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## I'm More Than a Farmer's Wife

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## I'm More Than a Farmer's Wife

### Abstract

Women have always contributed to family farming operations; however, their labor was largely positioned as “women’s work” and ignored as contributing to the economics of the farming enterprise. Through examining the stories of farmers’ wives, this essay examined how the gender division of work and the ideology of domesticity silenced women’s contributions to family farming operations. Through oral history interviews and thematic analysis, this research project presents stories from two farmers’ wives (Annie and Belle) from western Illinois. The resultant analysis reveals that Annie and Belle labored on their family farming operations for most of their lives.

### Keywords

farmer’s wife, women’s work, oral history, family farms

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# I'm More Than a Farmer's Wife

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Women have always contributed to family farming operations; however, their labor was largely positioned as “women’s work” and ignored as contributing to the economics of the farming enterprise. Through examining the stories of farmers’ wives, this essay examined how the gender division of work and the ideology of domesticity silenced women’s contributions to family farming operations. Through oral history interviews and thematic analysis, this research project presents stories from two farmers’ wives (Annie and Belle) from western Illinois. The resultant analysis reveals that Annie and Belle labored on their family farming operations for most of their lives.

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## Introduction

Some years ago, I began listening with both curiosity and fear to the stories about the timber or about the howling from coyotes at night. There are moments in the rural countryside when you hear the wind whip around your home with such force that your bones creak and your teeth chatter. You realize the inadequacy of human beings when you see the power and force with which storms roll across the afternoon sky, painting the landscape with blackness and sending every living soul seeking shelter. The harshness of the weather is a reminder that the Midwest will never be fully controlled or tamed by machinery nor stable or predictable because of human innovations. Stories about rolling black tornados moving across thousands of acres of farmland were shared to narrate how the farmers in the area “never gave-up.” As I listened, the stories about farming life in a forgotten corner of western Illinois wove together the most intricate history about a space that seemed so insignificant to the outside world.

As I listened, a barn was not a barn in the typical sense. It was embedded into *his* story—the farmer’s story. “The grandfather built the barn with his hands” or “he hand-cut the timber” were recollections shared about the history of farming life. A barn, collection of antique tractors, or collapsing grain silo were all imbued with meaning about the past and embedded into the present storytelling about farming. However, as I listened, I became attuned to the absence of stories about women who were simply referred to as: “Just a farmer’s wife.” I wondered, “Who was the farmer’s wife?” and “What stories would she tell about her life?”

The stories of farmers’ wives from the rural western Illinois countryside are a part of a larger narrative. Before White pioneers arrived in the Midwest, the Great Lakes region was home to Indigenous peoples who were the first to farm the nutrient rich soil and utilize the waterways of the Mississippi River for the transportation of people and agricultural products. As White pioneers increasingly arrived in the region in the early nineteenth century, they established multi-generational family farms. The farms were owned and operated by nuclear families and labored on by children, in-laws, or extended family members. Salamon (1992) explains family farms in Illinois reflect complex histories of family processes, business arrangements, and decision-making. The traditional family farm is the center of family life but is also the primary business and means of an income. The myth of American family farming paints an idyllic image of a way of life with little strife or struggle; however, as Neth (1995)

asserts, a tension between the farm and the family always exists because of the family labor system. In the Midwest, the family labor system is guided by an ideology that family labor is for the future of the farm and the family in order to maintain the farming way of life for future generations (Neth, 1995). Neth argues that family labor encourages supportive and cooperative labor, but it also produces patriarchal structures that make “familial relations hierarchical, not mutual” (p. 18). Because of this, women’s contributions to the family farm are further obscured by the ever-present and pervasive structure of patriarchy.

Farm women undergo a type of silencing and under-recognition for their work both related to the farm and with the family that is not dissimilar from the effects of patriarchal-gender structure prevalent in wider society. Through her analysis Sachs (1996) argues, farm women’s stories are often veiled because women are rarely (if ever) afforded opportunities to share their experiences, and agrarian ideologies perpetuate romantic myths that celebrate rural farming life as idyllic. One of the more challenging aspects of understanding the subjugated nature of farm women’s experiences is the fact that the farm “home” became a commercialized and politicized site with the industrialization of farming. By exploring the lives of farm wives, scholars can consider how gender ideals have pushed women’s stories to the background of history.

Through oral history interviews, the stories in this research report present the lives of two farmers’ wives from western Illinois. Their stories reveal how farm women’s labor is often obscured in history because of the gender division of labor on family farms and reveal how the narratives of domesticity reinforce women’s marginalization. Munz (2019) labels the labor of farmers’ wives as “invisible labor” because of the dualistic understanding of the private and public sphere, which fails to recognize women’s labor on the farm home/farm/farmland as contributing to the agricultural economy (p. 264). Farmers’ wives’ stories are the counter narrative(s) that expose the gender division of labor and life in Midwestern farming communities. The stories from two participants reveal the labor they independently contributed to the family farm, but also how their stories remain largely silenced and overlooked in Midwest farming literature.

