

Personal Perspectives on the 1950s

Iowa's Rural Women Newspaper Columnists

GLADYS TALCOTT RIFE

RURAL WOMEN in the 1950s were central forces in their communities. In their homes as well as in the connections they constructed between their homes and churches, schools, libraries, and other cultural institutions, women were largely responsible for maintaining the quality of rural community life. But they lived in a patriarchal world. Men were the heads of the household, figuratively and literally. Men owned and managed banks and other important businesses. They served on and presided over influential boards and committees. Almost all newspapers were published and edited by men.¹ Because rural women exerted their influence primarily in the domestic sphere, and because they tended to emphasize the "feminine values of nurturing, relatedness, [and] process," observers have taken little note of women's voices from the period.²

Yet immediately after World War II some rural women found a way to make their voices heard by writing personal columns for their local weekly newspapers or for nearby city publications. The genre of the personal column allowed the writers to express freely their own thoughts and feelings about their lives

1. Of the 437 Iowa newspapers listed in the *Iowa Official Register, 1950-1951*, only 15 were published or copublished by women.

2. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, "The Metaphysics of Matrilinearity in Women's Autobiography," in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Estelle C. Jelinek (Bloomington, IN, 1980), 180, quoted in Katherine Jellison, "'Sunshine and Rain in Iowa': Using Women's Autobiography as a Historical Source," *Annals of Iowa* 49 (1989), 596.

at home, their activities in the community, and developments in the postwar world. This first golden age of women's column writing foreshadowed the later increase in the numbers of women in all areas of journalism and marked a trend toward the personalization of writing sometimes called the "new journalism." More important, it provided a public forum for the views of rural women.

Because the columns reflect the intensely personal concerns of rural women in the 1950s, they are like a window on that particular period in history—a window that frames a woman's view of her time and of her place and purpose in her home, community, state, nation, and world. Iowa's rural women columnists gave special attention to the physical landscapes that surrounded them; to the meaning and importance of farm and small-town life; and to the values and traditions of extended family, community, and state. These women also extended their personal voices to comment on developments in the larger public world.

Their work sheds light on the richness and diversity present in their personal lives and in rural Iowa community life, and reveals the solid contributions that middle-class women made in their homes and rural communities. Like so much of the lost work of women artists, their columns deserve recognition as an important historical and cultural resource. Many also deserve study of their literary quality. The language of the women writers is representative of idioms, ambiguities, and stylistic forms which were familiar in that historical period. In that context the columns deserve to be preserved and understood for their cultural and literary value and social significance, and for that reason I will be quoting extensively from those writings in the discussion that follows.

IOWA'S RURAL WOMEN COLUMNISTS had much in common. Most of them chose a format referred to by members of the Press Columnists of Iowa as "hodge-podge," and known more formally as the personal column. The columns were short, nonchronological, anecdotal, aphoristic or descriptive pieces. The writers used the essay form only occasionally for biographical and historical materials. The unedited columns appeared

regularly, generally on the editorial page or some other inside page of the local papers.³

All of the columnists from a sample of fourteen major writers (see table) were midwesterners who grew up in rural communities.⁴ Only four—Miriam Baker, Elizabeth Ink, Fran O'Brien, and Gladys Rife—actually lived on farms during their column-writing years. The others were members of rural communities but did not live on farms at the time they wrote their columns, although several had done so during their childhood.⁵ In their writing, the farm women often claimed to speak not only for themselves, but for their husbands and also for the many country wives in their communities who had no similar access to public opinion.

These women provided leadership in their home communities because of their educational background and because of their column writing itself. Of the fourteen writers in the sample, nine held bachelor's degrees when they began their journalistic writing; and at a time when few rural women had attended college or vocational schools after completing their high school education, all of the columnists had some postsecondary education.⁶ During the 1950s, when there was a shortage of school

3. Miriam Baker's "Kitchen Window" column and Elizabeth Ink's "Country Diary" appeared in the farm section of the Sunday editions of the *Sioux City Journal* and the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, respectively.

4. The biographical data presented in this and the following paragraphs were gathered from personal interviews, correspondence from the writers and their friends, Cornell College Alumni Office files, obituaries, eulogies, and various issues of the *PCI Bulletin*. For biographical sketches of these writers, see Gladys Rife, "Iowa's Rural Women Columnists, Especially of the Fifties: Their Cultural and Historical Import in a Comparative Context" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1988), chap. 4. My sample of fourteen major rural Iowa women columnists represents those writers who were best known through their participation in the Press Columnists of Iowa (PCI) group, and the frequent use of quotations from their work in Iowa newspapers, *PCI Bulletins*, "We Iowa Editors" radio scripts, and Jack Shelley's "Hometown News" broadcasts. The sample includes representatives from all four of the state's quadrants by which the PCI was organized. I have read major portions of the columns written by these fourteen women. My access to the columns of other rural Iowa women columnists was largely limited to selections published in the *PCI Bulletin*, a monthly publication distributed by the Press Columnists of Iowa to its members, and which I was able to find only in a private collection.

