IN OR OUT OF THE HISTORICAL KITCHEN?

Interpretations of Minnesota Rural Women

Whether categorized as women's history or rural history, the study of women in the American West is not only alive and well, but is extremely robust and vital. Its practitioners are numerous and its literature exceedingly rich. Yet one troubling question increasingly demands attention: should the history of western women be recounted in a way that is as scholarly and "objective" as possible, or should it be presented in a manner that reflects and advances contemporary feminism?

Often, scholars of the first persuasion place women within the historical kitchen while scholars of the second prefer to emphasize women's resistance to, and rejection of, the kitchen. Sometimes the two sides engage in sincere, collegial dialogue, but too often one side is disparaging and disrespectful of the other. It is the intent of this essay to illuminate this scholarly conflict by established a case study of Minnesota women before and after the emergence of the market economy and to explore how each interpretive viewpoint might explain the alterations that that economy wrought in women's lives.

There is little doubt that the market economy created a wide range of modifications in Minnesota women's lives. This economic system, in which supply and demand determine what goods are produced as well as the methods of production, modified women's work loads, type and amount of work, equipment used,

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THIS TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY WOMAN MADE HER BUTTER IN A BARREL CHURN.
range and number of customers, and attitudes toward their work and leisure time.1

Before the market economy developed in any given region of Minnesota, women worked as domestic artisans in their homes, which also served as their workplaces or factories. The technology available to them ranged from basic to downright primitive. As a result, early rural women's writings overflow with details about whitewashing cabin walls, making medicines and treating the ill, making candles and soap, processing foods, cooking in open fireplaces or on small stoves, making cloth and clothing, and washing clothes "on the board." A Steele County woman remembered, for example, that her mother made shoes with uppers of thick cloth and soles cut from the tops of worn-out boots. She also dyed and braided straw for summer hats, spun yarn and knitted socks, and sewed clothes by hand for ten people. Most of this work was done during the evening by the light of a candle, but despite the difficult working conditions, she also made hide gloves to sell for extra cash.2

1 A recent definition of market economy characterized it as "an economic system in which decisions about the allocation of resources and production are made on the basis of prices generated by voluntary exchanges between producers, consumers, workers and owners of factors of production." Market economies "also involve a system of private ownership of the means of production (i.e., they are 'capitalist' or 'free enterprise economies'); David Pearce, ed., The MIT Dictionary of Modern Economics, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 263-264.

2 This article is based on a keynote speech made to the annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in November, 1989.

3 Julia K. S. Hibbard, "Reminiscences, 1856-68," undated, and Kathryn Stover Hicks Moody, "Territorial Days in Minnesota," 1960, both at Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) manuscripts department; unless otherwise noted, all papers cited in this article are originals or copies available in MHS. See also Catharine Bisell Ely, Diary, 1835-1839; Edmund F. Ely and Family Papers, one of the earliest accounts of Minnesota rural women's work, although the diary focuses on child care after the birth of Ely's first child.

4 Carpenter to "Dear Cousin Laura," Aug. 18, 1871, in Mary E. Lovell Carpenter and Family Papers. For more on this woman, see Sara Brooks Sundberg, "A Farm Woman on the Minnesota Prairie: The Letters of Mary E. Carpenter," Minnesota History 51 (Spring, 1989): 186-193.


This combination of domestic and market production was not unusual. Mary E. Carpenter, who lived on a farm near Rochester, wrote to her cousin that she had gotten up at four in the morning to prepare breakfast. After breakfast, she "skimmed milk, churned . . . did a large washing, baked 6 loaves of bread, & seven punkin [sic] pies . . . put on the irons & did the ironing got supper &—besides washing all the dishes, making the beds." In the same letter, she told of making 100 pounds of butter in June and selling "28 doz of eggs at 10 cts a doz" later in the summer. She proudly, and expansively, added that her butter-and-egg money had paid for "everything" that her family had.

