

Rural Midwestern Women and the New Deal

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Agriculture has always been at the heart of the Midwest. Many families settled in the Midwestern United States and took advantage of the fertile and expansive farmlands. These farm families became the basis of communities that grew up throughout the area and contributed to the economic prosperity of the country. The family farm was once the center of the Midwestern community. Until the early twentieth century, women played a very important role, as wives, mothers, and economic partners in the farming business. Without women, many farms would not have survived. Nevertheless, history often forgets rural women, as many times their stories were never told. Family farms would not have been able to exist without the help and support of the farm wives, but historians often overlook their contributions.

Women's roles on the farm often overlapped between the spheres of traditional women's and men's work. While a division of labor existed between what men and women considered proper types of work, that division was often blurred on the family farm. Due to different circumstances, men often expected women to do whatever work was necessary to keep the farm going. This work, often termed "helping out," was an integral part of the workings of the farm.¹ Without this extra work at critical times, family farms would not have been able to operate. This "helping out" could also be transferred out of the farm and into the public arena.

Although this seems to have been the norm for rural women, the perception of women in public discourse was changing at this time. As some farms began to grow from small family units into larger, business-oriented enterprises, the ideal of women's place within the unit was changing. Societal norms expected women to be consumers in the home, adapting to new labor-saving and scientific devices in the home, rather than acting as producers for the farm. This idea, popularized and strengthened through the Country Life Movement and the Cooperative Extension Service within the federal government, focused on women increasing their productivity in homemaking endeavors. Rural women, however, were not interested in conforming to this role.

As technology began to separate women's and men's roles, rural life began to change. This was not always a welcome change. As the use of

technology increased, the big business aspects of farming threatened to overturn the way of life for the family farmer.² For women, this was extremely crucial, as it redefined the importance of their roles on the farm. When technological advancements overshadowed women's economic contributions to the farm, women were forced into traditional gender roles as consumers.³

During the 1930s, when the country entered into the Great Depression, agriculture presented a major problem for the federal government. Issues such as overproduction dominated the political arena, and the federal government passed legislation for the regulation of agriculture and farming. Though in popular memory women were not involved in this process, farm women actually had a stake in and were interested in the political decisions made during the New Deal. The Depression exacerbated the tensions between what the government thought was best for farm families and what the families themselves thought was important.

Women were invested in the farm and believed it in their best interest to make political decisions that would affect their own families and farms. Through publications targeted to women throughout the Depression, women were encouraged to have an opinion about the state of political affairs.

The Changing Ideal of Rural Life

Rural family farms usually operated as single units, with men and women sharing responsibilities for production. While this was standard for rural families, the government had a different vision of gender roles. Rural families were seen as backward by the government, and Progressive reformers sought to educate them in modern and scientific farming and homemaking techniques. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a Country Life Commission to investigate problems within the rural community. This Commission "supported economic measures to promote scientific and efficient farming; educational efforts, including the funding of extension services; and social measures to increase rural prosperity and survey the conditions of rural living."⁴

Acting on the information the Country Life Commission found, the federal government took measures to improve the lives of rural families. In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, which organized the Cooperative Extension Service through land-grant colleges. With this act, Congress allocated money to states to fund programs to educate farmers

² Michael W. Schuyler, *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933-1939* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1989), 201.

³ Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 228.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹ Linda G. Ford, "Another Double Burden: Farm Women and Agrarian Activism in Depression Era New York State," *New York History* 75 (October 1994): 375.

and their families on issues of agriculture and home economics. The act put the impetus on rural communities to create and plan their own programs, as they helped fund them.⁵ Most importantly, the Act emphasized education for the whole farm family, especially the farm homemaker, whose work was the backbone of the farm family.⁶ Here the government recognized the contributions that farm women made to the family farm, but it stressed their role in the home rather than production.