5. Rural communities are those with a population under 2,500.

6. According to Rachel Ann Rosenfeld, *Farm Women: Work, Farm, and Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1986), American farm women achieve status ratings based on educational achievement.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

MAJOR RURAL IOWA WOMEN COLUMNISTS

Name	Title of Column	Newspaper	Dates of Publication
Miriam Baker	"Kitchen Window"	<i>Sioux City Journal</i>	1951-1981
Wilma Collins	"It's Your Town, Too"	<i>Grimes News</i>	1947-1952
Oneita Fisher	"Talk, Talk, Talk"	<i>West Branch Times</i>	1950-1962
Marilyn Gallo	"Strawberries 'n Cream"	<i>Strawberry Point Press Journal</i>	1958-1968
Victoria Gunsolus	"A Taste of Honey"	<i>West Union Argo-Gazette</i>	1949-1953
Florence Hoidahl	"Might Mention"	<i>Hawkeye Record and Lisbon Herald</i>	1953-1962
LaVerne Hull	"Passerby"	<i>Waukon Republican-Standard</i>	1945-1979
Elizabeth Ink	"Country Diary"	<i>Cedar Rapids Gazette</i>	1949-1963
Grace Jones	"Mother's Diary"	<i>Manson Journal</i>	1944-1967
Fran O'Brien	"Everyday Echoes"	<i>Algona Advance</i>	1952-1963
Gladys Talcott Rife	"Country Line"	<i>Lone Tree Reporter</i>	1948-1952
Gladys Talcott Rife	"Rural Reflections"	<i>Iowa City Press-Citizen</i>	1950-1961
Grace Sigsbee	"Woman's World"	<i>Algona Upper Des Moines</i>	1948-1967
Emily Swartz	"Fayette in Focus"	<i>Fayette County Union</i>	1949-1969
Mildred Turnbull	"Bird Notes"	<i>Diagonal Reporter</i>	1948-1972

teachers, six of the women—Miriam Baker, Marilyn Gallo, Victoria Gunsolus, Fran O'Brien, Gladys Rife, and Emily Swartz—resumed teaching careers from which they had retired at the time of their marriage. Elizabeth Ink had been a history teacher, but did not return to paid professional work other than her column writing. Florence Hoidahl, who had taught before her marriage, returned to employment in the 1950s as a staff member of the *Mount Vernon Hawkeye Record*. Several other columnists served on the staffs of the newspapers in which their columns appeared.

The pay these columnists received, small as it was, represented an important factor in their lives. Typically, in the 1950s, "farm wives," as they were then known, did not have a dependable source of cash to call their own. For staff member columnists, writing was part of assigned, salaried work. For wives of editor/publishers, the work, like that of farm wives, was a basic part of a shared commitment of wife, husband, and children to the business of making a living.

But the pay was certainly not the only reason that rural Iowa women chose to write columns. Possibly because most women columnists were either actively teaching or had taught in the

public schools, they turned to column writing to expand their personal audiences. In column writing they could convey ideas, thoughts, feelings, and images not always appropriately expressed within the confines of the classroom.

For some of them, writing itself was an activity that allowed them to maintain sanity and perspective in the midst of daily demands imposed on any wife and mother by a house, a husband, children, and outside commitments.⁷ A number of these women writers may have chosen this kind of work as a means of escape and personal fulfillment. If words are the tools of one's art, the sheer labor of choosing, arranging, and forming them into sentences and paragraphs affords a special kind of pleasure. This joyful element of their work appears in the individual's shaping of her writing in ways that enabled her to transcend the less rewarding elements of her daily life. It represents the striving toward achieving one's potential which is now referred to as "self-actualization."

These columnists did not hesitate to share the frustrations of their daily life with their readers, as Grace Jones did in a "Mother's Diary" column in 1954.

Lu Egli reported a telephone call the other day from a friend who said fretfully, "I just don't know what to do with all the goodies around here—I can't get anything done." She had little ones laid out on davenport and cots with the flu and felt that it didn't make for absolutely perfect housekeeping. Thursday—I knew what she meant, Dale was stretched out on one davenport, Martha on the other, Bruce in a chair, with the hassock in the middle of the room to accommodate his long legs, and Becky, Cynthia and Joann on the floor in the dining room doorway, coloring. I gave up any idea of vacuuming. As I looked around at the glasses of water, books, magazines, and boxes of Kleenex on the tables and chairs, I gave up all idea of dusting, too. So I cooked, and washed dishes and clothes and made up a speech to deliver to Nancy if she made any comments about the condition of the house when she got home [from college] Friday.⁸

7. Similar motives are ascribed to nineteenth-century women writers in Ann D. Woods, "The Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," *American Quarterly* 23 (1971), 3-24.

8. Grace Jones, "Mother's Diary," *Manson Journal*, 25 March 1954.

The historical and cultural value of this bit of writing about such a mundane setting should not be underestimated. It corroborates the mother's traditional role in the middle-class home, and calls attention to ordinary but modern material artifacts such as the hassock, the vacuum cleaner, and the boxes of Kleenex. One should also note the proliferation of books and magazines and the absence of television. Most important, one sees all of this from the mother's perspective, her personal window on the world.

