

Iowa Farm Women in the 1930s

A Reassessment

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AMERICANS SUFFERED the most severe and prolonged economic depression in their history during the 1930s. America's farm families bore their share of the suffering. For many years, Iowa's rural people endured low farm prices; at times, prices for corn and hogs fell below the costs of production. Farm debts increased and farm families found it difficult to meet their financial obligations. Yet the number of farms remained nearly constant. A large number of farm people probably would have moved to the city if there had been jobs, but the depression kept them in rural areas as redundant, underemployed farm workers.¹

Historians and other scholars of the farm depression of the 1930s have traditionally examined total farm income, paying particular attention to prices paid for basic farm products such as corn and hogs. Historians have also been concerned about the farmer's total purchasing power, the rate of mortgage foreclosures, and hence about the impact of New Deal farm programs. Most historians have not, however, considered the role of farm women.

To understand more fully the farm situation during the 1930s in Iowa—and, no doubt, in other farm states as well—historians need to look more closely at the role of farm women, taking into account the economic roles they played as well as recognizing the social changes that took place in women's lives during that decade. Farm women as well as men shouldered new

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1. Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: An Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis, 1979), 122–23.

responsibilities in the 1930s. Both economically and socially farm women played important roles in supporting and maintaining a farm population that seemed to overreach both labor needs and economic resources. Economically, farm women continued their patterns of production both for consumption and for income. Their contributions were significant for maintaining the kin-based, owner-operated, moderate-scale farm structure that has historically characterized Iowa farm life. During the depression, however, women's production constituted a larger and more significant portion of the household economy. Ironically, while general economic conditions worsened during the depression, many Iowa farm women experienced improved living conditions that diminished the isolation and drudgery of rural life. Improved automobiles, better roads, and especially electricity provided Iowa farm women, along with their families, with something of a social renaissance in the thirties.²

2. We restrict our analysis to women who were married to farmers who managed farm operations as owners, part-owners, or tenants. We thereby exclude from analysis women who were running farms as independent operators or who were hired laborers. In addition to the nuclear family of husband, wife, and children, who were the basis of the household, a number of households also included hired help, grandparents, and other relatives. The majority of Iowa farm families shared a similar European cultural background, having roots in northern or western Europe, the British Isles, or Bohemia (Czechoslovakia). Some of the data for this paper came from interviews with people who lived on Iowa farms during the 1930s. Fink interviewed nineteen women and five men from a rural community in northwestern Iowa in 1982; Schwieder interviewed seven people from central Iowa. An anthropologist, Fink assigns pseudonyms to informants; Schwieder uses actual names, which are recorded in the footnotes. A fuller account of Fink's work is contained in Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change* (Albany, NY, 1986). We also employ census and survey data gathered in the 1930s, extension bulletins and reports, and writings by and about women in the popular farm journal, *Wallaces' Farmer*. By the 1920s, *Wallaces' Farmer* was one of the most widely read and most influential farm journals in the Middle West. In 1932, for example, the publication had a circulation of 244,870 (by comparison, Iowa had 214,928 farms in 1930). Henry A. Wallace, later to become U.S. secretary of agriculture, served as editor from 1921 to 1933. *Wallaces' Farmer* offered a plethora of information and advice to farm women. The journal carried a column (actually two pages for many years) for farm women including articles on domestic activity as well as articles promoting pride in farm living. Many Iowa farm women wrote letters to the woman's page editor expressing their views on all aspects of their lives. The column provided women with a means of communicating with other farm women throughout the Middle West although Iowa women were the main contributors. Through these columns women shared advice on such diverse subjects as

THE ROOTS of the farm difficulties that Iowans experienced in the 1920s and 1930s go back to World War I. That event set up a roller coaster price cycle that resulted in a farm depression ten years before the general economic depression of the thirties. With heavy indebtedness and low farm prices, farm people suffered in relative isolation during the 1920s. Many were forced off their farms. Farm women were particularly disadvantaged as they found themselves isolated on the farms, carrying water and wood and cleaning lamp chimneys while their counterparts in town seemed to be enjoying the leisure of modern homes and the companionship of close neighbors.³

In the 1930s farm women came to a new appreciation of the economic resources available on the farms. A large part of what was consumed within an Iowa farm household in the 1930s was produced on the farm under the direction of women. Women kept large gardens and orchards and dried or preserved the fruits, vegetables, and potatoes for use throughout the year. Butchering entailed packing and processing many jars of meat, rendering lard, and often grinding and stuffing sausage. Farm women baked bread, cakes, pies, and cookies year round. They butchered poultry and gathered eggs for the family table. Many helped milk cows, separated cream, and churned butter for the table and for sale. Most women also made clothing for themselves and their children. They washed, ironed, and mended for the whole family. In addition, they were responsible for the care of children and the nursing of any sick household member.⁴

how to avoid milking cows to ways of making money during the Great Depression. The journal also provided much consumer information on new products such as stoves, washing machines, radios, and food products. Henry A. Wallace was a strong supporter of rural life. Through his editorials he constantly urged farm people to develop a rural culture, separate from that of nearby cities and towns. Wallace strongly supported community clubs, for example, which provided farm people with social outlets. See Dorothy Schwieder, "Education and Change in the Lives of Iowa Farm Women, 1900-1940," *Agricultural History* 60 (Spring 1986), 200-215 for a full discussion of the role *Wallaces' Farmer* played in the lives of Iowa farm women.