Women were seen as an important element of the home, but not always for their economic contributions. Some still viewed rural women as backward, and the federal government established the Extension Service to open doors for farm wives. According to H.C. Sanders, "When extension service work began, the rural home had barely been touched by the industrial revolution. The lot of the farm wife was one of drudgery, hardship, and isolation. She had been able to develop but a few of the social graces. She dressed and looked differently from her city cousin and was uncomfortable when away from her environment."⁷ This is a very narrow view of rural women, however, because not all women felt backward or uncomfortable with themselves. Most rural women recognized their importance to the farm business, and did not welcome the idea that they were drudges.

Not all farm families took advantage of the programs offered. Many farm families instead chose to participate in traditional practices of survival involving the community, rather than agricultural organizations or state sponsored groups.⁸ In the May 1932 issue of *The Farmer's Wife*, a monthly periodical for rural women, the letters section contained an ongoing debate about the usefulness of the Extension Service.⁹ Oftentimes, the resistance to the Extension had to do with what kinds of activities the Extension agents chose as important to women.

Examples from circulars of the Cooperative Extensions of various Midwestern states show the kinds of activities that the government thought were important for rural women. These articles, written by women, stressed homemaking activities and the scientific methods needed to increase the efficiency of these activities. With titles such as "Modern Laundry," and "Convenient Kitchens," these articles stressed new, more efficient ways to perform chores in the home.¹⁰ Other topics included

"Household Care and Cleaning," and "Clothing Construction."¹¹ These articles all assume women are in charge of the housework.

The Extension promoted many homemaking activities and their scientific advantages and disadvantages. New York state, though not in the Midwest, provides an example of how these teachings were not welcomed by many farm women. The home demonstration agents were mainly single, college-educated young women who did not have the years of experience of running a home and raising children that the older rural women had.¹² This generation gap caused much tension, as the farm women did not wish to be told how to raise children and keep house by someone who was not experienced in it herself.

The rural women in New York also ran into conflict with the Extension agents over handcrafts. Most farm women at the time were more interested in productive enterprises that would earn them needed income, such as handmade crafts and products. According to Babbitt, this income could be what kept the farm in solvency.¹³ The argument over what was useful for women to learn was a big issue for farm women interested in participating in the Extension. These farm women believed that their productivity was increasingly important to the family farm.

The Extension Service received opposition such as this for its purely educational stance. The Farm Bureau was another organization that was started for educational purposes, but eventually adapted to the political needs of the agricultural community.¹⁴ Eventually, the Farm Bureau recognized the potential for political activism. With the Illinois Agricultural Association in 1916, the Farm Bureau ceased to be connected with the Extension Service when business and farm legislation became the primary concern of the group.¹⁵

Obviously, there were tensions between what the government felt was best for farm families and what the families themselves felt was important. The tension manifested itself in the worth of small farms versus large ones. During the Great Depression, the federal government intervened more into the lives of farmers with the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The AAA saw overproduction as a main issue of the depression and set limits on how much farmers could produce.¹⁶ The reactions of small farmers varied as to their agreement with the AAA. Some felt that the Great Depression and the New Deal were detrimental to the family farm

⁵ Edmund Brunner and E. Hsin Pao Yang, *Rural America and the Extension Service: A History and Critique of the Cooperative Agricultural and Home Economics Extension Service* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1949), 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ H.C. Sanders, ed., *The Cooperative Extension Service* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 6.

⁸ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 146.

⁹ *The Farmer's Wife*, May 1932, 14.

¹⁰ Michigan State College Extension Service, Extension Bulletins 184 and 185, August 1938 and March 1946.

¹¹ University of Illinois College of Agriculture and Agricultural Experiment Station, Circulars 407 and 416, May 1933 and November 1938.

¹² Kathleen R. Babbitt, "The Productive Farm Woman and the Extension Home Economist in New York State, 1920-1940," *Agricultural History* 67 (1993): 88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁴ Christiana McFayden Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal: A Study of Making of National Farm Policy, 1933-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶ Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 72.

neighborhood.¹⁷ Even so, the Extension Service joined with the New Deal to help with farm relief.