There was something about the vastness of the space, the history of American farming, and the lives of women that drew me. Women’s lived experiences were, and continue to be, equally important as men’s, even though they are less examined. As a scholar interested in women’s lives, but also an outsider to farming, I became connected to the rural western Illinois country 12 years ago through my partner. In reviewing Midwest literature, I realized there was a scarcity in stories about women’s lives. When depicted, their lives were almost always monolithic representations of a woman who cooked and tended to children for the family. Eventually, I became more interested in how the women of a farming community worked and lived in a space that mostly failed to remember/recognize their experiences. My curiosity about how the women in a farming community understood, re-remembered, and narrated their own everyday experiences inspired this project. As I read more about the history of the Midwest and farming communities, I realized that one story was missing: The story of the farmer’s wife.

### **Research Practices**

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I conducted oral history interviews and ethnographic practices, which included participant-observations and archival research to understand the women’s lived experiences. As I conducted my research, I also documented my experiences through field notes and photography and sought to situate the women’s stories through historical literature.

## Participants

All women lived and worked on family farms in western Illinois. Through the help of a community member, I was provided a list of some participants and used snowball sampling in which active participants suggested were asked to identify other potential participants. Upon receiving written consent from each of participant, I audio recorded and subsequently transcribed all interviews. The two oral history interviews presented in this research paper, aligned with illuminating the farm labor women performed on their family farming operations.

### *Ethnographic Practices and Oral History Interviews*

As I begin my fieldwork, I enmeshed myself in the culture of family farming and remained attuned to the ethnographic principles of Clifford (1986), among others, who articulates ethnography as “inherently partial—committed and incomplete” (p. 7) Through listening and in my writing, I sought to understand each of the women’s stories as one of many possible stories/re-rememberings of her life. I also embraced feminist ethnographic commitments set-forth by Visweswaran (1994), who maintains, “feminist ethnography could focus on women’s relationships to other women, and the power differentials between them” (p. 20). Through embracing these principles, I sought to gather stories about farm women’s lives and carefully considered the ways their stories were influenced, created, and reproduced through systems of power that subjugate and veil women’s experiences.

Oral history and ethnography are brought together through their shared value for stories and observations and in this way, overlap in methodological and theoretical approaches. Characterized by blurred genres as discussed by Geertz (1980), I experience oral history and ethnography as no longer isolated, but rather interdisciplinary, overlapping, and messy. Oral history allows for stories to be uncovered and revealed from an individual perspective and archived for future generations. I engaged my participants with clarifying and probing questions to engage their memories about family farming. When my participants re-remembered stories to share with me, we experienced what oral historian and performance scholar Pollock (2005) explains as “making history in dialogue” or “the heart of oral history” (p. 2). Through these moments, my participants connected the past with the present and often re-remembered other stories through their storytelling. As each woman told her story, I remained committed to gathering stories about women’s lives in their own language that revealed their experiences on family farms.

Through inductive analysis and aligned with the tenets of oral history and ethnography, Annie and Belle’s stories were intertwined because they revealed insights into women’s independent work on family farms. In this research paper, I foreground the women’s stories rather than privileging theory and literature. Their stories are reflected as ethnographic moments and as Conquergood (1991) suggests reveal the “interpersonal contingencies and experiential give-and-take” of my field experiences with my participants (p. 181). Together, their stories revealed how they did not work on the periphery of the family farm. The women were not merely supplemental help on the family farm or helpers to their husband but nevertheless were treated as expendable and underappreciated. Their stories reveal the gendered positionality of farm women and how as a result of changing farming economic and other challenges the women’s jobs were eventually eliminated. These are the stories from Annie and Belle, farmers’ wives from the rural western Illinois countryside.

### Annie, 87, Rural Henderson County

I met Annie through another farmer's wife, Ellie. "She's bent at the waist, so she doesn't get many visitors, but she would like to chat with you," Ellie informed me during our conversation. Although, in the moment, I was unsure of exactly what "bent at the waist" meant, I was grateful for the name and phone number of another potential participant. I quickly wrote down Annie's information in my fieldnote book. On a hot and humid day in June, I knocked on Annie's door. Her son, a slim, soft-spoken, and middle-aged man said, "Come-on in. Come into the kitchen." I walked through a small living room that had floors of an avocado green and walls decorated with family photos. "Hi, I'm Paul," he said to me. "Nice, to meet you," I said. Annie looked up to me and said, "So sorry, I didn't recognize your voice at the door." Before I could say anything, Paul said with a laugh, "Well, Ma, that's why I'm here." After a few moments of Paul and Annie discussing upcoming bills that "needed paid," Paul left to work outside on the generator powering Annie's home.

