

Introduction

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Women have always been crucial actors in the production, distribution, and consumption of food. Despite regional and national differences, rural and small town populations were still the majority during the first half of the twentieth century, the era we focus on in this collection. Women—most of them from rural backgrounds themselves—have also claimed a place as educators, commodity specialists, agricultural representatives, and leaders of voluntary organizations. The essays in this collection explore these aspects of women's history and its relation to the growing field of food studies. Previous studies have focused mainly on women as homemakers purchasing and preparing food, as mothers concerned about nutrition for their families, and as cultural agents who create and preserve particular foodways.¹ *Women in Agriculture* focuses instead on the largely untold history of women as agricultural professionals. The women we study provide examples of work in areas that are central to food studies, including social research, the science of production, and community engagement. Thus, this book will contribute to a fuller understanding of the emerging professions and disciplines relating to food during the period from 1880 to 1965.

Early agrarian professional women worked with food in commodity science, rural sociology, and marketing of agricultural products. Others were social scientists who surveyed and interviewed rural women about their roles as farmworkers, producers, and marketers of food products. Education, both formal and informal, was crucial to changing attitudes

about what were considered appropriate kinds of agricultural work for women. From the Langham Place feminists of the nineteenth century to the promoters of female-run markets to community activists, agrarian professionals played key roles in suggesting new possibilities for women's engagement with food. Harriette Cushman, Emily Hoag, and Lorian Jefferson represent women who helped develop various agricultural sciences. Home demonstration agents, instructors of short courses, and organizers of Women's Institutes converted the recent research into forms that could be understood by lay audiences, primarily women. Most of these professionals believed in the power of women's collective efforts to transform their own lives and reform their communities. Rural women as producers and marketers of food needed support for these tasks as well as for their roles as homemakers and consumers, tasks they shared with the growing population of urban women. The information that rural women received from educators, organizers, and peers served to enrich their own experiences as farmers, homemakers, and community organizers. The information rural women shared with professionals also helped shape marketing policy. Organizations for rural women were key, not just for information transfer about food preparation or production schemes, but also for the collective self-confidence they engendered when local women strategized about how to improve their own conditions. Although rural women socialized with and learned from extension agents and home economists, they applied that knowledge in surprising and often unforeseen ways.

These essays on agrarian women, while an important addition to rural and food studies, also expand the concept of the New Woman, which has largely been conceived of as a strictly urban phenomenon. These New Women took up a variety of issues, such as their right to college education, engagement in "public" roles as opposed to "home" work, better pay and working conditions, new attitudes toward marriage, and wider acceptance for women's participation in nontraditional physical activities, including recreational activities and physical work. Scholars have explained that these New Women, who carved out career niches within both governmental and other public institutions, were usually young and unmarried. They claimed the right to a place in the middle-class occupational hierarchy previously reserved for white males. The first generation often worked in cities, yet many of these activists had deep roots in rural and small-town communities,² and, as we will show, some remained committed to working with rural women.

Although scholarship on the urban New Women provided key ways to look at professionals who worked in cities between 1880 and the 1920s, it ignored rural professionals. The women who engaged in rural professional work shared with urban New Women a defiance of conventional gendered norms by entering careers previously closed to women. *Women in Agriculture* looks beyond urban reformers to those who spoke to the still rural majority of the population and played key roles in professions central to food studies.³

Rural women's history is a field that has experienced significant advances over the past forty years. As with most other genres of women's history in the 1970s, researchers had first to overcome the common argument that sources did not exist to write histories of rural women. An early volume that refuted the argument that sources did not exist was Joan M. Jensen's book, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land*, published by Feminist Press in 1981. Jensen organized more than 250 excerpts from writings by and about rural women, proving that a plethora of sources did exist. Since then dozens of historians have creatively explored the archives that already existed, created new archives through oral history, and crossed disciplinary borders to employ a variety of methods to explore in more detail the various roles rural women occupied as producers, partners, and protesters. *Women in Agriculture* continues that exploration.