These early rural women in Minnesota frequently performed their domestic and market chores under great pressure. For instance, they were often distressed by Indians who silently stared in their windows at them while they worked, or begged for food and medicine, or forcefully seized food from limited supplies. In 1862 a Hutchinson woman wrote that Indians had ransacked her house. In common parlance of the time, which was later immortalized by television westerns, she added that Indians were "skulking all around," even though white men with rifles had caused several of them "to bite the dust."

In addition to Indian intruders, early rural women also had many invited and uninvited guests, for inns and hotels were crude or nonexistent. One Leon settler complained that the demands of frequent guests left her little time to write a letter or two home. A Forest River woman said that they had so much company, mostly travelers and homeseekers, that their house was widely known as "Sanborn Stopping Place."

Women's work was also difficult because raw materials were scarce. Mary Burns, an inventive woman living near Ely Lake in 1892, created one "company" chair by embroidering burlap for its cover. She also made pillows by filling gunny sacks with pine needles; she ground coffee by putting "roasted berries into a strong cloth bag, taking it to a rock outside and pounding it to the right degree of fineness." She told her friends and family back east about her strange new life in letters that she wrote on thin sheets of birch.

These women also had to cope with a volatile and destructive environment that frequently interrupted their lives and work with hailstorms, blizzards, and grasshopper plagues. Storms killed more than one woman's chickens and pigs and sometimes threatened, or killed, her children and menfolks as well. "Hoppers," or grasshoppers, were known, not only devasted fields and gardens, but entered homes, eating furniture, curtains, clothing, and precious stocks of food. According to a Hawley woman, one swarm was so dense that it "obscured the sun." The despair that women felt after experiencing nature's devastation was
best expressed by Mary Carpenter, who, during the mid-1870s, was living on a farm near Marshall. When she lost a baby, she attributed it to “worriment,” depression, and “irregular diet” that resulted from recent damage to the Carpenter farm by natural disasters.  

EXCEPT for the fortunate few who employed help, women who lived in rural towns also performed demanding and exhausting domestic labor during the premarket years. They often kept chickens, or even pigs and cows, carried their family’s supply of water from wells a street or two away, and washed “on the board.” Nor were early rural towns far ahead of farms in technological “improvements” or social opportunities. During the early 1860s, for example, one woman characterized the town of St. Anthony, now Minneapolis, as a “very quiet village” in a “sleepy condition.”

In the years that preceded the market economy, women held a variety of attitudes toward their work. Most saw their homes and families as their primary responsibility. Britania Livingston described her husband as “the man I came west with to take care of.” Another loyally followed a husband filled with wanderlust from region to region, although she had buried four children along the way. She complained that, “If

WOMEN AND CHILD FEEDING CHICKENS, ABOUT 1900

we would only light somewheres is what I say. . . . We always movin [sic].” Alice Claggett Evans remembered that rural society was organized simply: “The mothers bore children, the fathers broke the prairie.”

A significant number of these early rural Minnesotans looked upon their domestic work loads with disgust. Mary Carpenter complained about the “monotony of her chores” and the ever-present problem of finding wood on the prairie. She saw her straw-burning stove as a demanding demon, for someone, often she, had to sit by and feed it straw. And Britania Livingston became so discouraged that she saw failure everywhere she looked. She literally made herself sick by dwelling upon the failure of women to “make the best of their means.” To her, these women had become “mere verbs—to be, to do, and to suffer.”

Others, however, were positive about their work. In 1876 one 45-year-old woman had her tenth baby the morning that the threshing crew was to arrive. She cheerfully sat up in bed and peeled potatoes for the threshers’ dinner. Still, Mary Burns takes the prize for optimism. She lived in an 11-by-13-foot log cabin, had only “three heavy tin pails” to cook in, and soon discovered that her bread pan completely filled the oven of her “doll-house sort of stove.” Yet she wrote about her

happy home and proclaimed that her “simple housekeeping” was like “taking part in a fascinating play of make-believe.”

