

Henry A. Wallace and the Mystique of the Farm Male, 1921-1933

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HISTORIANS of women have long been aware of the existence and research value of female prescriptive literature in their efforts to define and understand gender roles and expectations. A similar, if less obvious, literature developed to shape men's thoughts and actions regarding their roles and expectations. By exploring one example of such male-oriented literature, Henry A. Wallace's writings as editor of *Wallaces' Farmer* from 1921 to 1933, we hope to raise awareness of such a prescriptive literature for men, to demonstrate that it can be a rich and broadly applicable research tool, and to encourage further exploration into other types of male-directed literature.

When the field of women's history began to emerge in the mid-1960s, scholars seized upon the many guidebooks, etiquette manuals, sermons, speeches, and tracts for women that appeared in growing numbers from the American colonial period to the present day. Those who prepared these publications often designed them for specific groups, such as young, single, married, childraising, New England, southern, western, urban, and rural women. Their unifying theme was, especially as the nineteenth century progressed, that a woman must necessarily pursue marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. As women's history scholarship became more sophisticated, researchers recognized that this literature might not tell them as much about how women acted as once believed. Scholars realized that if women had already been acting in the prescribed ways there would have been little need for guidebooks. Rather than causing the rejection of such documents as sources, however, this realization made prescriptive literature

for women more valuable because it illustrated societal wishes for women's behavior, widely held values about women, and the roles that society hoped women would fill.¹

If scholars recognize the existence and examine the content of similar literature for men, they can discern comparable information about social perceptions of men. Thus far, only a few researchers have taken this approach, partly because of the customary assumption that male-oriented literature is generic, that is, for all people. Yet, viewed from a different angle, documents such as Horatio Alger stories, for example, were directed toward males who had the sanctions and opportunities to develop an "acre of diamonds." Women, on the other hand, were to gain economic success only by marrying those who held such acres.²

In the same vein, literature aimed at farmers to encourage them to achieve greater and more efficient production was speaking to farm men about their roles. Until recently, even the term "farmer" automatically connoted a male. A close reading of such sources reveals the characteristics, abilities, skills, and talents then seen as desirable for successful farmers. The writings of Henry Wallace are extremely significant examples of this genre of male-oriented literature. For more than a decade he edited a widely read and influential farm journal. Missouri novelist Homer Croy recalled of his own years as a farm boy: "At night, before I would blink off to sleep in my chair, I would read and reread *Wallaces' Farmer*." According to Croy, "Everybody took a farm paper. . . . *Wallaces' Farmer* was

1. Several recent studies of women's prescriptive literature, for example, have focused on the World War II era. See Susan M. Hartmann, "Prescriptions for Penelope: Literature on Women's Obligations to Returning World War II Veterans," *Women's Studies* 5 (1978), 223-239 and Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, 1970), especially chapter 6, "Rosie the Riveter: American Mobilization Propaganda," 137-166.

2. For discussion of male prescriptive literature see Donald H. Bell, "Up from Patriarchy: The Male Role in Historical Perspective," in Robert A. Lewis, ed., *Men in Difficult Times: Masculinity Today and Tomorrow* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980), 306-323; John G. Cawelti, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man* (Chicago, 1965), 1-6, 201-205, 227-236; and Michael Gordon, "The Ideal Husband as Depicted in the Nineteenth-Century Marriage Manual," in Elizabeth H. Pleck and Joseph H. Pleck, *The American Man* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980), 145-157.

the most popular. . . . Ma would read the *Farmer* aloud and it opened up a world that the country weekly didn't know existed." After serving as an editor, Wallace became the leading figure in the most creative era of American farm policy. Under his leadership, the nation developed a set of agricultural policies that still affect America's farming. The writings of this prominent individual in agricultural history both reflected and reinforced gender roles and expectations for farm males.³

While farm women were reading extension bulletins, domestic science pamphlets, and "farm home" columns that promoted marriage, motherhood, efficient home production, and other related domestic values, Wallace's columns and essays, carried in a journal that had over 100,000 subscribers by the mid-1920s, promoted a different set of gender values for men. Each age has a myth or a mystique to help people cope with the elements and events of the times, and an understanding of the myth or mystique of the farm male may contribute to comprehension of his beliefs, values, and actions. Scholars generally agree that sex roles vary with ethnicity, class, region, generation, and era. Thus historians must peel back the male mystique one layer at a time. Wallace's prescriptions for farm men applied particularly to the Corn Belt states during the rapidly changing era of the 1920s and early 1930s. This time was critical, not just for agrarian Americans and agricultural policymakers, but for men in general. Such events as the achievement of woman suffrage in 1920, the introduction of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1923, the appearance of flappers who smoked and practiced a new sexual freedom, and the increasing entry of women into previously male workplaces shook traditional convictions about women and men to their very foundations.⁴

3. This essay looks at Wallace's ideas from a vantage point which the development of women's history has supplied. For an examination of the same body of evidence from an agricultural history perspective, see two essays by Richard S. Kirkendall: "The Mind of a Farm Leader," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (Fall 1983), 138-153 and "Corn Huskers and Master Farmers: Henry A. Wallace and the Merchandising of Iowa Agriculture," *Palimpsest* 65 (May/June 1984), 82-93. For the quotations from Homer Croy see his *Country Cured* (New York, 1943), 37, 58.

