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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR

WOMEN IN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

[By Vivian Wisner, National Economic Analysis Division, Economic Research Service, USDA]

As the United States has been looking forward to 1976, its Bicentennial Year, there has been increasing interest in the role that various groups have played in its history. Only the high points can be touched and certainly this is true of the role of women in our agricultural development. They came, among the first settlers, they toiled, and died.

The ratio of men to women was a particularly crucial one in early Virginia history. In 1619, the "brides' ship" brought 90 young women "of good character" who were to become wives of men who paid 120 pounds of tobacco to cover the cost of their transportation. All were married within a few months.

Travel accounts of the American colonies were numerous. One such description of agriculture in 1625 in the Dutch colony of New Netherlands (New York), told of the men spending their time hunting and the women doing the rest of the work, "tilling the soil, etc."

Almost from the beginning, agriculture developed unevenly. Farm holdings were both large and small, and while some owners had indentured servants, others had slaves, or hired workers. Many women labored along side of the men, and some headed large households. One such fortunate young lady, Eliza Lucas Pinckney has been credited with initiating the indigo industry in South Carolina in 1739. She not only experimented with processing the indigo but raised seed that she distributed among a number of planters. Before long both the colonial government and the British Parliament encouraged indigo production by granting bounties.

The lives of farm women were made even more complicated during times of conflict, when changes in agriculture took place. During the early years of the War for Independence, there were definite shifts from wheat, corn, and other grains to crops that required less heavy work and from very fat to lighter weight animals.

At the time of the American Revolution, 90 percent of the entire population of the new nation lived on farms. Leading gentlemen farmers formed societies to promote agricultural improvement. A few of these continued to operate, but reached only men. Some years later, Elkanah Watson, who promoted the organization of the Berkshire Agricultural Society with its fairs for local farmers, realized the importance of women to the success of such activities. In 1813, a separate section on "domestic manufactures" was set up for the ladies and the

“Farmer’s Holiday” was closed with an agricultural ball. The system was adopted by other groups organized by Watson and elsewhere in the country.

Another activity in which women took part along with the men was the production of silk. Two periods of great interest were the 1830’s to 1840’s and the last decades of the 19th century. It was hoped, that silk production would utilize underemployed women and children. Mrs. Thomas Forman of Rose Hill, Maryland, wrote of baking the cocoons in the oven after she took out the bread. Then she cleaned and “scoured” the parlor after the silkworms but the flower in the carpet “will never be clean again.” Another woman who was involved more deeply was a widow with three children, Sarah Briggs Stabler, of nearby Sandy Springs. She tried to make it a livelihood. She raised the trees, tended the silkworms, processed the cocoons, and reeled the silk. Needless to say the repairs on the fences and buildings had to wait. Women were even more in the forefront in the late 1800’s organizing the Women’s Silk Culture Association in Philadelphia. They cooperated with the Department of Agriculture’s project, distributed mulberry trees, entered exhibits at fairs, and purchased cocoons.

A considerably more important role was taken by women during the Civil War. By this time, in the older parts of the North, it was no longer the custom for women to work in the barn or the fields. But when the men went off to war, the farm journals wrote about women running mowers, reapers, rakes, drills and even plows. They also cared for livestock, milked cows, and made butter and cheese. In spite of the outcry that outdoor labor would degrade them, coarsen their minds, lower their social position, and deform their bodies, they kept up the production and fed the country. In the South, where even a larger percentage of the men were in the army, many farm women did the work required to produce food, while others bore the responsibility of managing plantations.

Although the Department of Agriculture got off to a slow start in 1862, it is interesting that its first report included an article on the “Health of Farmers’ Families.” The second half of the report dealt with “Hardships of Farmers’ Wives,” in which the author wrote that on “three farms out of four the wife works harder, endures more, than any other on the place.” Little consideration was given to lightening her work load or for any other conveniences. The author felt that husbands could and should remedy this situation and that a mother should train her daughters for marriage and her sons in giving their wives proper treatment.

The Commissioner of the new Department of Agriculture, who was interested in rebuilding Southern agriculture, sent Oliver Hudson Kelley on a evaluative trip. Out of this came the idea of a new farmer’s organization. His niece, Caroline Hall, became involved and advocated membership for women. In 1867, seven men met in Washington to organize the Patrons of Husbandry, now known as the National Grange. From the beginning, the family was an important unit. Soon women were holding a number of positions, including treasurer. They also served on many standing committees. Women, such as Mary Anne Bryant Mayo of Michigan, were lecturing and encouraging other women to become more interested in social and educational activities. As the years passed, the importance of Caroline Hall’s work was rec-

ognized and in 1892 the Grange voted to regard her as equal to a founder of the organization.

