

Women in Wheat Country

by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

*Dear cousin . . . I heard there was a lots a girls out there. Maybe there is one left for me, I wish you would find me a good girl out there. I am coming out there this fall or this winter. I don't care if she got money or not, just so that she is good. That is all I care for. If you find one please send me her picture and tell her to write. Now maybe you think I am making fun but I mean it. Please try your best and let me know as quick as you can. . . . Best regards to you and all and to the girl you find for me. Dear cousin write soon, soon, soon, soon, soon, soon.*¹

Although almost comic in tone, this 1900 letter written by a young Reno County farmer to a cousin to the east reflected a grave reality in wheat country; a farm without a woman was at a serious disadvantage.² Females, young and old, were an essential part of the economic fabric of wheat farming. They participated in a nearly lifelong cycle of work, attending to whatever tasks the farm and family demanded of them. From the moment that a girl was old enough to work, her mother trained her to labor in the family's agricultural enterprise. By the time she was a young woman, her work was vital to numerous as-

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1. August Meyer to Cousin Martha, May 27, 1900, August Meyer Miscellaneous Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

2. While the exact location of the cousin is unclear from the document, she probably lived in eastern Kansas or other points farther east in the Midwest. When young men appealed to friends and relatives to find young women for them, they generally were forced to do so in communities to the east, which were more thickly populated with females.





Women bring the noon meal to the harvest hands on the Earnest Anschutz farm in Russell County, July 4, 1913.



Married women on the farm bore, reared, and trained the next generation of farmers. Girls' jobs ranged from housekeeping to outdoor chores, gardening, and field work. TOP: Marian Ritchie feeds chicken at the Ritchie farm, Shawnee County, ca. 1912. CENTER: Mrs. George Wilcoxon stands at the family soddie near Bloom, Ford County, with her husband, far right, and their six children. With five boys and only one girl, chances are the daughter's duties would involve helping her mother in the home. BOTTOM: Unidentified young girl assists with field work in Sherman County.



pects of the survival of her family's farm, from housekeeping to gardening and crop production. As a married woman on her own farm, she bore, reared, and trained the next generation of farmers; labored in her home, barnyard, and often fields; and cared for the needs of the larger community. As that somewhat desperate young man in Reno County knew, a farm without a woman was impoverished indeed.

Although earlier generations of historians often thought of farming as a male province, in the last twenty years scholars have increasingly acknowledged that women have played a vital role in the development of American agriculture. Throughout most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, labor in the agricultural North was both scarce and expensive.³ Rather than attempt to hire the hands that they needed to farm their lands, families traditionally relied upon their own efforts to meet labor needs. This economic reality dictated that farm women bore and trained large numbers of children to work the family farm and participated actively themselves in agricultural labor, from dairying in the Northeast to corn and livestock production in the Midwest and wheat growing on the Great Plains.⁴

How women have participated in their families' agricultural enterprises has varied from region to region and over time. A woman's activities also changed during the course of her own life cycle. The tasks expected from a teenaged girl, living on her parents' farm, might be quite different from those performed by a mature woman, either in or past her childbearing years. The writings of and about women on wheat farms reveal the complexity and variety of their tasks and the vital roles they played in developing their families' enterprises.⁵

3. Lee A. Craig, *To Sow One Acre More: Childbearing and Farm Productivity in the Antebellum North* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 28–29.

4. A number of recent works effectively demonstrate women's importance to American agriculture. See, for example, Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913–1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

5. All of the women whose diaries and memoirs are cited in this article were members of Kansas farming families that cultivated wheat. In the pre-World War I period most of these farms were mixed farms, cultivating other crops and livestock in addition to wheat. Wheat farms became less likely to be diversified as the twentieth century progressed. The Dyck farm was perhaps most thoroughly invested in wheat, with five hundred or more acres in that crop from the 1920s onward.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries growing up on a farm meant assuming an ever larger part of its work. In 1877 Ottilia Schulz was fourteen, and a worker. Her father's diary, which documented life on the Schulz family's farm in McPherson County, Kansas, describes the kind of work a daughter in her early teens might be expected to accomplish. Ottilia labored in the fields, pulling rye out of the wheat, shocking and stacking wheat, cutting sorghum, planting corn and potatoes, and herding cattle. She also ran errands for her busy parents. This did not exempt her from work inside the home, as Schulz noted: "Otilie cleaning bedsteads and washing."⁶ Only three children remained in the Schulz home (Agnes, age twenty-one; Alexander Paul, nineteen; and Ottilia, fourteen), and Ottilia's parents expected her to be useful in whatever way was necessary, be it in the fields or in the home.

Bertha Benke of Barton County, Kansas, also was fourteen and one of three children when she wrote her diary. Her 1886–1887 writings detail her activities hunting eggs, picking peas, planting and harvesting corn, and cutting wheat with a scythe beside her father.⁷ Much of this work was a cooperative effort between Bertha, her nine year-old sister Ida, and her parents. When her brother Hermann was not away teaching school, he also worked in the fields. As Benke wrote on January 29, 1887: "Ida, myself, and P. [father] & M. [mother] went to work in the field all day. I and H. chop stalks and P. & M. pick them into large heaps, all the fore noon."⁸ Without the help of their daughters, the Benkes would have been hard pressed to accomplish the work of the farm. It should be noted, however, that Bertha Benke was not an overworked daughter. Her journal attests to the hours she spent hunting, swimming, drawing, and studying. Although Bertha was often "buisy," she also had lazy days when she and Ida were free "to hunt some nise Flowers."⁹

For a girl to work in the fields as well as in the home was not unusual. In 1916 Children's Bureau investigators studying a wheat farming community in western Kansas found that in their youth many Kansas-raised women had

6. August Schulz, diary, July 20, 1877, August Schulz Miscellaneous Collection, Library and Archives Division.

7. Although the Benkes harvested their grain using a scythe, this would have been somewhat unusual. By this time, most families with the resources, and large enough fields, would have been using a McCormick reaper.