As I looked around Annie's kitchen, I noticed how her kitchen table was a space she rarely left. It was as if she was tucked in by the spread of newspapers and documents in front of her. I could sense that there was a familiarity and comfort for her in the clutter of cups with pens and pencils, the stacks of bills, and mailers as she gently ran her hand across the piles to tidy them. Annie is "bent at the waist" from osteoporosis and had to keep her forearm on her kitchen table to keep herself upright. As we spoke, she hardly moved her body except for the few instances where she used her right hand to spin her thin gold wedding band. At Annie's feet sat a red 1970s radio equipped with an antenna playing Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried" softly in the background. Behind her, the small galley style kitchen was decorated with wood paneling and yellowish Formica countertops. The countertops were stacked with Tupperware containers, bowls, pots, and spices (see Figure 1).

#### Figure 1

*Photo in Annie's Kitchen*



Carefully placed on top of a Tupperware container of spices I noticed a picture of a priest. The picture became an entry for us to begin our conversation. "That's my grandson. He's studying to be a priest in the Chicagoland area," Annie said with a smile. Steeped in the traditions of Catholicism, Annie drew on her faith to inform me how she understood her farming life. She stated:

I think about what God has provided me with the farmland. We should take care of it and appreciate it and if you do then you might be rewarded with good crops. We have to appreciate the timely rains and hope there are no early snowfalls or bad storms. Farmers are dependent on the weather; you have to respect it and sometimes be ready to pray...sometimes people think of this life as a drudgery, but you can also enjoy it...it can be good life.

Annie explained that after graduating high school in 1946, she worked as a bank clerk for a local bank branch. After working her shift each day, she would come home to parent's farm and milk cows and "chore'd" through the night. I learned Annie's labor was critical to the success of her parent's farm because her mother contracted Tuberculosis during her childhood, which left her bedfast and frequently ill. Annie's father also died when she was a child, and his death left the responsibility of the farm to her and brother. Although Annie participated in the laboring on the farm (see Figure 2), true to traditional gendered inheritance patterns her brother inherited the land and home. In 1951, she moved seven miles from her parents' farm after she married her husband, Patrick, who purchased a 300-acre grain farm from his grandmother's estate. In 1954, she began her married life on the farm where she raised five sons. Her four living sons reside on the farm today.

**Figure 2**

*Original Farmhouse on Annie's Farm (far left building)*



**Women's Work on the Farm**

The work Annie performed contributed to the success of the farming operation and allowed for her husband to solely farm. Annie explained:

I would be up at 5:00 a.m. and go to bed by 9:00 p.m. The boys and I would have very long days. I would have the boys all day with me, so they learned to chore. We'd get water and feed to the cows and take care of the calves. When we moved here, we had electricity, but we didn't have running water...so I was

carrying water to different areas on the farm. The calves were always my responsibility. They were a sideline income for us.

The work that Annie completed was, according to Dougherty (2011) central but part of the “hidden economy” (p. 66). That is, the work Annie completed did not earn her living wages, but rather, as Dougherty (2011) notes, she “reproduced labor and cared for [family members] in such a way that men could act as paid labor in the capitalist market” (p. 66). In her own words she said, “You have to help your husband make the money, take care of the money, and pay the bills...those are the responsibilities of farmer’s wife.” Annie performed many unpaid tasks on the farm that required labor such as bottle-feeding up to twenty baby calves each morning and night. “Bottle feeding took an hour each morning and each night,” Annie noted. However, the process was quite labor intensive, and she explained:

The whole process took a long time. First, you had to milk the cows. Then you had to get that milk and prepare it. You had to fix the milk and bottles and bottle-feed each calf individually. I was busying fixing the bottles and telling the boys which calves to feed...that was my job and so anyway...I guess they just grew up working with me...

This was also a farm chore Annie performed as a five or six-year-old child on her parents’ farm. For Annie, there were few changes from her childhood to womanhood since her farm chores and responsibilities stayed consistent. Annie explained her view of the work she completed on her farm as, “It was our life. We grew up in it and continued; it was not any change, you know?” It was curious to me that Annie frequently seemed to simplify her experiences by stating it was just “our life.” One of the challenges of understanding the labor performed by a farmer’s wife is that women like Annie, frequently discounted their work because they completed it with their children.