Women's writing in general may be separated from that of men not only by its style but by its view of what constitutes the importance of any subject.⁹ In reflecting and recording the lives of rural midwestern women and men, Iowa's women columnists directed attention to subjects they saw as significant—landscapes, family life, and farm and small-town community life. They presented these personal subjects as enlightening entertainment. These special views by women columnists are not found in history books or sorted out from newspaper archives; they deserve to be preserved and studied.

THE IOWA LANDSCAPE was a favorite subject for these rural columnists, and each of them created in her work strong evocations of very private landscapes. "Landscape," wrote Marjorie Greene, "is where I dwell as distinct from geography. . . . Everyone inhabits a landscape. . . . A landscape or a neighborhood is universal to lived existence in a way in which geographical location is not."¹⁰

For two writers, corn symbolized the special qualities of the state of Iowa. According to LaVerne Hull, "Iowa, that 'beautiful land' of the long-ago Indians, is Corn Country—and much more—in the new era which seems so far from pioneer times of another century. No matter how many factories spread over the land, how many superhighways cut through Iowa's fields, the

9. That is not to say that all women share a common style. As Mary Eagleton says, "There is no indication that criticism will ever discern a definitive female style. The differences between women writers always seem to outnumber the similarities." See Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York, 1986), 201, 203.

10. Marjorie Greene, "Landscape," in Ronald Bruzina and Bruce Wilshire, eds., *Phenomenology Dialogues and Bridges* (Albany, NY, 1982), 56.

symbol of this state is the golden ear of corn, fat and bounteous, and the subject of the Iowa Corn Song which makes Iowans far from home see that beautiful land through a sentimental mist when a band strikes up 'our song.'"¹¹ Gladys Rife treated the plant itself with a farm woman's eye; she took the reader through the life cycle of corn as an expressive and impressive product of a farmer's growing season from planting to maturity.

Corn. It's beautiful. Beautiful in its springing up from the moist black earth, tiny points of green forming brave patterns across the field. Beautiful in its growing to the six inch height, paired leaves curling back from the sturdy stem. Beautiful at knee-high, taking on the blue-green tone, stretching to cover the ground between the rows. And later, it lies in green waves across the land, soothing the eye, full of promise. At tasseling, it's beautiful frosted with the pollen stems; and at shooting, wearing tiny ears tipped with shining silks. Then it's late August, and the ears have grown; proudly the strong, maturing stalks bear their weight. Row on row, field by field, mile by mile, the corn marches across our state. Tire of it? Never.¹²

This statement, a somewhat emotional depiction of the beauty of Iowa, reflected the writer's sense of a well-loved, familiar, living landscape amid which she had always dwelt.

Town-dweller Florence Hoidahl necessarily considered the Iowa landscape from a different point of view. In responding to the controversy about changing Iowa's automobile license plate slogans from "The Corn State," she referred to the Grant Wood painting "Spring," which shows "rich, dark earth lying like blocks on a patchwork quilt. Some are polkadotted by tiny shoots of new green corn. Change the slogan? When it's our very livelihood—when Iowans raise corn to feed the world! It is the center of our being—the symbol of strong individual Americans of a mid-west state who scientifically plow their fields and plant their seed and then humble themselves to the Lord."¹³

11. LaVerne Keetel Hull, *Corn Country Cooking* (Waukon, IA, 1953), 1.

12. Gladys Rife, "Rural Reflections," *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 12 October 1953.

13. Florence Hoidahl, "Might Mention," *Hawkeye Record*, 17 March 1953.

Other women writers presented seasonal pictures from the domestic privacy of their personal landscapes. Leah Jane Smith reflected on the view from her farmhouse in northwest Iowa.

As I sit by the sunroom window and look out on this beautiful Iowa scene, I wonder where you could find more beauty than here. The crisp white snow covers the ground and drapes itself about shrubs and trees. The glistening blanket shines through tracks and mounds. Bare trees in lacy pattern silhouette themselves against a sky that is a shade of blue not seen anywhere else. Curls of smoke wind upwards and lose themselves in the sky. Everything stands out against that white and develops patterns not seen at any other time of year.¹⁴

Laura C. Watson, residing in almost the exact center of the state, viewed winter in more social terms, reflecting a rural woman's isolation. To such an observer, the "feathered friends" offered companionship. "We are getting a great deal of delight these cold wintry days watching several cardinals who have been almost daily visitors to our little bush with the red berries in the back yard. We get such a good view of our feathered friends from the window right over our stove and we have also tempted them with feasts of crumbs, suet and other bird goodies."¹⁵

In her autumn picture, Elizabeth Ink, a retired history teacher, evoked Iowa's Indian heritage in her presentation of a personal rural landscape that she loved. "Although not versed in Indian lore, I can tell without benefit of calendar that it's September—purple roadside asters; deep purple wild grapes on fences; shafts of scarlet in sumac and an occasional yellow leaf earthward bound. Second only to the blazing glory of October is the distant hilltop crowned by the towering chapel, now wearing fresh raiment in shades of spring green."¹⁶

All of these writers framed their personal landscapes in ways that express something of the universality of love for home

14. Leah Jane Smith, "The Sunroom Window," *Rock Rapids Reporter*, reprinted in PCI Booklet, 1954, 37. This booklet was the only one published by the PCI. Like the *PCI Bulletin*, it was distributed only to members of the PCI.

