

“No Occupation:” How Urban Experts Defined and Changed Farm Women's Lives, 1900-1920

"As long as the man keeps hold of the big end of the telescope in viewing his wife's work he will be inclined to belittle her efforts to promote the general welfare. In taking the 1910 census the Census Bureau failed to find a name that would include cook, waitress, dishwasher, dairy maid, seamstress, laundress, and baby tender and so they assigned 'no occupation' to the farmer's wife."

– A farm woman in Kansas, USDA Report No. 106, 1915.

In the time period between 1900 and 1920, often called the “golden age” of agriculture, many political and cultural changes were taking place in America. Urban populations swelled and more people entered professional fields. Middle class urban women became staunch homemakers and mothers and with the advent of home electricity, electric appliances, home telephones, central heat, and indoor plumbing, enjoyed a relative ease of life previously unheard of. With increased leisure came pressure to get involved socially in their communities, joining charitable organizations, book clubs, and getting more involved in their children's schooling. For the middle and upper-class, life was good. Production was up, wages were steady or increasing, and technology was easing everyone's lives.

Life was different in rural areas. Although advances had been made in agricultural technology, and crop prices were high, many of the other technologies enjoyed by urbanites were cost-prohibitive or slow to advance in rural areas. Indoor plumbing was still scarce. Wood or coal-fired cookstoves and wooden, drainless kitchen sinks were still used.¹ Water sources were often closer to livestock housing

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Helen Dodd and Ellen B. Richards. *The Healthful Farmhouse*. Boston: Whitcomb & Barrows, 1906, p. 6-7.

than the farmhouse and water had to be carried.² Mail boxes were located at crossroads far from farm houses and roads were poor, especially in winter. Labor-saving devices were few and far between and local hired household labor was scarce.³ Most farms still produced the bulk of the food consumed by the families running them and women were instrumental in gardening, foraging, and preserving food for their families. In addition to engaging in “farm-home industries” to supplement farm profits, farm women simultaneously cared for children, cooked for and cleaned up after farm hands, assisted with field work during harvest time, and engaged in numerous household chores made more difficult by the unavailability of modern tools. Poultry and eggs, butter making, garden truck, and home-preserved foods were all businesses in which women were the primary laborers, even if they rarely saw much personal profit from these tasks.⁴ Most farms were cash-poor and had to purchase goods on credit to be paid off when harvest came in.⁵ Many farm women saw their primary role as savers of money, using their own labor to “make do” and avoid spending money instead of augmenting cash flow.⁶

In the face of all this hard work with little monetary reward, many young people in the 1900s and 1910s chose instead to leave the farm. Better educational opportunities and higher wages in the city meant better cash flow to purchase modern appliances, ready-made clothing, and to purchase instead of produce food. Both rural parents and government officials were worried about the future of farming.

In the early twentieth century the so-called “rural problem” came to the fore for urban

² United States Department of Agriculture. *Report No. 104: Domestic Needs of Farm Women*. Washington: Government Printing Office (1915); Deborah Fink. *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

³ 60th Congress, 2nd Session, Senate. *Report of the Country Life Commission*. Document No. 507. Washington: Government Printing Offices (1909), p. 43-44.

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture. *Report No. 106: Economic Needs of Farm Women*. Washington: Government Printing Office (1915), p. 6.

⁵ Ibid. p. 22-27.

⁶ USDA Report No. 104, p. 29; Mary Neth. *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 32.

Progressives and farmers alike. The “problem” was that for the first time in American history, urban areas were reaching population parity with rural areas. What would become a grand exodus of young people from rural communities into large urban cities had begun and both farming folk and the federal government worried about what could be done. At the same time, agrarianism, which romanticized rural life as better than urban life for the supposed wholesomeness and goodness of its people and lifestyle, was infiltrating many aspects of American life with its alluring message, including rural farming populations.⁷ Farm women became both a touchstone and a lightning rod for solutions to the “rural problem.” Caught between the romanticized, traditional conservative values of the Country Life Movement and the science and technology of the burgeoning home economics movement, farm women were given unprecedented opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns about where farming, and their role in it, was headed in this still-new century. Unfortunately, both sides, including state and federal efforts, chose to ignore many of the innovative solutions farm women suggested and instead supported ideas better suited to their own ends. Together, these ends became one-size-fits-all, top-down policies, and the decisions that were made about farming and agriculture in this time period, both by individuals and by state and federal authorities, would lay the foundation for a sea change in American agriculture.

In the early part of the century, several Progressive movements were underway, including agricultural science, domestic science (later home economics), and rural sociology. The Country Life Movement, not formally organized until 1919, was a multifaceted Progressive force for rural change in an era when farm profits were close to, if not at all-time highs.⁸ Farmers, at least, seemed well satisfied with their increasing profits, but government officials and urban Progressives were concerned with the fact that technology and standards of living on the farm were not keeping pace with that of

⁷ Janet Galligani Casey. *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 59.

⁸ Danbom, p. 46.

industrialized urban areas.⁹ In addition, there was concern about the impact of such high crop prices on food prices in urban areas, which were steadily climbing.

The Country Life Movement was a political, moral, and racial movement, glorifying the conservative politics, large, racially appropriate, and wholesome morals of farming families, even when such traits were not necessarily warranted. In addition, the Country Life Movement was both a rejection of the worst of urban life – crowding, filth, abject poverty, immigration, and unemployment – and the best of urban life – varied entertainments, social activities, educational opportunities, and leisure. In rural communities, proponents of the Country Life Movement saw an opportunity to create an ideal world, embracing both the natural setting and work out-of-doors, and trying to reform social and educational norms. For the Country Life Movement, as with many Progressive movements, this meant employing the use of “experts” to help engineer change in the farming communities of the nation.

David Danbom wrote extensively on the topic of “experts” in agricultural reform in *Resisted Revolution*, in which he argues that nearly all rural reform “experts” (lumped together in one group he calls “Country Lifers,” after the Country Life Movement) were in fact not as concerned with the health, wealth, and well-being of rural people as they were with that of urbanites.