It is difficult to determine ways in which the work of ethnic and black women of this era were clearly different or unique. The writings of ethnic women do
indicate that they clung to Old World customs including language, religion, holiday celebrations, clothing, and special foods. And some mentioned doing heavy field work. But similar generalizations cannot be made about black women’s work because their documents are few. It does appear, however, that the farm acted as a great leveler or acculturator, for, despite race or ethnic origins, women had to adjust quickly to the way work was done in their new locales if their families were to survive.


Emily Veblen Olsen, “Memoirs,” 1941, describes improved housing. In order to see the continuing domestic focus of women before and after the market economy, it is helpful to compare women’s writings to those of Minnesota men. Unlike his wife, Edmund Ely, for example, seldom mentions his young daughter; Edmund F. Ely, Diary, 1838-1839. Another man advised his brother in 1858 to keep his wife “in oven wood & tea & there wont be much trouble.” He added, “be careful [sic] & not let her get your pants on for if you do it will make a fuss [sic] in the family.” Rufus W. Payne to “Dear Brother,” Dec. 12, 1858, R. W. Payne and Family letters. Other similar and interesting sources are E. Grahame Paul, Reminiscences of English Settlements in Iowa and Minnesota, 1880; Charles V. Kegley, interview, Dec. 31, 1934, describes taking up land near Lydia; and Claude E. Simmonds, “George Davies, Wright County Pioneer,” 1946, detailing settlement in Minnesota, especially near Lake Pulaski; Lucia B. Johnson, “Memoir,” Aug. 28, 1963; Gertrude B. Vandergon, “Our Pioneer Days in Minnesota,” 1940-41.

As the market economy reached various parts of Minnesota, it unquestionably brought many changes, and some improvements, to the lives of rural women. For one thing, women now labored in larger, better-equipped homes/workplaces. Still, their work loads and the nature of that work changed more than the amount of that work. Women spent more time each day trimming wicks and cleaning kerosene lamps instead of devoting time to collecting tallow and making candles. They employed treadle-powered sewing machines to make clothing that was becoming increasingly complicated. One woman near Jordan explained that although her grandmother had spun thread on a spinning wheel and sewed cloths by hand, her mother worked on a sewing machine beginning in 1886. But a St. Cloud woman of the era remarked that it now took 12 yards of material and numerous ruffles and tucks to make an acceptable dress. Growing numbers of women also washed clothes in washing machines, but had to turn the agitators by hand and carry clean water to the machines and dirty water from them, because they lacked such support technology as indoor plumbing and electricity.

Agnes Kolshorn remembered clothes-washing days on the family farm near Red Wing during the 1880s and 1890s with great clarity. The washing equipment...
and a mop.” To operate this wondrous device, a woman loaded dishes in the rack, closed the lid, turned a crank that churned the water and cleaned the dishes, and then transferred the dishes to the second tub for rinsing. Copious amounts of water had to be heated on the stove and carried to and from the tubs. This dishwasher created so much extra work that its new owner decided to wash dishes by hand in the larger tub, using the little mop. Her husband eventually carried away the smaller tub to use as a footbath.16

AFTER the development of the market economy, women continued to produce domestic goods for sale. In fact, their work load often expanded, for the opportunity existed to sell in greater quantities to a larger market. During the closing decades of the 19th century, farm woman Lydia Sprague Scott sold butter, milk, and eggs to numerous customers in nearby Mankato. The Kolshorn women also made extra butter and collected eggs to sell in town. Agnes remembered the “exacting, time consuming task” that culminated in packing butter into two- or five-pound earthenware jars to be transported to Red Wing.17

Even after the Kolshorn family moved into Red Wing themselves in 1901, women’s work continued to be difficult and tedious. Because their house lacked indoor plumbing, the women carried water from an outdoor cistern equipped with a hand-operated pump or from a well located in a nearby street. They got their milk from a married son who kept a cow in town. And the Kolshorn family emptied the drip pan of their new icebox several times a day and depended upon an ice man in a horse-drawn wagon to make deliveries several days each week.18

In some ways, of course, the market economy created definite improvements in women’s domestic work. As soon as a region became settled and the economy began to develop, hotels and inns sprang up to house travelers and an abundant supply of raw materials became available. As early as the 1850s the pages of the Minnesota Pioneer advertised exotic foodstuffs like oys-

