

Comment

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Editor's note: Editors of scholarly journals are becoming increasingly aware of the role their journals have always played in the continuing dialogue among their readers. Recently some of those editors have begun to foster dialogue more explicitly in the pages of their journals. In that spirit, *The Annals of Iowa* offers the comments that follow by Katherine Jellison and Deborah Fink on Gladys Talcott Rife's article, "Personal Perspectives on the 1950s: Iowa's Rural Women Newspaper Columnists."

WITH THE CREATION of women's history as a distinct field of study, feminist scholars have sought in recent years to examine the history of women and their work and to correct the oversights of previous historians. As historian Joan Jensen has noted, "women and their work, whether rural or urban, have in the past not been subjects historians have valued."¹ Jensen herself has worked to shed some light on the everyday working experiences of rural women, a topic that has largely escaped the attention of women's historians. Until this century the vast majority of North American women were rural women, and in some regions, including Iowa and other Farm Belt states, rural women continued to compose a significant proportion of the female population well into the twentieth century. In order to understand women's experience in America, therefore, one must be familiar with the history of rural women. With its focus on "a special view of a special time in the prosperous fifties," Gladys Rife's article, "Personal Perspectives on the 1950s: Iowa's Rural Women Newspaper Columnists," contributes significantly to our knowledge of rural women's history.

The "special view" that Rife examines is that of rural women newspaper columnists, whose perspective was at the same time typical and unique. These women were writing not only about a

1. Joan Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, NY, 1981), xx-xxi.

specific time and place—rural Iowa in the 1950s—but about women's experience in general. In many ways their writing transcended time and location. In their focus on the Iowa landscape, for example, these columnists continued a literary tradition that had begun in the previous century, when women writers had viewed the Iowa prairie as a domestic garden, "a paradise in which the garden and the home were one."² As Rife notes, columnists in the 1950s also "framed their personal landscapes in ways that express something of the universality of love for home and homeland," an attitude perhaps best summarized in columnist Marilyn Gallo's comments about "the basic goodness of the farms."

Iowa's women columnists also harked back to the nineteenth century with their focus on family histories and pioneer ancestors. In writing about their family and personal histories, these columnists often centered on the homes in which they had grown up and the influence of their mothers within the home. Columnist Mildred Wiley Turnbull credited her career as a writer to the atmosphere her mother had created in Turnbull's childhood home, an account resembling those by well-known urban writers, including Margaret Mead and Lillian Hellman, who also focused on the ways in which female family members shaped their lives and careers.³

Another characteristic that the writing of Iowa's columnists shared with the work of other women writers was its focus on personal views of public events. In discussing the columns written by rural women writers, Rife refers to the "affective power of women's writing, which sees life through their personal perspectives." This "personal way of knowing," so characteristic of women's autobiographical writing in general, found expression in the columnists' discussions of political events of the 1950s. With their focus on domestic details, family problems, close friends, and people who had influenced them, the rural colum-

2. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1984), 6.

3. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, "The Metaphysics of Matrilinearity in Women's Autobiography: Studies of Mead's *Blackberry Winter*, Hellman's *Pentimento*, Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Estelle C. Jelinek (Bloomington, IN, 1980), 180.

nists recorded the "individual differences" of life during the postwar period and thus pushed aside the politicians and Cold War rhetoric to provide a picture of everyday life during the turbulent 1950s.⁴ In referring to political turmoil in the Middle East, columnist Gladys Rife contrasted the peaceful practice of "porch sitting" in rural Iowa with strife overseas, and LaVerne Hull "interlaced personal events in a list of global incidents" in her discussion of the development of the hydrogen bomb.

Like women writers of an earlier era, and like their urban contemporaries, Iowa's postwar columnists celebrated a peculiarly female vision of the American experience. These women wrote about American life in a way that contrasted sharply with the version that male writers of the period presented. Their vision celebrated domesticity and personal connection rather than the maintenance of superpower status. The work of these columnists thus provides historians with a picture of American life from the vantage point of the 1950s that enriches the portrait created by male writers of the time.

As well as providing a female point of view on American life in the 1950s, however, the writing of these columnists presents historians in the 1980s with insight into the specific experiences of Iowa's rural women. The 1950s were a time of great change for Iowa's female population. Between 1950 and 1960, a demographic shift occurred that affected the self-image of Iowa's rural women. During that decade, for the first time in Iowa history, more women were living in urban areas of the state than in rural regions.⁵ Although Iowa's rural women now made up only slightly less than half of the state's female population, they nevertheless adopted a distinct minority mentality during the 1950s. As evidenced by the defensive writing of the rural columnists, this attitude often found expression in reactions to stereotypes about rural life. Marilyn Gallo assured her readers that although rural midwesterners were stereotyped as "provin-

4. Lillian Smith, "Autobiography as a Dialogue Between King and Corpse," in *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, ed. Michelle Cliff (New York, 1978), 190-91. See also Estelle C. Jelinek's introduction to her *Women's Autobiography* and Robert J. Lifton, "Woman as Knower: Some Psychohistorical Perspectives," in *The Woman in America*, ed. Robert J. Lifton (Boston, 1964), 31.

5. Sandra Charvat Burke and Willis Goudy, *Women in Iowa: 1980 and a Century of Perspective* (Ames, 1986), 5.

cial," it was actually the city dweller—"who can not believe that there is another type of life besides his own"—who correctly bore that label.

Rural women's lives changed in other ways during the 1950s. With the integration of the poultry industry in the postwar era, poultry production moved from Iowa farms to West Coast "egg factories." Women, who had traditionally been the ones who raised chickens on Iowa farms, were thus displaced from one of their chief contributions to the farm family economy. With the large-scale mechanization of farm work following World War II, Iowa farm families no longer depended heavily on hired labor, and women no longer contributed to the farm family economy by feeding and caring for hired men. The work lives of Iowa farm women thus became more like those of urban housewives, with the major focus on performing household chores for family members.⁶

The work of Iowa farm women, however, was not limited strictly to housework. Columnist Fran O'Brien noted that farm women's work in the 1950s also included "helping" their husbands in the field, particularly during the busy harvest season. As the language used by O'Brien and other writers indicated, however, this work was undervalued and not seen as women's own—such as work in the henhouse had been. Although O'Brien apparently viewed her work with her husband as a partnership, she was definitely the junior partner.

As farming became less labor intensive and more technologically dependent in the 1950s, women also increasingly worked for wages to help finance farm life and work. In a system in which men were seen as the primary field workers and producers of large livestock, women were viewed as the logical ones to hold outside employment. Newly freed from traditional chores in the henhouse and elsewhere, some farm women took jobs in town, while others performed work that could be done at home—such as writing a column for the local newspaper. Even when the payment farm women received for such work was not great, Rife observes, it could be crucial to the farm family economy. As they once contributed to the family economy with their

6. For a good discussion of farm women's lives in the postwar era, see Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany, NY, 1986).

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"egg money," farm women could now contribute money earned in nonfarm work.

Rural women who worked as columnists in the 1950s spoke for women at a time when women's voices were often neglected, and they spoke for rural dwellers at a time when rural people felt that their way of life was vanishing and increasingly ignored. Most important, these writers spoke specifically for *rural women*, women whose lives were changing significantly in the 1950s. In their columns, these writers defended, celebrated, and preserved the experiences of Iowa's rural women for the readers of a future generation. In collecting and interpreting the writing of these rural women, Gladys Rife has recognized the value of their work and experiences and shared their perspectives with us.

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