8. Bertha Mary Emily Benke, diary, January 29, 1887, microfilm MS 92, Library and Archives Division.

9. *Ibid.*, July 3, 1886.

ventured beyond traditional female tasks. Of these women, a third had done only housework as girls, but nearly half had provided “some work in the fields. For girls raised in western Kansas this field work usually consisted of driving teams or herding cattle.”¹⁰ Many girls, as well as boys, became familiar with crop and livestock production.

As their unmarried daughters matured, families set them to the tasks most needed by the family. The Capper family lived on a farm near Beverly in Lincoln County where they raised wheat, corn, kafir corn, and livestock. Four Capper children lived at home. Daughter Olive, age twenty-four, was the oldest, followed by Earl, fifteen; Rob, twelve; and Myrtle, seven. Olive generally participated in tasks that were stereotypically female. Aside from picking and shucking corn and occasionally working in the garden, Olive did not work outdoors. Instead, housekeeping was her contribution to the family economy. Washing and ironing filled many of her days as did sewing and mending. Olive described her work during one week in February: “I washed,” “I ironed some,” “I ironed in evening,” “I washed and baked,” “I finished ironing, baked bread & cut carpet rags today.”¹¹ Neighbors also hired Olive to do their housekeeping, although it is unclear if she kept her wages or contributed them to her family. Olive’s mother was more likely to be in the fields working than Olive was, which may have reflected her mother’s preferences or the best use of their individual abilities.

In 1879 Lottie Norton was twenty-two and her mother’s full partner in housekeeping. Her tasks rarely took her into the fields, although she often did gardening chores such as planting potatoes and setting out cabbages. She did assist her father with corn and sorghum planting, as did many girls and young women, but she was more likely to be washing and sewing. Indeed, she took advantage of the family farm’s close proximity to Fort Larned and took in soldiers’ washing. Lottie contributed her earnings to the family coffers. As her mother wrote in the spring of 1880, “Lottie got a calico dress for a present for me and got none for herself. Also got some calico for the children. Spent all her wash money, poor child, and only got herself

some cheap shoes and cheap gloves. I am ashamed to take the dress.”¹² Mary Norton worried about the weight of her eldest daughter’s burdens. In the late spring of 1880 Mary wrote, “She has worked too hard this week—helped plant the sorghum when it was very warm.”¹³ Lottie Norton’s life was a busy one, consumed with the needs of her parents, brothers, and sisters.

Mary and Lottie Norton spent the larger portion of their time working in the house and the garden, while others generally worked in the fields. This distribution of labor reflected the ages of the Norton children as well as their numbers. In 1879, when the Norton family diary began, Lottie was the oldest child in residence. Additionally, there were four Norton sons aged eleven to twenty, and five other children, nine years of age and younger. Lucy Ida was the youngest at one year old. With so many small children in the household and so many sons whom their parents considered old enough to do field work, it made great sense for the Norton women to focus their attentions on the household.

The adult women in the Schulz family divided their labors differently. Louisa Schulz and her daughter Agnes both worked inside and out, although Agnes spent more time in the fields than did her mother. Their apparent willingness to work in the fields may have been a reflection of the family’s German heritage. German women, as well as women of Scandinavian and Eastern European descent, were more likely to work in the fields on a regular basis than native-born women, who sometimes considered field work undignified and unfeminine.¹⁴ Agnes, at twenty-one, moved regularly from the work in the fields to the work in the house. She shared the gardening with her mother. She weeded the wheat fields with her siblings and shocked with them as well. During harvest, the local men moved from farm to farm, cutting, binding, shocking, and threshing wheat. Agnes also followed the harvest, cooking for the men at various neighbors’ houses and going into the fields when needed. As her father wrote in the midst of the wheat harvest, “harvesting upon Morrell’s farm, Agnes prepairing dinner there & helping in the field, her nose bleeding several times, caused from the hot weather.”¹⁵ When the

10. Elizabeth Moore, *Maternity and Infant Care in a Rural County in Kansas*, Rural Child Welfare Series 1, Bureau Publication 26 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor Children’s Bureau, 1917), 40.

11. Olive Capper, diary, February 25–March 2, 1895, Olive Capper Miscellaneous Collection, Library and Archives Division.

12. Norton family diaries, March 11, 1880, microfilm MS 1190 (Library and Archives Division, typescript).

13. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1880.

14. In her study of women and agriculture in the Midwest, Mary Neth found that German and Norwegian women were more likely to work in the fields than women of other ethnic backgrounds. See Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 25.