3. Leland Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames, 1974). See chapter 15, "The First World War and Its Aftermath." See also Dorothy Schwieder, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s: Conflict and Continuity," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (Fall 1983), 104-15.

4. Fink interviews, 1982. Charles Crim, interview, Ames, Iowa, March 1983; Mildred Erickson Crim, interview, Ames, Iowa, March 1983; Lola Crim, interview, Ames, Iowa, March 1983.

Male hired hands, who remained in rural Iowa in large numbers during the depression, actually increased the work of the household. Clara, born in 1930, told of her mother buying clothing for their hired man as well as doing laundry, preparing food, darning socks, and patching overalls for him.⁵ James Hearst remembered that during the depression his family took back a hired man who had quit several years earlier to work in a factory in Waterloo. The man called up one day and said, "Come and get me. I'll work just for my food. I ain't going on relief." Although the Hearst family already had two hired men, they managed to absorb another.⁶ It was women's work that expanded to provide the food and amenities for this additional member of the household.

Women on the more prosperous farms had hired girls to help them, and older daughters usually assisted their mothers. On the other hand, small children added to the work load of the household without contributing to its support. Large farm households provided labor power for the farming enterprise, and farm women gave birth to significantly more children than did urban women.⁷ In the 1930s this labor power, too, was maintained chiefly through the increased efforts of women, who were responsible for meeting the basic needs of all members of the household.

The economic importance of women's home production for consumption can hardly be overemphasized. Nationally, in farm families of moderate means (just over one thousand dollars of annual income), the value of home-produced goods constituted 45 percent of net family income in 1935-1936.⁸ Anna and her husband Bernard started married life on a farm in 1935 with Bernard working his family farm for his widowed mother. He received thirty dollars per month for the first two years and thirty-five dollars per month for the rest of the 1930s. Because of Anna's home production of food and clothing they were able to

5. Fink interviews, 1982.

6. James Hearst, "We All Worked Together: A Memory of Drought and Depression," *Palimpsest* 59 (May/June 1978), 70.

7. Dwight Sanderson, *Rural Sociology and Rural Social Organization* (New York, 1942), 100.

8. Day Monroe, "Patterns of Living of Farm Families," *Farmers in a Changing World: The Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940* (Washington, D.C., 1940), 850.

save \$136 one of the first years and \$138 a year later. These savings allowed them to buy their own land in 1940.⁹ An Iowa Farm Security survey in 1938 found that of a sample of families receiving Farm Security assistance the average family produced food and fuel at home worth \$352.63, while they spent an average of only \$325.67 in cash. Although the relative proportion of home production to cash expenditures diminished for those farms that had higher agricultural incomes, the input of the farm woman's home production was typically 40 to 50 percent of the total household budget.¹⁰

In addition to the economic contribution women made through their production for home consumption, farm women were also earning cash. Unlike the income of farm men, most of which went for farm debts, women's income was used for the everyday expenses of maintaining the farm household and meeting social obligations. This money was usually kept separate from farm accounts, its allocation being the responsibility of farm women.

Iowa's farm families had diversified operations. Many families had small milking herds. On these farms women and children worked in the dairy enterprises, helping to feed, water, and milk cows. Almost invariably the women separated the cream and washed the milking equipment. The wife would customarily get cream and milk for her needs, and the husband would get the skimmed milk, which constituted the protein for his hog operation. Some farm women sold cream, butter, and cheese to town customers; most women used the products in their home and sold the surplus cream to a local creamery. For small milking operations of four or five cows, the cream check tended to be considered women's money.¹¹

Eggs and poultry were the most common sources of cash income for farm women of the 1930s. Iowa was the nation's leading egg producer from the turn of the century through World War II. These eggs came not from large-scale producers but from

9. Fink interviews, 1982.

10. Mildred L. Stenswick, "Certain Homes Management Practices of 73 Families in Union County, Iowa," *Farm Security Studies* 1 (M.A. thesis, Iowa State College, 1939), 30-38.