15. Laura C. Watson, "Coffee Grounds," *State Center Enterprise*, reprinted in *PCI Bulletin*, 1 March 1957.

16. Elizabeth Ink, "Country Diary," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, reprinted in PCI Booklet, 1954, 17.

and homeland, an important element in the affectiveness of women's columns. As Marilyn Gallo viewed the landscape from her own houseyard, for example, she expanded it to include her sense of the wholeness of Iowa. "Around us, there is a quietness and peace. The noises that the housewife hears when she steps outside to hang up clothes or shake a mop are the sounds of children at play at recess, or the reassuring noise of the noon whistle. There is room and beauty in the countryside and the reassurance of the basic goodness of the farms, that somehow seems right."¹⁷

However much these women columnists sought to universalize their visions of the good life, they were always rooted in a very particular personal landscape, a sensitivity to the sights and sounds that surrounded them. They did not focus exclusively on those landscapes, though; they broadened their horizons to encompass their families and communities, and ultimately the world, within a vision shaped by their personal landscapes.

FAMILY LIFE as actually lived on farms and in small towns was a second major component in the writing of Iowa's rural women columnists of this period. Images of family life were often lively extensions of the writers' views of their personal landscapes, as the last quotation from Marilyn Gallo indicates. Yet these same images also provided opportunities for expressing the writers' satisfaction with their own particular way of life and its meaning, especially in contrast with their perception of the disadvantages of urban life.

Elizabeth Ink, in the excerpt quoted above, claimed she could tell it was autumn by observing nature, but for the anonymous writer of "Vanity Box," the sounds of nature blended naturally with the sounds of her family at work and play to tell her it was spring. "It sounds like spring . . . thrilling chorus of bird song that wakes you up in the early dawn . . . soothing magic in the gentle pattering of rain on the roof . . . zing-zing-zing of roller skates racing down the block . . . steady roar of tractors catching up on spring planting . . . the ding-ding of Junior's tricycle bell

17. Marilyn Gallo, "Strawberries 'n Cream," *Strawberry Point Press-Journal*, personal collection, 1958.

. . . moan and shriek of a powersaw . . . sweet, sleepy carol of robins settling down in twilight. . . it sounds like spring!"¹⁸

Helen Attleson of New Hampton shared her pleasures in an Iowa season by focusing on a family's shared sense of the feel and tastes of summer, and she added the note of affirmation of the neighborly joys of rural life, so typical of middle-class culture in that period.

A bunch of cars in the yard of a home this time of year and the passerby almost can smell fried chicken, taste the new peas, and the strawberry shortcake, savor "freshies" of the garden, like radishes, lettuce and onions. But the real enjoyment of Iowa's good eats is the company. Families unite, forget the cares of the week-day and gain stimulation to face problems coming up by visiting by the hour with good people. Go ahead—live in your metropolitan centers, wonder who your neighbor is, and why. For down-to-earth folksy living, join us from good old Ioway."¹⁹

Women columnists who lived on farms made a conscious effort to inform nonfarm people about various aspects of life on the farm, both positive and negative. They often strove to shatter midcentury stereotypes of farmers and farm life. In this excerpt from "Everyday Echoes," Fran O'Brien of Algona provided a serious exposition of what it really meant to be out on the acres, by defining both the work itself and the nature of the partnership between the wife and husband.

A farmer knows a lot about 'the show must go on,' even if he has never played a role on the stage. For his work goes on in spite of heat and drought, wind and rain, snow and cold. It is a matter of necessity in his pursuit of earning a living. This affects not only the farmer but his family as well. And at no season is it more in evidence than at harvest, when his wife often is called upon to help get the crop in. Thus it was that I found myself on the open prairie

18. [Sue Dodd], "Vanity Fair," *Grundy Register*, reprinted in PCI Booklet, 1954, 21. In response to a 1984 questionnaire concerning rural women columnists of the fifties, the editor of the *Grundy Center Register* revealed that the anonymous writer was in fact Sue Dodd, an English teacher (now deceased) who had written the "Vanity Fair" column from 1939 to 1979.

19. Helen Attleson, "On the Lighter Side," *New Hampton Tribune*, reprinted in PCI Booklet, 1954, 32.

near a lone corn crib, guiding corn into the elevator hopper from an uphoisted wagon. My husband was in the crib, in the role of the traffic cop, guiding the corn in the right direction. Both are dangerous jobs, near the moving parts of a machine-driven elevator, and a person has to be constantly on the alert. It was a bitterly cold day, with a high wind that whipped through my blue jeans and heavy jacket. My toes curled from the cold inside thick-soled wedges and my fingers were numb in well padded gloves. Worst of all, the wind's blasts blew dust, silks, and bits of husks in my face, blinding my eyes and increasing the dangers of the task. The day was beginning to darken into dusk as we finished the load and retreated to the welcome shelter of the car for a cup of hot coffee. My hands shook as I poured it from the Thermos bottle and my teeth chattered.²⁰

In this vivid re-creation, O'Brien forced readers to consider the nature of the hard work she shared with her husband.

