

The Farmer Takes a Wife

Women on the Farm in the 20th Century



Illustration from *Farm Quarterly*. Autumn 1946. Automobile Digest Publication Company.

Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. RS.14.F.005. D03579

Introduction

Agriculture and farming is a large part of the United States' identity and a backbone within our society and economy. Despite its importance, there is one major role that often gets overlooked – the farmer's wife.

By examining farm journals from the past 130 years published especially for farmers, we can look at the role of the farmer's wife and farm women, especially for viewing social trends within the American family. The focus of the farm wife's role has changed drastically from a supporting role before the Great Depression, to being fashionable and baking the county's best pie in the 1940s and 50s before shifting to becoming an equal partner within the farm in the 1970s and beyond.

The following exhibit will look at these roles in depth and their meaning for women in agriculture today.

Part One

Pre-1900: Kitchens and Short Stories

Advertisement for a Dry Goods Emporium

Within the first issue of *Farm Journal*, one of the most circulated and well-renowned agricultural journals to date, is a section devoted to the “Ladies of the Home.” This section includes such things as advertisements for fabrics and dress patterns, kitchen implements, as well as short stories aimed at female readers.

The advertisement for a dry good emporium at left focuses on the farm wife, advising her to spend frugally in order to help increase the farm’s profits. Although not an active role within the farm, it shows how the farmer’s wife was important to the farm’s overall success.

Farm Journal. March 1877. 1(1). Wilmer Atkinson. (Replica). Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign V1.12.F.123



The Parlor and Kitchen: A Journal for the Wives and Daughters of America. February 1887. Parlor and Kitchen Publishing Company. 16 pages.

Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. RS.12.P.124

The Parlor and Kitchen: A Journal for the Wives and Daughters of America.

One of the first publications strictly for the ladies of the farm household, *The Parlor and Kitchen* included short stories, recipes, and ads for kitchen tools and utensils. The journal featured stories and poems written by women, including the poem on the front of this issue, "A Valentine" by Mary Ainge de Vere.

In addition to stories, intricate illustrations were a key component of the journal. There are many details in each of the images drawn, especially within the logo at the top. It shows a mantelpiece with typical objects in a farm house and a husband (reading a newspaper) and wife enjoying a meal.

Part Two

1900-1970: Beauty and Baking

The Farmer's Wife

Previously, farm magazines for women mainly contained recipes and fictional stories, but shortly a new image came into fruition. A new, glamorous type of farm wife became the ideal for rural women to aspire to. The color illustration of a woman with rosy cheeks, a fashionable haircut, and a coy smile is a starkly different appearance and feel than the text-heavy journals of the past.



The Farmer's Wife: The Magazine for Farm Women. July 1926. Webb Publishing Company. Magazine Cover.
Agricultural Communications Documentation Center,
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. HS.12.14.

Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife

This joint publication, later downsized to only *Farm Journal*, demonstrates the juxtaposition of the man and woman's role within the farm. While during World War II, the general perception of women joining was them joining the workforce in order to help out the war effort. However, this does not appear to be the case within rural households.

The showcased pages (right) located in the *Farmer's Wife* portion of the magazine has an advertisement for the "Ruffles of Spring" about making the most of scarce fabric to keep up with ongoing fashion trends. Meanwhile, next to this page is a depiction of an elderly man shoveling with the title "Thousands 'get back in the harness.'" Between the two pages, stereotypical gender roles are shown, even in the tough times of war.



***Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife*. April 1944. Farm Journal Incorporated. 68(4). 98 pages.**

Agricultural Communications Documentation Center,
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. RS.12.F.057.

Part Three

1970s and Beyond: Partnership
within the Farm

Comic in *Farm Wife News*

This comic entitled "He & She" shows how the role of the farm wife changed from primarily baking to becoming a partner within the business of the farm. The text on the left under the two men talking reads, "She made me teach her to keep the farm records. Guess it builds up her ego or something." Under the women in the Farm Office, the text reads, "I just had to take over! He's the type that could add nine and seven three times and get three different answers."

In comparison to the magazines twenty years prior, this comic is pointing fun at the gender roles within the farm, but also making women aware that being part of the business is a viable option.



Comic in *Farm Wife News*. December 1970. Reiman Publications. 1(1). 24 pages.

Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. V1.14.F.093.

FBN Secretary of the Month Column

Farm Building News, a newsletter aimed at the facilities management aspect of farms, had a monthly column dedicated to the "Secretary of the Month" throughout most of the issues in the 1970s. This particular issue describes the secretary as "pert, pretty, and blue-eyed" and the farmer who nominated her described her knowledge base as "Believe it or not, she *does* know the difference between a farm building and a grain bin!"

As opposed to other publications beginning at this time working towards a view of partnership, *Farm Building News* showcases the women on the farm as "Good Girl Fridays."



FBN Secretary of the Month Column. *Farm Building News*. May 1970. American Farm Building Services Incorporated. 4(3). 24 pages.
Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. RS.12.F.052.



Farm Woman Arts and Crafts

Advertised as the first "modern" publication for farm wives, this bimonthly newsletter was written for farm women, by farm women. The content of the newsletter is extremely varied and includes recipes, as well as arts and crafts instructions. However, it also includes mainly articles on accounting, finances, and tips on getting her voice heard within her husband's business to have more of a partnership within the farm.

One of the main articles within this issue is an editorial by a farm wife describing her experiences on taking classes at a local community college in accounting and business to further her education. The editorial also provides tips for others for those interested in going in a similar professional path.

Farm Woman & Arts, Crafts, and Hobbies. January/February 1993. United Grain Growers (Supplement to GrainNews). 32 pages. Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. V1.12.F.148.

For more about Farm Women or
the V1N1 Collection, please
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