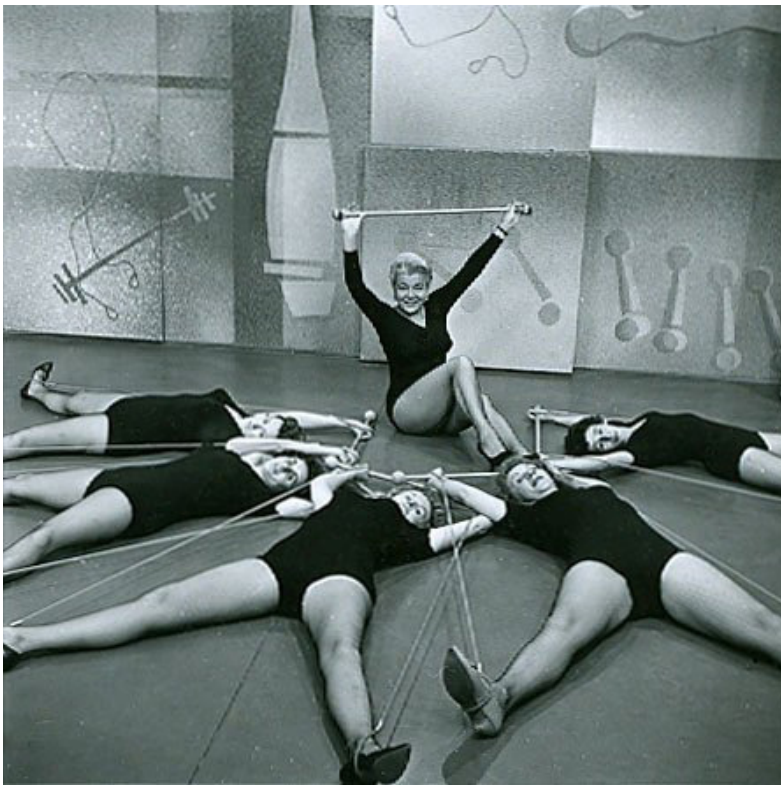
date in the era of Twiggy, hippies, the Vietnam War, and the fight for Women's Rights. Another factor may have also been her advancing age and the meteoric rise of Debbie Drake, the younger and more shapely exercise personality whose "Debbie Drake Show" was syndicated nationally in 1961.⁹¹

Paige Palmer had a long and successful life, accomplishing a great many things. She not only began one of the longest-running fitness television programs in the United States, but she also marketed her own line of women's fitness products, served as president of the American Women in Radio and Television (AWRT) for a time, wrote at least eight travel guides, and claimed that she had even interviewed the Dalai Lama.⁹² Palmer spent a lifetime working towards a fitter self, exercising a youthful curiosity and energy that served to keep mind, body, and spirit healthy and lively. It was this broad vision of fitness that Palmer peddled on her TV show, a vision that allowed women of the post-war era to embrace their femininity, embrace domesticity if they chose, while also encouraging women to pursue opportunities outside the home that might give them greater financial independence. There are definitely aspects of Palmer's

life that demonstrate an altruistic nature, but she was also an entrepreneur who viewed her audience as an untapped market and used the new medium of television, as LaLanne and Debbie Drake would, to market both her products and herself, thereby becoming a wealthy woman. Paige Palmer passed away on 21 November 2009 at the age of 93.⁹³

NOTES

1. Fogarty's fifteen-minute program, aimed at women, played on WGN-TV until 1957. Ben Pollack, "Becoming Jack LaLanne," (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 2018), 240-247.
2. Alice Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality," *The News-Herald* (Cleveland, Ohio), 17 June 1965, 7. See also Milt Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV: Reducing Show Fattens Akronite's Income," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 6 November 1951, 35; Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging, "Mythbuster: Paige Palmer." October 2000; Xerox of article that is no longer on Rose Institute website; Jan Todd personal archives, Austin, Texas. See also Diane Fenel, "The Palmer Story," *Horizons Senior Monthly*, n.d., Paige Palmer Collection, University of Kent, Ohio.