4. For subscription statistics see *Wallaces' Farmer*, 24 December 1926. For a discussion of ideas about rural women see Pamela Tyler, "The Ideal Rural Southern Woman as Seen by *Progressive Farmer* in the 1930s," *Southern*

Several historians have traced the problems of the 1920s in female-male relations back to the late nineteenth century. They have found a disturbance so profound that some refer to it as a "masculinity crisis." Pointing to such influences as industrialization and progressive reforms for equality and woman suffrage, these writers agree that the 1890s marked the emergence of a national concern with the essence of masculinity and femininity, a concern that became an important feature of the 1920s. Certainly the popular press of the 1920s reflected many Americans' worries about the changing roles of men and women. In 1929, for example, an article titled "I'm One of Those Boob Husbands" appeared in the *American Magazine*. Its author complained that women used to "settle down" at about age thirty, but in 1929 were only beginning to live at that age while their tired husbands sought the peaceful refuge of a traditional home. The following year, an essay called "The New Masculinism" appeared in *Harper's Magazine* to lament men's growing fears, bitterness, and dismay over the new position of women. Its author concluded that "because all through history man has acquired the habits of superiority and because that superiority is now being challenged, he is suffering more than woman from the ravages of the conflict" created by the emergence of the "New Woman." By 1931, Ida M. Tarbell wrote that American women were "domesticating" males by drawing them into "fifty-fifty" relationships both at home and in the workplace.⁵

Studies 20 (Fall 1981), 278-296. On the male mystique see Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1979), 1-12, 205-211; Clyde W. Franklin, II, *The Changing Definition of Masculinity* (New York, 1984), 2-9; Ralph A. Luce, "From Hero to Robot: Masculinity in America—Stereotype and Reality," *Psychoanalytic Review* 54 (Winter 1967), 53-74; Jack Nichols, *Men's Liberation: A New Definition of Masculinity* (New York, 1975), 311-323; Pleck and Pleck, *American Man*, 6-7, 155-164; David G. Pugh, *Sons of Liberty: The Masculine Mind in Nineteenth Century America* (Westport, 1983), 129-153; Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Masculine/Feminine or Human? An Overview of the Sociology of Sex Roles* (Itasca, Ill., 1974), 54; Howard F. Stein, "Sittin' Tight and Bustin' Loose: Contradiction and Conflict in Mid-western Masculinity and the Psycho-History of America," *Journal of Psychohistory* 11 (Spring 1984), 501-512; Andrew Tolson, *The Limits of Masculinity: Male Identity and Women's Liberation* (New York, 1977), 12-13; and Peter Filene, *Him/Her/Self* (New York, 1974), 131-156. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese presents an interesting interpretation of gender roles in the agrarian South in "Cavaliers and Ladies, Bucks and Mammies: Gender Conventions in the Antebellum South," unpublished paper, in author Riley's possession, 1-29.

5. Writings which trace 1920s gender concerns back to the nineteenth

Because Henry Wallace wrote during such a crucial period for American men, and because he directed his thoughts to farm men in particular, his contributions to the mystique are highly significant. The historical literature on American men and their changing roles tends to concentrate on urban factory workers and executives. Few, if any, historians have examined what shape the masculinity debate of the 1920s and 1930s took for rural men. Wallace's writings clearly illustrate that the "crisis" also touched farm men and that their literature urged them to maintain high standards of manliness. Wallace pursued six major themes in his male-related articles and editorials in *Wallaces' Farmer*. The farm man he held up for admiration and imitation placed a high value on success, saw the farm as a desirable environment, displayed superior qualities as a worker and breadwinner, had great physical ability, was a stable family man, and served as an active and responsible citizen.

First, in the Horatio Alger tradition, Wallace preached a gospel of success. Men with the right qualities—as Wallace saw them—could move up the economic ladder and should try to do so. He was confident that a high percentage of the readers of *Wallaces' Farmer* had such qualities and belonged to a class of superior farmers. He believed as well that he had special responsibilities to these subscribers. He must do what he could to help them prosper. One of the journal's two primary goals was, he explained, "to make the readers of *Wallaces' Farmer* efficient enough to survive in the bitter struggle now going on. . . ."⁶

Although Wallace preached a philosophy of success, his ideas differed fundamentally from those of others about where

century include Bell, "Up from Patriarchy," 28-30 and Joe L. Dubbert, "Progressivism and the Masculinity Crisis," in Pleck and Pleck, *American Man*, 305-320. See also John Russell, "How the Arts Mirror the Retreat of Manhood," *New York Times*, 1 February 1981. For a discussion of how comic strips have portrayed masculinity see Alan M. Kirshner, *Masculinity in an Historical Perspective: Readings and Discussions* (Washington, D.C., 1977), 10-25. For contemporary comments see W. O. Saunders, "I'm One of Those Boob Husbands!" *American Magazine* 107 (April 1929), 58-59, 165; Lillian Symes, "The New Masculinism," *Harper's Magazine* 161 (June 1930), 99-107; Ida M. Tarbell, "Domesticating the Male," *Woman's Home Companion* 58 (June 1931), 13-14, 138-139.

6. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 23 April 1926.

men might best succeed in America. He urged those males he sought to influence to stay on the farm. "When you came home from World War One . . . you sold your mules and saddle horse," former rural neighbors wired Harry Truman in 1945. "We all knew you were going somewhere." Prophets of male success usually preached that ambitious farm males had to indeed go "somewhere" to achieve prosperity; they could not stay at home on the farm and do so. Those who offered advice on "getting ahead" in America typically presented farm life as valuable only as a prelude to and a training ground for activities elsewhere. These advisers preached that a rural childhood could provide the good health and high moral standards need to climb social and economic ladders, but they made it clear that at an appropriate stage in life the rural lad should migrate to the city to take advantage of its vast opportunities. One student of this male prescriptive literature explained that:

Along with the glorification of poverty in the success cult's ideology went the glorification of rural childhood. Throughout the last century self-help propagandists insisted that rural origins foretold success and urban origins failure. . . . Fresh air and good food kept the country boy in good physical condition, and his daily round of work left him little time for the mischief that distracted his less busy city cousin. . . . In only one respect, and that a crucial one, did philosophers of success concede that cities offered advantages which rural villages could not match. Opportunities for making money were better in the city. If the farm boy expected to become a millionaire he had to migrate to a metropolis.