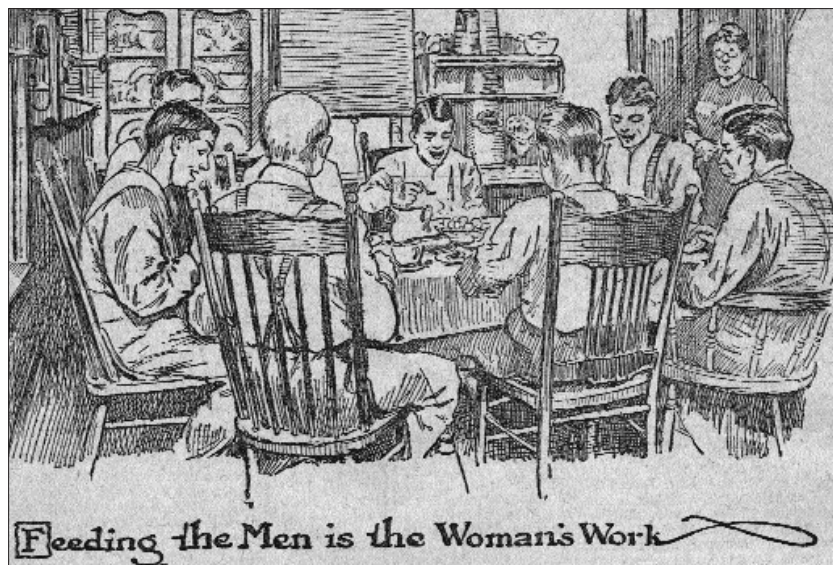
15. Schulz diary, July 11, 1877.

The Women and the Wheat

Feeding the Farmer and His Harvest Hand



An article on women's work during wheat harvest appeared in the June 14, 1914, issue of the *Kansas City Star*. The accompanying illustration clearly notes that preparing meals for the men was a major responsibility for women.



crop no longer claimed her attention, she washed, sewed, scrubbed, made soap, and generally made herself useful to her family. Neither she nor her mother specialized in housekeeping to the exclusion of other farm tasks.¹⁶

Agnes Schulz appeared to be helping her family in another way as well. As a twenty-one-year-old adult she was eligible to claim land under the Homestead Act. The act only required that a homesteader be a legal adult and the head of his or her own household to claim land; in that way, homesteading was open to both women and men. In 1887, although still resident on her parents' farm, Agnes Schulz made a land claim in her own right. The claim was contested, perhaps because she was not actually living on the land or working it herself, but the court dismissed the suit. Schulz's claim appeared to be a homestead acquired for family, rather than personal, purposes. Her land was

very close to her parents' farm, and she continued to live and work at home, while her brother and a hired man did the plowing and planting.¹⁷ In the fall of 1877 Agnes might have been preparing to move to her land (she was purchasing dishes and other household items), but she had not done so by the summer of 1878. By making a land claim on neighboring acres, Agnes Schulz had effectively increased the size of her parents' farm by 160 acres, at least until such time as she might want to sell the land or marry. It is impossible to know how many daughters homesteaded for the purpose of increasing their families' holdings. Although questionable legally, their actions were enormously valuable to their parents.¹⁸

In marriage farm women put their many years of experience to the test. To the housework, and sometimes field

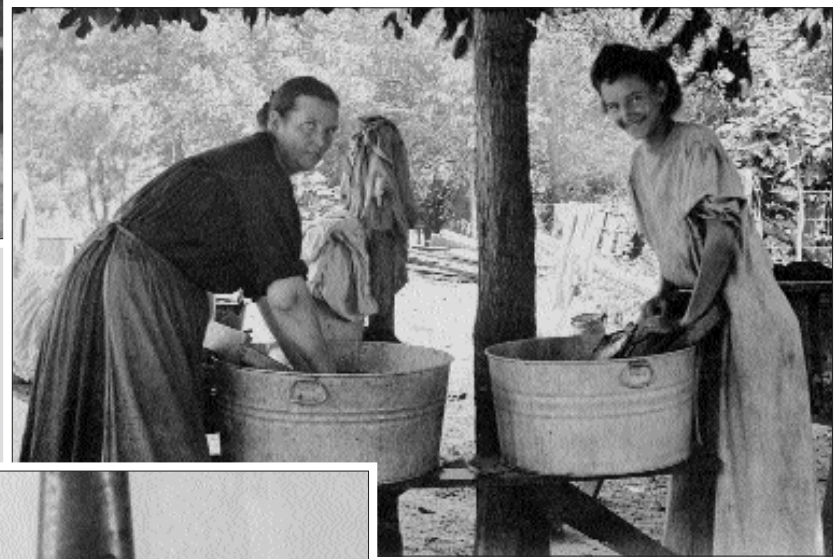
17. Schulz diary, April 24, June 3, June 4, June 18–26, 1877.

18. Katherine Harris, *Long Vistas: Women and Families on Colorado Homesteads* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1993), 20–21, 119, argues that most single women who homesteaded did so in close proximity to family members. While men in their families often had use of that land, women retained ownership and proceeds from sales.

16. Unfortunately, August Schulz's diary-writing habits do not allow a very full picture of Louisa Schulz's activities. He took great pains to record his own activities and those of his children, but he made much less effort to record his wife's.