In the beginning days of the Depression, the Extension Service had taken on this different role. During the New Deal, the Extension was used to administer the legislated programs.¹⁸ In fact, the A.F.B.F. (American Farm Bureau Federation) was very much in favor of using the Extension to administer programs, although the Department of Agriculture did not want so much dependence on Extension Services to spearhead the New Deal programs.¹⁹ These programs, however, were more effective for larger farms.

Large business-oriented farms and small family farms had both operated successfully for years. Although the AAA favored large farms, it did not cause them to form.²⁰ The differences between large and small farms just became more apparent during this time. Before the New Deal, small farms had not had much to do with the government, but that changed with the passage of the new agricultural laws.²¹ Overall, however, there seems to be the general belief that the New Deal was not doing enough for small farmers, as the New Deal programs that benefited small farmers were not the same as the ones that were to help agriculture as a whole.²²

With these tensions between farming businesses and small family farm enterprises, the ideal role for rural woman changed drastically. Rural women, however, resisted this ideology and continued to function as they had before. Because of financial difficulties incurred by the Great Depression, rural women's contributions to the farm became more important than ever. The roles prescribed to women by government programs were not helpful to the family farm.

Women on the Farm

Women had always played a very important role on the family farm. The areas of the home and family had always fallen under the care of the farm wife. According to a 1920s survey, "more than 90 percent of farm women washed clothes, sewed family clothing, and baked their own bread," among other necessary household jobs.²³ Household work fell to women, as well as raising the children. Mothers connected very closely with their children and raised their children to be productive members of the farming community.

¹⁷ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 271.

¹⁸ Schuyler, *The Dread of Plenty*, 49.

¹⁹ Campbell, *The Farm Bureau and the New Deal*, 156.

²⁰ Schuyler, *The Dread of Plenty*, 206.

²¹ Jane Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life: Southern Illinois, 1890-1990* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 146.

²² Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 116.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

Children were economically important to the family farm. Mothers taught their children the same ethic of doing work wherever necessary to which women subscribed. Based on the needs of the family farm, children often did jobs that crossed gendered lines.²⁴ The children born to rural families became "an efficiently produced, low-cost, highly intensive labor force."²⁵ Women were responsible for raising children in this way.

Traditional women's work was not all tied to housekeeping and child-rearing. Women often participated in commodity production as part of their realm of influence. Poultry production, gardening, and milk production were often part of women's jobs. Women raised chickens for eggs and meat to sell or trade in the local marketplace, and this was often a strictly female occupation. Because the henhouses were usually within the boundaries of the household, they were under the auspices of the farm wife.²⁶

Poultry raising was so ingrained as a feminine occupation that women's farm periodicals often had a section dedicated to all things poultry. *The Farmer's Wife* was a monthly magazine published by *Wallace's Farmer* especially for farm women. Every month, *The Farmer's Wife* included a section on raising poultry that was written specifically for women. With articles such as "Poultry Questions Answered," women were able to get the most up-to-date information on poultry production.²⁷ The magazine also furnished many advertisements for the latest in feed and breeding technology.

Sometimes, the money women were able to get for their sideline businesses was a substantial portion of the household income. Although some historians have thought that women's contributions were for subsistence only, the sale of women's productive fruits often kept the family farm afloat.²⁸ An article in the January 1929 issue of *The Farmer's Wife* detailed how women's side work could become the main income source. The article "No Longer a Side Line" detailed how an Evansville, Indiana farmer and his wife made poultry raising their main business. Mr. Appel had planned to run a truck garden business while his wife raised chickens for their own consumption, when the garden customers began requesting to buy chickens and eggs.²⁹ The article gives all of the details regarding how they ran their business in case any woman might want to duplicate it. In closing the article, the author noted that the Appels enjoyed their business and that "they had not planned to turn the place over to poultry but the

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Fink, *Agrarian Women*, 133.