When we think of work, we often assume that it must be completed outside of the home, but this is not the case for many women, including farm women. Work and home life, according to sociologist Hochschild (2001), are in the American imagination in opposition to one another. However, this positioning fails to recognize the work that women like Annie performed on their family farm, where home and work life were intertwined. Hochschild (2001) claims women are more likely than men in families to be “starved for time,” which results from women working, taking care of childcare, and home needs (p. 229). For example, each spring for over seventy years, Annie purchased 300 chicks. She raised the chicks, gathered fresh eggs every day, and sold the eggs as a sideline income. Annie completed this job to contribute additional revenue to the family farm. While feeding and caring for the hens, she also brought her youngest sons with her into the henhouse. Often not written about as labor, but also critical to the identities of farmers’ wives is the task of raising and socializing one’s children to the family farm. As Salamon (1992) notes, “the merger of home and workplace,” meant a farmer’s wife like Annie had to take her children with her when she worked on the farm (p. 50). For Annie, there was no division between work and home life; just like there was no division between farm labor and being a mother.

## **Gender Roles**

The family farm is a space with specific gender roles for a wife and husband. On family farms, Rosenfeld (1987) claims that a farmer’s wife is frequently positioned as a “helper” or “helpmate” which undervalues their work (p. 53). Through Rosenfeld’s (1987) analysis of farm and housework, we learn there is considerable variation in the work women perform on family



farms. A farmer's wife may run errands, cook meals, milk heifers, run farm machinery, or raise chicks as a sideline income for the family farm. Through her analysis of place and gender relations, Massey (1994) articulates being a wife and/or mother to a male who performs a masculine job (e.g., mining, farming, or carpentry) often relegates the woman to complete the domestic labor tasks. As a result, Massey (1994) explains the association of masculinity for particular professions creates gender roles and relations. In other words, when a profession such as farming is denoted as masculine a specific set of gender relations are constructed in other spheres. For Annie and other farm wives, this translated into childcare and homemaking responsibilities being feminine or women's work. By constructing the farmer as a masculine role, the farmer's wife's role was constructed as feminine. This gender construction is important because it specifies our understanding of role relations on a family farm.

Farm wives have always contributed to the family farming economy; however, the construction of masculine and feminine roles also contributed to the subjugation of a farm wife's work on the family farm. Whereas men's work, Rosenfeld (1987) posits, is associated with physical or productive work on the farm, women's work is linked more with the home, and, thus, less with the agricultural economy. When women's work is dissociated from the agricultural economy, it then becomes easy to suggest that a farmer's wife like Annie, who spent the majority of her life child-rearing and homemaking, did not contribute to the farm economy. The tasks a farm wife, like Annie, completed often did not require a tremendous amount of physical labor (e.g., raising chickens, bottle-feeding calves, or milking heifers) and were frequently completed with children, which also contributed to an ideology that women's work did not support the farm economy. The tasks that Annie completed were separated from her husband's tasks only by the labor she performed on the farm. However, they both worked every day on the 300-acre farm in order to make it financially successful.

### **Farming Economics**

The economics of farming are such that it would be largely impossible for a farming operation to be successful without the help of the wife. In fact, historian Rugh (2001) explains farm women's labor was vital to the "transformation of agrarian capitalism" (p. 65). The labor that many farm women performed included not only raising chickens and selling baby chicks and eggs, but also making butter from cream. For Annie, cooking and preparing meals for her family is not a chore or a task. Cooking or preparing "farm dinners" is a responsibility she has always had on her farming operation. It is also one of the few chores she is still able to complete; therefore, it is her way of contributing to the farming operation to this day. Even now, her family expects her to have a "maid-rite" meal available anytime. A "maid-rite" meal is something that is pre-cooked and ready to eat on a short notice. Annie explained:

I make maid-rite. I always keep something on hand because when they come in, they are hungry. It might be 9:00 p.m. or even 10:00 p.m., and they haven't had supper. I fix them a sandwich, heat up a roast, and warm up a pie. I usually cook every day.

I listened to a lot of stories about the importance of the noon-meal from farmers' wives. The noon-meal is commonly referred to as "dinner" for farm families because it is the biggest meal of the day, and the evening meal is known as "supper." Cooking and meal preparation is a means by which farm women are "erased from farming" because this task is not treated as legitimate work (Dougherty, 2011, p. 147). On family farms, farmers' wives like Annie view their job of cooking as their role in their family as well as a means of contributing to their farm. Each family member in a farming family has a role and a responsibility, and for Annie, the role

of preparing meals continues to be important to her identity as a farmer's wife. The invisible labor Annie performed through cooking and preparing meals allowed her husband to work longer hours on the farm because Annie would have the food prepared, and she would frequently bring it out to him, too.

For Annie, the performance of cooking as well as canning food for her family meant a lot. It was, and continues to be, her way of contributing to the family farm. Providing cooked meals for her family served a functional need of satisfying hunger, but it was also a labor role Annie performed for the farming operation. By being invited into her story and her life, I learned that cooking was not just about feeding the family. Cooking was about contributing to the success of the farm because it allowed her husband and other males to continue running machinery in the fields. In other words, family farming is a business, but there is interdependency between the farm and the family members who farm the land. Annie is not only a mother and a wife but also a farmhand and an independent worker on her family farm. The tasks she performed were not just for the household or her children; they were for the economic success of the farm.