3. For information on beauty in the postwar years see Elizabeth M. Matelski, "The Color(s) of Perfection: The Feminine Body, Beauty Ideals and Identity in Postwar America, 1945-1970," (Ph.D. diss.; Loyola University, 2011).
4. For Palmer's birth announcement, see "It's a Girl," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 20 January 1916, 1. The 1920 US Census confirms she is the baby referred to in the announcement. Goldner suggests that Palmer was born in Bath, not Akron) from Cheri Goldner, "Getting to Know Paige Palmer," *Past Pursuits: A Newsletter of the Special Collections Division Akron-Summit County Public Library* 15, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 5. This latter source was written after Palmer donated things from her career to the public library.
5. Goldner, "Getting to Know Paige Palmer," 5.
6. Accounts of Palmer's early life are scarce and are not all in agreement with what Palmer later claimed. Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality," 7, suggested she did not start teaching at the YWCA until she was sixteen years old, casting doubt that she was teaching swimming at the Y at age thirteen.
7. Rose, "Mythbuster."
8. "Shirley Fry," National Tennis Hall of Fame: www.tennisfame.com/hall-of-famers/inductees/shirley-fry.
9. Palmer claimed during interviews in 1951 and 2000 that she was 16 when she founded the school, but different sources suggest she was closer to 18. See: Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV;" and Rose, "Mythbuster." In Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality," 7, Williams writes that Palmer was 18 when she started her school. The earliest record we found for Palmer's School of Expression is from 1935: "Republican Women Hear Mrs. Mary Forrest; Rose Moriarity Will



Dorothy Rohrer adopted the stage name Paige Palmer and began teaching exercise on WEWS in Cleveland, Ohio, in January of 1948. Paige's girls are seen here performing some shoulder and leg work using her rubber ropes hooked to wands.

- Present Candidates," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 18 June 1935, 10. An ad for the school also appeared in the *Akron Beacon Journal* on 23 January 1937, 23.
10. Quotes from Amanda Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93, Fashionable 'First Lady of Fitness' on Cleveland Television: Obituary," *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio), 22 November 2009.
11. Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
12. City of Akron, "History of Akron Timeline," viewed at: <https://www.akronohio.gov/cms/1900-1949/index.html>.
13. Rose, "Mythbuster."
14. Her father, Dr. Paul Rohrer, had maintained a dentistry clinic in Akron since at least 1920 and was elected a director of the Home Savings Company (later the Savings & Loan Corporation) in 1920. "Dr. Paul Rohrer," *Akron Evening Times*, 9 June 1920, 13. The Home Savings Company was taken over by the Savings & Loan Corporation in 1921, see Harvey C. Smith, *Ohio General Statistics for the Fiscal Year Commencing July 1, 1920 and Ending June 30, 1921* (Springfield, Ohio: The Kelly-Springfield Printing Company, 1922), 145. This supposition is supported by a February 1939 map of "residential security" (projected home values) that gave Palmer's Akron neighborhood a B- grade (the family had lived at 134 S. Portage Path since at least 1931). A B- grade meant that an area was "completely developed...within recent years [these areas] have reached their peak, should continue to be static for a number of years and remain desirable places in which to live." Home ownership would serve as the foundation for a growing American middle class, homes a valuable asset that appreciated and were key to the creation of generational wealth, passed from parents to children and helping to ensure the maintenance of class standing. February 1939 map can be found on an Ohio State database of redlining maps: guides.osu.edu/maps-geospatial-data/maps/redlining.
15. Rose, "Mythbuster."
16. Advertisement for The School of Expression, *Akron Beacon Journal*, 23 January 1937, 23. This is the final ad found in the *Akron Beacon*.
17. Goldner, "Getting to Know . . . Paige Palmer."
18. University of Akron, *Tel Buch 1937 Yearbook*, 61, viewed at www.e-yearbook.com/sp/eybb?school=771-year=1937&up=2&startpage=61.
