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OUR PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE AS WOMEN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMISTS

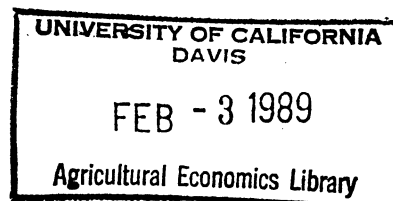
by

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As a woman who is an agricultural economist, I, of course, have links to the past; I am here at present, but I am most interested in our future. Food and its consumption in the household have long been the province of women in almost all societies, and so it was that women were employed to deal with food consumption and contiguously all consumption-related and household-related subject areas both in departments of agricultural economics and in the Department of Agriculture in what is now the U. S. Economic Research Service--in the latter, as far back as the 1930s. (The Home Economists had been employed in Universities since the beginning of the century.)

Stanford University employed them in the Food Research Institute in the 1930s. Women who were economists were employed in women's colleges, by the U. S. government agencies, and occasionally by major universities during that period. Three notable examples were Lucy Stebbins who came to the University of California at Berkeley to teach social economics in 1910, achieving tenure in 1923 as Full Professor, and Jessica Piexotto and Emily Huntington who were Full Professors in the Economics Department of the University of California at Berkeley in the 1930s. Emily Huntington was my advisor. Margaret Reid was at Iowa but I did not know her until she was at Chicago.



1988

Agricultural economists

In the 1940s, when men were involved in World War II, more women found employment as economists; but they were still relatively few and, outside of the government and Stanford, if I may count the Food Research Institute as a department of agricultural economics, there were none that I could find on record in university departments of agricultural economics.

It was not until the 1970s that the picture changed. The civil rights movement--and of particular interest to us, the women's movement--led to legislation and affirmative action programs and, by 1980, to an increase in opportunities in government employment, in academia, and in agribusiness. But there were other factors that helped as well. More women had discovered and had enrolled as undergraduate and graduate students, for the most part working toward master's degrees in agricultural economics. Enrollments of white males in departments of agricultural economics were declining. The profession itself had changed, and there was a lessened emphasis on traditional farm management.

In 1970 Professor Roger Gray of Stanford, likening farmers to prairie dogs who were in the process of being eradicated and agricultural economists to the black-footed ferret, a member of an endangered species for whom prairie dogs furnished food and shelter, noted that the eradication of the prairie dogs had caused black-footed ferrets to become extinct, but there were more ferrets than ever. The black-footed ferret had mutated. So have we. Agricultural economists were now demand theorists, environmental economists, resource economists, development economists, specialists in international trade, econometricians, et al.

We still have farm management specialists and agricultural economists who analyze agricultural commodity data, farm income data, and other data that provide the basis for agricultural policy, but women have largely entered the nontraditional areas (Offutt, 1984).

To conclude, the future for women as agricultural economists, despite the decline in farm numbers, is bright; but, for the most part, opportunities will be in the nontraditional expanding areas, i.e., development, international trade, etc., all of which require a strong grounding in econometrics and economic theory.

References

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- Offutt, Susan E. "Training Agricultural Economists: Are Women Different?" In Opportunities for Women in Agricultural Economics. Symposium presented at American Agricultural Economics Association Annual Meetings, Logan, Utah, August 1-4, 1982.