### **Belle, 50, Rural Henderson County**

There was a quiet hum of conversation in "O'Leary's," a dive bar and grill on Route 83 on the day I met Belle. I arrived a half-hour early, so I could order lunch before my conversation with Belle. Inside there are a few customers who, from their dress, are most likely farmers or farm help. It is not just the coveralls and cut off t-shirts, but the smell of dirt and manure they carry with them—literally. Chunks and clumps of dirt speckle the gray linoleum floor. The smell of farming lingered in the air as I pulled up a stool to the bar. "A Pepsi and the lunch special," I said to Vickie behind the bar. I watch as Vickie slides a pork tenderloin onto the grill and drops fresh cut fries into the oil fryer. The bar is for people who belong to the rural western Illinois countryside, and as I waited for Belle to arrive, I am reminded by looks from other customers that I am not from here. Just as I begin feeling these looks, a woman came in and orders ten lunch specials to go for "the boys." "A great deal," she said to me with a smile, and I agreed with a nod.

Today, on one of the many rainy summer days in June, Belle is late for our conversation. I remember the weather on this day because it marked almost two weeks of continuous rainfall. During many conversations, the weather was brought up as farm fields began flooding and the corn began growing too quickly, leaving the stalks weak and vulnerable. "You pray for it and curse it out," a farmer's wife said referencing the rain. Belle is a small framed and muscular woman whose skin is sun kissed and weathered with age. Her family and her husband are all from Henderson County (see Figure 3) and are known for being pork farmers. Belle has lived in the area her entire life and moved only six miles from her childhood home onto her husband's farm nearly twenty-six years ago. As I study Belle's skin, I can sense a story about her life, and I know she is a worker. Her hands and face are wrinkled, but not from vacations in the sun. I notice the deep-set wrinkles around her eyes and mouth as she laughs when I ask her to tell me about her childhood. She details:

My dad had about 180 acres and he also worked for the railroad. He was a plowman for the Burlington Northern Railroad, so he worked every day and he farmed at night. My brother and I raised 40 head of cattle, lots of horses...it was like any other farm kid back then...you worked...you worked a lot...you did chores in the morning before you went to school, you came home from school and worked again, and you didn't get to eat until the animals were fed. We did all the farm chores together...I had to help with laundry and cooking. And when

we were older, we had to make sure that the hay bales were moved and racked so they could be put into the barn at night.

**Figure 3**

*Barn in Rural Henderson County Near Belle's Farm*



While Belle's narrative detailed her labor on the farm, often women are unnoticed for their interactions with agricultural and the nonagricultural activities that sustain both the family and the farm (Sachs, 1996). Daughters and women have/continue to find themselves overlooked for their contributions on the farm and in the home. Holt (1995) explains daughters and women were always involved in the economy on family farms, both as a laborer and advocate of farm educational programs. In this way, women actively participated in the labor of farming; however, women's participation in these experiences were subordinated by the ideology of domesticity, and so their stories were relegated to the private sphere or home. A consequence of this ideology was the reality that women's labor in the home was undervalued, unrewarded, and not recognized as a form of work.

**A Daughter on the Farm**

Growing up on a small family farm, Belle's childhood was filled with hard work. She was raised on a farm by hardworking parents. Her father was a full-time farmer and full-time plowman for the Burlington-Northern Iowa Railroad. Her mother worked second shift as a nurse after "chore-ing all morning" on the farm. In many ways, Belle's childhood fits neatly into the historical script for girls who grow up on farms in the Midwest. As the oldest sibling, she explained:

Being the oldest and being a girl, I kinda got thrown into all of it. So, it was like I had to do housework, and I had to do farm work. You also didn't realize everybody was just as poor as everybody else. We had a wringer washer until I was a junior in high school.

Belle's childhood is different in the respect that she most likely worked more than the average daughter in a farming family. One explanation for this is the fact that her father did not inherit any farmland. The ownership of farmland by a farming family helps to generate income for the farm and the household. It was only after Belle's father married her mother and he purchased

180 acres of farmland that the family ceased cash renting farmland. Her father purchased the farmland because he grew-up in tenet homes on cash rented farmland in Warren and Mercer Counties. In Belle's paternal family, the earliest farming relatives to the area rented rather than purchased farmland. When the Depression came, it made it even more difficult for families like Belle's to purchase farmland, so they continued to operate as cash renters. Belle, explained:

My dad's family was a farm family and his mom and dad cash rented, so they would move from farmstead to farmstead. If you lost a farm, you got a different one. My grandmother, my dad's mom, and my grandpa and for all them growing up it was very different. Times were tough. It was the Depression and my grandmother, my dad's mom, had eight kids and my great-grandmother would stay home and my grandfather would go to different states by hopping trains to find more work. Then he would send money home, so things were tough, especially if you had any kids in the Depression.