19. "Miss Rohrer Goes to Convention," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 24 June 1936, 12.
20. "Dorothy C. Roush in the 1940 United States Census," viewed at: <https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?d-b=1940usfedcen&indiv=try&h=34209981>. And, University of Akron, *Tel Buch Yearbooks for 1939, 1940 and 1941*, viewed at: <https://www.e-yearbook.com/sp/eybb>.
21. Rose, "Mythbuster." The *1938-1939 University of Akron Bulletin* shows several kinds of dance classes listed on page 43. Viewed at: <https://sc.uakron.edu/registrar/bulletins/ugrad/1936-1940/GeneralBulletin1938-39.pdf>.
22. Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93."
23. Rose, "Mythbuster."
24. Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
25. Ibid. St. Vincent and St. Mary would merge in 1972. See St. Vincent-St. Mary High School, "School History." See also Brad Townsend, "Flashback: Thirteen years ago, we visited LeBron James' [sic] high school and saw the future," *The Dallas Morning News*, 21 June 2016.
26. Palmer mentions her experiences working at camps in the Rose, "Mythbuster" interview and is supported by the following articles: "YWCA Camp on Shores of Lake Erie Opens Season Sunday for Large Number of Akron Girls," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 7 July 1934, 9; "Stay-At-Home Camp To Give Program," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 31 July 1935, 13; "Parents, Friends Invited to Camp," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 16 August 1939, 8.
27. Rose, "Mythbuster." In the 1940 census, Palmer listed her occupation as "Teacher Physical Education," and listed the "Industry" as "Church." The census report further states that she worked 38 weeks in 1939 and had earned only \$390.00. "Dorothy C. Roush in the 1940 United States Census."
28. On his marriage license, Mr. Roush listed his occupation as "Goodrich," see "Marriage Record No. 72, Summit County, Ohio," Summit County, Ohio, Marriage Records, 1936-1937 vol. 72, 12 June 1937. Additionally, in the 1940 Census, Roush lists his occupation as inspector in the rubber industry, see Margaret M. Harthis, *Sixteenth Census of the United States—Population, Akron, Summit County, Ohio, Ward 8, Block 37*, Sheet 8A, Line 18-19, 11-12 April, 1940.
29. The wedding notice in the Akron paper cites her as teaching at Our Lady of the Elms in 1937, see "To Wed," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 29 May 1937, 8.
30. "Marriage Record No. 72, Summit County, Ohio," *Summit County, Ohio, Marriage Records, 1936-1937*, vol. 72, 12 June 1937. For information on their son, see "Obituary: Paul A. Roush, 1942-2019," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 7 January 2020, and "Marriage Record No. 172, Summit County, Ohio," *Summit County, Ohio Marriage Records, 1960-1961* vol. 172, 4 December 1960.
31. No divorce records could be found for the Rohrer v. Roush divorce. Palmer also remarried—first to Robert Brown in 1951 (they divorced in 1963), and then to Caryl Ashbaugh, her partner until his death in 1998. Palmer had a son with Robert Brown in 1953 or 1954 named Perry Brown. Palmer (as Dorothy R. Brown) appears in the Ohio Divorce Records on 5 November 1963, requesting a divorce from Robert N. Brown after twelve years of marriage on the grounds of "gross neglect and/or extreme cruelty"—see certificate number 21404 in volume 1376 of the Ohio Divorce Abstracts, 1962-1963. Caryl Ashbaugh's 1998 death is recorded in the Ohio Death Records, see "Caryl Hamilton Ashbaugh," *Ohio Death Records, 1938-2018*, certificate number 026467, 7 March 1998. Palmer's maternity leave for Perry Brown was announced in *Variety*, see "From the Production Centres—In Cleveland...," *Variety*, 16 December 1953. Perry Brown's name appears in the obituaries of his mother and brother, see "Obituary: Paul A. Roush, 1942-2019," *Akron Beacon Journal*. See also Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93."
32. Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93." One of the first references to Paige Palmer is found in "Visits Father Over Holidays," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 31 December 1945, 3. One of the final references to Dorothy Rohrer in newspapers appears in "Karl Rohrer Has First Trip East As Pre-Army Holiday," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 16 July 1944, 15.
33. Rose, "Mythbuster."
34. Palmer talks about this period of her life in the Rose, "Mythbuster" interview. Of the few sources we've been able to piece together about this figure contest, one is a book full of short biographies of Ohio women (including Palmer.) The book was written by an academic for a popular audience (i.e. without citations): Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Profiles of Ohio Women, 1803-2003* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 209. Royster's book suggests that the contest was held by Richard Hudnut. Hudnut's New York cosmetics company (DuBarry) advertised in many major newspapers and women's magazines between 1940 and 1946, and offered not only cosmetics, but in-home "Success Courses" that culminated in contests with prizes offered to women who had improved the most. See "Beauty Editors Vote on 'Success School' Contest," *Women's Wear Daily*, 7 April 1941, 4. See also DuBarry Success Course, "Fat Girl Flunks—Slender Girl Succeeds," *Vogue* 99, no. 10 (15 May

- 1942): 93.
35. Goldner, "Getting to Know...Paige Palmer."
 36. Matelski, "The Color(s) of Perfection: The Feminine Body, Beauty Ideals and Identity in Postwar America, 1945-1970."
 37. Goldner, "Getting to Know...Paige Palmer," 5.
 38. "Beauty Editors Vote," 4.
 39. Ibid.
 40. "Cosmetics and Skin: Stories from the History and Science of Cosmetics, Skin-care and Early Beauty Culture," Dubarry Success Course," viewed at: <https://www.cosmeticsandskin.com/efe/dubarry-success.php>.
 41. Rose, "Mythbuster."
 42. Ibid.
 43. Ibid.
 44. Ibid.
 45. Ibid.
 46. Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality." Palmer reported herself at 5'4" and 118 pounds in 1951, see Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
 47. "Visits Father Over Holidays." More information about the modeling jobs she held between 1942 and 1945 in Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
 48. Verification of these claims is slim. Her Berkeley MA is mentioned in Royster, *Profiles of Ohio Women, 1803-2003*, 209; the modeling schools are in Freudheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV;" Alice Williams mentions her as an editor of *Milady* in "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality."
 49. Advertisement, "Paige Palmer Inc.: Look For The Woman," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 15 October 1947, 11; Advertisement, "Paige Palmer Inc.: Good Grooming is an Asset," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 9 July 1947, 8.
 50. "Win Your Man in '49," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 5 December 1948, 62. See also "Paige Palmer Inc.: For Attractive Girls A Distinctive Career," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 16 November 1947, 54.
 51. "Paige Palmer Inc.: Good Grooming."
 52. For example: "School of Charm," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 2 November 1947, 54; and "Charm School," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 7 April 1948, 13.
 53. Rose, "Mythbuster."
 54. Ibid.
 55. Mike and Janice Olszewski, *Cleveland TV Tales* (Cleveland: Gray and Co., 2014), 84-85. The authors do not suggest who shared these opinions with them.
 56. Kent State University, "Panache: Paige Palmer-A Salute to Fifty Years of Fashion and Fitness," viewed at: <https://www.kent.edu/museum/event/panache-paige-palmer-salute-fifty-years-fashion-and-fitness>.
 57. "Poise and Personality," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegram*, 11 June 1951, 23. For WDTV-KDKA switchover, see Lynn Boyd Hinds, *Broadcasting the Local News: The Early Years of Pittsburgh's KDKA-TV* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 109.
 58. Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality." See also Freudenheim, "Paige Flirts With Big-Time TV."
 59. Williams, "Paige Palmer: Sparkling TV Personality."
 60. Ibid.
 61. Palmer also helped to destigmatize pap smears and other women's health subjects, foregrounding the care and maintenance of the body as a means to happiness within the home, Ibid.; and Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93."