Over the past almost four decades of research, scholars have laid the groundwork for rural women's studies, pointed the direction for further research, and suggested ways to incorporate interdisciplinary methods. Following the publication of *With These Hands*, a conference on rural women's history was organized in 1982, bringing together almost 125 scholars and rural women. From that beginning, new questions about women's role in rural life helped to expand the focus from rural women's history to rural women's studies. Conferences continued every few years during the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the formation of the Rural Women's Studies Association (RWSA) in 1997. Since then, triennial conferences have been held in different regions of the United States and, in 2012, in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. The next RWSA conference is scheduled for 2018 in Athens, Ohio. Although the largest contingents come from the United States, the conferences always include participants from Canada, Europe, and often Asia and Africa. Meanwhile, the RWSA has also sponsored and encouraged sessions on gender and rural women at the annual Agricultural History Society conferences. Other collabora-

tions have included panels at the Berkshire Conference on Women's History in Toronto in 2014 and at meetings of the European Rural History Organization.

Our present collection reflects those transnational conversations, which have expanded the history of rural women from the United States to other countries, and continues them by uncovering previously untold stories and contributing to discussions and debates about feminism in rural settings. It advances our understanding of female experts, women's collective action, and the local responses to advice offered from state and educational authorities. We focus as well on rural women's greater participation in postsecondary education, paid work, and public roles. The essays in this volume profile women whose work was embedded in specific national contexts so as to form a collective biography of women who graduated into a world that was not always prepared to welcome them into the public life that professions demanded. It was also a time when various academic social sciences—economics, sociology, and political science—were emerging. Middle-class men were already creating these new disciplines and prescribing more traditional gender roles for these New Women. Professional women contributing to food sciences, commodity production, and community outreach sometimes encountered opposition from men (a resistance we call the “new patriarchy”). At times, however, these women received important assistance from men, especially those who shared a common rural background and an interest in rural life and agricultural production. Given the complexity of this history of women entering rural professions related to food, it is important to explore both practice and policy through a lens that is gendered.

Thus, a primary goal of our book is to emphasize the intersection of food studies and gender studies. The scholarship of the contributors forms part of the ongoing conversations within various disciplines of history—agriculture, gender, education, and public policy. By joining these ongoing scholarly discussions to food studies, we introduce new issues not always recognized as crucial to food studies, in particular the work of various rural professionals who made major contributions to food production, food security, and food science. The essays recover untold stories of women significant to history in various ways, but most important, the collection emphasizes how food studies can be enriched by paying particular attention to gender.

We hope that both scholarly and more popular audiences will find intriguing this group of women who performed in various intellectual

and professional sectors. Our collection includes United States, Canadian, and Western European case studies of these previously neglected professional women who worked in rural settings. Mostly middle-class and Caucasian—with some important exceptions, such as African American and Native American women in the United States—the women we study were part of the growing transatlantic partnerships that also fostered both domestic and foreign colonialism. Despite the national differences, there was a dovetailing of economic and social thinking on both sides of the Atlantic, especially evident during times of war. As the New Women we study found ways to interact with their male counterparts, many of whom did not welcome women's presence, sometimes they shared racist, colonialist attitudes, but their own position as an unwanted minority also gave them a different view of the developing modern economies and societies. Indeed, agrarian professional women insisted that rural sociologists and other social scientists needed to hear the voices of the rural women in local communities where they worked.

This volume seeks to untangle some of the complicated ties between women and food. Because they were constantly looking for ways to increase their incomes and economize on their household expenses, rural women's relationships with food were complicated. As these essays reveal, the roles of women as producers and consumers were not distinct and discrete. While the rural producers sought strategies to get their best-quality products to market so that they could command the best price, those same women were consumers of food as well. There was a chain of interdependency that tied producers and consumers together in particular ways. Black women in rural Arkansas, for example, made efforts to expand their own production beyond cotton to include foodstuffs for their families and for market.