Numerous household duties occupied much of a woman's time. TOP: Mrs. R.H. Larzalere of Doniphan County, sewing. CENTER: Wash day, unidentified Kansas women. BOTTOM: Gussie Weichold, Chase County, cooking.



work, that they had performed as their parents' daughters, they added childbearing and child rearing. Families in farming communities tended to be large. In Kansas in 1900 the average family consisted of 4.57 persons. In heavily urban areas such as Johnson, Shawnee, and Sedgwick Counties, the average family was smaller. In more rural counties, such as those represented in this study, the average family was larger. Mothers on the Great Plains, and especially on new farms, often bore larger numbers of children than their counterparts farther to the east.¹⁹

Circumstances forced women to integrate childbearing into the work of the farm to the best of their abilities. A 1916 study found that only about half of the farm women in a western Kansas county had hired help in the house when their babies were born, and fewer than one-fifth had any sort of help in the last months of pregnancy.²⁰ This lack of help was not the result of poverty but of a shortage of female labor. As the researcher discovered, "pregnant mothers keep up their usual round of duties until labor begins, unless they are disabled by serious ill health."²¹ The story of Mrs. Green's pregnancy was typical. "Harvest occurred two and a half months before the baby was born, and Mrs. Green had six extra men to board for two weeks; but she had a hired girl for that time." A heavily pregnant Mrs. Green also had to tend to the threshers. "The thrashing crew came three weeks before the baby was born, just when the oldest boy was having the measles; but Mr. Green arranged so that none of the men boarded at the house."²² Mrs. Green integrated pregnancy and childbirth into her work, although she had the great good fortune of hired help and an accommodating husband. If Mrs. Green followed the patterns prevalent in her community, she would have nursed her baby throughout its first year of life, and perhaps into its second.²³ Each new

addition to the family complicated already busy schedules, and aside from the two weeks immediately following the birth of their babies, most mothers continued their usual round of work.

In 1890 Mary Logan of Decatur County experienced a threshing season much like Mrs. Green's. She found herself with no time to rest and recuperate immediately following childbirth. As she wrote many years later, "Before I was able to be up, the threshing machine came into the neighborhood, and if you did not get your threshing done when it came through the first time, there was no telling when it would come back. So Dan thought he must thresh." A fifteen-year-old girl came to help, but Mary Logan supervised. "I gave them instructions from my bed and they killed and dressed four or five chickens, and kept the fire roaring in the stove all day. During the hot August days, this was almost too much for me, and I thought I was going to pass out." A thresher's wife came to her aid. "Mrs. Wintzen, came in and fanned me, and this and the fact that it cooled off at night was the only reason I was able to stand it." In retrospect, Logan believed that her husband had asked too much of her. "I should have put my foot down and said 'no threshers until I am up,' but Dan said it would save work to thresh out of shocks. We had a good crop that year and got money ahead." The successful harvest brought the Logans enough money to build a new house. This meant additional work for Mary Logan in the form of boarding the builders while they worked, and as she nursed a baby and cared for small children.²⁴ Her experience was far from unusual.

Child care was at the center of any mother's life, but child care often meant child training. Once her daughters were old enough, one of the most essential jobs of any farm woman was to train them to assume the work of the household and farm. An 1874 essay in the *Kansas Farmer*, titled "What Shall We Teach our Daughters," captured the essence of a mother's task. In practical terms, mothers were to teach their daughters the fine art of homemaking:

19. The 1900 census shows family sizes of 4.41, 4.38, and 4.48 in Johnson, Shawnee, and Sedgwick Counties, respectively. In more rural areas such as Barton, McPherson, Reno, Lincoln, Decatur, and Cloud Counties, average family size ranged from 4.61 to 4.81 persons. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Population*, vol. 2, pt. 2 (Washington, D.C.: United States Census Office, 1902), 627; Craig, *To Sow One Acre More*, 17; Dorothy Schwieder and Deborah Fink, "U.S. Prairie and Plains Women in the 1920s: A Comparison of Women, Family, and Environment," *Agricultural History* 73 (Spring 1999): 197-99.

20. Moore, *Maternity and Infant Care*, did not identify the study area, but it may have been Ford County. Moore described the county as near the southern border of the state, one third of the way from the Colorado border, and traversed west to east by the Arkansas River.

21. *Ibid.*, 27, 31.

22. *Ibid.*, 10.

23. In this western Kansas community 92 percent of infants were breast fed throughout the first month of life; 6 percent partially breast fed.

Seventy-one percent were exclusively breast fed at five months, 61 percent at six months; 8 percent were still exclusively breast fed at one year. At the end of a year 70 percent of infants were still receiving some breast milk. At eighteen months nearly one quarter were not weaned. Although Moore and the Children's Bureau disapproved of long breast feeding and generally believed that nine months was sufficient, the many months that women breast fed their infants may well have contributed significantly to the low levels of infant mortality in this community. See Moore, *Maternity and Infant Care*, 41.

24. Mary Cornelia Wood Logan, "Grandma Logan's Story," in "Reminiscences," Mary Cornelia Wood Logan Miscellaneous Collection (Library and Archives Division, typescript), 46, 47.

Give them a good, substantial, common education.
 Teach them how to cook a good meal of victuals.
 Teach them how to darn stockings and sew on buttons.
 Teach them how to make shirts.
 Teach them how to make bread.
 Teach them all of the mysteries of the kitchen, the dining room and the parlor.²⁵

In addition to homemaking skills, the writer admonished mothers to teach their daughters common sense, morality, and “the essentials of life—truth, honesty, uprightness—then at a suitable time to marry.” The author warned parents, “Rely upon it, that upon your teaching depends in a great measure the weal or woe of their after-life.”²⁶ Upon a mother’s teaching also rested her own welfare and peace of mind. As the lives of young women such as Bertha Benke, Olive Capper, Lottie Norton, and the Schulz sisters demonstrate, a well-trained, willing daughter could do much to lighten the burdens of a hard-working mother. When such a daughter left home, a mother might grieve the loss of her company and assistance. When Lottie Norton married and moved to Illinois, her mother wrote, “Nobody knows how much I miss Lottie.”²⁷ She, like many other daughters, had eased her mother’s burdens and carried much of the weight of the work in a very large household.