11. Fink interviews, 1982.

small flocks.¹² These flocks were augmented by the yearly purchase of five hundred to one thousand chicks for meat and pullets. Women managed these enterprises. Children often fed and watered the chickens and collected the eggs, but a cost-efficient enterprise required careful supervision. While poultry raising was expected of farm women and was not usually considered a technically sophisticated enterprise, it actually entailed a high degree of skill. Women learned the trade first from their mothers and second from extension programs and farm journals. During the 1930s *Wallaces' Farmer* had a regular feature, "The Poultry," which gave extensive information on poultry production.¹³

By the 1930s most chick hatching was done commercially. Farm women purchased day-old chicks from hatcheries. Brooding these chicks, however, demanded close attention. Women started new chicks in the spring in order to have the new hens far enough along to survive and lay well when cold weather came in the fall. But the unpredictable spring weather coupled with the absence of thermostats and, often, electricity made this a difficult, demanding job. A malfunctioning heater or a sudden storm could kill a full brooder of chicks. Even older chicks had to be carefully tended. Hans recalled his wife's poultry enterprise of the early 1930s. "We had it happen too already that we was to church and a thunderstorm come up. . . . If those chicks got wet once they were goners. I know Charlotte [his wife] felt pretty bad about that sometimes. We'd have to stay home all the time, she said. You did all that work and had them that far and then you'd lose them."¹⁴

12. R. L. Baker, "The Growth of Iowa's Poultry Industry," *Iowa Department of Agriculture Year Book, 1945* (Des Moines, 1946), 570; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., 1942), 1: 160.

13. Fink interviews, 1982. The *Wallaces' Farmer* poultry section was a regular, lengthy feature. In 1936 a typical weekly issue had seven page-long columns of information on poultry, twenty-five accompanying advertisements for chicks, and other classified advertisements for started poultry, hatching eggs, and turkeys. See, for example, *Wallaces' Farmer*, "The Poultry," 14 March 1936, 230-31. Some of the advertisements had pictures of women recommending the products. Sometimes the articles would include examples of women's operations and pictures of women doing the recommended poultry work. Although there were also many male experts and allusions to men as poultry managers, this feature was at least partially geared to female readers.

14. Fink interviews, 1982.

Culling the laying flock demanded less time but more skill and intuition. Poultry experts stressed that feeding high quality feed to a laying flock was cost effective. This made careful culling of the "spent hens" more critical. The position of the pelvic bones and the colors of the comb and the feet were among the features to be observed. Some women had their flocks culled professionally, but others used a combination of intuition, extension bulletins, and magazine articles as guides in doing their own culling.¹⁵

Farm women experienced a favorable return on increased time and labor expended on poultry production. Keeping informed on feeding, housing, culling, and marketing was cost effective, as the quality of flock management meant the difference between a net profit and a net loss.¹⁶ In order to cull effectively, one woman who was interviewed spent an entire day in the hen house counting each egg laid and marking each hen that laid an egg. Returns could also be increased by making the extra effort to keep a breeding flock for a hatchery. This meant keeping roosters and carefully collecting and storing eggs for delivery to the hatchery. A few farm women had their own hatching enterprises; this meant tending an incubator and turning eggs. Most women sold live poultry to merchants or dealers in towns, but they could increase their prices by selling butchered and cleaned poultry to local customers. Even for an experienced farm woman, drawing, plucking, and cleaning a hundred chickens was a lot of work.¹⁷

The usual marketing practice was to take eggs and poultry to town and trade them for groceries and dry goods. Merchants gave a slight bonus on eggs if the money was taken out in trade in their stores. Often, no money changed hands. The dealer merely kept a running account of a woman's balance. Some women would develop a surplus in their accounts; less often the merchants would extend credit if the egg money was insufficient for the needed purchases.

Most women did not keep written records of their poultry enterprises, in spite of pleas by the extension service for them to

15. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 8 July 1933, 299, 312.

16. "Poultry Record Report," *Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics* (Ames, 1934), 2.

17. Fink interviews, 1982.

do so. We lack data from a representative sample of enterprises, and the data that are available suggest rather than define the place of poultry in the household economy. We know that during the depression egg prices went as low as eight cents per dozen, which would yield a gross return on egg sales of \$120 to \$150 per flock. A number of poultry raisers across Iowa sent in monthly figures on a printed postcard form provided by the state extension poultry service. These records (which probably represent the more ambitious producers) showed average yearly poultry profits ranging from sixty cents per bird (about seventy-five dollars total) in 1932 to \$1.59 per bird (about two hundred dollars total) in 1938. Mrs. Harry Frakes of Dallas County, a poultry producer featured in *Wallaces' Farmer*, cleared \$2,303.39 on her operation in 1931.¹⁸ She must have been an exceptionally good manager, and her one thousand layers were several times the usual laying flock.