²⁶ Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 90.

²⁷ *The Farmer's Wife*, January 1930, 41.

²⁸ Dorothy Schweider, "Changing Times: Iowa Farm Women and Home Economics Cooperative Extension in the 1920s and 1950s," in *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads*, eds. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Wendy Hamand Venet (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 206.

²⁹ *The Farmer's Wife*, January 1929, 40.

increasing demands from customers has changed the small flock to the main business of the farm.”³⁰ Obviously, women’s businesses could be extremely influential in the workings of the family farm.

Women also participated in other types of sideline businesses. Farm women had an extensive part in dairying as butter was an important commodity traded or sold.³¹ Women also made various artisanal goods like rugs or opened their homes to townspeople and schoolteachers for room and board.³² Advertisements in *The Farmer’s Wife* included seed packets, flower bulbs, and canning supplies, all potential ideas for sideline businesses.

Not all women were excited with the idea of having businesses or working outside of the household. In the March 1930 issue of *The Farmer’s Wife*, a letter from “Harriet Farmer” stated, “I’ve yet to meet or read of a woman whose talents and energies were sufficient to cover the big task of the abundant life which is Homemaking.”³³ This letter provoked a variety of responses from other readers throughout the year. Some responses said to each her own, pointing out that some women enjoyed homemaking and some needed more in their lives.³⁴ Others noted “the kind of work in which farm women usually engage to increase the family income does not take them from the home.”³⁵ The letter quoted above, as well as many other responses, indicated that men and women on the farm shared duties, as “we are partners in everything, homemaking, breadwinning and ownership of the property.”³⁶ The majority of the response letters took “Harriet Farmer” to task for her narrow view of women’s roles on the farm. It would seem that many women did recognize the significance of the contributions they made to the family and farm.

Overlap of Gender Roles

Women most certainly realized their ability to contribute to the farm. No doubt, men discerned the significant work women did as well. Because of the nature of farm work, women and men often blurred the lines of what was considered proper for either gender. According to Mary Neth, “On the family farm, there were no separate spheres for women and men. The industrial division of wage and domestic work, between production for market and production for family use, had less meaning on a family farm.”³⁷ As explained earlier, there was a difference between men and women’s work. Each sex had specific roles that they were expected to fill. However,

³⁰ Ibid., 41.

³¹ Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 90.

³² Schweider, “Changing Times,” 206.

³³ *The Farmer’s Wife*, March 1930, 55.

³⁴ *The Farmer’s Wife*, June 1930, 13.

³⁵ *The Farmer’s Wife*, May 1930, 19.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 17.

due to the nature of farm work, these definitions of proper gender roles in labor often did not mean as much to farm families.³⁸

The most obvious place where this phenomenon appeared was in the fields. It appears that working and managing the farm land were specifically male spheres of labor.³⁹ However, men usually expected women to participate. Men were in charge of the work and delegating it, while women worked where needed. In *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900–1940*, Mary Neth has noted several situations in which women were required to change the normal status of their roles to adapt to the needs of the farm. The daughter in an Iowa family whose father had died described the composition of the family work force:

When her father died, the family worked the farm with her mother’s bachelor brother or a hired man. As the oldest child, she took on the role of mother and cooked, washed, ironed, and cleaned. Her mother assisted in the fields, fulfilling the role of the oldest son. As the children grew older, the family ran the farm without adult male assistance. Her mother had primary field responsibility, planting and plowing, and she began to disk and drag the fields.⁴⁰

These women obviously were able to adapt to different roles in order to keep the farm going.

Another situation involved a girl who was the oldest child, and therefore did a significant amount of field work.⁴¹ Once she married, to the delight of her husband, she continued in this line because she enjoyed it.⁴² Neth includes many more instances of men and women sharing work, and in these instances, women were able to have some control and power over their own lives and labor.⁴³

No matter what women were doing on the farm, there was often an issue of power relationships between men and women. Katherine Jellison has argued that women held onto power on the family farm by rejecting the ideal of the woman as homemaker and advocating for women’s roles as important producers. These farm women recognized their importance and asserted power based on their vital role as producers.