When scholars explore the ways in which experts interact with rural people, it is easy to make the assumption that the exchange is a classic case of social control, where experts impose their knowledge and their ways onto local rural women. Examples to the contrary, however, abound in this collection. Black demonstration agents who worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) gave instruction and demonstrated preferred methods, but Arkansan women modified instructions to suit their local circumstances. The case was similar in the Netherlands, where innovations were presented to rural women, but because of particular economic circumstances and family dynamics, women either ignored the suggestions or only managed to introduce change incrementally given

the constraints of family dynamics. Often they had to please a husband's palate or comply with a mother or mother-in-law who continued to preside over the domestic space, thus slowing the pace of change. Instructors observed this incremental implementation and recognized that their rural students were working within a set of complex social realities. Perhaps one of the most striking examples in this collection of respecting local circumstances and acknowledging local ways of knowing is the case study in chapter 10 of Densmore and Warren, who worked together to produce an important book about indigenous uses of plants. Densmore depended on Warren's expertise as an indigenous woman to instruct her on botany by disclosing the practical uses of particular plants. Together, they wrote down the knowledge that Warren communicated and as a result created an important text.

Also complicated are the relationships that rural women had with experts. Indeed, understanding the question of "expertise" among rural women is itself a complicated matter. National bureaucracies gave rural women access to experts by offering instruction through a variety of state-financed initiatives in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. But the process of delivering information to rural women was never completely a one-way exchange. Some individuals were tagged as "experts" either by virtue of their employment as educators at agricultural schools or land-grant colleges, as commodity specialists or policy advisors, or as home economists named by the USDA extension service, the provincial department of agriculture, or the national agricultural service. Others drew their expertise from a variety of sources. Mabel Webb was able to establish her cultural currency from her war work among rural women, and she channeled that into a successful broadcasting career in which she shared the culinary expertise of other women. Adelaide Hoodless wrote a textbook for Ontario schools after her own child died because of improper food-handling practices in her home. Madge Watt declared herself a "rural expert" because she had several strategies in mind for empowering Canadian and British rural women to make money from their horticultural and agricultural efforts. Densmore collaborated with an Ojibwe elder to collect information on traditional uses of plant food.

None of those efforts to collaborate were problem free. Webb found her folksy household talks on radio challenged by some male scientists of the day, such as V. H. Mottram, who criticized her hints about economizing

by reheating meats or stretching the food budget with peer-based advice. The Women's Institutes, transplanted from Canada to the United Kingdom, have often been gently mocked for their ubiquitous tea parties and cakes, but Andrews has argued that the movement became "the acceptable face of feminism." Although naysayers have sought to trivialize it, the movement's recent centenary celebrations in London included her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who acknowledged the many accomplishments of the group for village life, social issues, and national concerns. When elders and others questioned Densmore and Warren's collaboration at the time of their project, they pursued it anyway. The text they created recorded indigenous knowledge and made it accessible in a way that remains unmatched. The authors could not have foreseen the threat that biopiracy would pose in the coming decades.

Home demonstration agents and home economists are central to any study of rural women and the professions. Scholars such as Carolyn M. Goldstein have taken the study of home economics quite far by retrieving it from the dustbin where some mainstream feminist scholarship had discarded it.⁴ While Goldstein's work concentrated on the period since the 1920s, many of the papers in this collection deal with the period before that era. Emily Hoag's work, for example, illustrates that before the rise and dominance of home economics, farm women's experiences were regarded as more complex and complicated than simply running a rural home under less-than-ideal circumstances. Yet the USDA's decision not to publish Hoag's findings meant that her study was relegated to the archives for several decades. Only when scholars discovered that treasure trove of data about rural women did Hoag's study begin to inform a different picture of rural women's experiences.

The essays in this volume point to other surprising discoveries as well. It seemed progressive, for example, that the work of home demonstration agents in the American South should be desegregated after the 1964 ruling in the United States that mandated it. Jones-Branch points out, however, that this seemingly progressive move had surprisingly negative consequences in some cases. McKinney's work on Harriette Cushman concludes that although she worked long and hard to establish standards for egg production and marketing in Montana, in the end, that work did not have long-term consequences. While Densmore and Warren's work at recording indigenous knowledge was laudable, the danger of biopiracy remains very real.