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15 Agnes Mary Kolshorn, “Kolshorn Family History,” 1983, quotation in supplement to Part 1, “Laundry”; for more on washing on the board, see Vandergon, “Pioneer Days.”
16 Dorothy St. Arnold, “Family Reminiscences,” part 1, p. 4 [1926].
17 Lydia M. Sprague Scott, Diary, 1878–1910, and Kolshorn, “Family History.”
18 Kolshorn, “Family History.” Keeping animals in early towns was not uncommon; one retired farm couple in Northfield during the 1880s kept not only a cow, but a horse and pig as well, while the Fuller sisters kept chickens in St. Paul. See Olsen, “Memoirs”; Sarah Fuller to “Dear Lizzy,” June 12, 1852, in clippings, Fuller Papers.
ters at "$1.00 a quart for family use," a real treat for former New Enganders. Another advertisement announced that steamships from New York and Europe had just brought a stock of the latest American, French, and English dry goods and invited the "ladies of St. Paul, St. Anthony, and vicinity" to examine them. Women's account books and diaries indicate that many took advantage of the increasing availability of goods. During the 1880s Lydia Scott noted purchases of calico, velvet, thread, buttons, lace and braid edging, hats, shoes, a parasol, a fan, and a corset.¹⁰

¹⁰ Minnesota Pioneer, May 2, Oct. 24, 1850; Scott, Diary. Clara Bier Berens to "Dear Mama," Oct. 12, 1878, commented that other rural women were well read. Abby Fuller Abbe frequently spoke of reading, attending lectures about authors and their works, and told of a subscription club for Godey's Lady's Magazine; clippings, Fuller Papers; Minnesota Pioneer, May 19, 1849, June 26, 1851; Buckeye Cookery and Practical Housekeeping (reprint ed., St. Paul: MHS Press, 1988).

Unlike rural women during premarket days who cherished their slim supplies of books and magazines, Minnesotans of the postmarket era had available an extensive supply of reading matter and household information. Books ranged from Home Influence, Woman's Friendship, and Mothers Recompensed to Buckeye Cookery and Practical Housekeeping. The latter book, published in Minneapolis, dedicated its recipes and household hints "To Those Plucky Housewives who master their work instead of allowing it to master them."²⁰

Another notable change, documented in gazetteers, city directories, and newspaper advertisements, was the increasing numbers of rural women who sought paid employment outside their homes. Although they usually worked as domestic, nursemaids, and in the needle trades, some women entered professions as teachers, nurses, doctors, and at least one as a minister. After 1870 more information became available regarding employed women in Minnesota, for the United
were 1,294 female teachers (both rural and urban) and in 1890, the census reported 65,625 women worked as compared with 403,461 men; and in 1910 there were 145,605 women working and 689,847 men.\(^1\)

In most jobs and professions, the shift toward paid employment was accelerated, rather than created, by the emergence of the market economy, for women had worked for pay very early. As a case in point, rural woman were among the first teachers in virtually every area of Minnesota. Anecdotal evidence indicates that they often established a settlement’s first school in their homes. Students paid fees, brought their own books, and in the first such venture in Rochester, supplied their own seats.\(^2\) When communities erected log or frame schoolhouses, women taught in them as well.

By 1870, when the census began to list teachers by gender, women outnumbered men. In Minnesota there were 1,294 female teachers (both rural and urban) compared to 460 men; in 1890 there were 7,371 women teachers as opposed to 2,085 men; and in 1910 there were 17,078 women and 2,452 men.\(^3\)

Women entered other fields principally after the emergence of the market economy. For instance, a growing number began to write about domestic matters, travel, and other nonpolitical topics for newspapers and magazines during the late 19th century. In 1870 there were no female journalists in Minnesota but 77 males. In 1890, however, there were 16 female (both rural and urban) and 550 male journalists. And 20 years later, 100 women worked as journalists (including editors and reporters), while 753 men did so. Women who were correspondents for newspapers or authors of sketches, stories, and essays for newspapers and journals frequently used pen names to protect their privacy and their reputations. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, one widely read Sauk Rapids woman used the name Minnie Mary Lee.\(^4\)