Belle's family history reveals she came from a less prosperous farming family. Her family always farmed, but because they cash rented, family members also had off-farm jobs. Owning farmland helps a farm family generate income for the farm and household because renting the ground is a tremendous and often burdensome debt. When farmers are less prosperous, Neth claims (1995), the family tends to depend more on children for labor on the farm and for off-farm income. Belle's father depended on her labor for the farm and in this way the strict gender lines around labor were blurred for her as a child. Through depending on Belle's labor, she was part of what Sachs (1996) notes as "a critical reserve labor force on family farms" (or back-up labor force; p. 125). Even though she contributed to the farming operation, the work she completed often went unrecognized by her father and failed to result in equal opportunities in the future with the farm (e.g., inheritance of farmland).

All these factors affect the positionality of daughters and wives in farming families, too. In fact, labor is situated and constructed in relationship to the farming operation for the entire family. A daughter, like Belle, was required to participate in the physical labor of milking cows, pulling weeds, watering livestock, and gathering wood because the family did not have the financial means to hire farmhands. Belle was responsible for completing these chores beginning in grade school when her mother and father were both at work. As Neth (1995) notes:

Children's labor could increase home production, which lessened expenses, or increased the amount of goods produced for cash sale, which enlarged income. Economic necessity countered the ideological gender definitions of labor. (p. 20)

Supporting this argument, Belle's childhood experiences included doing chores in the home and on the farming operation before and after school. In fact, during the summer months she and her brother were left alone during the day while their parents worked off-farm in full-time jobs. Belle explained her father would instruct her and her brother to mow, rake, and bale the hay while he was working during the day so that when he got home, they could move it into the barn. She said:

It was just the things you did. I hate to say this, but kids were farmhands. And, if you had that oldest girl, I guess she was also like a surrogate mama, too. That's what I was.

The story of Belle's childhood was about completing chores, which included cooking, cleaning, and keeping track of her younger brother, as well as laboring on the farming operation. Although her brother was expected to complete the farm jobs with her, he was not expected to participate in completing any of the housework. This gendered form of labor continued when Belle was married, as she was primarily responsible for "the laundry, cookin' meals, cleanin' the house, takin' care of kids," along with her daughter. However, Belle's son and husband worked on the hog farm and were not responsible for any of jobs in the home.

### **Gender & Inheritance**

The history of the farmland farmed by family farmers is critical to the history of family farming in the Midwest. It situates and positions the women in farming families because the land carries economic, social, and family cultural values. The inheritance of farmland also frequently privileges males, as sons form partnerships with their fathers and purchase land or machinery jointly to expand the farming operation (Garkovich et al., 1995). Both Belle and her brother inherited from their parent's farming estate, but only Belle's brother inherited the rights to physically farm the land. Shortall (1999) states, "Women rarely inherit land. Their typical entry to farming, and the farm family, is through marriage" (p. 1). For Belle, this statement only holds partially true, as she grew up in a long lineage of family farmers on her paternal side; however, she was not permitted to bring inherited farmland into her marriage. Belle helped her father to farm, but because of the gender lines organized around farming, only her brother was permitted to farm the land. Across my conversations with farm wives, it was quite typical that an inheritance would dictate that a son inherits the right to physically farm the land. Often the inheritance would prescribe that the inheriting son would pay rent to his female siblings for use of the land. This means even in the rare instance that a female was to inherit a portion of farmland, she would not inherit the right to own the farm or farm the land. Practices such as these further illustrate how women are rendered invisible on family farms and positioned as reliant on men in their family.

We learn through Shortall's (1999) analysis of family farms, the transfer of land is "governed by a system of beliefs," and these beliefs also ascribe cultural meanings to the relationships between family, land, and community (p. 29). When farming is framed as belonging to men, and women are viewed as complementing the men; women are positioned as a "help-mate" or supporter on the farm (Faragher, 1993, p. 6). These views generalize women's experiences and position them as reliant on their fathers or husbands. Further, it oversimplifies the role of a woman and fails to recognize their labor on the farm and in the home. Although family members often work together to maintain and pass on the family farm to the next generation, the labor system is separated by gender and age. Frequently, women and female children are interconnected with the farm but are exclusively responsible for household labor tasks.