A writer from southeast Iowa struck a softer note on farm living in this picture of a pleasant evening on the farm, again blending a sense of appreciation for the landscape with a view of farm family life.

Town and country, porch sitting is still popular. But for as long as we can remember it is peculiarly the farmer who likes to sit for a while after his day's work and before supper on the back steps. Then he leans on his knees and looks out over . . . the flat, fertile fields toward the rim of hills locally known, even today, as Buffalo Bluffs. It's so peaceful here, in spite of the disturbing news from the Middle East. Or perhaps it is because of such news that we become more conscious of the quiet home scene, the cows leisurely in the pasture, the hens cackling companionably from their house, Bootsie following the boys, his tail wagging, and over all the calm sky, peaceful still.²¹

20. Fran O'Brien, "Everyday Echoes," *Algona Advance*, personal files, circa 1955.

21. Gladys Rife, "Rural Reflections," 19 July 1958. The philosophy expressed here reflects that of an editorial by Henry A. Wallace in a 1922 *Wallaces' Farmer*. Wallace wrote that the farmer could always revitalize himself by pondering in a "moment of quiet in the evening when the cows and horses are cropping quietly out in the pasture." Quoted by Don S. Kirschner, in "Henry A. Wallace as Farm Editor," *American Quarterly* 17 (1965), 188.

Gladys Rife used the anecdotal form to emphasize patterns of daily relationships on the farm.

It must have startled F. H. [Friend Husband] to see us emerge from the house coated and scarfed against the frosty morn, heading toward the car.

"Where are you going?" he yelled, in a tone to startle the milk cows he was heading toward the pasture, and awaken all of his sleeping children.

"To the neighbors," we carolled back, enigmatically.

"Wha for?" again the cry exploded on the wings of dawn.

It was then we had to break down and admit we'd forgotten to buy coffee for the Royal Breakfast, were en route to the Brauns to "borry a cup."²²

Here the picture reveals the farmer and his wife in traditional roles, the children safely close by, and the interdependence among neighbors—a special view of a special time in the prosperous fifties. Such quasi-literary columns, so reflective of ordinary lives and commonplace events, serve the historian by filling the void found in much social science writing which "has done little to teach Americans about the unique quality of individual places."²³

THE SENSE OF CONTINUITY in family and community life stressed by several of the columnists grew naturally out of their emphasis on their own immediate family's life. For some of them it was the source of inspiration—and even of the literary skill—that made their column writing possible. And because it reinforced their readers' own feelings of "rootedness" in Iowa's pioneer and immigrant heritage, it also contributed to the affective power of their writing.

Wilma Collins was one of those who emphasized family continuity. "Before the passing of my father last week," she wrote in a column in 1950, "I spent many hours with him on the farm where I was born and lived 18 years of my life. My father, too, spent most of his youth on this same place where his mother

22. Gladys Rife, "Rural Reflections," 19 July 1958.

23. John Mack Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly* 33 (1981), 537.

and father had homesteaded many, many years before." Collins documented her family's migration as part of the major westward movement from New York State and continued with a reference to descendants buried in the early family cemetery. In her conclusion, Collins returned to the personal experience that stimulated her reflection. "My father and I talked long that day of bygone days. As we did so I jotted down names and dates on the flyleaf of my Bible. Little I suspected that would be the last time we were to talk of those who had gone before us. Memories we hold, but links with the past gradually break away."²⁴

Some writers emphasized especially their mother's influence on them and their writing. "In company with other blessings I owe my mother," explained Mildred Wiley Turnbull, "belongs the pleasure derived from writing this column. It grew from her love of beauty, her unusual gift of observation, her attention to detail. In lesser degree, the column stems from her appreciation of words themselves, though we were never able to gain her precision of right choice, to discard the not-quite-right, or to manage, as she could, the correct structure of words, sentences, paragraphs, to convey an exact meaning." In the same vein of daughterly love and admiration, Turnbull accounted for the title of her column, "Bird Notes," and its special meaning. "Through her ears, I first heard the robins sing of morning, spied the oriole cradles, catbirds in the cherries, was aware of wrens. But not until I was grown, away from that serene and unspoiled piece of rural world, did I know how much I had absorbed. Every blossom, every bud, brought words of appreciation to her lips, wonder to her face, and to this daughter, an awareness of the presence of God." Clearly, this passage indicates more than a mentor's influence on specific details regarding the technical and artful construction of a column. It also reveals how family background and an abiding sense of place continued to influence all aspects of the writer's life. Especially important were the mother's language skills, her emphasis on the beauty of nature, and the linkage of God and nature, all of which were reflected in the daughter's life and writing.²⁵