 62. "Paige Palmer Interview," viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cI96lUrSX40>. Palmer's short clip starts at approximately 1:01.
 63. Paige Palmer, "Stretch Rope Exercises in Hi Fi (with Uncle Cran at the Organ)," PP: 345-A, 45 RPM Record. Paige Palmer, "Exercise to Music with Paige Palmer," Paige Palmer Enterprises, Inc., PK 2956, LP Record. Paige Palmer, *Fitness is a Family Affair* (New York: Famous Features Syndicate, 1966). Paige Palmer, *The Senior Citizen's 10-Minutes-A-Day Fitness Plan* (Babylon, New York: Pilot Books, 1984).
 64. Palmer, "Exercise to Music."
 65. Ibid., 5:36-6:54.
 66. Ibid.
 67. Palmer, "Exercise to Music," 17:38-17:42 and 12:55-13:08.
 68. Palmer, *Fitness*, 34.
 69. Ibid., 42.
 70. Ibid., 7.
 71. Ibid., 33-36.
 72. One example of just such a calisthenic plan: Alex Robles and Brittany Robles, "The Complete List of Calisthenic Exercises [Beginner To Advanced]," *The White Coat Trainer*, 26 June 2019.
 73. Palmer, *Fitness*, 10.
 74. Ibid, 75, 81.
 75. Ibid, 37-40.
 76. Goldner, "Getting to Know...Paige Palmer," 6.
 77. Rose, "Mythbuster." Birth date of third son unclear, but *Variety* notes her maternity leave: "From the Production Centres: In Cleveland..." *Variety*, 16 December 1953, 34.
 78. Rose, "Mythbuster."
 79. Palmer, *Fitness*, 51-57.
 80. Ibid., 53.
 81. Ibid., 51-56.
 82. Jack Major, "She's on Girl-Watcher's Side," *Akron Beacon Journal*, 11 March 1962, 146-147.
 83. "Selling Pointers," *Women's Wear Daily*, 11 October 1960, 34. See also Jessica Brandt, "She's Selling Up a Storm," *Women's Wear Daily*, 11 October 1960, 18. Palmer's sales expertise is also discussed in Jessica Bradt, "Television Report—Thru Daily Fashion 'Specs': Two Toy Firms Again Sponsor Macy Telecast," *Women's Wear Daily*, 13 October 1960, 12.
 84. For example: Paige Palmer, *The Senior Citizen's Guide to Budget Travel in the United States and Canada*, (Babylon, NY: Pilot Books, 1983); Paige Palmer, *The Travel and Vacation Discount Guide*, (Babylon, NY: Pilot Books, 1987); Paige Palmer, *The Best of India* (New York: Pilot Books, 1987).
 85. Debbie Hanson, "Paige Palmer: Television Pioneer, First Lady of Fitness, Fashionista and so much more," at <http://www.clevelandwomen.com/people/paige-palmer.htm>, 5.
 86. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
 87. Marsha F. Cassidy, *What Women Watched: Daytime Television in the 1950s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
 88. Matelski, 27-28.
 89. Ibid.
 90. "Media Women Win Annual Shoe Award," *The Chicago Defender*, 16 January 1965, 12; "Cleveland AFTRA Awards Announced," *Broadcasting, Telecasting*, 8 March 1954, 92.
 91. Ben Pollack, "Hot Body for a Cool Medium: Debbie Drake, Television, and the Sexualization of Exercise in Post-War America," typescript, Jan Todd Collection. Pollack's paper won the North American Society for Sport History Graduate Essay Contest in 2017.
 92. For AWRT President election: "TV Radio Production Centres," *Variety*, 29 May 1968, 38. Palmer's fitness products were often sold under the "Paige Palmer Inc." or "The Complete Home Gym" label and included a stretch rope that could be used for light resistance training, each stretch rope sold with a sheet of recommended exercises. For Palmer's claim that she interviewed the Dalai Lama, see Rose, "Mythbuster."
 93. Garrett, "Paige Palmer, 93."