"In place of the laissez-faire countryside, with its individualism, informality, localism, and inefficiency, the Country Lifers hoped to build an agriculture which conformed to modern industrial standards of social and economic organization and efficiency. The Country Life Movement, stripped of all pretensions, was nothing less than the demand of an ascendant urban-industrial America, backed by an increasingly activist state, for an organized and efficient agriculture that would adequately supplement it socially

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Ibid. p. 23

and economically."¹⁰

Danbom also asserted that most "Country Lifers" were concerned almost exclusively with ensuring a large, cheap supply of domestic agricultural products for urban-dwellers.¹¹ He indicates that although the Country Life Movement was concerned with keeping families and young people on the farm, it was for reasons other than altruism and nostalgia; a large farming population and an increase in production supported by industrial techniques and technology would guarantee not only a cheap and abundant food supply, but a large conservative and moral political force as well.¹²

In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt formed the Country Life Commission (CLC), a research panel which consisted exclusively of white, urban, politically progressive men.¹³ The CLC was tasked with discovering what exactly was driving young people out of their supposedly wholesome rural communities to urban areas which were thought by many to be dirty, corrupt, and already overcrowded. For Progressives like Roosevelt and the men of the CLC, Thomas Jefferson's agrarian ideal was the basis for a stable America, both culturally and economically. "Not only in the material wealth they produce, but in the supply of independent and strong citizenship, the agricultural people constitute the very foundation of our national efficiency."¹⁴ Rural communities were also thought to produce politically and socially conservative citizens who were averse to change and maintained the bastion of, to use a more modern phrase, traditional family values. The city, on the other hand, was considered by those who would later form the Country Life Movement to be a corrupting influence, full of immigrants and the unsavory poor (mostly factory laborers); a dirty place with unclean food which

¹⁰ Danbom, p. 69.

¹¹ Ibid., 72-73.

¹² Danbom, p. 73-74.

¹³ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁴ CLC Report, p. 14

produced wan, undernourished, and racially questionable children.¹⁵

Race played a significant role in the formation of Roosevelt's commission. Eugenics and the fitness of white Anglo-Americans for the solid, foundational work of agriculture were central to the Country Life Movement, as was the fertility of farm women and large families, which were necessary additions to the farm labor force for American agriculture to succeed. Fears regarding the influx of immigrants from undesirable locales like Eastern Europe helped boost the idea that only assimilated white Anglo Americans were fit for the hard but honest work of farming. As a bonus, large farming families ensured the continuation of Roosevelt's favored "race."¹⁶ At the same time as it disparaged cities for their immigrants and urban poor, the CLC and other urban Progressives lauded the leisure time and education of the upper-middle class, favoring these as partial solutions to the "rural problem."¹⁷

Feeling that rural communities were neglected by reform-minded modern society, Roosevelt purposed his CLC with conducting a nationwide survey of farming folk, and in 1909 the Commission published a report that outlined all of the issues facing farming at the time, including the plight of farm women as a main concern in keeping young people on the farms and keeping rural communities together.¹⁸ To its credit, the report outlines honest problems facing farm women of the time. First, the report acknowledges that by their very nature, household tasks such as cooking were unending and monotonous and that while outdoor farm-related activities were often deemed important enough to

¹⁵ Danbom, p. 21, 28.

¹⁶ Danbom, p. 30; William L. Bowers. *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974, p. 66.

¹⁷ Martha Foote Crow. *The American Country Girl*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1915, p. 79-81; Charles W. Burkett. "What the Farm Home Needs." *Good Housekeeping*. Vol. 48, No. 2 (1909), p. 148; CLC Report, p. 47.

¹⁸ CLC report p. 47

warrant the purchase of “labor-saving devices,” women's household activities were not.¹⁹ Second, the report notes that with the need for better education and sending older children to school, farm women were deprived of help in the home. Local hired girls were also scarce for this same reason.²⁰ Finally, a lack of in-situ social activities sent many young people running for the city.²¹

However, the section on women is just a small portion of the report, which focuses primarily on the business-related obstacles the Commission perceived as preventing farmers from making their farms more profitable. But, as Roosevelt said in his introduction, "If the woman shirks her duty as housewife, as home keeper, as the mother whose prime function it is to bear and rear a sufficient number of healthy children, then she is not entitled to our regard. But if she does her duty she is **more entitled to our regard even than the man who does his duty**; and the man should show special consideration for her needs."²² [emphasis added]

Rural farm women were *deemed* to be in need of help. But what solutions would work best? The CLC report emphasized the need for labor-saving devices and upgrades to the farmhouse such as running water and telephones.²³ Social solutions were also suggested. Cooperative creameries and cooperative laundries co-located with creameries and taking advantage of on-site running water and steam were held up as models of cooperative efficiency.²⁴ The formation of women's clubs, home management education in schools, and better roads were also suggested. Perhaps most indicative of the Country Life movement is this phrase from the report, “a less exclusive ideal of money getting on the part of the farmer,” which is in direct opposition to another suggestion listed in the same sentence,

¹⁹

Ibid.

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Ibid p. 44-45

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Ibid p. 47.

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Ibid. p. 9.

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CLC Report, p. 47.

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Ibid. p. 43-44.

“more mechanical help.”²⁵ Within this one report lay the many paradoxes of the “rural problem.”

Part of this Progressive movement included the burgeoning home economics movement. Changing educational standards in the beginning of the century and the formation of land-grant colleges helped spur an interest in industrial and agricultural topics. High schools and colleges were becoming increasingly common and educational reform emphasized practical knowledge and skills over the previous standard of Latin, abstract sciences, and ancient history. These changes to higher education led to the rise of “experts.” During this time period, academic knowledge and achievement were valued more than first-hand experience without the benefit of formal education.²⁶ As scientific inquiry and testing spread to other subjects, urban women with an interest in science and technology began to study how the principles of inquiry, evidence, and efficiency which had been developed for industry could be applied to the household. Household sanitation, food science and nutrition, efficiency of labor, and economic management developed at colleges like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) with its first female graduate, Ellen Richards, a professional chemist who had been among the first women to apply these principles to the study of the home.²⁷ Land-grant colleges were particularly instrumental in helping the newborn subject of home economics grow in size and influence, though it took time for traditional academics, both male and female, to understand that home economics was not simply cooking classes.²⁸ As the nation grew more concerned with the “rural problem” and the CLC published its report outlining the plight of rural women, home economists joined in the fight to “modernize” rural households with both technology and education. Home economists were patron saints of technology and hard science. Unfortunately for them, their ideas and ideals were not always instantly embraced by farm women, and they often conflicted with farm

²⁵ Ibid., p. 47

²⁶ Megan J. Elias. *Stir it Up: Home Economics in American Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, p. 10.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 11-12, 21.