24. Wilma Collins, "It's Your Town, Too!" *Grimes News*, 2 November 1950.

25. Mildred Wiley Turnbull, "Bird Notes," *Diagonal Reporter*, personal files, 1951.

Emily Allyn Swartz, whose column "Fayette in Focus" appeared in the *Fayette County Union* from the late forties to the early seventies, was also acutely aware of early parental influences. In her early columns, Swartz wrote about the social milieu of her childhood home and demonstrated the importance of family life in the development of her verbal skills. In an undated column dedicated to her father's memory, Swartz recalled how articulate he had been. "[He took] pleasure in reading and the radio, in considering, discussing, arguing. Meal times were always a lively interchange of ideas, with someone saying 'Why is thus and so?' and someone else, or several someones, carrying it on from there." Also, like Collins, Swartz wrote her own family's history, speaking of her father's pride in his American ancestry, which went back over three hundred years to colonial Connecticut. In one of her last columns Swartz again recalled that family dinner table. This time she emphasized general sociability and included a reference to the people who were always "dropping in—all kinds of people from all kinds of places. Mother never knew just how many places to set until it was time to put the meal on the table." This social situation reflects the rural practice, common before the advent of automobiles and good roads, of asking people who were away from home to stay for supper or dinner, as the case might be—a response related not only to an ingrained Christian ethic of sharing but also to a family's appreciation of company. "When we were children at home," Swartz remembered, "our dinner table was always a lively proving ground for the budding personalities of the five children who sat there with their parents and friends. It mattered not that we jostled with words. Our parents saw that we received the necessary stimulation and that we did not use those words to wound." As a result, Swartz, like other rural women writers of the fifties, came to her work with a solid knowledge of the power of words, and she respected that power, using it to emphasize the basic value of shared family living.²⁶

A third Iowa columnist whose work documented the appeal of family history as journalistic material was Grace Sigsbee. Her "Woman's World" column presented her German grand-

26. Emily Allyn Swartz, "Fayette in Focus," *Fayette County Union*, n.d., personal files.

mother in a way that both personalized Iowa history and illustrated this columnist's fond use of irony.

Grandma was born in the old country. She had a step-father who was unkind to her and an unhappy youthful romance. So she was glad to make the long trip alone across the sea and over a continent to Iowa. Her aunt sent the passage money and Grandma repaid it by doing housework. It was considered a good situation in those days, for she received three dollars a month and all she had to do for it was to work from sunrise to sunset. Evenings were gay affairs for then she was allowed to sit still and knit socks until the nine o'clock bedtime. Grandma's aunt had a step-son who took to hanging around Grandma. It got to be quite a habit for this [Grandpa's death] is their first parting after over 61 years of marriage.²⁷

A number of other Iowa columnists shed similar light on the history of immigration and the cultural influence of ethnic groups. Marilyn Gallo's father-in-law, for example, came directly from Italy in his youth, and her columns often contained references to him and his twin loves: family and gardening. LaVerne Hull also had fond memories of immigrant ancestors.

When our mother went to club, we went to grandma's after school. Our German grandmother kept a cookie jar on the pantry shelf, just for us. Our Danish grandmother, who was married to a German, was usually sitting at the old walnut table in the kitchen, when we came in. She and grandpa were lingering over their coffee cups. Our father, who was a doctor, did not approve of coffee for children, but grandma's coffee was diluted with hot milk, laced with sugar, and practically eaten with a spoon.²⁸

Everyday episodes like this underline the importance of sociability for Iowa's rural columnists. Because it was real to them and to their readers, the unexceptional was as significant as the unique for these writers and their readers. Women columnists have reported that men as well as women responded to such depictions of childhood scenes, and found pleasure in recalling

27. Grace Sigsbee, "Woman's World," *Algona Upper Des Moines*, 1 May 1956.

28. LaVerne Keetel Hull, *Corn Country Cooking*, 24.

their own related memories. Thus one learns of the particularly affective power of women's writing, which sees life through their personal perspectives.

IOWA'S RURAL WOMEN COLUMNISTS at mid-century, with their love of family and tradition, were not "feminists" in the present sense of the word. The clearest voices among them cried out for the retention of traditional values. This does not mean that the women were politically or intellectually unaware. They were modern women, many of whom expressed ideas directly attributable to the Progressive movement. Fully cognizant of their importance to family and community, they were eager to learn and generally amenable to cultural changes that they felt would be of benefit to the community, state, and nation. Many were activists. Along with their column writing they worked as community leaders within a variety of groups in support of cultural values commonly associated with the specialized nature and quality of rural life. They especially emphasized respect for others and their property, adequate schooling, and sharing of community responsibilities in order to ensure a better world.