But Henry Wallace rejected such teaching about rural-urban migration.⁷

Just as counselors of women assumed that the welfare of the nation depended upon women playing their valuable roles in their "proper sphere," the home, Wallace maintained that talented farm males must stay in their proper place, the farm.

7. John H. Perkins et al to Harry S. Truman, letter, 20 January 1945, Truman Papers, Vice-Presidential File, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Mo.; Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: The Myth of Rags to Riches* (New York, 1966), 24, 27-28.

While believing that some rural men should move away from the farm, he hoped that only the least effective, least efficient farmers would do so. Thus his second theme was the desirability of the farm environment. He recognized that many intelligent and educated young men, and good farmers, were abandoning their farms, through force or desire. He despaired about this migration in the same way that many women's advisers lamented female employment outside the home. They were anti-employment for the same reasons that Wallace was anti-city. Because both the farm and the home were institutions that undergirded American society, their preservation was critical. So, as prescriptive literature linked women to domesticity and the home, Wallace linked farm men to agriculture and the fields.

Wallace believed that most men already on the land could and should stay there, and he frequently expressed this view in terms of population distribution. In the mid-1920s he suggested, for example, that the then current ratio of 2.5 urban people to each rural individual might not be "dangerous." If the ratio increased to three to one, however, the United States would become "a civilization no longer firmly rooted in the soil" and would "almost certainly lose vigor centuries before it would if agriculture and commerce were developed on a more even basis." Clearly, to Wallace the nation had moved close to the danger point. Therefore men had to stay on the farm in much the same way that women had to stay in the home to preserve its sanctity and morality.⁸

Wallace believed that urban opportunities were creating a great problem by drawing farm men of ability and ambition away from their proper place. "It seems to me that the men who have the foresight, ability and money to build up their soil, are just the kind of men to make incomes of five thousand dollars a year or more in the cities," he suggested. "Many men of such abilities, therefore, find their way to town, where they feel that there is more satisfaction for themselves and their families than on the farm." This farm-to-city migration deeply troubled Wallace and he tried to check the rural exodus in the same way that proponents of the home attempted to turn

8. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 28 November 1924.

women from seeking employment in the factories and offices of growing cities.⁹

Like these critics, who predicted that the destruction of families would result from women's employment, Wallace dreaded the nightmare of a totally industrialized and urbanized America. "Two conceptions of civilization here in the United States are fighting for recognition," he proclaimed. "The one which seems to be championed by Hoover looks forward to the most rapid possible growth in the commercial and industrial centers and takes an interest in agriculture chiefly in so far as it conduces to the honor, glory, and profit of commerce." Wallace believed that the nation's leaders, especially Herbert Hoover, were moving the nation toward disaster. "The great industrial system is running away with us," Wallace warned. "Soon we shall have four or five people living in the city to every one person living on the land." It was time, he remonstrated, "for the people of the United States to stop and ask themselves just how far they want to travel along this path."¹⁰

Although these trends distressed Wallace, he was not a pessimist. He believed that people could take command of history and move it in a desirable direction. Hoping to rouse Americans to action, he offered dire warnings. If trends continued, he predicted in 1929, the United States would soon have "about twenty-five million people living on the land and a hundred fifty million people living in the towns and cities." This concentration of population would be inherently unstable and seemed certain to have only a short life, in part because a nation with such an unbalanced population would surely blunder badly in handling food, a commodity of fundamental importance. "After people in the towns have been more than a generation away from the farm they lose all sympathy with the farmer and all knowledge of his situation," Wallace was convinced. He believed that "such a civilization is full of peril, once the prices of food begin to soar, as they inevitably will some day." Rising food costs, Wallace thought, would create a time of trouble when the nation would see hunger, class conflict, revolution, and war. "We have had murmuring for

9. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 13 April 1928.

10. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 6 March 1925, 13 May 1927, 21 August 1925.

many years about the high cost of food in the United States, but we have not had the really savage cry which is likely to find utterance in ever increasing volume sometime along about the year 1960," he prophesied. "Laborers are not conservative like farmers," he noted, "and they are in a position to cause trouble that farmers can not."¹¹

WALLACE knew that his warnings, in such a negative vein, would not alone convince farmers to do their duty. He needed to offer some positive rewards in order to be persuasive. He improved his campaign's appeal by expanding the mystique of the farm male. Along with presenting the farm as the proper environment, he stressed the strong rewards of profitable work that would adequately support one's family. In his third major theme, the editor played upon the American male's belief that work validated and defined him. A man's entry into the workplace provided him with income that in turn accorded him respect and a recognition of his manhood. As heirs of the Puritan ethic of hard work, the majority of American men accepted labor as a given in their lives. For most men, work defined their identities as well as determining the male role and the way males thought, behaved, and characterized themselves.¹²

By the 1920s, however, the meaning and value of work were beginning to deteriorate. Large numbers of men were working at routine jobs in factories and offices. They were working less and making more money, yet they were uncertain how to spend the new leisure time and how to make their incomes purchase the abundance of goods becoming available. The amount of consumer goods with which a man could supply his

11. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 19 April 1929, 28 March 1924, 23 March 1923.