²⁸ Elias, p. 27.

women's own ideas of what their role on the farm was and ought to be.²⁹

It is within this conflict of ideals that the American farm woman of the early twentieth century was caught. On the one hand was the agrarian mythology of the Country Life movement, which combined the romance of the outdoors and the satisfaction of hard work with the politically and socially conservative nuclear family ideal in which farming was a family-oriented lifestyle. On the other was the scientific Progressive ideal of the farm as an efficiently run business, with cash profits to improve efficiency through technology, both on the farm and in the home, and a clear delineation between the business of the farm (and the farmer) and the work of the home (and his wife). Between the two was the American farm woman, who conformed to neither ideal and had her own ideas of what was best for herself and her own family. The “experts” of agricultural and domestic science, though they purported to provide for farm women's needs, more often than not were more interested in furthering their own ideas of what farm life was and what it meant than listening to the farm women they were supposed to serve.

Some women realized this. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, though an urban dweller herself and something of a radical, wrote of her outrage regarding the lack of women on Roosevelt's Country Life Commission to *Good Housekeeping Magazine* in January of 1909. She suggested that it was sheer folly to study farm women without them having a say in the matter and insinuated that women were thus being studied as livestock.³⁰ She suggested another commission, this one made up entirely of “experts” in every aspect of domesticity and household management be appointed to supplement the all-male commission by talking to farm women about their “existing conditions.”³¹ But Gilman suggested that

²⁹ Ibid., 57-58.

³⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman. “That Rural Home Inquiry – Why Are There No Women on the President's Commission?” *Good Housekeeping*. Vol. 48, no. 1. (Jan. 1909), p. 120.

³¹ Ibid. p. 120

“at the same time literature of information, attractively prepared, could be circulated.”³² This suggestion indicates that Gilman already thought there was a “rural problem,” despite insisting that farm women needed to be studied and heard, and that rural women needed to be educated by “experts” more than experts needed to hear the voices and concerns of farm women.

Despite adhering to the idea that farm women's only purview was the home, Gilman made some rather radical suggestions as to how rural communities should be arranged. She advocated for clustering farm houses together, with common space in between and large spacious yards, and farmland surrounding the mini-towns. Even for cattle ranchers, she suggested rangeland around the houses, “each owning a pie-shaped piece of a great circle.”³³ With communities arranged thusly, Gilman argued,

"The economic efficiency of such a group would be many times increased. The necessary work now taking all the time of all the women, and poorly done, would be better done in half the time by half the women or less; and the others would be free to take up productive labor of any kind preferred; such as raising flowers or fruit, the preservation of fruit and vegetables, many kinds of handwork, even some local manufacture. Women so working would not only lead easier and happier lives, but would add to the wealth of the world, and incidentally, to the economic well-being of their own families."³⁴

Here Gilman seems to advocate for cooperative housework, as well as cash-producing farm-home industries, both agricultural and craft.

In other ways, Gilman was much less radical. She suggested that, “[t]he pre-eminent business of

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, p. 121

³⁴ Ibid. p. 122.

women, as women, is improvement of the human stock” and that farm women should look to “race improvement” when rearing their children.³⁵ Here, she clearly agrees with Roosevelt and his Commission on the role of farm women as saviors of the race and breeders of good “human stock.” For all her contention that farm women should not be treated as livestock, Gilman makes that connection in the same essay. Her article, though important in its advocacy for the inclusion of women in the commission survey, clearly reflected the paradox of assumptions about farm women and imposed urban Progressive ideals on farmers, even when they did not necessarily want the “help” that was being offered, as Gilman admitted in her introduction - “Some of the farmers have been heard from, rather resenting this commission, and suggesting that they are as well able to look after their own homes, children and female relatives as are any other men.”³⁶

In reaction to Gilman's essay, *Good Housekeeping* formed the Good Housekeeping Commission, which in conjunction with several other rurally-focused periodicals, intended to survey farm women all over the country. In addition, articles regarding farm life were published for the first few months. Professor Charles W. Burkett published an article entitled, “What the Farm Home Needs” in the February, 1909 issue. In it, Burkett argued that the isolation so many insist is standard for rural living was vastly overstated and that better roads, rural mail delivery, telephones, and increased leisure allowed plenty of time for visiting in the off season.³⁷ He agreed that women were overworked and that giving the heavy labor of production work such as dairy or butter-making over to men and mechanizing other heavy work such as laundry would lighten women's loads. He also advocated for music, literature, magazines, and visiting as methods of alleviating drudgery and isolation.³⁸ But what Burkett failed to admit is that as a man, he had not done the work of women on farms. He seemed to confine his

³⁵ Gilman, p. 121.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 120.

³⁷ Burkett, p. 148.

³⁸ Burkett, p. 149.

assumptions to the more middle-class portions of farming, perhaps even to the Northeast, judging by his insistence that better roads and telephones made isolation a thing of the past, for roads were not good everywhere nor could all farmers afford telephone service.

In the same February, 1909 issue, the editors of *Good Housekeeping* advocated for support of the “Davis bill,” which advocated for education reform in regards to home and agricultural education. They also again mentioned the inquiry, but did not necessarily endorse all of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ideas, stating, “While we cannot subscribe to all details of her plan, nor indorse [sic] her every word, we feel her criticism to be a just one.”³⁹ On the next page, the editorial took an interesting tack by insisting that rural life is not as bad as the CLC suggested - “Herein another blunder was made by the president in the implication that conditions on the farm are particularly unfortunate. The farmers live better by far than members of most of the corresponding classes in the cities.”⁴⁰ Whether this is the voice of real farm women or merely the opinion of urban editors is unclear.

In March again a related article appeared, “Inspiring Examples of Rural Uplift,” by Katharine Wyman, which simply listed some of the achievements of rural women around the country, such as the creation of rest rooms in towns in Nebraska or the rug-making industry of women in New Hampshire.⁴¹ Deerfield, MA was held up as an example of “rural uplift” via the reform of its high school, which brought local families and clubs together that had previously been at odds.⁴² Once again *Good Housekeeping* took a decidedly positive stance regarding the “rural problem,” perhaps even one of denial. Why? One can only surmise that the editors did not deem radical agrarian reform as beneficial to their primarily urban readership. Or perhaps that they simply preferred to emphasize positive gains

³⁹ Editorial. *Good Housekeeping*. Vol. 48, No. 2 (1909): 218-219.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 219.

⁴¹ Katherine Wyman. “Inspiring Examples of Rural Uplift.” *Good Housekeeping*. Vol. 48, No. 3 (March, 1909), p. 293

⁴² Ibid., 289.

instead of reprinting the complaints of farm women.