This was not a universal vision of farm women. Working in the fields was not always a liberating experience for women. Jane Adams’ interviews with women from Union County, Illinois, note instances in which husbands

³⁸ Ibid., 18.

³⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁴¹ Ibid., 25.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 26.

took advantage of or brutalized their wives. One particular woman was made to plow in the fields, after which her husband would “make her sit up till midnight reading the Bible.”⁴⁴ The woman subsequently ran away from her husband. While Adams notes that this type of story is not usually mentioned in interviews, most likely there were many men who threatened violence against their wives and children to maintain their masculine authority.⁴⁵

Deborah Fink also has identified the struggles of rural women against a patriarchal system. According to Fink, “the agrarian vision demanded a subordinate woman, usually concealed and peripheral.... Women stirred inside the agrarian system and urban reformers took note of the hardships farm women faced. Yet no one publicly questioned the assumption that farm women would interpret their lives in terms of their duties as wives and mothers.”⁴⁶ She also points to inequality in farm labor in the fact that women worked all of the time and men’s work was often seasonal, giving them time to participate in other activities.⁴⁷ In addition, because the husband was the head of the household, he made all decisions and his ownership of the actual property gave him legal authority over the farm.⁴⁸ In Fink’s view, farm work did not give women more autonomy, but it only further emphasized the man’s role in a patriarchal system.

Although there were instances in which women faced challenges stemming from a dominating male, it seems that many women were able to have a certain amount of autonomy. One woman in particular, Anna Pratt Erickson, actually ran a farm on her own for a number of years and recorded her experiences in a daily diary. Due to availability problems, I was not able to obtain this diary and analyze it myself, but Mary Neth provides an analysis of its content in *Preserving the Family Farm*.

Anna Pratt Erickson acquired her own land from her first husband after he passed away and continued to work it after her divorce from her second husband. Erickson notes in her diary how she and her first husband shared labor: “Conrad frequently assisted Anna with berry picking, laundry, childcare, churning, and garden and vegetable production. Anna assisted Conrad with haying, shocking wheat, and other field tasks that demanded more labor.”⁴⁹

After separating from her second husband, who did not treat her as well as her first husband did, “Erickson’s independent control of land as a widow gave her the economic resources to continue farming without a husband, and the labor of her children and neighbors enabled her to keep

⁴⁴ Edith Rendleman, “The Story of My Life,” quoted in Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 97.

⁴⁵ Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 97.

⁴⁶ Fink, *Agrarian Women*, 28–29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 34.

operating the farm until her son took over following World War II.”⁵⁰ Neth notes that equality on the farm came from a sense of mutuality among family members, even though the necessity of women’s work did not automatically lead to this sense of equality.⁵¹

Although Erickson’s situation was unusual, it was not a singular case. According to information about Illinois from the 1930 United States Census, 5,994 women were farm owners or tenants, with 1,088 female farm wage workers and 1,232 female unpaid family laborers.⁵² For Richland County, Illinois, a county in southern Illinois, there were 29 female farm owners.⁵³ While the census does not tell us anything specifically about these women, it does convey that there were other women in situations like Anna Pratt Erickson’s.

Women’s work on the farm was so integral that, although some men took advantage, most farm families looked at marriage and family in terms of how it would affect the farm enterprise positively or negatively. Because equality in work led to greater productivity, it would make sense that family farms would be better off embracing the equality.⁵⁴

Stemming from this equality in work, women had a stake in making sure the farm was successful. In the Great Depression, the government passed many laws affecting how farmers were able to produce their crops and goods. Many women felt it important to either support or protest against the legislation dealing with agricultural matters. Women were interested in the New Deal programs, and made their opinions known in publications such as *The Farmer’s Wife*. There was also literature directed at women through the Cooperative Extension that women were able to weigh in on and be active politically in an economically trying time.