On the West Coast, Eliza Tibbetts made her contribution by promoting the growth of the Navel orange. In 1873, William Saunders of the United States Department of Agriculture sent her two trees propagated from stock brought in from Brazil in 1870. The Washington Navel orange, as it was called, was a prolific fruit of fine quality, a good shipping fruit. Its medium size trees were more manageable than those raised previously. Scions from these trees gave rise to extensive orchards. For years the original trees sent by USDA were points of historic interest in Riverside, California, one at the head of Magnolia Avenue and the other in the court of the Mission Inn.

Another of the leaders in American agriculture was Mary Elizabeth Lease, a mother of four, who became associated with the Farmers Alliance movement. She moved to Kansas in 1873 and knew first hand the tribulations of the Midwest. Admitted to the bar in 1885, she developed a gift of oratory that she used in support of Union Labor candidates during the 1888 campaign. During the 1890 campaign, she made no less than 160 speeches for the cause including the one "What you farmers need to do is to raise less corn and more Hell." Mrs. Lease stirred up many men. In 1892, one southern paper found "the sight of a woman traveling around the country making political speeches simply disgusting" and "Southern manhood revolts at the idea of degrading womanhood to the level of politics." In another area she was called the "Patrick Henry in Petticoats." But in the silver states she was well received and sometimes made as many as eight speeches a day. There were, of course, many others, clad in faded calico, with skins tanned to parchment, and hands hardened by toil, could talk in meetings and come straight to the point.

It would be interesting but exceedingly difficult to find out whether these women were associated with the Grange or other organizations.

Perhaps some women had gained experience in speaking from not only the National Grange but also from the farmers' institutes that were organized by agricultural societies, state boards of agriculture, state colleges of agriculture or experiment stations. Some state legislatures appropriated funds. Some states had a decentralized program, where the farmers brought their wives. Sometimes men lectured on subjects of interest to women. Almost from the beginning, women lectured to mixed groups on such subjects as food preparation and diet or even on purely agricultural topics. In 1895, the American Association of Farmers Institute Workers was formed. Women were active participants in these meetings. When the proposal was made to have separate sessions for them, some objected, but it passed. A committee was set up to work on women's institutes. However, they faced competition from the Homemakers Association, the increasing number of canning clubs, and the work of the extension home demonstration agents. The institutes were discontinued during World War I.

These various movements were concerned with what was wrong with rural life and with improved production practices and nutrition. In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed the Country Life Commission to study the situation. The report of the Commission the following year discussed women's work on the farm and the fact that "relief to farm women must come through a general elevation of coun-

try life." Such improvement would give women time to participate in vital affairs of the community.

The place of women in agriculture continued to be a topic of discussion and study. A 1911 study of a New York county discussed a number of farms owned or operated by women. When the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting Agriculture held a Rural Life Conference the following year, with greetings from Theodore Roosevelt, one speaker discussed at length problems of loneliness and monotony for farm women that had resulted in many being in mental institutions. The speaker felt that much less had been done to lighten the work of women than men on farms. Martha Van Rensselaer, the well known professor of home economics at Cornell University, went further and said that not just work at home but social and mental improvement was imperative.

At about the same time, a survey by C. W. Thompson and G. W. Warber in Minnesota showed changes in women's work that by today's standards seems ludicrous. The percentage of conveniences introduced were given: oil stoves, 57 percent; furnaces, 15 percent; hard coal stoves, 44; soft coal heaters, 31; washing machines, 33; washing machines run by engines, ten; drinking water in the house, 11; soft water in the house, 63; soft water beside the house, 10. The percentages of farm families purchasing particular types of food included: canned vegetables, 16; fruit, 44; fresh meat, 59; prepared breakfast food, 33. They found that women were working in the fields, doing some of the heaviest work. On the other hand, a study by George Holmes, from USDA's Bureau of Statistics concluded that women's work on the farm was limited to household duties and that they no longer tended the kitchen garden and made less butter and cheese.

Another survey, reported by Secretary Houston in 1913, showed that women wanted appliances that would lighten their work, assistance in home management, and a women's bureau. Again, they complained of isolation. Some of these problems were alleviated with the formalization of the extension work following the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914.

Some women were interested in careers in agriculture even before World War I, and attended land grant colleges. California, so Ernest Babcock wrote, had always had a few women students, but the number was increasing in 1914. J. L. Stone at Cornell felt that women agriculture students were at a disadvantage and that the best fields for them were poultry, floriculture, apiculture, small fruits and gardening, or, in other words, professionalizing the lines they had traditionally followed.

Some of the women who attended college and others as well, read Department publications. In 1911, Elizabeth White, daughter of a cranberry grower in Burlington County, New Jersey, read F. V. Coville's bulletin on the experiments of the Bureau of Plant Industry with blueberry culture. They sounded interesting, since she had seen wild blueberries in the fringes of cranberry bogs. Soon she was cooperating with the Department under an agreement for the use of "Whitesbog" near New Lisbon for field tests of blueberries. Several successful varieties were developed there. Work at "Whitesbog" and other places resulted in the domestication, hybridization, and the development of the blueberry as a commercial crop.