As mothers, teachers, and editors these women columnists had a special way of perceiving the world around them. Violet Lundquist, an editor-columnist, used her editorial tone in a typical comment on parental responsibility. "Parents are criminally negligent when they try to help their youngsters who are guilty of reckless driving charges to evade the penalties of their actions. Sterner parental control would also help reduce the teenagers' appallingly high accident rate."²⁹ In a related comment, Miriam Baker tried to explain, from a mother's perspective, the growing problem of vandalism and to record her awareness of an appropriate public-spirited response. "It was heartening to discover that an attempt has been made to restore the appearance of the Floyd monument," she said. But "we found it easier to tell the 5-year old why the monument was erected than to explain the scribbling which defaced it."³⁰

29. Mrs. V. A. (Violet) Lundquist, "Observations," *Anthon Herald*, reprinted in PCI Booklet, 1954, 7.

30. Miriam Baker, "From the Kitchen Window," *Sioux City Journal*, 19 August 1957, personal files.

Florence Hoidahl agreed that vandalism had become a serious problem. "The 'vanishing American' today is the individual who has respect for the appearance and condition of physical property. Perhaps this is partly due to the great industrialism of the age in contrast to the home craftsman, but the careless scratch seems an earmark of the 1950s."³¹

The writers shared a keen interest in education, and they brought their personal perspectives to bear on that issue as well. They differed widely not about the goals of education but about methods of instilling it. Mrs. Jessie Hines felt that high school students in particular should be forced to work harder. As she noted in the *Redfield Review*, "We believe our high school has been made too easy, we are too lax about passing in high school, and the extracurricular should be after study. More should be done for the ambitious than for the lazy student. There should be no 'snap' courses for drifters."³² But Fraulein Hays used a mother-teacher tone to warn against forced study. "Youth is to be led—not driven; to be treated as reasonable beings—not forced like brute animals."³³ Gladys Rife expressed a more general view: "Much that is good in new approaches to the problems of learning has come into our schools through the 'progressive' approach. We are on solid ground as long as we realize the need for mastery of the basic skills of learning by whatever methods. It seems to us that there is little excuse for graduating pupils without these skills." But always conscious of the vital relationships that should exist between teacher and student, Rife emphasized that "no American school should become so large that the individual pupil is unimportant."³⁴

Rural communities, in the view of Iowa's rural women columnists, made valuable contributions to good citizenship both in their home communities and in the wider world precisely because caring for individuals was an important part of a small community's life. The work of Marilyn Gallo exemplified this view.

31. Florence Hoidahl, "Might Mention," *Hawkeye Record*, 1954.

32. Quoted in John M. Henry, ed., "... Columns, Too ..." (Des Moines, 1946), 9.

33. *Ibid.*, 25.

34. Gladys Rife, "Rural Reflections," 14 January 1955.

I'm invariably thankful that we are able to rear our children in a small town. There is a basic dignity, a quality of CARING for the well-being of others, a sense of belonging, that makes the childhood spent in a small community truly unique, to be remembered with affection and poignance long after one has left his childhood environs far behind. In a way, we who live in the little towns are like a large family. We know everyone else in town and just about everything about him. We know his good points and his bad, his sorrows and his joys, why he reacts as he does; we know, too, that he knows all about us. We have our ups and our downs, but most of the time we truly LIKE one another. Above all, though, we care and show that we care when adversity strikes one of us and we rejoice with one another upon the advent of fortune. Towns the size of ours are vigorous; yet, we too, know that most of our children will not stay here, upon reaching adulthood, because there is no livelihood for them. That this is so creates a sadness. . . . yet it has always been so that the most valuable export of a small town is its young people, who, imbued with the rare independence and feeling that they are as good as anyone anywhere (bred of the feeling of belonging nurtured in their small-town childhood), become assets to their communities, wherever they go.³⁵

Oneita Fisher reinforced the special qualities of small-town life in her column "Talk, Talk, Talk." "Of course there's unhappiness here in a small town," she acknowledged, "but it's of a more transient nature than the metropolitan variety. In a village your troubles are shared and even the heaviest burden is lighter when divided among a couple of hundred neighbors. So don't laugh at a small town. We have something that can't be bought. It's a way of life. It's village style."³⁶

Marilyn Gallo argued that life in small towns did not make their residents parochial. She announced to readers of the *Clayton County Press*, which had a wide distribution area, that Iowa small-town residents had become as world-minded as the rest of the United States. The tone of Gallo's writing hovers between the defensive and the belligerent, but it accurately represents the thoughts and feelings of other rural Iowa women columnists, who saw it as part of their task to break down stereo-

35. Marilyn Gallo, "Strawberries 'n Cream," 1959 collection.

36. Oneita Fisher, "Talk, Talk, Talk," *West Branch Times*, reprinted in *PCI Bulletin*, 1 March 1957.

types of rural life. This excerpt provides the thoughtful reader with a fuller appreciation of the kind of leadership role assumed by these strong-minded women writers of the 1950s.

'Tis said that we in the small towns are "provincial"; and if we happen to live in a MID-WESTERN small town, we are forced into a stereotype that is well nigh impossible to crack. Time was, perhaps, when residents of small towns in mid-America were narrow and provincial, but that was in the days when they were more or less forced into such a role through the absence of refreshing contact with the outside world. Now, we are at one with the rest of America through the miracle of mass communication, our residents travel widely and possess a curiosity and first hand knowledge about life elsewhere that is in refreshing contrast with the very real provincialism of many a city dweller who can not believe that there is another type of life besides his own.³⁷

As these excerpts indicate, Iowa's rural women columnists tended to extend their view of community based on personal, face-to-face relationships to the world at large. Thus it is not surprising to find that many of them, following the lead of that most famous columnist, Eleanor Roosevelt, were enthusiastic supporters of the United Nations, and concurred that women should have a humanizing and moralizing effect on government.