Eggs, poultry, and dairy products, along with the scattered incidence of boarders in farm homes had long been sources of income for women, but Iowa farm women also found novel means of intensifying labor to increase their incomes in the 1930s. *Wallaces' Farmer* ran a contest entitled "Swelling the Family Income" in which women were invited to write to the journal about what extra things they were doing to make money during the hard times. Most common was the direct sale of poultry and dairy products to town customers rather than to dealers. Among other products peddled were tomato, pimento, and celery plants, braided rugs, homemade quilts, Persian cats, canaries, baked goods, and black walnuts. Services offered included sewing and mending, babysitting, and catering meals. Rather than cash sales some transactions involved direct trade for medical or other services, and farm women paid their pastors with farm produce of all kinds.¹⁹

The impact of women's income on farm households can be roughly gauged by available data on money earned and uses of the money. A 1938 study indicated that farm households that used the resources of the Home Management Specialist at Iowa State (probably among the more prosperous farms) spent an av-

18. Iowa State Extension Service, Poultry Record Report (1932), p. 1, and (1938), p. 8; and *Wallaces' Farmer*, 8 July 1933, 299, 312.

19. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 13 May 1933, 220; Fink interviews, 1982.

erage of \$933 on household items, while a sample of families receiving assistance spent \$324.67. In 1935-1936 about one-fourth of the nation's farms had incomes of less than five hundred dollars, and half had incomes of less than one thousand dollars, including the value of the home-produced items, which represented 45 percent of the one-thousand-dollar incomes.²⁰ Thus, an income of one thousand dollars would translate to five hundred fifty dollars in available cash. These figures indicate that a farm woman's income of several hundred dollars would, at the minimum, represent a sizeable portion of the family expenses. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it did more.

Farm people who lived during the 1930s mostly agree that food, clothing, and most household items were bought with the farm woman's money. Alice, born in 1931 on an Iowa farm, said that poultry income was all her family ever had for their household expenses. In fact, when her parents were married in 1922, they lived on her father's parents' farm and did not receive a cent of the farming returns. Their only income was from poultry, which by custom any tenant family was entitled to keep as extra income, separate from the farm books. A 1935 advertisement in *Wallaces' Farmer* pictured a woman surrounded by hens; the caption read, "Farm women can now buy Monarch Ranges out of poultry money—only \$6.25 a month." Not only were women buying the bare essentials with their money, the writer of the advertisement envisioned women buying major appliances with it.²¹

Women's income could also reach beyond the farm household to play a direct part in keeping the capital farm operation running. The 1932 Iowa State Poultry Records Report had on its cover a cartoon of a large hen pulling a small farm truck up a steep hill. The caption read, "Helping the farmer over a bad stretch." Hans said that he used accumulated egg and poultry credit at the grocery store to pay a veterinarian for vaccinating his pigs. According to Hans, no one had money to pay the veterinarian, who had accumulated a bill of four hundred dollars at the store, so he simply transferred some credit as payment. He also transferred

20. Stenswick, "Certain Homes Management," 30; and Monroe, "Patterns of Living," 849-50.

21. Fink interviews, 1982; and *Wallaces' Farmer*, 13 April 1935, 248, and 11 May 1935, 299.

store credit to his mother, who lived in town and received payments from him for the farm property. Other farm people tell stories similar to that of Clara, whose father collected his wife's egg credit money in order to make a down payment on some cheap land in 1938. In these and other instances women's income provided the reserves needed at crucial points for the maintenance or expansion of the farm operation.²² In most of these instances when poultry money was used as farm capital, however, the farm man rather than the woman initiated the action. We have no evidence of women resenting this use of their money.

This summary of Iowa farm women's economic roles during the depression has not touched on the considerable work that women did in direct support of the farm. It would be difficult to assess the varying worth of women's work in picking corn, raking hay, driving horses in the fields, and doing animal chores. In addition, by 1940, 7.4 percent of Iowa's farm women had jobs outside the home.²³ All of this work belonged to the males' sphere, but there are many stories of women doing these and other men's jobs. What is clear is that women's work was central to the farm household of the 1930s.

IMPORTANT SOCIAL CHANGES occurred in the lives of farm women during the 1930s. Historians seeking a more comprehensive view of farm women's life styles need to understand those social changes as well as the economic contributions of farm women. On one hand, farm families carried over many social practices from the previous decade. At the same time, Iowa farm women took part in a larger number of activities outside the home. These were made possible by a number of conditions. First, many Iowa roads were improved during the 1930s, thus allowing rural women to travel to town more often. Second, during the latter half of the decade, many Iowa farm women found their domestic work lightened considerably by electricity. Third, farm women's economic activities provided them with at least a small amount of cash that could be used to hire domestic help or to purchase labor-saving appliances for the home. These ac-

22. Fink interviews, 1982.

23. Computed from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Labor Force* (Washington, D.C., 1943), 3: 11.

tions, in turn, allowed farm women to take part in more organized social activities.