Child care and training had to be integrated into a large variety of housekeeping tasks. On the Norton family’s Pawnee County farm, mother Mary raised ten children (an eleventh was by 1879 deceased), washed, scrubbed, baked, sewed, preserved food, and made a garden. When her husband and older sons left the family’s cash-strapped farm to work in distant communities, she became the farm manager. On January 24, 1881, she described her household chores: “I’ve done nothing today but bake a little, make cranberry jelly, clean pantry shelves, cook, sweep, etc. Every day. I think I’ll have leisure to sew some. Guess I’m getting old and slow.” She sometimes felt great ambivalence about her work: “I made a pair of pants for Charles today—an important event to note down, but that is about what my life amounts to.”²⁸ Mary Norton was not the only woman with less than charitable thoughts about housework. Nancy Cool of Cloud County must have captured the feelings of many women when she wrote on a hot July day, “Glad our folk, are all able and willing to eat:

but it is very hot work for the women to cook.”²⁹ Women’s work on the farm, like men’s, was often repetitive, back-breaking, and uncomfortably warm.

These day-to-day tasks, which were more than enough to keep any woman busy, were eclipsed by harvest and threshing. As an observer wrote in 1916, “at wheat-harvest time, and often at thrashing, there comes an almost overwhelming rush of work because of the necessity of boarding crews. This is always a great burden.”³⁰ Mary Norton’s experiences confirmed this assessment. On an August day she wrote, “I was taken ill last Saturday night with quite a severe attack of Bloody Flux. . . . We threshed last Saturday—had 327 bushels of wheat. It was a very hot day.”³¹ For all concerned, harvest and threshing were the most arduous phases of crop production.

At the hottest time of the year, women went into the kitchen to cook for large numbers of men over wood and coal-fired stoves. One meal would hardly be concluded before preparations for the next began. The frenetic pace of harvest was the culmination of months of hard work. Women began planning for the event well in advance. As Elma Bamberg, who was raised on an Ellis County farm, reminisced, “The women were planning on the big groups they would have to feed. Most of them were sure there would be plenty of milk; the meat product was planned for since the previous cold months when it had been butchered and cured or stored in five or ten gallon crocks in lard.” This advance planning included raising enough chickens for both meat and eggs and planting an early spring garden, “so they could have vegetables to set the table. Potatoes, though they were not fully matured could be dug and used, though it took a lot of hills to make a meal and a lot of scraping to prepare them.” Bamberg asserted that “the woman’s part was not so easy, but with foresight it was done year after year.”³² This foresight was essential for the successful completion of both harvest and threshing.

Hot, home-cooked meals provided the fuel that kept laborers working. Women provided the ingenuity, planning, and sweat that brought those meals to the table. The panic in a husband’s words is apparent when his wife decided to leave home four days before the threshers appeared.

25. “What Shall We Teach Our Daughters,” *Kansas Farmer* 12 (January 28, 1874): 30.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Norton diary, January 21, 1881.

28. *Ibid.*, January 24, 1881, February 25, 1879.

29. Amanda and J. Cool Family, diary, July 29, 1880, microfilm MS 953, Library and Archives Division.

30. Moore, *Maternity and Infant Care*, 47.

31. Norton diary, August 11, 1881.

32. Elma L. Bamberg, “My Home on the Smoky,” (Library and Archives Division, typescript), 185; or see Elma L. Bamberg, “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread’: A Harvest Memoir,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 23 (Spring–Summer 2000): 6–11.

Women often integrated field work into their already busy domestic lives. RIGHT: Anna M. Hoffman of Greeley County on her family's farm, operating the auto-scythe, 1924.



LEFT: Unidentified woman managing a team of horses, Bourbon County.

Mother took a bundle of clothes and Started for Alma's a foot, to work for her. I had asked her to Stay and help her family at home but She would not. I found her gone when I came home from the hay field for dinner. . . . It is hard for me to get the cows after dark and milk every night. I did not know Mother intended to leave home.³³

The day before the threshers arrived, a son went to try to retrieve his mother. "Lewis went C. C. King's found Mother there told her of the much work we had to do and asked her to come home to help but would not do it."³⁴ While it is entirely unclear why "Mother" left prior to threshing and returned the following week, it is clear that her absence posed

serious logistical problems for her family. Perhaps she had cooked and sweated through one harvest too many.

Women's participation in crop production was not confined to cooking and cleaning for the men who worked in the fields. Women often integrated field work into their already busy lives. The degree to which they did so depended upon a number of factors: need, ethnicity, inclination, number of children on the farm and their ages, and stage of a farm's development. Need was the most important factor determining a woman's actions. When need dictated, women worked in the fields. This was particularly true in busy times, such as harvesting and threshing. As previously stated, women from certain ethnic backgrounds were more likely to perform field work than others. German women did not necessarily see field work as men's work but as their work as well. Inclination, too, played an important role in determining a woman's ac-

33. Cool diary, August 25, 1881.

34. Ibid., August 28, 1881.

RIGHT: An unidentified young woman drives the water wagon to the field, Russell County, August 1, 1908.