A few other related articles appeared in the following months, but by the end of the year little was said about the survey. In July of 1910 *Good Housekeeping* finally revealed the results of the inquiry, which was tucked away in a small article near the back of the magazine (instead of near the front as the first few articles). It consisted almost entirely of the positive gains specific individual Progressive farm women or communities had made, much like Wyman's article and unlike the CLC report, which focused primarily on the problems facing farm women. A mere page and a half long, the report scarcely did justice to the hype the editors gave the survey the first few months of 1909.⁴³

This lack of consistency and interest could be interpreted less as a lack of support for farm women and more as support of and interest in the solutions offered by urban Agrarian and Progressive ideas and ideals. For *Good Housekeeping* was read by a primarily urban audience, and judging by other articles written on new methods of child-rearing and rather faddish health foods, a Progressive-minded audience. Though it had a primarily urban readership, the fact that the much-touted report fizzled at the end and failed to address real concerns made by real rural women further illustrates the complex relationship urban reformers had with rural women. The report said little about the lives of everyday women in rural areas, but the public protest from women regarding the CLC report led to another survey.

In 1913 the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) came up with a survey in response to the *Good Housekeeping* charges that women were not adequately represented by the CLC report. The USDA chose to survey 55,000 crop correspondents (farmers who would gather crop data from other farmers their region and report back to the USDA) and their wives – a rather Progressive and economically comfortable demographic and thus not particularly representative of the national

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“Home Science in the Rural Districts.” *Good Housekeeping*. Vol. 51 No. 2 (August, 1910), p. 143-144.

farm demographic. Nevertheless, the four resultant reports, “Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women,” “Domestic Needs of Farm Women,” “Educational Needs of Farm Women,” and “Economic Needs of Farm Women,” published in 1915, provide valuable first-hand accounts from farm women around the country.

In the reports, excerpts from real women (and men) who responded to the survey make up the bulk of the reports, organized by topic. Each subtopic is headed by interpretation from survey staff. The responses are clearly edited based on topic and some responses are doubled-up in separate reports as they are relevant to more than one topic. Each response is grouped with other responses by region and again by state. Men's responses are prefaced with “A man,” but women's responses are unmarked as they form the bulk of the letters. In the introduction of each report is an explanation of how the survey was executed. Improving upon the 1909 survey, the 1913 survey asked open-ended instead of yes-or-no questions and a month and a half was given for respondents to reply. Interestingly, the introduction notes that as no paper was included for replies, many women replied by writing directly on the cover letter, or writing on scraps of brown paper, indicating that had they included paper the surveyors may have gotten a better response. It also indicates that although they only polled crop correspondents, these farmers were not necessarily wealthy, as paper was clearly dear.⁴⁴

The responses contained within the report are illuminating. Despite *Good Housekeeping's* insistence, most women complained of isolation as a main obstacle to keeping young people on the farm. This response from a woman from New York encapsulates many of the main complaints,

“The hardest phase of country life for the women in my neighborhood is the monotony with no means or opportunity for any social life whatever. 'We are so isolated we can not even go to church on Sunday' they all say to me. The country men do not care for the entertainments and amusements that the towns and cities offer. They meet among

⁴⁴ USDA Report No. 103, p. 6.

themselves at work more than the women can and life is dreary indeed with never an afternoon or an evening spent away from home."⁴⁵

Isolation was common even in the Northeast, as a woman from Pennsylvania also complained of abject isolation which prevented her even from visiting her nearest neighbors, two to three miles away.⁴⁶ In the same vein, another woman from New York indicated that "The more progressive" have home-farm industries such as poultry raising, which brought them "in contact with business people."⁴⁷

Although *Good Housekeeping* insisted that telephones and good roads made isolation a thing of the past, many women (and men) complained of poor roads, particularly in winter, and of expensive telephone service. Here are a few of the quotes from the USDA Reports:

From New Hampshire, "Some think if the Government owned the telegraph and telephone it might reduce the expense and so bring it within the means of more farmers. As it is now in this section all the farmers have to pay \$18 per year in order to have a telephone and then have to pay besides for every message sent. Cheaper telephone service."

From Vermont, "If we could have cheaper telephone rates and longer distance as we had before the present company took it all they would be pleased. Most all had telephones when It was \$15 per year. Then rates were raised to \$18 and only a short distance talk. Many had telephones removed and they miss them much but don t feel able to pay so much."

From New York, "Put the telephone companies under Government control so that service can be furnished at reasonable rates. Eighteen dollars a year is too much. Few feel like paying so much. The

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 11-12.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 12.

⁴⁷ USDA Report No. 103, p. 16.

higher the price the more limited service is given.”⁴⁸

Although these women advocated for government ownership of telephone lines to ensure adequate service, lines remained (and remain to this day) the purview and responsibility of the companies who used them. As for roads, those which served small rural communities were often (and still are) the last to be fixed or updated.

Even in the Northeast, where roads were presumably better than the more sparsely-populated West, loneliness and isolation were problematic. Mabel Lila Wait, although atypical in her status as an unmarried woman without children running her deceased parents' farm, recorded feelings of loneliness and isolation almost daily in her 1901 diary and frequently in her 1902 diary. For Mabel, letters provided the main link to her sister and friends. Although she went to town most Saturdays, no neighbors were within walking distance. Even mail delivery was a long walk from the house, at the crossroads. Mabel often wrote of “waiting for the stage,” meaning waiting for letters. She read and wrote daily. She also wrote of depression she experienced when the stage was late or did not arrive.⁴⁹

Women in the USDA reports suggested using rural delivery as a way of cutting out the middle man in farm production by marketing directly to consumers. But as the USDA survey staff noted, by 1915 weight and postage requirements made such a marketing campaign unprofitable. Instead of asking how to make direct-to-consumer marketing easier and more profitable, however, the report merely dismissed the suggestion as irrelevant once postage laws changed.⁵⁰

Monotony was another major issue, as the woman from New York indicated above. Monotony in these letters almost always referred to housework such as laundry, dishes, cooking, and cleaning.

⁴⁸ USDA Report No. 106, p. 77.

⁴⁹ Susan Ward, ed. *Dear Home: The 1901 and 1902 Diary of Mabel Lila Wait*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

⁵⁰ USDA Report No. 103, p. 75.