For farm women in the 1930s improvements in farm living were extremely important. During the previous decade, farm women, along with other members of their families, had experienced the social deficiencies of farm living. Throughout the 1920s farm people repeatedly contrasted rural life with town and country life. Town people enjoyed greater cultural, social, and educational opportunities. Perhaps even more obvious, townspeople had a wide range of comforts and conveniences not shared by rural people. Many town families enjoyed electric lights, electric appliances, central heating, and indoor plumbing. At the same time, rural living was often portrayed as dreary and monotonous: advertisements in farm journals urged farm people to take the bleakness out of their lives by buying radios, self-contained lighting systems, and other items that would "bring the city to the farm"; and farm people feared that because of the drawbacks of farm living, rural youths would leave the farm for the city.²⁴

With the coming of the 1930s, however, Iowa farm women experienced important social as well as economic changes. While major social institutions carried over from the previous decade, other aspects of rural life changed considerably, affecting life on and off the farm. The world beyond the farm became far more accessible. Although the percentage of Iowa farm families with automobiles in 1930 and 1940 was identical at 90.2, automobile improvements of the 1930s made them more dependable for country driving. But the most important consideration was the improvement of country roads. In 1925 only 23,909 farm families lived along roads that were either hard surfaced or finished with gravel, shell, or shale. By the end of the 1930s the number of farm families living along improved roads had risen to 121,863, which represented 57 percent of the total number of Iowa farms.²⁵ For farm families greater mobility meant a wider range and a greater number of social outlets and advantages.

Many social activities of rural people carried over from the 1920s to the 1930s. For the most part, the social lives of rural

24. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 11 March 1921, 481, 9 January 1925, 4, and 6 March 1925, 347. See also Schwieder, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s."

25. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., 1942), 1: 119.



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people continued to center around family, church, and school. Rural neighborhoods abounded throughout Iowa. Charles and Mildred, both raised on farms in Boone County in the teens and twenties, recalled that during the 1920s and the first part of the 1930s three distinct neighborhoods existed within their township alone. Each rural neighborhood had its own school and church. One neighborhood, East Marion, had a community band whose members, with the help of other neighbors, raised money and constructed a community hall used primarily for band practices and band performances. Sometimes neighborhood people held dances there. At its peak the East Marion Band contained about fifty members, all of whom were proudly outfitted in white pants, black band jackets, and band caps. The South Marion neighborhood had a church with an active program for its young people. Once a month the young people came together for a social event. At Halloween members always planned a costume party, and in the winter they enjoyed sledding parties. In the summertime young people met on the church lawn for recreation. Mildred and Charles remembered that the young peoples' group was very active, with as many as thirty-five or forty people participating. Rural schools also provided a focal point for rural neighborhoods. Several times each year rural families came together at the local school to attend box socials, spell downs, and picnics. The rural schoolhouse sometimes served as a place for general neighborhood meetings. The rural schools kept people in touch with one another and provided a social outlet for all neighborhood residents.²⁶

The community club was another important rural institution in both the 1920s and 1930s. In 1931 *Wallaces' Farmer* offered a prize of one hundred dollars to the rural community that had been the most active the previous year. Thirty-five communities entered the contest. The Pleasant Ridge Community in Page County won first place. When their old meeting place burned down, residents there raised money to build a community hall that seated 450 people and had a basement and a stage with lighting equipment and scenery props.²⁷ The continuation of such community clubs across the state underscores the role of

26. Charles and Mildred Crim, interview.

27. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 3 January 1931, 5.

rural neighborhoods as important social outlets for local farm people.

Iowa farm women were involved in many other types of club work as well. In 1935 *Wallaces' Farmer* sponsored a contest in which it asked rural women to send in copies of their clubs' yearbooks and to pass along tips for handling club programs. The farm journal offered prizes to the three top yearbooks. First prize went to the Union Township Mothers' and Daughters' Club near Algona. This club was open to any woman in the township and offered a diverse program including book reviews, music presentations, and papers written by members. The club that won second prize, the Hilltop Women's Club of McClelland, had divided its work into two departments, garden and literary. Each group met once a month, and the entire club met quarterly. Literary group subjects included "books, far away lands, religion, and political situations." In addition to their regular meetings, many clubs sponsored special projects: they raised money for charity, gave banquets for their husbands, held mothers' day teas, and assisted at their schools' graduation exercises.²⁸

During the 1930s farm women also took part in extension activities in their counties. By 1930 the Iowa State College Extension Service had seventeen specialists and twenty-four home demonstration agents. Extension officials estimated that the home economics personnel were responsible for holding more than forty thousand meetings throughout the state with an attendance of 187,737 people. In O'Brien County, for example, the first home demonstration agent arrived in the early 1930s, and the number of rural extension clubs multiplied rapidly after her arrival. Farm women not only attended extension meetings; they also served as local leaders, working in cooperation with extension personnel. In 1931, 10,169 rural women served as local leaders. Each year farm women helped select the annual extension project and had the opportunity to attend training schools to develop their leadership roles.²⁹

28. *Ibid.*, 16 February 1935, 98-99. Third prize was won by the Ridge-Leeperton Club, Princeton, Illinois.