If a woman preferred outdoor work, a daughter may take over the indoor chores allowing her mother to tend to matters in the field. LEFT: Unidentified women on a hay wagon, possibly Geary County.

tions. If a woman preferred to work outdoors, she might substitute a daughter's labors for her own inside the house. If she preferred to work indoors, she might send an older daughter out to work in her stead.³⁵ As the case of the Norton family shows, a mother with a large number of children over twelve, and particularly boys, would have greater freedom to work in the house, rather than the fields. The large numbers of Norton children and their age and sex distribution allowed Mary Norton to devote her energies to the house and garden. Other families had different labor needs. By the 1880s the Cool household was shrinking. Only two daughters and one son made up the available work force. A third daughter lived at home, but she worked for wages off the farm. Nancy Cool worked

35. Neth found women "specializing" in indoor or outdoor work based in part on their own preferences and the ages and genders of their children. See Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 25.

outside of the house, helping her younger daughter Hattie with various chores. As Cool wrote, "Hattie and I took turns herding: Too hot for one to stand the sunshine very long at a time."³⁶ Other women planted, harvested, and threshed as their circumstances dictated.³⁷

Farm women not only worked in their homes and fields but also found ways to earn sorely needed dollars. Many women sold milk, cream, butter, and eggs to supplement their families' incomes. Other women participated in the service economy. Lottie Norton, for example, took in soldiers' washing to aid her cash-poor fam-

36. Cool diary, June 30, 1881.

37. It is important not to make unwarranted assumptions about the apparent liberation of women who performed men's work. Schwieder and Fink make the following observation: "[T]here is no evidence that an early-twentieth century farm woman with a house-full of small children

ily. Flora Heston, living on the frontier in Clark County, Kansas, found many ways to supplement her family's income from crop sales. She discovered that local bachelor farmers craved home baking. She wrote to her relatives in Indiana, "I sell bread to the fellows that batch around here; have sold \$4.50 within less than two weeks. . . . I sell three small loaves for a quarter. . . . I can more than keep us in flour by selling bread."³⁸ She also sold butter at twenty-five cents a pound. When she planted her garden, she planned to grow enough vegetables to sell to her neighbors. Heston made profitable use of her knitting skills as well. "Well, I must tell you what I am doing. I get yarn out of the store and knit it up into socks, make twenty-five cents on each pair as I get fifty cents a pair. I can knit a pair in three days." When the opportunity presented itself, she boarded the surveyor when he came to the county. The impact of Heston's money-making efforts, and those of many other farm women, could be described in a single phrase: "every little bit helps."³⁹

It is important to remember that although many women in wheat country carried enormous family commitments, they also maintained a close relationship with the surrounding community, caring for the sick, injured, and dying. This generally happened later in life when their own children were grown. Such was the case of Nancy Cool. In 1879 her children were nearly grown, and all of them were thirteen years of age or older, giving her greater freedom to care for neighbors. She often was away from home "visiting the sick." Visiting the sick might mean nursing a local family recovering from "a desperate case of diphtheria," delivering a baby, or visiting a neighbor such as Arthur Bishop, who had broken his leg. Occasionally, Cool received payment for her services, bringing needed cash into the family coffers. After delivering a baby at the Pilchard home, Cool wrote, Mr. Pilchard "paid me 5,00 dollars in full of all accounts[.] They have another plough boy at their house arrived last night."⁴⁰ Nancy Cool's world was bigger than home and farm; it also encompassed a community in need of her care and nurturing.

would have sought to broaden her horizons by doing more outside farm work. More likely, she would have defined her 'liberation' in terms of wider social contacts, more time for church and club work, and improved household equipment." Undoubtedly, the same could be said for the late-nineteenth-century women described here. See Schwieder and Fink, "U.S. Prairie and Plains Women in the 1920s," 199.

38. Flora Heston to "Dear Folks at Home," April 27, 1885, Flora Heston Miscellaneous Collection, Library and Archives Division. A published version of the Heston letters can be found in "I Think I Will Like Kansas": The Letters of Flora Moorman Heston, 1885-1886," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 6 (Summer 1983): 70-95.

39. Heston to "Dear Folks at Home," May 10, 1885, February 14, 1886, December 27, 1885.

40. Cool diary, August 7, 1882, September-October 1879.

As agriculture in Kansas evolved during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women fulfilled many roles. From their childhoods onward they assumed an incredible variety of tasks. Like their brothers, they aided in planting, harvesting, herding, and dozens of other jobs related to crop and livestock production. Unlike their brothers, their parents expected them to become proficient in all of the tasks of household management as well. Marriage and motherhood meant the continuation of these chores, although generally with less emphasis on field work and more emphasis on the home. When need demanded, women found ways to supplement their families' incomes. When compassion required it, they attended to the needs of their neighbors, as well as their own. The farm that operated without the services of a woman operated at a decided handicap.

The preceding descriptions of women's work in wheat country date to the years prior to World War I. In the period between 1870 and 1917, wheat farming was becoming established in Kansas. In these early years farming families largely worked without the benefit of internal combustion engines. They also were more likely to plant a variety of crops and to raise animals for both sale and home consumption than were families in the World War I period and after. The war brought more tractors to Kansas, more monoculture, and many more acres of wheat. Although individual farm families might experience these years in differing ways, these changes had the potential to considerably alter the lives of farming women.

The technological developments of the early twentieth century transformed farm households. Obviously, tractors changed how farmers pursued their business, increasing the amount of work individuals could do and decreasing farmers' reliance on hired labor. Other inventions revolutionized life on the farm as well. Automobiles were a favorite purchase, giving farm families greater access to the world beyond the farm. The radio served a similar purpose, bringing a world of information and entertainment to isolated farmsteads. In the 1920s telephone service reached more than three-quarters of rural Kansas households, but it bypassed many of those in the far western reaches of the state because of the expense of installation in sparsely settled communities.⁴¹ Families purchased appliances such as irons and washing machines that could be

41. Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 28; Earl H. Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community, Sublette, Kansas Rural Life Studies 2* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1942): 64.