The entrance of the United States into World War I drained manpower from the farm and women filled the void. The passage of the Food Production Act in 1917 meant that 600 women were employed as emergency agents in the extension work, principally among women and in the boys' and girls' club work. The following year, there were 1,724 home demonstration workers and 762 boys' and girls' club workers. Moreover, many women and children were picking cotton, picking and packing fruit and harvesting other crops. In fact, some came from nearby towns. They cooperated in the joint U.S. Department of Agriculture—Food Administration drives for increased production and conservation of food. They worked at canning, drying, or otherwise preserving food. They also worked in commercial processing plants.

During the War years, many young women came to Washington to work in the Department of Agriculture or the United States Food Administration. Generally, they were in low grade clerical positions, except for a few in extension work and the library. There was also a sprinkling in scientific bureaus, such as Mary Pennington, who came to head the food research laboratory of the Bureau of Chemistry in 1907. In 1919, she left the Department for a position in private industry that paid about double her salary here. In recognition of her achievements in the field of poultry refrigeration, the Poultry Historical Society elected her to its Hall of Fame in 1959.

Secretary Henry C. Wallace was instrumental in bringing to the Department the first and only woman to head a major agency. When he spoke before the American Home Economics Association in 1922, he announced his intention to expand the home economics work into a new bureau to be led by a woman, Louise Stanley, a friend of the Wallace family, was selected. She had previously been head of the Home Economics Division of the University of Missouri. One of her first actions as chief of the new bureau was to call a meeting of national women's organizations to discuss plans, policies, and fields of research, thereby getting their support from the beginning. Research of the Bureau was given further financial support when the Purnell Act was passed in 1925.

Studies of adequate diets at various levels of living, initiated by Dr. Stanley and carried out under the direction of Hazel K. Stiebeling, were of major importance in departmental planning. In 1933, these diets were modified to meet emergency conditions and published as *Diets of Four Levels of Nutritive Content and Cost and Food Budgets for Nutrition and Production Programs*. They were of special importance since they provided the basis for estimating the food products needed for an adequate diet.

Stanley, Stiebeling, and a host of others inside and outside the Department had long worked through various organizations to change conditions in rural areas. The Women's National Farm and Garden Association had been formed in January 1914. The home economists had joined together in establishing the American Home Economics Association in 1909. In 1918, Anne Evans found that country women were active in many organizations including Parent-Teacher Associations, cooperatives, home makers' clubs, garden clubs, National Congress of Farm Women, and the like. As the farm bureau movement expanded many worked through its channels.

At about the same time that the *Four Levels of Diet* was published, women's rural organizations took an important step forward by organizing the international Country Women of the World. Representatives from over thirty organizations met in London in 1933 to take the final action.

Another organization to strengthen work with and by women is the National Extension Homemakers Council, organized in 1936. It was organized to provide an opportunity for homemakers and home demonstration groups to pool their judgment and experiences for the progressive improvement of home and community life. State councils representing homemakers were organized through the cooperative extension service of the USDA and the land grant colleges. They have centered their attention on such areas as home nursing and first aid, health services, school lunch programs, and continuing health programs.

Women reached another peak in their contributions to farm production during World War II. In many ways, their reaction was comparable with that in World War I, but the war was more extensive and lasted longer. Farm women and girls drove tractors or horse drawn equipment, operated combines, reapers, mowing machines and hay loaders, cared for cattle, and did the chores. Some of the daughters came home for vacation or for the duration to help.

Other women and girls went out from towns and cities especially to help detassel corn, chop and pick cotton, harvest vegetables, and pick fruit. These groups were part of the Women's Land Army. Their members came from colleges, high schools, offices, and homes. They worked for eight or nine hours a day at piece rates or hourly wages of forty or fifty cents. During the period 1943 to 1945 it has been estimated that over a million women were recruited for seasonal work and over 32,000 worked year round, primarily on dairy and poultry farms. Women also worked in food processing plants, many located in rural areas. These canned, froze, and dried food.

The major changes in American agriculture during World War II and the post war years affected the farm home and the life of farm women. Most homes now having running water, central heating, electricity, telephone, radio, television, freezers, and other labor saving appliances. The emphasis on large scale or more specialized production has resulted in many farms no longer keeping a large garden or a cow to provide butter and milk, or poultry.

Nonetheless, farm women and children still work hard, sometimes, for example, running tractors during planting and harvest time, preserving and freezing food, and so on. But they take more responsibility than their mothers could for local schools, cooperatives, farm organizations, churches, and other community activities. It is fitting that their contributions be recognized in this International Women's Year.