29. J. Brownlee Davison, Herbert M. Hamlin, and Paul C. Taff, *A Study of the Extension Service in Agriculture and Home Economics in Iowa* (Ames, 1933), 192-94.

The diaries of farm people offer other evidence of the social activities and mobility of rural women in the thirties. In 1932 Clara Ackerman, a farm woman in eastern Iowa, wrote about many functions that she attended in her rural neighborhood, including church, a PTA meeting at the local rural school, and a bridal shower and wedding for a neighborhood couple; and on Sundays the Ackermans sometimes had dinner with rural neighbors. The Elmer Powers family from Boone County frequently went to town to attend movies or to take the two Powers children to their piano lessons. They also traveled to town for Sunday school, and Mrs. Powers went to town to shop and to attend Farm Bureau meetings. During the summer the Powers family attended many neighborhood picnics. Indeed, a day rarely went by that the Powers family did not engage in some neighborhood social activity or travel to town. Even in the midst of the depression they lived a life that was not too different from the lives of their counterparts in town. The same could not be said about farm families in the 1920s.³⁰

All of these activities of rural women indicate that life outside the farmhouse changed during the thirties, but life within the farmhouse also changed significantly. In 1935 the federal government established the Rural Electrification Association, which was designed to bring electrical power to farm homes. James Hearst recalled the significance of that event for rural

30. Clara Ackerman, Diary, 7 and 13 February, 2 and 13 March 1932, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City; Elmer Powers, Diary, June and July 1931, *passim*, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City. Another perspective is that when farm women lessened their work through the acquisition of labor-saving devices, they gained what today would be termed discretionary time. Some women chose to use that time for reading, joining organizations such as extension clubs, or taking part in recreational activities, but others chose to devote more time to different tasks around the home. In a study of Oregon farm women, Maud Wilson, "The Farm Homemaker's Job," *Rural America* 8 (February 1930), 8-9, found that women whose homes had electricity spent less time on basic tasks such as "clearing away meals, cleaning and washing" and more time on "comfort-beauty aspects of homemaking." Studies of urban women have shown that with labor-saving devices, the time spent doing household work was actually longer since housekeeping standards changed accordingly. See Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The 'Industrial Revolution' in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the Twentieth Century," in *Women's America: Refocusing the Past*, ed. Linda K. Kerber and Jane DeHart-Mathews, 2d ed. (New York, 1987). A more detailed examination of Iowa farm women in this context awaits further study.

people when he wrote, "Farm life took on a new dimension. Not even the telephone changed our way of living, thinking and acting as much as the coming of electricity. This break with the past seemed an entrance to the modern world."³¹ Not all farm families received electricity as soon as the Hearst family, but by the end of the decade, 86,786 farm dwellings, or 40.7 percent of all farm dwellings in Iowa, were lighted by electricity. That number contrasted with 46,042 (21.4 percent) in 1930 and 32,552 (15.3 percent) in 1920.³² Even if all farm families did not have electricity by the end of the thirties, at least with the passage of the Rural Electrification Act there was the promise that things would soon get better. This in itself marked a substantial change from the 1920s.

When farm families did obtain electricity, however, farm life became far more pleasant. In 1937 *Wallaces' Farmer* periodically ran articles about changes that occurred in farm homes after the electric power lines had reached the farms. For an October 1937 article entitled "Servants on the Farm: Electricity in Rural Homes," the journal asked farm women to share the ways they used electricity in their homes. The farm women who responded all agreed that electricity was "the equivalent of a houseful of servants—servants that carry water, sweep rugs, help with washing and ironing and preparing of meals." The women stated that they used all types of electrical appliances from washing machines to stoves to refrigerators. A farm woman from Tama County expressed her appreciation this way: "The good fairy, electricity, has waved her magic wand across my path and now I lead a charmed life. . . . No water to be carried uphill; no waste water to be carried out; no kerosene lamps to be cleaned and filled; no hand scorching sad-irons to be used; no fuel to clutter up my kitchen in pails and boxes; no ashes to be swept up and carried out. . . . It seems too good to be true." A farm woman from Carroll County wrote, "To me, as a farm woman, electricity is an emancipation with the key to leisure."³³

31. James Hearst, "Farm Life When the Power Changed," *Palimpsest* 60 (September/October 1979), 145.

32. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., 1942), 1: 119.

33. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 9 October 1937, 754.

While electricity acted as a "servant on the farm," it also provided the major means of home entertainment. Battery powered radios had been available in the 1920s, but with the advent of electricity, radios were not only cheaper but had wider reception and better tone. The column "Country Air," a regular feature in *Wallaces' Farmer* during the 1930s, was sometimes devoted entirely to schedules of local radio stations. Farm families not only enjoyed music, sports, and comedy shows on radio, but also kept informed on political events and agricultural market conditions.

For many Iowa farm women in the 1930s, electricity had made the great difference. With electrical appliances to lighten their workloads of meal preparation, food preservation, cleaning, and laundering, many farm women had the leisure time, as well as the energy, to join more groups outside the home and to lead a more active social life. By the latter half of the 1930s farm women could enjoy most social and physical advantages enjoyed by town and city women. With the coming of electricity, a farm woman from Dallas County commented, "The farm woman of yesterday envied the city woman for her youthfulness. But now, with our modern homes, I think the city woman may well envy her farm sister."³⁴

The farm woman in Dallas County expressed the sentiments of most farm women, having sensed the blurring of social distinctions between town and country living during the 1930s. At times, country people, with their self-sufficiency in food production, seemed to have the preferred position. Farm people who lived through the period frequently comment, "Well, at least on the farm we had plenty to eat." That was not always the case in town.

34. Ibid. Although many farm people ceased to feel that farm living was inferior to town and city living, not all people changed their view. In his autobiography of growing up in rural northwestern Iowa (*We Have All Gone Away*), Curtis Harnack writes that his mother pushed her children to leave the farm, believing that opportunities were greater elsewhere. Harnack's mother told her children, "Farm work could kill you." Betty Durden, raised on a farm in the 1930s in Jefferson County, sensed a similar attitude in her mother, who believed that farm life was hard and that her children deserved better. Mildred Crim remembered that it was the lifelong dream of her parents to move to town when they retired. Betty Durden, interview, Des Moines, March 1983; and Mildred Crim, interview.

Throughout the 1930s advertisements in *Wallaces' Farmer* reflected the way country people were viewed by outsiders as well as the way country people viewed themselves. Those views contrasted sharply with views expressed through advertisements in the same journal in the 1920s. Throughout the mid-1920s countless advertisements either intimated or stated directly that farm life was less fulfilling and more difficult than town and city living because farm people lacked the conveniences and comforts of urban life. Country living, the ads proclaimed, was monotonous and dreary. Advertisement after advertisement proclaimed that farm people should adopt all types of consumer goods so that they could "bring the city to the farm." By the 1930s advertisements in *Wallaces' Farmer* no longer contained comparisons between town and country living. Instead, ads for consumer items were placed totally within the context of rural society. In 1931 the Maytag Company ran advertisements for washing machines which read, "All Work and No Play is Not for the Farm Woman of Today. . . ." and "Big Farm Washings Cost Less with the Maytag." Four years later, the Monarch Range Company ran a series of advertisements in *Wallaces' Farmer*. Instead of telling farm women they should imitate town women and purchase the stoves to make their lives more comfortable, the advertisements made a direct appeal to farm women to purchase the stoves for their *own* comfort and convenience.³⁵


Other articles in *Wallaces' Farmer* also touched on the changes that had taken place since the 1920s. Throughout the twenties, almost every issue of *Wallaces' Farmer* contained one or more articles on ways that farm people ought to change their way of living to improve rural society. Henry A. Wallace wrote numerous editorials expressing the view that rural people should work to develop a distinctive rural culture. Supporters of the Country Life movement of the early years of the century had offered a plethora of ways in which rural society should be improved, including both economic and social changes. Articles on the woman's page in *Wallaces' Farmer* often proposed that farm

35. Schwieder, "Rural Iowa in the 1920s"; *Wallaces' Farmer*, 13 June 1931, 751, 15 August 1931, 937, 13 April 1935, 248, and 11 May 1935, 299. See also Katherine Jellison, "Let Your Cornstalks Buy a Maytag: Prescriptive Literature and Domestic Consumerism in Rural Iowa, 1929-1939," *Palimpsest* 69 (Fall 1988), 132-39.

Wallaces' Farmer, 13 April 1935, 248.

"YOUR HUSBAND MUST BE FEELING PROSPEROUS TO BUY A FINE NEW RANGE LIKE THAT."