12. Tolson, *Limits of Masculinity*, 47-51; Bell, "Up from Patriarchy," 307-308. For a discussion of changing work patterns during the Progressive Era see James R. McGovern, "David Graham Phillips and the Virility Impulse of Progressives," *New England Quarterly* 49 (September 1966), 334-355. For an overview of the crucial role of work in men's lives see Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society* (New York, 1979). In "'A Partnership of Equals': Feminist Marriages in 19th-Century America," Pleck and Pleck, *American Man*, 183-215, Blanche Glassman Hersh argues that even feminists accepted men in their breadwinner roles and women in the wife-mother roles.

family increasingly determined his effectiveness as a breadwinner. Even executives at the top of the hierarchy were disillusioned with their success. Victorian beliefs about self-reliance, independence, and strong character no longer seemed to apply to the industrialized, urbanized society in which American men functioned. The soldier, frontiersman, or rough rider of previous decades could only be a captain of industry or perhaps a salesman. Instead of producing some tangible thing or subduing a territory, he was only making money.¹³

While men were striving to succeed at their jobs, many women were striving to attract up-and-coming men. Married women were becoming the primary spenders of their husbands' earnings in the new culture of consumption. To supply these female consumers, elaborate department stores appeared in most large cities by 1925. Along with restaurants, style shows, theaters, and many other attractions, such stores became symbols of consumer culture and institutions that welcomed women while generally bypassing the men who produced the income that purchased their wares.¹⁴

While urban male workers faced these new pressures, Henry Wallace offered dignity and self-esteem to tillers of the soil. Despite the "farm problem" of these years, Wallace claimed that farmers with special personal characteristics could succeed. Farm men, he insisted, could move ahead if they were efficient. "There is no escape from the doctrine that for the individual, the only plan is to produce as efficiently as possible and to try to keep out of the marginal class that is wiped out in hard times." Wallace's farm paper thus devoted many pages to making its male readers more efficient farmers.¹⁵

Wallace also held up alertness and adaptability as qualities essential to the efficient farmer. He felt that farmers were living through an "agricultural revolution" during which methods were changing rapidly and new competitors were rising,

13. Pleck and Pleck, *American Man*, 31-32; Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 160-161.

14. Warren T. Farrell, "Beyond Masculinity: Liberating Men and Their Relationships With Women," in Lucile Duberman, *Gender, Sex and Society* (New York, 1975), 221, 224-230; William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890-1925," *Journal of American History* 71 (September 1984), 319-342.

15. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 23 April 1926.

while shifts in the price level, international trade, and eating habits further complicated the situation. He argued that those who would survive in agriculture would be those who were the most alert and adaptable. "One of the best guides to successful farming practice is the experience of leading farmers who have been able to meet these new conditions," he taught. So his farm journal reported on the activities of such farmers, holding them up as models for imitation.¹⁶

Implied in this praise of flexibility was advice to farmers against domination by old ways and attitudes. Wallace warned against hostility toward "book farming." Although heavily influenced by the American agrarian tradition and not fully convinced of the values of modernization, Wallace did advocate more science in agriculture, including more social science. As his behavior when secretary of agriculture would demonstrate, he was a champion of "adjustment," which meant that farmers, to prosper, must change at least some of their practices. They had to make use of new knowledge and technology, work together in marketing cooperatives and other farm organizations, and behave in a variety of "modern" ways. In this regard, Wallace paralleled the Beecher sisters who, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, used the pages of their journal, the *American Woman*, to enjoin homemakers to adopt the scientific kitchen and the techniques of home economics.

Also like the Beechers, who encouraged women to take pride in their domestic accomplishments, Wallace wanted farm men to be proud of their profession. By publicizing cornhusking champions and "master farmers," the editor hoped to help farmers value their labor and develop a "feeling of workmanship" in farm activities. "Pride in our work," he wrote, "will help us to live more pleasantly thru [sic] the hard years until production is finally readjusted and farm products are again selling as high as they should." Respect for farming might, he hoped, counteract the pressure which low farm prices exerted on farmers to leave their land. At the same time, by tapping good Victorian notions of manhood and hard work, Wallace might relieve farmers of the types of anxieties that urban workers were experiencing in regard to their labor.¹⁷

16. *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 3 January 1931.

17. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 14 December 1923.

Wallace, like other preachers of the gospel of success, maintained that ambitious men must be highly moral men. And much as the sportswriters of the day described their heroes, he portrayed corn-husking champions as men to be imitated for their moral qualities. He wrote of one such champion, "He lives on his own farm and does not smoke, chew nor swear. . . . He is a good example to many other young corn huskers who seem to think it is smart to smoke cigarettes and to use strong language."¹⁸

As he developed his gospel of successful farming, Wallace did not dwell upon failures, but he did not ignore them either. On occasion he pointed out behavior patterns that farm men should avoid. "It would be interesting and stimulating to our sympathies, although perhaps not very profitable, to search out the fourteen unluckiest farmers in Iowa," Wallace replied to a critic of his master farmer contest. "We could make out a score card for them, giving points to ignorance, laziness, slack business methods, lack of conveniences and out-of-date machinery." Like a good Victorian father admonishing his son, Wallace made his point about the qualities that led to true manhood and success by calling attention to those that indicated weakness and led to financial failure.¹⁹

Rather than emphasize these failures, however, Wallace devoted much space to what he called "master farmers." In the mid-twenties, he established a master farmer contest in Iowa in the hope that it would affect the ways in which farmers perceived themselves and others perceived them and thereby would influence the size and quality of the rural population. The contest proclaimed, in Wallace's words: "Here is work that is the most important in the nation. Here are men who are efficient producers, who are expert business men, who are unselfish community leaders in this most important field." Although costly, the program seemed worthwhile to Wallace "in order to impress the importance of agriculture on other groups, and to let our boys and girls on the farm see that distinction can be achieved by hard, intelligent, cooperative work on the farm and in the farm community." Farm boys

18. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 27 November 1925.

19. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 16 March 1928.

often seemed "discouraged about farming" because it did not offer "intangible" rewards, he analyzed. But the farm might be more appealing "as a field of future activity" if young men could "see outstanding accomplishment in farming getting due recognition."²⁰

Henry Wallace thought that society presented farm boys with a poor selection of heroes, a matter of considerable importance to males. Boys would see "fame of a sort going to relatively unimportant men" and often wondered why it was "necessary to be a ball player or a prize fighter or a successful speculator in order to win the admiration of the crowd." Even some young men who liked farm life wondered, when they saw "the honors and attention going to men in the cities," if "the city was therefore the place to go." Wallace hoped that the master farmer program would "make distinction in farming take on its proper importance in the eyes of farm boys." He wanted it to hold up "an example worth following" as well as to "turn the attention of farm boys to the size and the importance of the farm job."²¹

Essential to the idea of a master farmer was the fourth theme to which Henry Wallace addressed himself: the desirability of great physical skills. Here he relied upon what historian James R. McGovern calls the "virility impulse," an idea that was, of course, not new to American males in the 1920s. An interest in manliness and its concomitant of physical power was evident in American from the movement to master the frontier through Teddy Roosevelt's charge up San Juan Hill. In the 1920s, such writers as Ernest Hemingway and Ring Lardner carried on the American tendency to equate manhood with physical prowess. What had changed by the 1920s were the kinds of opportunities available to express manliness through physical activity. Old standards based on frontier feats of bravery or even on individualism at home had largely dissipated. Modernization, industrialization, democracy, and the emergence of the "new woman" all constrained manly expression

20. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 25 January 1929; *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 11 April 1931, 18 January 1930; *Wallaces' Farmer*, 13 January 1928.

21. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 13 January 1928, 11 November 1927; *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 18 January 1930; *Wallaces' Farmer*, 25 January 1929, 14 January 1927.

of virility through brute power. Increasingly, men turned to sports, first as participants in their early years and later as spectators, in order to validate their masculinity.²²

Popular sentiment regarding American males' growing interest in sports was mixed during the 1920s. For instance, in 1928 *Harper's Magazine* presented an essay titled "The Great God Football," in which the author complained that football had become a national religion rather than a national sport. The following year, an article in *North American Review* argued that devotion to spectator sports was actually healthy since they provided a catharsis for basic human aggressive impulses. That this author, a medical doctor, was only considering the benefits of spectator sports for men is clear in his statement that "vigorous physical activity is by no means an invariably sound prescription for the man whose normal occupation is sedentary or inactive, and indeed it may be distinctly dangerous." He continued that while the "average man" would not be enthusiastic about playing a game, he would identify with skilled players, thus benefitting himself "mentally, physically and morally by spectator-participation in his favorite sport."²³

Henry Wallace had much to offer the farmers in this area. Not only was he offering them pride in being job strivers, but

22. McGovern, "David Graham Phillips," 334-335; Warren T. Farrell, *The Liberated Man, Beyond Masculinity: Freeing Men and Their Relationships with Women* (New York, 1975), 37-42; Joseph H. Pleck, "Men's Power with Women, Other Men, and Society: A Men's Movement Analysis," in Pleck and Pleck, *American Man*, 424-425. For nineteenth-century changes in physical standards for masculinity see E. Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood, 1770-1920," *Journal of Social History* 16 (Summer 1983), 23-37. For a further discussion of issues and factors in male-role definition see Joseph H. Pleck, "The Male Sex Role: Definitions, Problems, and Sources of Change," *Journal of Social Issues* 32, (Summer 1976), 155-164. For stories by Hemingway, Lardner, and other writers which express the importance of physical prowess see Leonard Kriegel, ed., *The Myth of American Manhood* (New York, 1978). For a discussion of movie heroes during this era see Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in American Film* (New York, 1977), 3-70 and Donald Spoto, *Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man* (New York, 1978), 1-5, 84-97, 192-205. On sports as a substitute for earlier outlets see Dubbert, *Man's Place*, 7-11, 191-205 and Myron Brenton, *The American Male* (Greenwich, 1966), 58-59.

23. John R. Tunis, "The Great God Football," *Harper's Magazine* 157 (November 1928), 742-752; A. A. Brill, "The Why of the Fan," *North American Review* 228 (October 1929), 429-434. See also Lotus Coffman, "Football or Baseball the National Game?" *Literary Digest* 83 (6 December 1924), 61-67.

he could also impart self-esteem as physical strivers at the same time. Wallace argued that to be successful in their work, farmers needed strength and agility, the qualities which great athletes possessed. He often compared the farmer with the athlete: "if the spirit of athletic contests could be applied to corn husking, it is probable that we should soon become much more efficient." He added that, "a genuinely good corn husker is entitled to more fame than the man who made the touch-down for Iowa against Yale University." He chided Americans for giving "praise and wide publicity to athletic heroes" while overlooking "economic heroes." He advocated wide recognition of "men who have added greatly to the productive power of the community by doing things unusually well with their hands," such as husking over 130 bushels of corn in one day.²⁴