This woman from Massachusetts indicated why women's work was so monotonous, "It seems to me that the farmers' wives' work is more laborious than the farmers'. The farmer has one day in seven for comparative rest but Sunday is often the hardest day in the week especially during the summer for the farmer's wife."⁵¹ One farmer later agreed, stating, "I believe in less big dinners on Sundays. Why make a slave of a woman on Sundays."⁵² The farmer's work slowed down in the winter, when crops were in and sold and only animals and machinery had to be attended to. Women's work, as the old adage goes, never ceased. Dusting, laundry, washing dishes, cooking, caring for the children, hauling water, feeding chickens and collecting eggs, all had to be done at minimum weekly (like laundry) but most were done daily. Women's work did slow down somewhat in the winter, as gardens did not have to be weeded, chickens laid fewer eggs, and the field labor of harvest and/or cooking for hired men like threshing crews was over. But unlike farm men, who had leisure time to read and plan next year's crop and mend tools, women's work remained largely the same.

Perhaps because women's work was daily and farm men spent little time in the house during the day, farm women reported that their labor was highly undervalued. From New York:

"The men don't care how hard the women work to do their tasks if only they themselves are provided with food regularly and their own comfort is looked after. The fact that women are forced to go pump and carry water from the well, that they work in dark poorly lighted rooms, that they mop hardwood floors, take millions of needless steps a year to accomplish their work, because of the way the house is planned, that they spend hours upon hours a year cleaning dirty kerosene lamps and lanterns that give no light after they are cleaned, that their whole house is infested with flies in summer because porches are not screened, all these facts and many more unpleasant conditions matter not

⁵¹ USDA Report No. 103 p. 44.

⁵² Ibid. p. 50.

to the men."⁵³

Carrying water, needless steps in old-fashioned kitchens, and flies were all common complaints. Some women also lobbied for labor-saving devices and complained that men were more likely to fund technology to save their own labor than that of their wives and daughters.⁵⁴ In fact, women of all backgrounds complained that farm men gave more thought to the health of their farm animals and the efficiency of their own work than that of their families and wives. Others, however, knew that most labor-saving devices were out of their financial reach.⁵⁵ Despite this fact, pressure from urban Progressives to adopt home technologies as the solution to women's labor woes continued. In *Entitled to Power*, Katherine Jellison evaluates early twentieth century advertisements geared toward women. Rather blatant by today's standards, many of these advertisements questioned women's fitness as wives and mothers as a way to get them to buy supposed labor-saving devices.⁵⁶ But the USDA reports indicate that some women, at least, were skeptical of new household devices. Several women called for government-produced reports on all brands and machines for the home, evaluating their effectiveness relative to cost.⁵⁷ In essence, these women were asking for government-sponsored version of *Consumer Reports*. Periodicals like *Good Housekeeping* did offer reviews of products, but as the same magazine issues might also include advertisements for the same products, the reviews were not quite as reliable as those that would have come from government sources. And some women had reason to be skeptical. Some wrote that they had purchased such items as charcoal-powered irons which turned out to be

⁵³ USDA Report No. 104, p. 9

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 8-9, 34-45. Katherine Jellison. *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p. 11; Crow, p. 87-88.

⁵⁵ Jellison, p. 22-23.

⁵⁶ Jellison, p. xxi.

⁵⁷ USDA Report No.106, p. 23.

useless.⁵⁸ When cash was scarce in the household, as it often was on farms, wasting money on ineffective products was doubly disappointing.

Women who could convince their husbands to buy them labor-saving devices were not uncommon, but neither were they the norm. Numerous primary sources, including the 1909 CLC report and the USDA reports indicated that many farm women still operated their households in the same way that their mothers, or perhaps even their grandmothers had. The onerous task of carrying water was especially hated. On many farms, water pumps were located near the barn to be convenient for watering livestock. But that distance meant that women who did not have indoor plumbing or conveniently located water sources had to haul all of the water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and bathing. Some women did have husbands or older sons who would haul water for them, particularly for special tasks such as laundry, but it seems that the bulk of women had to haul it for themselves.⁵⁹ Not long after her parents died, Mabel Lila Wait wrote, “I did quite a washing and brought and emptied all the water myself. Got kind of tired.”⁶⁰ The “all the water myself” indicates that this was not a common chore for Mabel. Perhaps her mother had done the water hauling, but at her age and with their economic status it was unlikely. More likely that a hired man or her brother hauled water for her. With higher standards of cleanliness advocated by urban sanitation reformers, keeping farmhouses clean was even more difficult than keeping urban houses clean, even when technological assistance was similar, due to the simple fact that farms were dirtier than most urban areas.

Indoor plumbing was one of the main improvements advocated for by both rural women and reformers. Not only did it greatly reduce women's physical labor, it made it far easier to keep sanitary conditions within the house. If plumbing was being installed for milk rooms or for livestock,

⁵⁸ United States Department of Agriculture. *Report No. 104: Domestic Needs of Farm Women*. Washington: Government Printing Office (1915), p. 30.

⁵⁹ Jellison, p. 11; Crow, p. 87-88; Ward, p. 34; USDA Report No. 106, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Ward, p. 34.

connecting the house as well was particularly encouraged.

Women also complained of the added burden of cooking for and cleaning up after hired farm hands, some of whom were perhaps not worth the wages which were being paid to them (and not to women).⁶¹ On a related note, some women questioned the value of expanding farm production because it often brought increased labor on their part. Especially when farm-home industries run by women brought increased farm profits, when extra land was purchased or more crops were put in, women saw little or no recognition for their efforts, monetary or otherwise.⁶²

Some women did get help from their husbands or other male family members. One example was Mabel Lila Wait. The youngest of three, Mabel lived on a rather wealthy dairy farm in northern New York state in the 1900s and '10s. When both of her parents died, she successfully lobbied her brother, who wanted to sell the farm, and her older sister to let her buy the farm herself. She kept a diary starting with the death of her father in 1901 and recorded her trials and tribulations in short, daily entries. As mentioned above, she complained of hauling water by herself to do laundry, which implies that previously either a male relative or hired man or possibly her mother did the water hauling before.⁶³ Although she did not do the milking on the dairy farm, she frequently made butter and sent it to the creamery with the milk. One day, however, Mabel wrote, “The milk was so thick they wouldn't take it at the factory so the boys had to churn it at home.”⁶⁴ Mabel frequently refers to “my butter jar” when sending butter to the creamery, so presumably churning such a large amount of milk into butter was a big enough job that the men did it instead of her. Toward the end of her diaries, written in 1901 and 1902, she writes of getting help with the dishes from each of her two suitors (on separate

⁶¹ USDA Report No. 106, p. 9.

⁶² USDA Report No. 106, p. 10-11; Casey, p. 70; Neth. p. 59.