Prior to the mechanization period that came with World War II, farm women's outdoor labors included a variety of jobs. TOP: Cultivating potatoes in Jefferson County near Valley Falls, ca. 1908. CENTER: Feeding turkeys on a Logan County farm. BOTTOM: Milking the family's cows, Riley County, 1903.



powered with gasoline and kerosene. Because of the difficulties of extending lines over long distances, electricity was slow to reach remote rural communities, and many did not have electricity in their homes until after World War II. Farm women often worked in conditions that were simultaneously modern and primitive. As researchers immediately before World War I found, "Although such conveniences as running water, sinks, and indoor toilets—which a city woman considers indispensable—are too often lacking, nevertheless mechanical labor-saving devices are fairly common."⁴² In 1923, 62 percent of Kansas farm families owned automobiles, but fewer than 10 percent had indoor water, gas, or electricity.⁴³

Change came to farm women's routines at an uneven pace. Hamilton County farm woman Mary Dyck performed many of the same kinds of work as had previous generations. By the 1930s her family's farm encompassed approximately one thousand acres. The Dycks largely grew wheat but also cultivated broom corn and forage crops. A large variety of household tasks filled Mary Dyck's days. She sewed, quilted, and made rag rugs. She washed, ironed, and scrubbed. She cooked, baked, and preserved gallons of fruits, vegetables, jams, and jellies, although Dust Bowl conditions forced her to purchase produce rather than grow it herself. She milked, made butter for home use, and sold butter, milk, and cream. She raised chickens and collected eggs for both home use and sale. She cooked and cleaned for hired hands.⁴⁴ The one part of the family enterprise in which she was not an active participant was crop production. The family-owned tractors and a combine and the crops in the field were the province of her husband, son, brother-in-law, nephew, and other hired laborers. She found, in fact, that machinery had usurped what had once been her role in crop production. On a September afternoon in 1938 she went out to help her husband unload broom corn, however "His sack automatically unloaded it so my help was all in vain." In spite of Dyck's ownership of a radio and the eventual addition of running water and electricity to her home, the contours of her life bear a great resemblance to those of Mary Norton and Nancy Cool—women who cared for their families in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁵

42. Moore, *Maternity and Infant Care*, 47.

43. Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 28.

44. See Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, ed., *Waiting on the Bounty: The Dust Bowl Diary of Mary Knackstedt Dyck* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999).

45. *Ibid.*, 145. Although Mary Dyck did not work in the fields, her daughter Thelma Dyck Warner occasionally did. December 1939 found her in the fields, helping with the sorghum harvest. See *ibid.*, 224.

It would be in the post-World War II period when farm women's activities became much more like those of urban women. In the postwar years, families electrified their homes, purchased more and better appliances, and replaced most of their hired laborers with purchased machinery. In the second half of the century, large gardens, flocks of chickens, and milk cows also succumbed to modernization. In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940 the acres of wheat grew. The acres of alternative crops shrank, as did the number of gardens, milk cows, and poultry.⁴⁶

The gardens, cows, and chickens had been women's province and had formed a large portion of their contribution to the family farm. Gardening and food preservation lessened a family's grocery bill and saved precious cash for other purchases. Milk, butter, and eggs were important to subsistence, but women could also trade them for groceries or sell them for cash. In hard times these resources became even more important. In 1935, when drought and Dust Bowl conditions beset the farm of Henry and Mary Dyck of Hamilton County, Kansas, Mary Dyck's sales and barter of chickens, eggs, cream, and butter were more profitable, after expenses, than her husband's wheat crop.⁴⁷ As the twentieth century wore on, this type of female participation in the family economy was becoming more and more rare, however, particularly as egg production and dairying grew in scale and became more industrial during World War II.⁴⁸

This was particularly true on the largest of farms.⁴⁹ The period from the 1920s onward saw the increased growth and development of enormous farming enterprises such as those managed by John Kriss of G-K Farms in western Kansas and eastern Colorado. Kriss was a suitcase, or non-resident, farmer who managed an operation in excess of ten thousand acres.⁵⁰ The spread of large suitcase farms

46. Bell noticed the same developments in his study of Haskell County. Other surveys found that between 1944 and 1949 the amount of gardening on Kansas farms shrank by 16 percent, the amount of dairying by 6 percent, and the amount of butchering by 7 percent. See Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community*, 55–58; Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 155, 149–80.

47. In his study of Haskell County, Bell found that many families maintained flocks of chickens as a hedge against hard times. The chickens made it possible for families to continue to purchase food and clothing. See Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community*, 56; see also Riney-Kehrberg, *Waiting on the Bounty*, 21–22.

48. Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 159–60.

49. Bell found very few substantial gardens on new, highly commercial farms. Neth argues that the gender division of labor was most rigid on the largest, most capital intensive farms. See Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community*, 57; Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 240.