### **Industrialization in the Countryside**

The industrialization and the mechanization of farming and the most recent electronic multi-media advancements (GPS planting/drones) have deeply affected farming practices. Most notably, they have impacted the amount of land that farming families need in order to make a profit. They have also effectively forced many farming families out of the farming business. Farmers have always dealt with the reality of the "cost-price squeeze" of earning a profit from farming crops or raising livestock (Garkovich et al., 1995, p. 136). To answer this problem, many farmers have chosen to increase the amount of land they farm or increase the productivity of the farming operation. Curious if Belle could recall any stories about farmers'

wives experiencing the changes brought to the rural western, Illinois countryside, I asked Belle if people ever shared stories about farmers' wives, she responded:

No, I don't think so...hmmmm...Growing up my great grandma was someone my mom would talk about. Her place was strictly as a farmer's wife; she was at home on the farm. She raised the kids, she did the garden, she did the canning, she cleaned the house...she helped in the fields. It was different for my mom; she was a nurse...my mom worked outside the home always...and then there is me I was the farmer's wife who worked on the farm...so you can see the differences in generations.

Leaning towards me, Belle continued:

So, my mother-in-law, she was a good old lady...but she never worked on the farm. If she had to help, of course she did...there is one picture that we found of her, and it's freaking hilarious because she's in a pair of old bib overalls with a cap on and boots on driving a straight truck...because my father-in-law needed somebody to drive one of the straight trucks. When I found the picture, she just about died...she was like, "Oh my gosh! No, no, no!" And I'm like, who cares? You did what you had to do!

As Belle shared these stories, I was struck by the absence of detail in describing the lives of her female relatives. A family farm is a historically patriarchal setting that is also dominated by stories from and about men. Heynen (2005) suggests the increase in industrialization and modernization created a position of ambiguity for women such that the ideals of "home" became "charged with contradictory expectations" (p. 12). Modernity charged with rationalism and efficiency permeated the ideals of domesticity and positioned women ambiguously both in and outside the home. Much like other spaces in larger society, a farm and the gendered ideals including domesticity are not simply constrained and constricted to the home but are also transposed as an ideology onto all aspects of farming life. While modernity suggested a change from domestic ideals and introduced an ideology of social and work equality in society, contemporary farm women still find themselves strongly influenced by the ideology of domesticity. The traditional gendered pattern of roles both in the home and outside of the home continue to follow the ideology of domesticity, which fails to recognize women's work in and outside the home as equally important as their male counterparts.

When Belle married into her husband's family, within three years she began working on their hog confinement operation. She was the only farmer's wife who did not discredit her labor by saying, "I didn't do anything on the farm." Belle acknowledged with confidence the work that she did on the farm. She described her work:

When I worked on the hog farm, first off you were up at 7:00 a.m. at the latest. Then you fed, processed, moved pigs, and then you washed. Then, you did the breeding and then you did anything else that needed fixed during the day. During all of that, it was like, well, I have to make feed, which is a long process. Then, at the end of the day you're feeding again and making more feed, so you have it in the morning. I mean it's just a process. Sometimes you were slamming it... it would be longer than 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m., and sometimes it would be a little earlier.

Belle's husband did not marry a woman with land, but he did marry a worker. She was a farmer's wife who worked on the hog operation for seventeen years. Belle explained, "The original operation where I worked was 550 sows farrow to finish. The operation my husband, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law own is about 25,000 sows farrow to finish. It's much larger." The fact that she did not bring farmland into the farming operation and was also from a smaller or more modest farm background, positioned her as a farmhand. When farmers' wives bring material property like land, a home, or equipment into the marriage, they bring with them the tradition of family farming and most importantly they bring economic wealth.

The family farming tradition is symbolized by a relationship of working with the land and the physical labor is a point of personal pride. I wondered why Belle, after seventeen years of working on the hog farm quit work that she said, "I was damn good at." So, I asked:

A: Belle, why did you quit working on the hog farm?

Belle: We closed that farm because it was built in the early 1970s, and we needed to re-do it or close it. So, we just closed it about six years ago.

A: Was it hard for you to shut that farm down?

Belle: Yes. I don't see myself just as a farmer's wife and I never have, but I am, you know? But it's like I wasn't just the farmer's wife, I worked on that farm. I helped be that farm.

Tears began welling in Belle's blue eyes. She asked me, "Okay, if I have a smoke?" "Oh yeah," I said feeling guilty that I had carelessly underestimated the importance of working on the hog farm for her. After the hog farm closed there was no place for Belle on the larger modern and technologically advanced operation because it only needed three employees (her husband, his brother, and their cousin). Having brought no capital into the relationship, Belle entered an "agrifamily system" that was already situated with heirs namely her husband, his brother, and their cousin (Salamon, 1992, p. 45). Helping to explain the positionality of a woman in a farming family, Salamon (1992) states:

If a heartland woman brings land or the promise of inherited land to a marriage, the dominance hierarchy of the team is less pronounced. A woman who brought no land into marriage with a man inheriting a substantial amount, for example, had a relatively low status. (p. 125)

The interdependency of the family and the farming business has changed as a result of mechanization and technology. In Belle's case, she found herself stuck between her husband's family and her lack of inherited land. Prior to the increase in mechanization and technology on farms, women like Belle performed jobs that were traditionally conceived of as male or head of household jobs. However, changes to government agricultural policies and the innovation of farming technology led to a transformation on family farming operations that resulted in dramatic changes in the jobs farmers' wives performed (Neth, 1995). The unforeseen consequences were stricter gender lines that ensued for many of my participants, including Belle. These gender lines would eventually force farmers' wives to give up their farm jobs and work exclusively in the home. For Belle, the reality was far too raw and real, who after seventeen years of being a leader at the hog confinement, is now responsible for cooking meals and taking care of housework, or as she said, "just being a farmer's wife."