To drive home his point about the athletic talents of farmers and to enhance their prestige, Wallace established a corn-husking contest in 1922 that quickly became a major event in the Corn Belt. After the first contest, he challenged "any two football players from Iowa University's championship team" to try "to husk as much corn in a day" as a corn-husking champion could "husk by himself." After the second event, he hoped that soon "Iowa's champion cornhusker will have more favorable publicity than the star football player or the crack hurdler at the university." Wallace did what he could to help other farmers learn from the cornhusking champions. He described one winner in terms worthy of the most manly of men: "Rickelman has an unusually powerful grip and instead of turning his left hand over with the thumb down so as to elevate the ear he has his thumb up," Wallace explained. "The question is can a man less powerful than Rickelman use a method demanding such a strong grip in the left hand?" Of another winner, the editor wrote, "Stanek is the most powerful and the same time the most graceful man I have ever seen husk." In 1928, he observed that, "Harmon, the new champion, looks something like Red Grange." Wallace had films made of these contests and their champions in order to give additional help to less talented farmers.²⁵

24. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 27 October, 24 November 1922.

25. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 15 December 1922, 21 September, 30 November 1923, 20 November 1925, 16 November 1928.

Wallace hoped that by giving farmers an opportunity to show the athletic skills that they had and that farming demanded he would influence population movements. In 1925, he reported that Dazzy Vance, who many regarded as "the best pitcher at work in either of the big leagues," had been born and raised in rural Iowa. He suggested that the problem was "to make the thousands of potential Dazzy Vances who are now growing up on the farms of the corn belt feel that they have a chance to win fame even tho [sic] they stay on the farm." Since other newspapers paid almost not attention to unusual farm exploits, "our Dazzy Vances go where they are appreciated." Only three years later, however, Wallace stated that his corn-husking contest had become "one of the accepted fall sports." He believed that every boy who husked corn could "picture himself in a year or two competing before thousands for substantial prizes and for the distinction that today means as much as distinction in any field of athletics." In 1931, over 60,000 spectators attended the "national championship" in Grundy County. This was "twice as many people. . . as had ever attended a football game in Iowa," Wallace exulted.²⁶

Although it may seem that Wallace had already presented an extremely attractive model of masculine success to farm men, he had yet a fifth element to add to the mystique. The farmer should also be a devoted and happy family man. In a day when many men who believed that home was the cornerstone of society and a reflection of their manhood felt that family life was toppling down around them, Wallace's words must have been welcome and comforting. Historian Peter Filene has pointed out that as more and more married women took jobs and asked for help from their husbands with household tasks, more and more men clung to Victorian ideals despite their recognition that they could no longer rely "upon women's dependency." Many Americans no longer expected a good husband to be the dominant partner and sole provider. Although many men sincerely tried to adjust to the demands of the "new woman" and changing standards of family life, they remained captives of their Victorian upbringings. Consequently, disillusioned males of the 1920s often envisioned their posi-

26. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 27 November 1925, 28 November 1931.

tion in the family in rather traditional terms. They were to be the providers and decisionmakers while women and children played their parts in the scenario by being pliable and obedient.²⁷

For farm families, this male vision often translated into patriarchy. Henry Wallace did not advocate the continuation of patriarchy, but he did make it clear that he saw farm women as wives and helpmeets in most cases. Although a woman did achieve recognition as a master farmer on one occasion and Wallace did use the inclusive "farm boys and girls" on others, *Wallaces' Farmer* did not include articles urging farm girls on to success as farmers. Shortly before Wallace became editor, the journal had run an article on three Iowa women—a Mrs. M. D. Longshore and her two daughters, Miss Caroline and Miss Marie" who were "really farming—not playing at it." They farmed "just as men do, and just as successfully," which the author apparently found most unusual. The "country life and outdoor activities" had "put roses in their cheeks and made them healthy and strong," but "in the home," there was that "refinement and feminine delicacy peculiar to their sex" even though they were "women farmers."²⁸

WALLACE considered farm women crucial to the farm man's success or failure. A farmer was to marry and do so wisely, according to the editor, while taking special precautions not to choose a woman who was likely to become discontented with life on the farm. "No farmer ever reached the first rank without the help of an able wife," the editor maintained. Convinced of the great importance of a wife to a farmer, Wallace

27. Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 162-163; Filene, "Between a Rock and a Soft Place: A Century of American Manhood," unpublished paper, in author Riley's possession, 1-22. See also Gordon, "Ideal Husband," 154-155; Gerald L. Marriner, "A Victorian in the Modern World: The 'Liberated' Male's Adjustment to the New Woman and the New Morality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 76 (Spring 1977), 190-203. For a discussion of this problem as it exists today see Franklin, *Changing Definition of Masculinity*, 106-111, 144-152, 195-199.

28. *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*, 23 January 1932; *Wallaces' Farmer*, 16 August 1918. See also Tolson, *Limits of Masculinity*, 51-54, 95-96 and Carolyn E. Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, N.J., 1983), 29-34, 69-70, 72-74.