⁶³ Ward, p. 34

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 88.

occasions, of course).⁶⁵

Another farm woman, Caroline “Carrie” Knight Morrison Somers of Vermont, also received aid from her husband. Her children report that when it came to the garden, “Dad planted the big stuff—peas, beans, corn, squash, potatoes, and cucumbers. Mom planted the beets, greens, lettuces, radishes, tomatoes, and string beans.”⁶⁶ Author Lorna Quimby goes on to write, “That is to say, Lee planted the beans that were dried for baking. Carrie prepared her garden herself, digging out the sods, because a wall came too close to her plot for plowing with the horses.”⁶⁷ That last part is important. It indicates that although Carrie received assistance from her husband in planting, he did all the planting that could be done with horse-drawn machinery on a large scale, while she did the more labor-intensive, smaller-scale crops.

Carolyn Sachs, in her article, “The Participation of Women and Girls in Market and Non-Market Activities on Pennsylvania Farms,” writes of a Pennsylvania woman who received garden help from her husband who prepared the soil and planted corn and beans with a mechanized planter. However, he did not assist with the harvest or preservation of the produce.⁶⁸

In addition, a woman from Delaware responding to the USDA survey wrote,

“The duties of women have greatly changed within the past 10 years, the labor having been transferred to men. This is especially true of dairying since milk is being shipped to the larger cities. Women do little or no milking and even where butter is made men do most of the work and in the matter of making clothing for both men and women this in

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 130.

⁶⁶ Lorna Quimby. “Far From Idle: An Early 20th Century Farm Wife Makes Do.” *Vermont History*, Vol. 72 (Summer/Fall 2004), 168.

⁶⁷ Quimby, p. 168.

⁶⁸ Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, ed. *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988, p. 130.

recent years is nearly all made in the cities and towns. This also applies to bedding of all kinds. The wife of a tenant farmer when asked why she had no sewing machine replied that she could buy ready made clothing and bedding cheaper than she could buy the raw material.”⁶⁹

Here, dairying and butter-making are no longer the purview of the farm wife, but instead have been monetized by male heads of household, possibly in reaction to increased grain and livestock production in the west. This transition is linked hand-in-hand with the industrialization of textile production and even home sewing. Despite this evidence, it is clear that although men did assist women with some household tasks occasionally, women performed the bulk of household labor alone.

Jellison indicates that women who were more educated than their husbands were more likely to own household devices than those who were not.⁷⁰ Education was important both to rural women and the urban progressives who thought to reform their lives. In New York, the New York Agricultural College (later Cornell University) in Ithaca became one of the forerunners of rural adult education, issuing *Reading Courses for Farmers* (later, *Reading Courses for the Farm*) and at the request of farm women, issued *Reading Courses for Farmer's Wives*, which later became the *Homemaker's Bulletin*.

For farmers, these bulletins were full of scientific advice on the best methods of care for livestock, dealing with crop pests, marketing goods, and the best methods for building barns and other outbuildings. A survey of some of the farmer's bulletins that deal with traditionally women's farm work, such as poultry, canning, and butter-making, reveals a complete and total absence of women from the literature. The issue, “Picking, Storing, and Marketing Fruit” makes no mention of women in the text,

⁶⁹ USDA Report No. 103 p. 17.

⁷⁰ Jellison, p. 40.

but does include a single photograph of a woman and a man sorting fruit in the orchard.⁷¹ This absence indicates that the agricultural scientists at Cornell wanted to professionalize these tasks by taking them out of the hands of women and putting them into the hands of men in an effort to increase production and make more money.

Women's bulletins, however, frequently mentioned men. 1903's "The Kitchen Garden" advocated for assistance from men and children in planting, weeding, and harvesting food from the kitchen garden. Author John Craig asserted, "The housewife cannot undertake it alone. She must enlist the interest and sympathy of husband and children."⁷² He went on to suggest that children be given a share of the garden's profits for their labor, indicating that in addition to feeding the family, garden truck was meant to be sold.⁷³ Craig also suggested that gardens be arranged in long strips, so that they could be plowed and cultivated with horse-drawn machinery, instead of by hand.⁷⁴ This would of course make it far easier for the farmer to assist his wife in the garden, as such machinery-related assistance took little effort on his part.

1904's "Farm Home Industries" outlined many of the same "industries" covered by "Reading Courses for the Farmer." Here, women were encouraged to "become a manager, and assume the responsibility of the farm."⁷⁵ The unnamed author insisted that,

"Many women are looking toward farming or some home industry as a healthful means of making a living in place of teaching, or of clerical work. Here is a great opportunity

⁷¹ Albert E. Wilkinson "Home-Garden Planning." *Cornell Reading Course for the Farm*. Vol. II, No. 34. (Feb. 1913), p. 73.

⁷² John Craig. "In the Kitchen-Garden." *Cornell Reading Courses for Farm Wives*. Vol I. No. 4 (Feb. 1903), 67-68.

⁷³ Craig, p. 68.

⁷⁴ Craig, p. 63.

⁷⁵ "Farm Home Industries." *Cornell Reading Courses for Farm Wives*. Vol. II No. 9 (Feb. 1904), p. 161.

for woman's talent and executive ability. She needs to employ manual labor, but so does the farmer if he carries on much of a business. Let her furnish the ability to plan, to save, to drive, to 'take time by the forelock,' and to get someone else to lift the beehive, climb the ladder, and hoe her garden. The latter labor is cheap; keeping the farm accounts and learning when to do things to advantage is a rarer accomplishment, and one which she may master.”⁷⁶

Although the unnamed author supports women's involvement in the business of farming, the business-oriented ideal inserts itself again, for women were to be managers of manual labor, instead of saving money through their own free labor, as so many farm women did and had done for decades. Where the start-up capital to hire labor outright will come from is not mentioned, nor where such “cheap” labor is to be had, as five years later the CLC report complains of farm labor shortages and nearly non-existent household labor. The article itself made note of such a paradox, for when it asserted that the money made from these “farm-home industries” could be used to pay someone else to do the washing, then admitted that, “The trouble is that sometimes she [the farm woman] raises the strawberries and does the washings besides.”⁷⁷

The majority of “Reading Courses for Farm Wives” were focused on household-related issues, with the exception of the above bulletins. In 1911, the “Reading Courses” reemerged as “Cornell Bulletins for Homemakers.” This change encapsulates the shift between the 1900s and the 1910s of how rural reformers viewed the role of women on the farm. The name change is also illuminating. During that same time, the “Reading Course for Farmers” changed to “Reading Course for the Farm.” Not only were women now excluded from the business of “the Farm,” but they were also no longer entitled to reading courses and were instead issued bulletins, a shift that suggests a much more top-

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 162.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 163.

down method of education. With the exception of some business-oriented bulletins on canning for market and with several in 1919 about managing household accounts, the vast majority of these bulletins focused on cooking, flower and vegetable gardening, and household tasks such as cleaning and sanitation, furnishing and arranging the home efficiently, and managing childcare. Unlike the farmer's courses, there are no bulletins whatsoever regarding butter production, poultry and egg production, or effective marketing techniques for farm-home products, despite overwhelming evidence that women regularly engaged in these businesses. In addition, the women's courses and bulletins were almost always significantly shorter than those issued for men. This discrepancy may reflect a complexity of the issues presented, but was more likely indicative of the importance placed on the topics at hand and the importance and intelligence of those reading them.

