

Comment

DEBORAH FINK

THE 1950s were quiet years between two storms. World War II was over, Rosie the Riveter settled into a happy home, and the birth rate boomed. Nowhere was the good life more readily observed than in prosperous rural Iowa. Rural Iowa women who wrote newspaper columns celebrated the beauty, hard work, and happiness of farm and country life. Feminists had not yet come forth to tell them that they were unhappy, and they were busy doing women's work at home and in the community. They viewed the world from their haven of sanity. What a beautiful world—corn shoots poking out of sticky, black, fragrant Iowa soil; children being appropriately and lovingly exasperating; farmers doing hard, uncomfortable but utterly necessary and noble work.

Yet beneath the surface lay another reality. Iowa farming and rural life were changing rapidly. New machinery, hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides brought record production with ever fewer farmers and farm hands. Farming was becoming steadily more capital intensive and less labor intensive, changing the nature of rural life both on the farm and in the small town. As a consequence, people were leaving rural communities as never before. The number of Iowa farms dropped from 203,159 in 1950 to 174,707 in 1959.¹ For the first time, the census of 1960 showed the population of Iowa to be more urban than rural.² As Marilyn Gallo observed, most of the children growing up in rural Iowa in the 1950s would leave. Perhaps they would go, as Gallo suggested, to make a living; but many rural

1. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1950* (Washington, DC, 1952), 1: 38; *U.S. Census of Agriculture: 1959* (Washington, DC, 1961), 1: 110.

2. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of the Population: 1960*, volume 1, *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, DC, 1963), 17-191.

youth left without nostalgia. They looked to the city for a better life as well as a better living. Not only was farm production changing to push young people away, the city was also pulling more and more people away from their rural roots.

The celebration of rural tradition and family continuity played against a background of change and uncertainty. To see the women's columns as a window through which we can view their world, we need to understand the frame that limits and focuses this view. By examining the meaning of tradition we can more fully comprehend what the women columnists were telling us about rural life and family.

Tradition is not just a recording of the past; it is a selective reading. Out of a myriad of complex, confusing, and often contradictory memories we find our own lessons and tell the stories that give meaning to our collective lives in the present. Rather than discovering our traditions, we create them. The themes that we select typically reveal as much about the conditions of the present as they do about the past.³ In this article Gladys Rife selects and organizes representative pieces of these rural women columnists' understandings of their world and their tradition in the 1950s.

Throughout the references to tradition, the columnists contrasted the past, or rural society, with a world that was not as nice, a world in which it was harder for people to live good lives, a world that was unnatural, a world that was violent and impersonal. LaVerne Hull contrasted the symbol of Iowa—a fat, juicy ear of corn—with the sterile highways and factories encroaching on nature. Helen Attleson lauded the “down-to-earth, folksy living” of her community that could not be attained in “metropolitan centers.” Gladys Rife said that news of the Middle East made her more conscious of the rural calm with its reassuring sounds of cows and hens. Florence Hoidahl lamented the passing of home craftsmen by contrasting the past with “the great industrialism of the 1950s.” Tradition took shape in terms of what it was not. Since what it was not had been changing so drastically in the 1940s and 1950s, tradition was accordingly being redefined and recreated. The women constructed a set of oppo-

3. See Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York, 1984).

sitions: between the country and the city, between the past and the present, and between the past and what they feared would happen in the future. Their statements were prescriptive as well as descriptive: they hoped that others would accept them and use them as guides. Perhaps they wanted to create a set of meanings and values that their children and others of the succeeding generation would carry with them into the larger world.

In this light, the women's insistence on the bedrock values of rural Iowa family life may be seen not only as an expression of rural values, but as a timely appeal for people to be aware of the wisdom passed down in the family, the emotional comfort of family life, and the warm physical sensations of favorite foods and comfortable furniture. They compared their own family life favorably with their images of urban family life, thereby revealing family values as they wanted them to be.

Apparently all of the women were married. In contrasting "feminists" with those in favor of traditional values, Rife finds the women not to have been feminists. Yet they were among the increasing numbers of married women who were finding "self-actualization" in reaching beyond the boundaries of the home. The pay that they received was an important factor in their lives, although Rife does not connect this with the history of Iowa women's egg money.⁴ Married women had long been present in the workforce as uncounted workers on Iowa farms, but they had also been moving into the nonfamily workforce for years. In spite of the baby boom and the pervasive appeals to domesticity in the 1950s, the number of rural Iowa women officially counted as workers increased by 25 percent between 1950 and 1960.⁵ Thus, even as they championed traditional values as opposed to feminism, these women were part of the movement that was reshaping the lives of American women. That they were working for pay while continuing to be civic minded and respectful of others might lead us to question some of the implied associa-

4. See Deborah Fink and Dorothy Schwieder, "Iowa Farm Women in the 1930s: A Reassessment," *Annals of Iowa* 49 (1989) 574-77; Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition, and Change* (Albany: 1986).

5. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of the Population: 1950*, volume 2, *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, DC, 1952), 15-51; *Census of the Population: 1960*, volume 1, *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, DC, 1963), 17-182.

tions of working women with selfishness and disrespect for social customs.

The excerpts from these women's writing that Rife presents in this article tell us little about the women's relationships with their husbands. They wrote at length on their fond memories of their parents; children also appear in affectionate scenes in the columns. The relationships among generations seem to have formed the core of family. But what about husbands? A husband was in the corn crib "in the role of a traffic cop," or he yelled to his wife in a tone to startle the milk cows and awaken his sleeping children. No stories are included that tell of a husband's moral support, wisdom, affection, or cheerfulness. Rife declares, "As mothers, teachers, and editors these women columnists had a special way of perceiving the world around them." Did they write as wives also? What did being a wife mean? Where did husbands fit into their lives? Were they necessary to make babies, economic security, and respectability without being expected to provide much intelligence, warmth, or humor? We know now that the outward image of marital bliss of the 1950s masked a great deal of private anguish and violence. Was this a reality for these women? Did they know the pain of some marriages and avoid discussing it? In the context of an essay on tradition and family values, how are we to read the marginal remarks about husbands?

These women columnists provide an important window on the lives of rural middle-class Iowa women of the 1950s. They bring some values and images into sharp focus, while other aspects of their lives remain shadowy and enigmatic. Of course, it is every writer's privilege to decide what to write and what not to write, just as it is the reader's privilege to ponder over the patterns of light and darkness in the images the writers create. The columns do indeed "deserve" to be preserved, meaning perhaps that we "deserve" to read them and that the women "deserve" to have their views read by succeeding generations. Through these columns we learn about the world of these women and about their hopes and fears, even as we puzzle over the empty spaces in the picture.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.