Wallace and Farm Male

worried about discontent among farm women. He believed that "one of the greatest drawbacks to farming is that few women like the farm." Sketching his stereotype of farm women in more detail, Wallace claimed that they detested the hard work, the lack of modern facilities, and the sparse social life. "I am sure that there are thousands of men who would be on the farm today if it were not for this feeling on the part of wives," he wrote in 1927. "Of the families that leave the farm I suspect that women are responsible for the departure of more than half." If household conveniences did not become more widespread and farm communities more modern, he believed that "large numbers of farm women" would "insist on moving to town" as soon as the family could afford to do so. He was "beginning to think that the farm problem" was "as much a problem of the farmer's wife" as it was of anything else and he feared that even when farmers obtained a fair share of the national income, the "farm wife problem" would remain unresolved.²⁹

Wallace's writings, although usually concerned primarily with men, contained messages about the proper treatment of the farm woman. These concerned her work and her social activities. According to Wallace, the farmer must do what he could to supply his wife with the latest labor-saving appliances. He must not insist that the family invest its funds only in the new technology for the field. Wallace's thinking followed the same lines as that of another Iowa writer, Herbert Quick, who had reported a few years earlier that men on farms were "much more contented and happy than the women." Quick commented that the farmer had become "a man who operates machines" which made his life "more interesting and easeful." But the farm woman had "not received a fair deal in the partnership." Quick also noted that the farm woman was demanding "first, things in the house for her housekeeping; secondly, things in the house for her children's happier and fuller home life; and thirdly, things outside the house, in the neighborhood, for the better and fuller community life of her-

29. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 14 January, 16 December 1927. For an opposing view of farm women see Sachs, *Invisible Farmers*, 75-117, 127-128 and Glenda Riley, "Farm Women's Roles in the Agricultural Development of South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 13 (Spring/Summer 1983), 83-121.

self, her children, her husband, and her neighbors." Wallace too suggested that the farmer must accept rather than resist his wife's demands. In addition to making sure that his wife benefitted from technological progress, he must do what he could to enrich her life in the rural community. Otherwise, he was not likely to remain in farming long enough to achieve success.³⁰

The farmers that Wallace publicized as models in the master farmer contest were both good husbands and good fathers. In writing of fathers, just as in writing of husbands, Wallace did not stress closeness and affection. Rather, he emphasized providing education for farm children. A master farmer would always see to it that his children were educated. It was Wallace's conviction that success on the farm depended upon receptivity to the teachings of institutions, like the agricultural colleges and farm journals, that were seeking to modernize agriculture and increase its output. Education would encourage this receptivity.

Wallace's prescriptions for farm men included a sixth major theme. The rural male was also to be a good citizen. In 1920, men lost their stronghold of public privilege, the voting booth, to woman suffrage. Gradually, Americans began to develop the modern view of citizenship as a human characteristic rather than a specifically male one. In the realm of citizenship, Henry Wallace took a traditional stand. When writing of citizens, he customarily wrote of men. One of the requirements for designation as a master farmer was good citizenship and virtually all of the "masters" were men. When deciding who to recognize, the contest judges looked at contributions to the community. The people selected, Wallace pointed out, "are those who are helping to build a sound rural community and a sound rural civilization as well as providing for themselves and for their families." Of course, the contest either overlooked women's "contributions" or included them as relating to domestic rather than community functions. Master farmers, however, Wallace argued, were "much interested in the general social and economic situation" and wanted to "know how the general situation is affecting not only themselves but also their neighbors."³¹

30. Herbert Quick, "The Women on the Farms," *Good Housekeeping* 57 (October 1913), 426-436.

31. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 13 January 1928; *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Home-*

Wallace and Farm Male

Wallace's farmer as citizen had to be concerned with national policies that affected the community as well as local policies and institutions. As a future New Dealer, the farm editor did not advise farm men that their success derived solely from their own efforts. It depended also on the economic environment in which farmers functioned. He therefore battled for government action to create more salutary circumstances for farmers. He wanted an environment that would supply rural folk with opportunities equal to those city people enjoyed. His specific suggestions included a government program to raise farm prices. The second major aim of *Wallaces' Farmer*, the editor indicated, was "to bring about mass action of farmers as a class that will put agriculture on a level with other occupations."³²

It was people of this quality—people capable of functioning as responsible citizens—that Wallace wished, above all, to keep on the farm. Thus he took a great interest in the decisions which farm boys made as they approached their adult years. While some had to move to the cities as there could not be enough economic opportunities in the country for all young males, he hoped that most of the more intelligent would enter farming and that nearly all of those who moved would be the less capable ones. "We can spare a few of our farm boys to become doctors, lawyers, editors, etc., and a larger number to work in the factories, machine shops, and garages," he advised in 1928. "The farm boys we want to hold on the farm are those who have real common sense and intelligence, a love of their fellowman and a vision of building up a fine community and a fine national civilization based on agriculture."³³

Not surprisingly, given his emphasis on the male as citizen, Wallace did not often select women to staff the agencies that he controlled as secretary of agriculture. Historian Susan Ware,

stead, 28 February 1931; Pleck and Pleck, *American Man*, 23; Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Masculine/Feminine or Human?*, 35-36. In this age of blurred standards of personal definition, many men turned to service clubs such as the Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions in search of personal worth. Membership in these groups quintupled during the 1920s, so that by 1930, 400,000 urban men were seeking meaning and fellowship within them. See Peter Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 162.

32. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 23 April 1926.