During postmarket years women’s thinking about their work and lives began to show marked changes.
from earlier eras. Homes and families were still the focus of their lives, and many women insisted that they enjoyed managing farm homes. By the late 19th century, however, most rural women believed that their talents should be exercised outside, as well as inside, their domestic sphere. Rural women had a long tradition of helping neighbors and friends, occasionally through organized groups. But they increasingly believed that it was their responsibility to create and improve societal amenities and supplement the inadequate efforts of men. As one Dundas woman poetically phrased it: "Those men believed they built that church, pointing it out with pride, nor realized it was the [Ladies'] Aid who really stemmed the tide."25

As a result of their expanded role, Minnesota women became involved in the club movement of the late 19th century and were active in a remarkable variety of service organizations. During the early 1870s, for example, Jewish women living in and around St. Paul formed the Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society to provide food and other supplies to Jewish families in need. In 1877 the Minnesota chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was organized. Soon such locals as the Scandinavian Young Women's Christian Temperance Union sprang up as well. Other associations were cultural groups, such as the Schubert Club, which sponsored musical performances. In 1895 Margaret Jane Evans Huntington became the first president of the newly formed Minnesota Federation of Women's Clubs.26
Rural women also became more interested in furthering their own educations, in part to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by the enlarged economy. In June, 1875, Helen Ely of Winona was heralded as the first woman to graduate from a four-year program at what is now the University of Minnesota. Women's rights also excited far more discussion than in premarket days. Rather than asking for equal jobs and equal pay, women believed that increased power lay in the right to vote. In 1870 Governor Horace Austin estimated that three-fifths of Minnesota's population was of foreign birth and opposed to woman suffrage—they are "hostile to the measure to a man"—yet many women worked on behalf of the cause. They also attempted to break down gender segregation in Minnesota politics in other ways. One instance is that of Susie Stageberg, long-term president of the Red Wing WCTU, who during the 1920s ran for Minnesota secretary of state on the Farmer-Labor ticket. 

There is no doubt that the changes that took place around the turn of the century are significant and deserving of further study. But they also raise an extremely important philosophic issue: how should academic and public historians interpret these alterations? How should they present modifications to students, readers, or visitors to museums, living history farms, and other historical sites? What is the lesson to be derived from Minnesota rural women's history? At the moment, many historians are divided concerning the answer to these questions. They clearly disagree regarding the method and purpose of historical interpretation. One group insists that researchers accept rural women's words as absolute truth: that is, as reasonably accurate representations of the way they saw things at the time, or the way they chose to remember their lives as they aged. These historians would agree that we cannot know the actual past but can only know the virtual past through written sources, artifacts, and other bits of evidence. Because we can only know the past through such material, researchers must interpret the sources as accurately as possible. Of course, all historians have biases, but a researcher can recognize them and strive for a degree of faithfulness to available source materials. If we do not try to achieve such scholarly rigor, the argument goes, and we let a feminist perspective, for example, take control, then rural women's history becomes a handmaiden of sorts to feminism.

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A historian holding this point of view, who attempted to follow Minnesota rural women's writings rather closely, might conclude that, although 19th-century women occasionally held jobs thought unacceptable, most worked at jobs that were in some way an extension of their domestic function and focus. Despite increasing numbers of working women, conceptions of proper paid jobs expanded little. The idea that women's work was supplemental to the breadwinner's income existed in the workplace as well as in the home. Women were seen as different from men, whether they were domestic or paid workers. Even as they came to dominate the profession of teaching, they were seen as earning supplemental income and were thus routinely paid less than men.

The danger in this approach is the possibility of overlooking some key point, some insightful generalization, that might bring light to our understanding of the past. By adhering closely to women's sources, we may fail to implement a useful approach, such as a feminist perspective, that could result in insights, while helping the cause of contemporary feminism along its way.

Other historians argue for a different approach to the source materials. This school of thought draws another conclusion from the idea that we can know only

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