Food security is a theme that is woven through many of the essays because, from the beginning, women's role in ensuring food provision was crucial. Women acquired most of the food needed to make their families and communities secure. They did so either through producing it on the land themselves or purchasing it or some combination of the two. During particular periods of history, providing food security took priority over quality, particularly during wartime. But even during periods of relative peace, women's role in producing and preserving was central. This was as true in the Netherlands as it was in England, Canada, and the United States. Helpful advice about how to stretch the food budget came in many forms. It included tips passed between peers at Women's Institute gatherings, short courses on canning and preserving taught through the USDA extension service, Dutch state programs, or English radio broadcasts. Resourceful experts instructed women on how to make multiple meals from the meat they had on hand and to preserve the bumper crops in their own yards and village greens. Production and sales of surplus food could ensure family survival in rural areas, and sometimes women could generate substantial incomes through their food production. In Montana, the humble hen could quietly and dependably pay the grocery bill for items that farm households could not produce, while in British Columbia bees and cows helped women ensure a reliable cash flow. Across North America and Europe, female farmers not only economized, but they could—and often did—generate respectable incomes.

Women did more than just work to produce food. Sometimes food provided a welcome opportunity for sociability, cultural celebrations, and fun. Members of women's groups looked forward to a monthly cup of tea with neighbor women, and producers welcomed the opportunity to attend state fairs and commodity shows. Short courses offered not only expertise in food production but opportunities for families, kin, and neighbors to gather and strengthen community bonds. Everywhere, families and friends gathered for annual festivities and celebrations. As Linda Ambrose argues in "Forever Lunching," women gathered not only to eat and to chat but to discuss serious and difficult topics such as political rights, farm finances, segregation, war losses, community infrastructure, and the challenges of living on the land. When they met over the teacups, in times of peace and war, women learned from each other as well as from the experts.

Women had always gathered, planted, reaped, cooked, and shared food with their families and communities. New in the second half of the

nineteenth century was an international market in food that, when combined with natural disasters of drought and pestilence, intermittently interrupted the traditional distribution of food. Women in the developed nations—the United States, Canada, and most of Europe—did not have to face famine during those years. Except for a famine in Finland and northern Sweden in the 1860s and one in Alaska in the late 1870s, there were no extreme shortages of food. In nations controlled by Western colonial powers, however, food security was often threatened. In India, some six million people died of starvation between 1896 and 1902. Chinese women faced extreme disruptions of food supplies because of war and drought during the first decade of the twentieth century. There were no major international wars in this period, however, and with a few important exceptions, women worldwide experienced relative food security. World War I interrupted food distribution in Lebanon, thus causing starvation and wartime food dislocations in Russia, which were increased by domestic unrest following the war. Some of the first international efforts to relieve food shortages emerged following World War I, a topic we do not cover but which was the foundation of an important international movement to deal with food insecurity.

In many developed countries agricultural communities changed as market economies grew and farm families adjusted to more commercialized agricultural systems. Yet important regional differences remained, and women of each region and nation faced new conditions. The United States provides one picture of those diverse conditions. In the South, black women farmers, especially, faced deteriorating racial relations and had greater difficulty than white women getting and retaining land. Many women turned to truck farming after the Civil War, raising small animals and vegetables to market locally or selling baked products. Reports from the South indicated that some black women canned fruit and found a ready market for their processed food. By the 1890s, however, getting and controlling land was increasingly difficult, and many were desperately looking for alternatives to the lives they faced as sharecroppers tied to a system that gave them little room to succeed as farm owners. Should they head north? Try to obtain land in the West and create black communities that they could run themselves? Or, head to Africa, where some felt they would have a chance for freedom?⁵

White women farmers in all areas of the United States faced new challenges as well. In the Midwest, settlers who took land from indigenous people faced continuing challenges as they moved west. Homesteaders

found soil that needed deep plowing with machinery and sturdy work-horses. To send crops east by train took additional money. As soon as one area was settled, land prices rose, making it hard to provide land for children even as the number of children in farm families declined. In the Northeast, women tried new crops, established truck farms, raised poultry, and planted orchards. Women everywhere turned to improving their traditional skills at dairying, producing butter for local markets, and raising poultry. They worked together to improve their rural communities and sent more of their children to school for a longer time when they could. Still, their political fortunes seemed to be more controlled by industrialists and the growing urban areas. By the 1890s protest groups—the Grange, Farmer’s Alliance, Populists, and the Country Life Movement—were forming in rural areas. Women belonged to all these groups and participated in protests and new farming experiments.⁶

To demonstrate the wide variety of professions that women took up related to food, *Women in Agriculture* is organized around three themes. Part 1, “Education,” focuses on women’s fight for access to pragmatic education about farming and to careers as educators, administrators, and researchers in institutions of higher learning and state-sponsored programs. Part 2, “Experts,” offers case studies of women who used their education to create nontraditional roles for women in agriculture as commodity experts, rural sociologists, and policy advisers. Part 3, “Extension,” turns to the important work of outreach, in which women worked as broadcasters, agricultural agents in state programs designed for rural women and men, or directly led community organizations, often with attention to food security, viable rural economies, and community organization.