33. *Wallaces' Farmer*, 1 June 1928.

in her study of women in the New Deal, expressed surprise that no member of what she defined as the "woman's network" served in the Department of Agriculture. "Other than the division of home economics, headed by career civil servant Dr. Louise Stanley, no prominent woman served in agriculture," Ware pointed out. This surprised her because Wallace's department was "often the center for experimentation and social change in the New Deal." Wallace's enthusiasm for experimentation, however, did not extend to the realm of male-female relations.³⁴

The secretary expressed his traditionalism to the Associated Country Women of the World in 1936. Speaking of the "Contributions of Women to Agriculture," he stressed the social importance of the farm woman and interpreted it as "fundamental . . . in the scheme of things to come." He defined her as mother and housewife, complained "that the great majority of farm women over the entire world still face the problem of operating a household with relatively primitive facilities," but deemed it fortunate that "during the past twenty years there have been enormous changes and there are prospects that there will be even greater changes during the next twenty years." Technology and science were modernizing the life of farm women: "Rural electrification is easing the burden of the farm wife more and more over the entire world," Wallace observed. "Good roads are widening her contacts and her interests. Knowledge of modern nutrition enables her to keep her children in better health." Because of her crucial roles as producer and raiser of children, the farm woman's progress benefitted all of society. "From the farm woman comes the breath of life to our cities, now that our cities over the entire western world are no longer producing enough children to maintain themselves," Wallace proclaimed. "A century hence it appears possible that two-thirds of the people of this country will be descended from the one-fifth of the women of the United States who are now on farms." Increasingly, "both the quantity and the quality" of the total population would depend upon the quality of the farm woman's life.³⁵

34. Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge, 1981), 65.

35. *Rural America* 14 (October 1936), 2.

The view of men and women that Wallace brought to Washington when he became secretary of agriculture in 1933 did not disqualify him as a New Dealer. Many New Dealers were traditionalists in this regard. They resisted pressures for change in gender roles which the Great Depression generated. Caught in the economic crisis of the early 1930s, men tried desperately to continue their roles as breadwinners, but faced unemployment and eventual resort to the relief rolls instead. Married women were dismissed from jobs while legislation and popular feeling denied them the right to seek others. Yet, because women clung to whatever jobs they might find to help support their families, the number of employed women rose during the depression years while the number of employed men fell. For men, all of this contributed to their loss of a sense of manhood. According to historian Peter Filene, "if a man could not say 'I am an accountant' or a lawyer or a pharmacist, it became harder to say 'I am a man.'" The dole became a mark of failure for such men. Given this difficult state of affairs, the status of many husbands began to break down discernibly. Some men protested the challenges to their traditional status. In 1934, Gilbert Seldes, in *Scribner's Magazine*, satirically described a "masculine revolt" against the pervasive influence of women. In 1936, also in *Scribner's*, two other authors argued that since women were taking over in all realms including the sexual, there was a pressing need to "reinstate the male."³⁶

While Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace promoted programs designed to help farmers enjoy economic success once again, other New Dealers did what they could to improve the status of other male workers. Harry Hopkins, for example,

36. Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 169-172, 176, 178; Gilbert Seldes, "The Masculine Revolt," *Scribner's Magazine* 95 (April 1934), 279-282; Thomas H. Uzzell and V. E. LeRoy, "The Decline of the Male," *Scribner's Magazine* 100 (December 1936), 19-25. See also Joe L. Dubbert, *Man's Place*, 211-225; Mirra Komarovsky, "The Breakdown of the Husband's Status," in Pleck and Pleck, *American Man*, 339-364; Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago, 1981), 1-11, 75-91, 115-141, 156-163; Winifred D. Wandersee Bolin, "The Economics of Middle-Income Family Life: Working Women During the Great Depression," *Journal of American History* 65 (June 1978), 60-74. For a vitriolic attack on women bureaucrats in the New Deal see U. V. Wilcox, "New Deal Females," *American Mercury* 38 (August 1936), 417-423.

in his management of relief programs, much preferred work relief to the commissary and the dole, for Civil Works and Work Progress Administration jobs seemed better able to restore men's morale than did "handouts." Such jobs could revive habits of work and give men the sense that they were doing all they could to look after themselves and their families. Work relief, Hopkins believed, "preserves a man's morale. It saves his skill. It gives him a chance to do something useful." The murals and plays which New Deal projects produced clearly reflected cultural attitudes about gender roles that were more familiar in the 1890s than in the 1920s. Although these representations were not about gender, they did portray male figures committed to making and doing along with females who represented generativity and human evolution. The most common image was that of the male engaged in physical labor and exuding a sense of mastery and manliness. The most frequent representation of a female showed her laboring alongside her man or with her child as a "proper" woman should be. In Henry Wallace's day, some heard the feminist voices demanding that men be emancipated from feelings of superiority and the necessity to "be a man," but those voices seemed hushed because of the economic disaster that had shrouded the nation.³⁷

That Henry Wallace's conception of the rural man had become part of the dominant conception of the American male illustrates the potential of men's prescriptive literature in offering insights into larger movements. Wallace's somewhat old-fashioned advice to farm men apparently spoke to a generation of Americans bowed low by economic reverses. What historian William Chafe has called "constant norms" seemed to be reappearing in the America of the 1930s. The willingness to return to old ideas of womanhood and manhood kept alive by Wallace, among others, during years of prosperity suggests the

37. Richard S. Kirkendall, "The New Deal and Agriculture," in John Braeman et al, eds., *The New Deal* (Columbus, 1975), 1: 83-109; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1959), 268; Barbara Melosh, "The Iconography of Gender: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Murals and Theatre," unpublished paper, in author Riley's possession, 1-40; Pringle Barret, "The Emancipation of Men," *Atlantic Monthly* 153 (June 1934), 665-672.

nature and extent of the crisis; it also demonstrates the possibilities of such literature as source material. Only the future work of scholars can unlock the potential that these resources hold.³⁸

38. William H. Chafe, "Constant Norms and Changing Realities: American Women From the 1920s to the 1970s," unpublished paper, in author Riley's possession, 1-22. To locate published scholarship on men see Eugene R. August, *Men's Studies: A Selected and Interdisciplinary Bibliography* (Littleton, Colo., 1985) and Kathleen E. Grady, Robert Brannon, and Joseph Pleck, comps., *The Male Sex Role: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography* (Washington, D.C., 1979).

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