50. Kriss can be identified as both a suitcase and a sidewalk farmer. Suitcase farmers were nonresident farmers who cultivated land outside their home counties. This was true of Kriss, and particularly of the lands



Harvest was possibly the busiest time on the family farm, demanding many diverse duties for women. In this unidentified western Kansas scene, women drive the wagon for the combine to unload its wheat.

and enterprises such as G-K Farms farm meant that the women involved, while married to wheat farmers, might not have a very substantial role in the farming enterprise and were more likely to live in town. Their husbands' business was farming, and those husbands went to work on the farm, much as the grocer went to work at the store or the miller went to work at the mill. While Stella Kriss performed bookkeeping chores, her primary role was, as historian Craig Miner put it, to be a "homemaker and mother, stabilizing that front for a busy man who covered lots of ground."⁵¹ The spread of these farming enterprises also meant that those families still living on their acres, rather than living in town and sidewalk farming, were more isolated and dependent upon automobiles, telephones, and other technologies when they wanted to visit with friends and neighbors.

he farmed in Colorado. He also was, at times, a sidewalk farmer, or one who lived in a town and "commuted" to the lands he farmed. For an article about G-K Farms, see Craig Miner, "Here Today, Here Tomorrow: G-K Farms in the Dust Bowl Years, Thomas County, Kansas," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 16 (Autumn 1993): 148–65.

51. Craig Miner, *Harvesting the High Plains: John Kriss and the Business of Wheat Farming, 1920–1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 60.

And while women such as Mary Dyck found that they no longer had a ready place in crop production, that did not have to be the case. The development of more and better machines to take the place of human muscle power meant that women, if they wished and if their families agreed to the distribution of labor, were better able to manage tasks such as plowing, planting, and harvesting. In fact, in 1942 when the Dyck family hired a custom cutter to harvest its wheat, that custom cutter was a woman.⁵² This, however, was not the overwhelming response of farm women to changes in farming technology. Instead of taking over the tractors and combines, women have more often taken over the automobiles and trucks. According to a survey taken in the early 1980s, only 11 percent of farm women regularly plowed, disked, cultivated, or planted, and only 22 percent regularly ran machinery during harvest. Farming women instead became the chief runners of


52. Jellison asserts that, for the most part, men determined the degree to which women were able to use the new technology of crop production. Men "told women where, when, and how to drive the farm tractor." Neth seems to agree with this assessment, stating "women's ability to control their labor depended on male cooperation." See Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 178–79; Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 26; Mary Knackstedt Dyck diaries, July 22–26, 1942, private collection of Patricia Warner Scott, Amarillo, Tex.

errands, with 85 percent regularly or occasionally going to town on farm business, using automobiles to link the farm with the town. And although some women did run combines, they were more likely to drive trucks at harvest time.⁵³ While they have the potential to do so, changes in technology have not erased the gender division of labor in agriculture.

The acquisition of automobiles, combined with fewer cattle and chickens demanding attention and providing income, has meant that farm women in the second half of the twentieth century often have supported their family enterprises by leaving the farm to work. Surveys from the 1950s onward found ever larger numbers of farm women working in town on a part-time or full-time basis. Sociologist Rachel Rosenfeld's 1980 survey of farm women showed that 31 percent were working off the farm at the time of the survey and an additional 6.4 percent had worked off the farm in the recent past.⁵⁴ Instead of contributing chicken and egg money to the family coffers, they contributed wages earned as cooks, laborers, teachers, secretaries, managers, and businesswomen of all varieties. In this way, too, farm women's lives have become more like those of women living in urban centers.

Community activities continued to be a part of farm women's lives. In Mary Dyck's Hamilton County community, women attended quilting bees, Farm Bureau meetings, and dances and other activities at the newly constructed community building.⁵⁵ In other parts of wheat country the same activities took place. In Haskell County in the 1940s, church services, school activities, the Farm Bureau, and women's club gatherings regularly brought farm women into contact with the larger community. In many cases they assumed leadership roles and were the driving force behind local improvements. The automobile,

increasingly used by women as a link with local cities and towns, made much of this possible. Rosenfeld's 1980 study found more than 60 percent of farm women involved in activities such as church groups or the Parent-Teacher Association. Smaller but significant numbers participated in farm organizations such as the Grange or Farm Bureau.⁵⁶ Commitments to their families and their farms did not prohibit them from continuing to aid the larger community. This traditional aspect of farm women's lives, like many others, lives on.

Women in wheat country still find much to occupy their time, but unlike Mary and Lottie Norton, few raise chickens or milk cows, or plant gardens large enough to provide a year's vegetables for a family of twelve. Like urban women, most farm women today buy their bread, milk, eggs, fruit, and vegetables at the grocery store. And the days of a woman like Nancy Cool delivering the neighborhood's babies and healing the sick are long past. Farm women more commonly contribute to their communities by way of churches, farm organizations, and women's club activities. Instead of knitting socks and baking bread for their bachelor neighbors, late twentieth-century Flora Hestons operate businesses out of their homes or go into town to earn wages that will supplement the family income. They also drive tractors and trucks, run errands, manage the books, keep house, and rear children. They still train their daughters in the skills necessary to running a farm household but send them off to college as well. While the details have changed, the general job description has not. Farm women are still essential to the continuation of their family enterprises and still contribute their labors as their family circumstances demand. A farm without the skills and labor that a woman brings remains gravely disadvantaged indeed. 

53. Rachel Rosenfeld, *Farm Women: Work, Farm and Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 56-57.

54. Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 167; Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 147.

55. See, for example, Riney-Kehrberg, *Waiting on the Bounty*, 58, 61, 121, 128, 133, 202.

56. Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community*, 101. While earlier generations of farm women often viewed the auto as a "male" technology and often did not know how to drive, younger women, and especially those in Haskell County, took to the automobile in ever-increasing numbers. See Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 122-23; Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 193.