Part 1: Education

According to Karen Sayer and Nicola Verdon, in England calls for women to enter the farming profession were rooted in the late nineteenth century. Arising from a feminist commitment to expanded horizons for women in all arenas, the women of the Langham Group argued that rather than drudgery or—worse yet—immorality, the work of farming could be a respectable undertaking for women with adequate background experience and professional training. The business of farming, they argued, not just field work or the more “feminine” pursuits of dairying and beekeeping, could be respectable and lucrative enterprises for women. What was

needed was adequate training and education to allow women to compete with men on equal footing in agricultural production. Sayer and Verdon make a persuasive case that the arguments presented in the pages of the *Englishwomen's Review* laid the groundwork for later developments in agricultural education.

Arguing that women played important roles in the fields of rural sociology and agricultural economics, Joan Jensen focuses on the example of Emily Hoag at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Hoag participated in research that guided food policy in the United States, and her work helped determine women's place in food production and food policy. Jensen shows that Hoag's work, both as a university instructor and as a research assistant, made her a key contributor to the development of the discipline of rural sociology. Although Hoag arrived in Madison as an experienced classroom teacher with a family farming background ideally suited to carry out research among farm families, the professors who published the results of her fieldwork usually recognized her only in a footnote. When the Wisconsin professors, all men, created their own history of agricultural economics and rural sociology, Hoag was seldom mentioned. By tracing Hoag's work, Jensen offers insight into the previously overlooked roles of New Women in university research settings.

Margreet van der Burg continues this attention to education. She explains how both male and female agricultural reformers in the Netherlands succeeded in establishing farm household management education with the national vocational system. By implementing curriculum suitable for different types of farms and social classes, the state and agricultural organizations acknowledged that farm women and other rural women were not homogenous. The qualified female teachers of the same background became their leaders. This way, many women participated in a wide variety of initiatives that challenged notions about women and food by emphasizing that women were not merely consumers or stereotypical "dairy maids" but central actors in the production of food stuffs and thus crucial participants in the rural economies.

Part 2: Experts

In the second part of the book, authors focus on individual women who played central roles in the history of food in North America. Amy McKinney opens this section by exploring the career of a commodity specialist, Harriette Cushman, who made efforts to develop marketing and

distribution strategies for Montana eggs from 1922 to 1955. As a poultry specialist, Cushman worked with poultry women, encouraging them to standardize the eggs they marketed by incorporating scientific candling and grading procedures. Cushman fostered new legislation to establish quality standards to guide the producers of this food staple. Women continued to dominate egg production and marketing for most of the early twentieth century.

Anne Moore's chapter introduces Lorian Jefferson, who joined the faculty of the Massachusetts Agricultural College in 1912, where she conducted research for more than twenty-five years. Moore argues that Jefferson's dedication to scientific and empirical investigation of New England food production, supply, and distribution offers an important example of a "new agrarian woman." Through her research and publications, Jefferson not only represented a woman occupying a nontraditional role but also one who "paid close attention to women's roles as producers and consumers in a new era of food availability and consumerism." Indeed, Jefferson and Emily Hoag had a great deal in common, including their connections to Madison, Wisconsin, and their ties to the Country Life Movement.

Linda Ambrose then looks at three Canadian women who were leaders in the Women's Institute (WI) movement: Adelaide Hoodless, Laura Rose, and Madge Robertson Watt. Ambrose reminds us that the WI, along with other groups for rural women, took up at least three different issues of interest to food studies—food science, food security, and food production for profit. All three women gained reputations as experts through their lectures, publications, and efforts to organize rural women, yet they followed very unconventional career paths. The learning they applied to rural situations arose in large part from their own life experiences. Adelaide Hoodless became an expert on domestic science because of a personal tragedy connected to the improper handling of milk. Laura Rose gained her expertise at dairy work through her time on a family farm in the United States; and Madge Watt, the Canadian founder of the WI in Britain, declared herself to be an expert on rural matters because her university education and journalism career had trained her to look for every available opportunity for women to broaden their horizons. These Canadian women set the stage for later transnational work, including founding the WI in Britain, where the movement led to a series of retail markets run by women.