Mabel Lila Wait, like many other farm women, frequently engaged in business. As the purchaser of her deceased parents' dairy farm (against her brother's wishes), she managed the farm on her own until she later married. Although she did not write of household accounts, she did mention selling eggs, hams, veal calves, and vegetables in town, as well as butter and milk to the creamery. "I did my trading," she wrote of her trip to town on Saturday in September of 1901.⁷⁸ In December she wrote, "Yesterday I got a chance to sell some more turnips and cabbages, so I guess none of them will spoil. Some people are very kind to me," and the next month, "I took down the turnips and cabbage to Mr. Miller's folks and Mrs. Griffith," indicating that she sold to local individuals as well as to the store in town.⁷⁹

Mabel recorded little of her daily life, except to note that she "did up [her] work," or "did Saturday's work."⁸⁰ Occasionally she wrote of harvesting vegetables or of taking produce to town to sell

⁷⁸ Ward, p. 59.

⁷⁹ Ward, p. 73, 81.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 27, 35.

or barter for credit at the country store. She often packed butter and sent it to the creamery with the milk. She kept hens and sold eggs and presumably kept hogs, for she recorded selling hams at one point.

Mabel's life was both typical and atypical. As was typical of many farm women during this time period, Mabel raised poultry, garden truck, and made butter to sell for additional income. With no children to care for, she spent a great deal of her time cleaning, although she did not appear to have a regimented schedule with the exception of Saturdays, when she would clean the whole house early in the morning so she could go to town in the afternoon. With no one else living in the house, she often had a lot of free time, which she spent primarily in reading, writing letters, doing small chores like baking cakes or repairing clothes, and going on long walks. Occasionally she would interact with other people her age, such as taking the train to the next town, attending sugaring off parties in late winter or going berrying in the summer.⁸¹

Mabel had the leisure time so many experts were calling for, particularly in the Country Life Movement. Her family's relatively high income are reflected in her devotion to letter writing, reading books and magazines, and going on long walks out in nature. At the same time, she also uses free time to do more mundane work like mend or remake clothing, do "crazy work" (presumably crazy quilting). Her single, childless, head-of-household status, however, was in direct contradiction to the Country Life Movement's primary opinion about the role of women in farming communities – that women should be fertile, productive mothers of many stable, conservative children.

The American Country Girl also advocated for free time to devote to reading and leisure, listing accounts from young women, primarily from economically better-off families, who frequently engaged in reading and leisure time. Other young women from poorer or more old-fashioned families craved or

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 31, 110.

complained of a lack of adequate reading materials, citing ignorant parents or poverty.⁸² Professor Burkett in his *Good Housekeeping* article outlines reading as only one of the many leisure activities rural women should be able to enjoy.⁸³ Unfortunately for Professor Burkett, despite his insistence that rural people should have plenty of down time, there were more rural families like that of the poor girls wanting to read than those of the wealthier girls who had few responsibilities and ample leisure time.

For women like Mabel, the calls for community organizing amongst women may or may not have worked. Many of the solutions suggested by the Country Life Commission report and the USDA reports included community organizing amongst women. Business-oriented clubs like canning clubs, educational groups like Cornell Reading Course discussion groups, and leisure groups like those organizing musical concerts or community lectures were all suggested as ways to not only alleviate the isolation of farm women but also to help ease the burden of their labors. The most interesting facet of that last aspect was the support for innovative cooperatives. Cooperative creameries were already common by the 1900s and cooperative grain storage was not far behind. In some communities, cooperative laundries had been instituted at creameries, where there was running hot water and steam.⁸⁴ Women who answered the USDA survey also advocated for cooperative housekeeping, cooking, bakeries, cooperative housing for hired help, poultry hatcheries, canneries, butchering, ice-buying, marketing of farm goods, and cooperative production.⁸⁵ As Katharine Wyland wrote in *Good Housekeeping*, some women even instituted cooperative craft groups, where women made and jointly sold handicrafts.

These ideas were popular among farm women – they were low or no-cost, alleviated labor

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Crow, p. 79.

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Burkett, p. 149.

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USDA Report No. 103, p. 61; Jellison, p. 37

⁸⁵

Ibid., p. 61-65.

burdens, and provided opportunities for socializing. But these ideas were not in line with what urban progressives and other “experts” wanted for rural communities by the 1910s. The emphasis had shifted from farming as a family lifestyle to farming as a cash-based, male-headed business with women relegated to the home. Despite pleas from farm women for low- or no-cost solutions to their inefficiently build and arranged homes, labor problems, and advice on organizing, most home economists and agricultural extensions like those at Cornell emphasized purchased technological devices as the sole solution.⁸⁶ Unfortunately for the “experts,” labor-saving devices cost money and even by the 1910s, when farm prices were high, many farms were exceedingly cash-poor.

The shift away from cooperation and organizing was not just on a community level. Within the farm home, “experts” gave advice almost exclusively on household-based tasks. Traditional women's farm tasks performed outdoors (with the exception of flower gardening), were completely ignored. Cooking, cleaning, home decorating, and child-rearing were now the exclusive and only purview of farm women and each woman was supposed to care for each task on her own.⁸⁷

At the same time, “experts” shifted their advice to farmers as well. Previously women and children had been acknowledged as necessary labor for the farm, but by the 1910s, the emphasis had shifted to mechanical aid and hired farm hands. Cooperation regarding farmers' work, however, continued to be supported, primarily through cooperative creameries and later cooperative grain elevators and mills to help farmers better control supply and thus get better prices for their products.

Some published books, such as *The Healthful Farmhouse*, published in 1909, did offer low-cost ways to improve the sanitation of the home and to save steps. Authors Helen Dodd and Ellen H. Richards, both women with farm experience, suggested simplifying the home kitchen, getting rid of unused household items, and turning “best” rooms like parlors and guest rooms into those for everyday

⁸⁶ Jellison, p. 37, Elias, p. 35.