## Concluding Reflections

The stories from Annie and Belle weave together the experiences of farmers' wives who lived and worked on family farms in western Illinois. Their stories reveal how they participated in labor on their farms for the success of the farming operation. Each of their labor stories challenge the widely held myth that physical labor was performed exclusively by male family members or farmhands; however, their labor continues to be underrecognized as contributing to the farm and often overlooked in farming literature. Through their stories, we learn how they directly participated in farm labor like milking heifers, feeding calves, managing a hog farm, and were primarily responsible for raising their children and taking care of the housework. In this way, we learn how child rearing, domestic, and farm labor tasks were entangled in their farm labor expectations. Their stories transgress the dominant ideology that a farmer's wife role was exclusively as a homemaker and a caretaker of children for the family. The women's stories revealed how these tasks and other unpaid labor they performed were crucial for the family farming business.

Examination of these participants' stories illustrates the deeply sedimented silencing and under-recognition farmers' wives experience. Farm wives like Annie and Belle are doubly subjugated because of their gender. They are subjugated as daughters who could only inherit farmland, but not the rights to farm the land. A practice that permeates the rural western Illinois countryside, leaving daughters in long-term incongruent power relationships with their brothers, who inherit both land and the rights to farm the land. These type of inheritance practices, position women in a patriarchal gender relationship with their brothers and in a farmhand relationship with their husbands. It is important to acknowledge both Annie and Belle privileged from their Whiteness and heterosexuality (aligning their identities with Christian patriarchal values), however their gender veiled their labor contributions and relegated them as secondary to their husbands. Whereas their husbands maintained positions of power both on the farm and in their martial/familial relationships.

The stories in this essay contribute to our collective understanding about women's experiences on family farms. We see in Belle's story how the effects of modern technology coupled with the changing financial demands of farming rendered the hog farm obsolete and effectively removed her labor role. While technological advancements were often welcomed by farming families because they reduced physical labor, the gender relations on family farming operations did not become equitable between a husband and wife. For Annie, advancements to farming equipment not only meant her husband could farm the fields longer, but it also equated to her spending more time performing invisible/gendered labor like preparing meals. Whether their job was eliminated because of farming advancements, or they performed labor with their children or in the home; their stories reveal the complexity of women's work on family farms.

Historically on farms, women have carried out all types of tasks both agricultural and non-agricultural. Examining women's lives on farms, Rugh (2001) firmly asserts women's labor is vital to the farming economy and Munz (2019) extends this argumentation to include emotional labor. However, we often have a fixed image of the types of jobs completed on farms, and they involve operating large machinery, taking care of livestock, and the planting of grains. Women's work on family farms is often obscured because their labor is unpaid or subordinated to the work of the men. In our mind, there is a separation between men's jobs and women's jobs on a family farm. The women's stories in this essay illuminate how they were responsible for independent labor tasks that contributes to the financial success of the family farm. From Annie, we learned how a farmer's wife's housework and farm labor were intertwined. Her story illustrates how women complete work that contributes to the farming operation while raising their children. Through her story, we become more aware how women's



work on the family farm is often considered supplemental to the work their husbands complete; when their work is, in fact, as necessary as the labor of their husband's. While Belle's story broadens our understanding of how deeply integral a farm wife's labor maybe for the farming operation—until her husband deems otherwise. Her story reveals the sense of powerlessness that many farmers' wives experience over their own labor/identity and further expands our understanding of the gendered expectations for women. Through listening to their stories, we can more carefully consider women's labor on farms.

Historically, farming is framed as belonging to men, and women are viewed as complementing the men. This ideology serves to undermine and obscure the experiences of women on farms as they are rarely, included in the stories about farming in the Midwest. Through the farm wives' stories, our understanding about the lives of women, the labor they performed, and the complexity of their lived experiences are broadened. We gain a richer appreciation for the silencing of women's experiences and how gender lines around labor obscure their labor contributions. Through examining the patriarchal setting of a family farming operation, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the gendered experiences of women and how gender ideologies shape our understanding of their lives and labor contributions. Through the women's stories, we can appreciate farm women as more than the "farmer's wife."

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