Part 3: Extension

One of the most common goals the experts shared was a commitment to extend educational opportunities to rural women in their own communities through demonstrations, short courses, and later by broadcasts designed specifically for rural audiences. Often, women professionals who were involved in the distribution of food knowledge simply called it “extension.” In turn, however, they learned much from rural women, including those indigenous to the land. The women who taught such courses, whether at colleges, in communities, or on the airwaves, were often the women we discuss in part 2 as “experts.”

As Maggie Andrews explains, Mabel Webb was not formally trained in the culinary arts, but she was a self-proclaimed expert on cooking because she traveled far and wide across England enjoying regional foods and gathering recipes, both tasty and economical, to share with her radio audience. In discussing the role of “Mrs. Webb,” who became popular in Britain after World War I, Andrews explains how this radio personality empowered women through her folksy radio talks about recipes and food. Although authorities criticized Webb for lack of scientific method or formal domestic science models, she wielded an enormous influence over her listening audience—a popularity that perplexed the executives at the British Broadcasting Corporation, who considered Webb’s assertive style to be overly “aggressive.” A New Woman in her own right, Webb commanded attention from both her loyal listeners and those who tried to confine or redirect her voice.

Cherisse Jones-Branch then describes how African American home demonstration agents in Arkansas created their own space for expanding traditional “extension” classes. From 1914 to 1965, these agents instructed women about food, its production, preservation, and preparation, as the Agricultural Extension Service expected them to do. But as Jones-Branch explains, in these segregated groups, agents also incorporated the concerns of local women that went far beyond these common concerns. Some scholars have argued that extension agents were a part of the long arm of segregation as they worked in the South. Jones-Branch argues that these extension programs under black demonstration agents also offered women opportunities for self-improvement. The roles and relationships established by black demonstration agents were complicated, and Jones-Branch provides an example of how agents hired to teach traditional female tasks, such as canning food, might go on to give instruction in

other health-related issues, including making birth control information accessible to rural women.

The impact of local women meeting together to receive instruction from extension agents or other food experts in seemingly traditional womanly arts should not be underestimated. Food was almost always at the center of such gatherings, and outsiders sometimes dismissed such gatherings as simple idle pursuits, deemed to be especially inappropriate during wartime. Linda Ambrose demonstrates that groups such as the Women's Institutes in Ontario could also function as a front for something far more political than they seemed. Serving food at meetings, particularly the elaborate rituals of tea pouring and cake making, might appear to be only a frivolous cultural practice. In fact, the consumption of food in these community settings provided a cultural space for women to exchange ideas about a variety of issues, and the funds they raised from selling food presented opportunities to strategize about various community-based initiatives that the women themselves controlled.

Some rural women, however, instructed the experts in a type of reverse extension. Joan Jensen discusses the instruction about food plants in indigenous cultures through the collaboration of Mary Warren English, an Ojibwe, with the nonnative anthropologist Frances Densmore. Densmore is known as the author of *The Uses of Plants by the Chippewa Indians*, but less is known about Mary Warren English, who worked with her collecting traditional knowledge about the plants and medicines that formed the basis for the book. Although English faced some opposition from indigenous people about recording traditional Ojibwe plant knowledge, she was convinced that writing it down was an important way to preserve that knowledge. Densmore and English's partnership suggests that the transfer of knowledge was sometimes the result of collaboration by women who felt that documenting native ways of knowing about the nutritional and healing properties of particular plants was an important way to preserve that knowledge. The work of Densmore and English foreshadowed the ongoing battles that rage between pharmaceutical companies, who are eager to capitalize on indigenous knowledge, and Native American communities, who claim sovereignty over that knowledge.

We hope that readers will enjoy this collection of essays focusing on women and food. It should broaden the understanding of how women historically have been intimately involved with food not only as producers, preparers, and consumers but also as food specialists, rural sociologists, policy analysts, demonstration agents, broadcasters, and community activists.