Women and the New Deal

Farm women were dissatisfied by the political situation regarding agriculture in the Depression. To some women, it intensified the problems they already faced, as they continued to be powerless in the face of the problems of the agricultural community where men still made the major decisions.⁵⁵ Others were not willing to accept any help offered because they looked on it as charity, something not done in their society.⁵⁶

Women did not collectively sit back and let men make decisions about the future of family farms, however. Rural women were deeply invested in the family farm and had a stake in the political decisions made

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵² United States Department of Commerce, 15th Census of the United States: 1930, Population Bulletin, 2nd Series Illinois: Composition and Characteristics of the Population (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁴ Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 39.

⁵⁵ Fink, *Agrarian Women*, 165.

⁵⁶ Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 148.

regarding agricultural production. As early as the World War I era, there are examples of women taking an interest in politics. Martha Treadway, an Illinois woman, eagerly raced to the polls to vote after Illinois gave women the vote in 1913.⁵⁷ Treadway exemplifies a typical rural farm woman with “her private domestic responsibilities, her economic contributions to her family’s welfare, and her new public role as voter.”⁵⁸ Although her political decisions did not include agricultural issues, she nevertheless is an example of how farm women could be involved in the political process.

Another example of women’s political action, this time in the agricultural field, is the 1939 Dairy Farmers Union strike in New York State. Linda Ford noted how during the trying time of the Depression, women’s role of “helping out” expanded to the political arena, as women were needed to fill in for their husbands either on the farm or in protest activities.⁵⁹ Women who helped protest were doing so within their traditional roles, but at the same time had helped the farm survive.⁶⁰

In a similar situation, William Pratt has analyzed the role of women in the farm revolt of the 1930s. Pratt focuses on three specific women, whom he admits are unrepresentative, but nevertheless received much attention from the press for their roles.⁶¹ Edith Pearson, one such woman, was responsible for organizing and orchestrating several demonstrations against foreclosures and was the vice-chairman of the county Holiday association.⁶² Although not many women were so prominent in political activism, many tried their best to make their voices heard, as they felt their contributions were worthwhile.

Women used a variety of techniques to express their views and attitudes. *The Farmer’s Wife* magazine was instrumental as a forum for women to learn about issues and speak their opinions freely. Throughout the 1930s, *The Farmer’s Wife* was generally favorable to the government and New Deal programs, but women still weighed in on what they thought was important. Voting for candidates who offered the best ideas for how to improve the economic situation dominated much of the discussion. According to one letter, “we women must scrutinize as never before the candidates for state and national legislative offices, for only through proper laws and their effectual enforcement can we hope for any real security.”⁶³ Other letters urged women to vote as well. In writing about the farm

⁵⁷ Virginia R. Boynton, “‘How I Hate This Hateful War!’ An Illinois Farm Woman faces World War I,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 93 (2000): 291.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵⁹ Ford, “Another Double Burden,” 376.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁶¹ William C. Pratt, “Women and the Farm Revolt of the 1930s,” *Agricultural History* 73 (Spring, 1993): 214.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 216-217.

⁶³ *The Farmer’s Wife*, April 1932, 27.

woman, one letter noted, “she should be working for things that offer improvement for farm conditions.”⁶⁴

The editorial board of *The Farmer’s Wife* also encouraged political activism. In the July 1933 issue the editorial exclaimed, “Is it not clear, therefore, that every farm woman should inform herself as to what the new law means, how it will operate, how it will affect her own family? What better club study project could there be than a study of these questions?”⁶⁵ The magazine then encouraged all farm women’s clubs to purchase an outline of questions to discuss as to the state of political affairs.⁶⁶ Another editorial proclaimed, “As never before farm women throughout the United States are taking interest in and studying the larger social and economic aspects of farming. Moreover, they are doing it without neglect of their farm home interests.”⁶⁷ This particular editorial even emphasized the dual responsibilities women had as productive farmers and keepers of the home.