In their own right, and because they supported promotions of United Nations Day by the Press Columnists of Iowa (PCI), several of the women wrote outstanding columns on the subject which did not use the pre-written paragraphs mailed to them in PCI Bulletins. The paragraphs provided by the PCI generalized the function of the United Nations as a collective effort to heal the wounds of war and act in the common interest to enforce the peace. In her award-winning 1951 column on the observance of United Nations Day, however, Wilma Collins took a more personal approach. She opened with a reference to the difficulty of writing such a column in view of waning interest on this sixth anniversary of the organization. "I do not want to write about it

37. Marilyn Gallo, collection. For a contemporary scholar's attempt to help break down some stereotypes of small towns, see John A. Jakle, *The American Small Town: Twentieth Century Images* (Hamden, CT, 1982).

because I feel that the majority of you people do not care one iota about the United Nations." She believed, however, that that indifference arose "probably because Americans have so little understanding of this organization." Thus, much of her column was devoted to a detailed explanation of how the United Nations worked. But her final plea spoke directly to those who had sons fighting in Korea. "If the UN is a means of hastening the day when peace reigns," she wrote, "shouldn't we all work toward that end?"³⁸ This column, which won national recognition, shows how a rural Iowa woman was able to reach a national audience to argue her deep-rooted belief in the importance of the United Nations for the ordinary people of Iowa.

In the same year, LaVerne Hull of the *Waukon Republican-Standard* used her "Passerby" column in a most atypical fashion to call readers' attention to the invention of the hydrogen bomb. In conveying her sense of personal horror, she used the device of holding a conversation with her longtime friend, her personal typewriter, to express the difficulty of trying to write anything cheerful about the birth of the H-bomb. Then she interlaced personal events in a list of global incidents and issues to achieve a strong emotional impact on her readers.

Smythe report . . . Lilienthal . . . Hickenlooper . . . Heavy water . . . Hydrogen . . . Uranium . . . How much do you know about physics, anyway? What's an atom? . . . How can anything be split if it can't be seen? . . . Who's got the biggest rock to throw now? Wonder if it's safe to offend Mr. Neanderthal today; looks like he has run out of jagged stones by this time. Peace, it's wonderful. . . . All men are brothers and the world is one union. . . . Tommy won't eat his five-dollar vitamin pills. . . . My child is dead because it starved to death; starved, I tell you, because it never had enough to eat, never, never, never. And I'm dying too, because I'm hungry and I'll never be fed. . . . United Nations . . . Peace parleys . . . Cold war . . . Shooting war . . . War by innuendo . . . Hands-around-the-world . . . Send your old shoes to the suffering. . . . Give Grandpa's old underwear to the underprivileged. . . . This man is your brother and you are his keeper. . . . (But does Russia have a bigger bomb than we do?)

38. Wilma Collins, "It's Your Town, Too!" *Grimes News*, 18 October 1951.

Her column concluded with this fantasy of the world's end: "So this is what it is like to die. . . . This is the end of time and space and the coherence of atoms that were my body and my personality. . . . This is what it is like to be one of the 50 thousand, or was it 50 million, that could die under one bomb's blow. . . . The stars are reeling in their courses. The world is off its track. . . . The sun has exploded. . . . The universe has come to an end, a scientist's end, born of hate and bred of governments, suspicious of each other."³⁹

Even today, Hull's powerful writing of the early fifties can evoke a strong response from the reader because it dramatized the early recognition of the overwhelming dilemma of our present world. Give to the suffering, yes; but continue Tommy's five-dollar vitamin pills, even though around the world, children are dying. Hull was only one of many concerned rural Iowa women writers who continued to work for peace by word and action through all the means available to them, but who lived with the terrible consciousness that from that time on, even "the universe in its place [was] at hazard."⁴⁰ More generally, Hull's column shows how even the ultimate world event—its very destruction, its incomprehensible finality—could not be separated in these women's minds from the details and patterns of daily life.

THESE SELECTIONS about farm and community life and its relationship with the wider world represent only a small part of the lost voices of women, the invisible historical record. Considered thoughtfully, they can flesh out general histories, and open windows of understanding on middle-class culture in the 1950s. John Mack Faragher has suggested that historians "have not heard rural women because they have listened to the powerful, not to the powerless."⁴¹ But now it is necessary in the study of history to redefine power and powerlessness. In particular, it is necessary to acknowledge and affirm the power of women's voices, especially in their homes and communities. For that purpose, one might well begin with Iowa's rural women columnists

39. LaVerne Hull, "Passerby," *Waukon Republican-Standard*, reprinted in John M. Henry, *How to Write Columns* (Ames, IA, 1952), 269–70. The ellipses are part of the author's style, not an indication of editorial omissions.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out," 538.

of the 1950s. By writing of their personal landscapes, family life on farms and in small towns, their faithfulness to their own historical roots, and their personal perspectives on the postwar world, Iowa's rural women writers of the fifties provide a window on the rural world of 1950s Iowa.

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