⁸⁷ Casey, p. 49, 59.

family use.⁸⁸ Dodd and Richards also encouraged simplifying meals, “The most conventional customs cling to the table. Farmers who wouldn't drive a horse too hard expect pie three times a day,” as well as cleaning routines, “the mother is likely to say to herself, 'I don't believe the men folk know whether I swept that room or not.' And the probabilities are they don't.”⁸⁹

On the other end of the spectrum, Martha Foote Crow, author of *The American Country Girl*, published in 1915, advocated extensively for technology as the savior of the American country girl and one of the main methods of encouraging young women to stay on the farm. In chapter eleven, titled, “The New Era,” Crow outlined a dizzying array of utensils that every kitchen should have, advocated for a card catalog to inventory household items, and recommended that every household own a “dissecting microscope,” in addition to more conventional suggestions like indoor plumbing and linoleum floors.⁹⁰ At the same time, Crow recorded accounts of dozens of farm girls from all over the country, some from middle-class or upper-middle-class farming families, and others living in near-
abject poverty, doing the work of their deceased mothers. (TBC)

While home scientists were pushing women back indoors, some farm women were lobbying for increased freedoms, such as a share of farm profits or at the very least control of the profits from their own labors, control of the account books for the whole farm, and even wages for housework.⁹¹ A few “experts” supported some of these ideas as they saw them as methods for keeping young people on the farm and as fair in comparison with city wages. For instance, in *The American Country Girl*, Crow advocated for girls to have a share in the profits of their labors, much in the way farm boys were given

⁸⁸ Dodd, p. 2-3, 18, 45.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 64-65.

⁹⁰ Crow, p. 130-133.

⁹¹ USDA Report No. 106, p. 10-11, 17.

livestock and allowed to raise and sell as they saw fit.⁹²

By the 1920s reform emphasis had shifted almost entirely to technology as the solution to the “rural problem.” As the Cornell bulletins illustrate, the focus of reform for women had placed them firmly in the role of homemaker, and only homemaker. At the same time as these experts were ignoring women's calls for low-cost solutions, cooperatives, and farm business advice, they did listen to a few pleas that made a lasting, positive impact on farm women's lives.

First was sanitation. Several women in the USDA survey called for information on germs and sanitation. The promotion of indoor plumbing and running water by rural reformers greatly alleviated the labors of those who could afford it as well as increased the health and sanitation of farms with poor wastewater disposal (dry sinks, dumping laundry water in farm yard) and toilet facilities. Advice on the science of sanitation was hit or miss. For instance, 1909's *The Healthful Farmhouse* gives advice on avoiding “impure air.”⁹³ But Cornell bulletins on canning stress sanitation to prevent the propagation of bacteria, which according to a rather sensationalized *Good Housekeeping* article, can kill. Martha Foote Crow urges women to treat their kitchen utensils the same sanitary way that creameries treat theirs.⁹⁴

Second was education. Rural men and women called for farming and agricultural science to be taught to young people in order to keep them on the farm, and land grant colleges with agricultural programs were the reformer's answer. However, this professionalized the field instead of making agricultural science more readily available to young people such as at the elementary or high school level. Reading courses and Cornell and USDA bulletins also helped educate farmers and their wives on the latest techniques and science behind farming. However, by the 1910s women's bulletins, already heavily domestic, shifted almost entirely to homemaking, as the profession of home economics opened

⁹² Crow, p. 183.

⁹³ Dodd, p. 50-51.

⁹⁴ Crow, p. 138-139.

educational doors for reform-minded urban women. Unlike published books, these bulletins were almost always free, and offered educational opportunities to rural men and women who might not otherwise be able to afford them.

Finally, the rural reform movement did bring much-needed attention to the issue of women's labor in the home and on the farm. However, the result of this attention, instead of empowering women's work in the business of farming instead confined them to the world of the household.

This shift had an impact on farming in general. As children and women were no longer encouraged to be part of the farm labor force, farmers increasingly hired hands and were caught in a sort of catch twenty-two. In order to hire hands, farmers had to earn more cash income from their operations, but in order to earn more cash they had to expand operations, which meant hiring more hands. The same could be said of where farm profits went. As more than one woman indicated in surveys, farmers often put most or all profits back into farm equipment or land or livestock, and women were left to support their families on farm-home business cash or by gardens and chickens alone.⁹⁵

This shift to a cash-based business helped move farmers away from diversification and toward monocropping, which in turn helped create modern agribusiness post-war. The businessification of American conventional farming has continued up until the present day, but there currently exists a sustainable farming movement, partially born out of nostalgia for the farming of yore, which of course is never historically the same as the nostalgic remember it. One thing common thread between early twentieth century farming and the modern sustainable farm movement, which is currently attracting many young people (especially women) who reject many aspects of modern urban and suburban life, is the value of nature and the outdoors. Mabel Lila Wait, survey respondents, and the Country Life Movement all indicate that closeness to the natural world and work outdoors (and conversely, distance from urban pollution, crowds, and squalor) were highly valuable aspects of farming life. Even in this,

⁹⁵ USDA Report No. 106, p. 10-11.

however, farm women were discouraged. With the exception of flower gardening and some vegetable gardening, outdoor farm work was verboten in the ideal home economist's world. But it was this connection to the outdoors which drew many non-farmers to farming and kept families on the farm.

Home economics and other urban experts in the early twentieth century attempted to help solve the “rural problem” with the best of intentions, but also with serious biases and set ideas about what farm life ought to be. These ideals were often in conflict with the requests and suggestions of real farm women who were caught between the nostalgic romance of the Country Life Movement and the science and technology of the agricultural and domestic science movements. Each ideal was adopted and adapted by each woman as she saw fit, but innovative ideas these women had about how to change and better farming practices were often ignored by the rural reform establishment. We can only wonder, if those women's ideas had been embraced and cultivated, if housekeeping cooperatives and farm-home businesses had been touted as solutions to the “rural problem,” what might today's farming look like? Would the United States be the same nation it is today? Would we still be a nation of farmers if the focus of farming had not shifted from family labor and subsistence lifestyles to single-earner employer businesses? Would agriculture today be where it was if these women's suggestions and desires had been taken seriously and implemented?

We will never know, but perhaps by understanding how and why modern agriculture came into being and what role women played in this pivotal time period in American agricultural history, we can better visualize the future of agriculture in America and where it might go.

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