"WELL HARDLY! I'M TRYING FOR THAT NEW MONARCH MYSELF OUT OF MY POULTRY MONEY. IT COST ME ONLY—"



Ask your dealer to show you this Model 2062—a full equipped range with 20 inch oven, push food and reservoir, just as illustrated, for only \$6.25 a month.

GENUINE Monarch MALLEABLE

\$6.25 A MONTH
 12 MONTHS
 THE SMALL DAILY PAYMENTS OF THIS
 LOW EXTRA CASHLESS PLAN ARE INTEREST

BIG FARM WASHINGS COST LESS with the MAYTAG



The sturdy-built Maytag is particularly desirable for big farm washings. It gives you more washings per dollar—a lifetime of service. Scores of Maytag Aluminum Washers in use in farm homes and large county institutions have each done an average of 5,000 to 6,000 washings and are still giving faithful service. This is equal to a hundred years of ordinary farm service.

The Maytag gives you greater speed, carefulness, convenience and washing ability. The rooney, one-piece, cast-aluminum tub, the roller water remover, and many other features originated by Maytag, have made it the choice of over half a million farm homes.

FOR HOMES WITHOUT ELECTRICITY
 The Maytag is available with in-built gasoline Multi-Motor, a simple, modern, in-built engine that a woman can operate. It has but four moving parts—interchangeable with an electric motor by removing only four bolts.

LET A TRIAL WASHING CONVINCE YOU
 Write or phone the nearest Maytag dealer. Test the Maytag in your own home. If the Maytag doesn't sell itself, don't keep it. Divided payments you'll never miss.

MAYTAG NOW MAKES A MULTI-MOTOR WASHER MODEL "G" (ILLUSTRATED) THAT SELLS FOR LESS THAN \$130

THE MAYTAG COMPANY
 HEVION IOWA
 NORTHWESTERN BRANCH
 212 Washington Ave., North Minneapolis, Minn.
 Write for Maytag the Maytag Radio Range now in U. S. C. Court in Court House Building—Every Monday, Overday Morning News, 9:00 P. M., P. 2, 3—4:00 C. T.—1:00 P. M., P. 2-3
 —6-22 P. C. 1. Standard time is one hour earlier. P. 2-3

THE Maytag WASHER • TABLE IRONER

Wallaces' Farmer, 15 August 1931, 937.

women should not work so hard, and should have more leisure time. They also agreed that farm children should have more exposure to cultural and artistic events. By the 1930s the tone of articles and advertising had changed. For the most part the articles telling farm families how they should revamp their lives were gone; instead, the journal carried articles documenting the fact that considerable change had already occurred.

THE ROLE OF IOWA FARM WOMEN in economic and social life in the 1930s needs to be reassessed. Traditionally, farm women have not been considered as income producers during the 1930s, but they certainly did fulfill that role, particularly through the sale of poultry and eggs, and to a lesser degree cream and other products. Raising poultry was not considered to involve much skill, but in reality, it required that farm women know a lot about feeding and culling flocks. At the same time, women contributed indirectly to the farm income by producing most of the food that was consumed by the farm family and the hired help. Farm women also earned indirect wages by sewing their family's clothing and bartering household items with other farm women. And some farm women contributed their labor directly to the general farm operation by doing fieldwork and animal chores. If a measure of economic control is a precondition for social power, Iowa farm women achieved a necessary, if not a sufficient, base for full participation in rural society in the 1930s.

On the social side, a reassessment is also in order. Because little attention has been given to the social side of farm women's lives, it is usually assumed that farm social life in the thirties approximated that of the twenties. For farm women that was often not the case. As early as 1913 Iowa author Herbert Quick wrote that farm women were often unhappy with farm life because of its isolation and because they had no labor-saving machines to lighten their workloads.³⁶ By the end of the 1930s both conditions had changed dramatically for many Iowa farm women. Farm families were experiencing far greater mobility because of improved roads. Within the home Iowa farm women pointed to electricity as a great emancipator. Because of these changes, the

36. Herbert Quick, "The Women on the Farms," *Good Housekeeping* 57 (October 1913), 426-27.

social deficiencies of farm living seemed to fade away. While the depression may have intensified the economic insecurity and dependency of urban women, it elevated the relative economic position of Iowa farm women, both within their households and possibly within rural society. A farm woman who wrote "Country Air" reflected on seeing a poor, hungry, jobless mother on a trip to town. Feeling sorrow at the woman's plight, she was nevertheless thankful that her lot was better. "Suddenly I thought of those jars of meat! Hallelujah! We had food! The coat which I had bought four years ago was still good. Thank goodness, I was sufficiently clad! The innumerable tasks which lay ahead of us with the opening of spring work looked big and beautiful to me. Glory be! We had a job!"³⁷

37. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 11 April 1936, 297.

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