The magazine made a concerted effort to include important political issues as well as advice for the home. In July 1933, *The Farmer’s Wife* published an article about first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and in April 1934 had one about Frances Perkins. Farm women often identified with women political figures. Women who wrote letters directly to Eleanor Roosevelt did so because they believed Roosevelt more keenly felt the plight of the farm woman as producer than did male politicians and would empathize more with their situation.⁶⁸

While many women were getting involved in the political process and supported the New Deal, some rural women were not pleased with the new vision of the farm woman that was proposed. As discussed earlier, throughout the early twentieth century and into the New Deal, there was a shift in the ideal of the urban housewife, which was expected to travel to the rural areas as well. As farming equipment modernized, the role of the woman was supposed to shift from producer to consumer. This proved to be a much different situation in rural areas than in urban ones. These issues of modernization were evident in the technologies produced. Male farmers were expected to buy tractors and other labor saving devices, while women were supposed to want the latest in household technology to lessen their domestic burdens. In this way, “farmers became businessmen who managed farms with brains and technology rather than working their farms with brawn. Farm women became professional homemakers relieved of the ‘drudgery’ of farm labor by new home technology.”⁶⁹

This ideology did not hold true for many farm women. According to Katherine Jellison, women who expressed their agricultural goals in letters

⁶⁴ *The Farmer’s Wife*, April 1933, 25.

⁶⁵ *The Farmer’s Wife*, July 1933, 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *The Farmer’s Wife*, September 1933, 3.

⁶⁸ Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 76.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

to the Secretary of Agriculture were obviously focused on much more than the modern consumption ideal.⁷⁰ Women were still concerned with their roles as farm producers and were not always favorable to the modernizing message sent by the federal government during the New Deal.

Women did seem to make the best of the situation. Owning new household technology did give women a sense of economic security, as many women's basic concerns during the Depression had more to do with making ends meet.⁷¹ Electricity as well was a modern convenience that was favorable to women. When the Rural Electrification Administration was established in 1935, some farm homes began to get electricity.⁷² Some women were very pleased with the REA, as one particular woman noted that electricity eased her household burdens by automating the chores of drawing water and doing laundry.⁷³ Though women strove for a place as an economic partner in the family farm, modern conveniences designed for the homemaker eventually became important parts of their lives.

Conclusion

Women played a very important role on the family farm. In rural areas, women were responsible for many aspects of life, including but not limited to the home, the children, and productive farm work. Without the contributions of women, many family farms would not have survived. Women confirmed the importance of their roles by their interest in politics and agricultural legislation, as they realized that what they did affected the workings of the farm. As women could vote at this time, the political decisions they made had a real impact on the outcome of elections and farm legislation.

Although the federal government pushed women's roles as consumers separate from the workings of the farm, not all farm people subscribed to this ideology. Throughout the 1930s, women continued to write into *The Farmer's Wife* and discuss the issues facing farm families as equal partners. As one writer noted, 50-50 marriages are the ones that succeed the best.⁷⁴ Rural families continued to support the idea of a partnership with both men and women contributing equally to the economic business of the farm.

Perhaps most telling about this attitude is a letter from a farm husband in the February 1937 issue of *The Farmer's Wife*. Due to the hardships of the Depression, in this particular farm family, the wife worked outside the home and the husband kept the house and the children. After describing that it had been hard to adjust to the lifestyle, this husband was now happy with his situation. According to him, "hard as it seemed at first,

⁷⁰ Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 73.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷³ Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 151.

⁷⁴ *The Farmer's Wife*, December 1934, 3.

I am proud that I could qualify as a 'farmer's wife.'"⁷⁵ Whether or not this was a representative situation, it does show that rural families subscribed to an equal way of life, where the wife's contributions were just as important as the husband's. Through the Great Depression and the New Deal, farm families tried to hold onto that way of life.

⁷⁵ *The Farmer's Wife*, February 1937, 14.