

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 establishing 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,

*Glenda Riley, professor of history at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls and winner of many awards, has written numerous articles on western women and several books including *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience*, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, and *The Female Frontier*. During the fall of 1990 she will serve as Association of Marquette University Women Professor of Humanistic Studies at that institution in Milwaukee.*

Glenda Riley



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.

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

² 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 Bissell 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.

³ 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.

⁴ Rebecca McAlmond Sumner, *Diary, 1862*. See also Arnold Fladager, "Memoir of My Mother," 1927, and Helena Carlson Vigen, "Reminiscences," 1921. On the New Ulm massacre, see Hibbard, "Reminiscences"; Moody, "Territorial Days"; Marion Louisa Sloan, "Reminiscences and Genealogical Data," 1926, 1936, 1937.

⁵ Sylvia Macomber Carpenter to "Dear Aunt" [Ellen S. Brooks in Portland, Michigan], 1863, Carpenter Family Papers; Harriet Sanborn, "Life Story," undated.

⁶ Mary Lyon Burns, "The Bright Side of Homesteading," 1923, p. 13–14.

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 &c—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.³

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."⁴

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."⁵

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.⁶

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," as grasshoppers were known, not only devastated 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.⁷

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."⁸

In the years that predated 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

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."⁹

A significant number of these early rural Minnesotans looked upon their domestic work loads with distaste. 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."¹⁰

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 house-keeping" was like "taking part in a fascinating play of make-believe."¹¹

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

WOMEN AND CHILD FEEDING CHICKENS,
ABOUT 1900



⁷ Minnesota American Mothers Committee Inc. (MAMC), comp., *Biographies Project*, 1975, "Johanna Tatley"; Carpenter to "Dear Cousin Lucy," July 9, 1874, Carpenter Papers. See also Annette Atkins, *Harvest of Grief: Grasshopper Plagues and Public Assistance in Minnesota, 1873-1878* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1984).

⁸ Abby Fuller Abbe, account of an 1854 trip, undated, and clippings, Abby Abbe Fuller and Family Papers; for quotations see Charlotte Ouisconsin Van Cleve, *Three Score Years and Ten: Life-Long Memories of Fort Snelling, Minnesota, and Other Parts of the West* (Minneapolis: Harrison and Smith, 1888), 161.

⁹ Britania J. Livingston, "Notes on Pioneer Life," Dec. 22, 1929, p. 2, 3, quoted in Meridel Le Sueur, *North Star Country* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1945), 118; Alice Claggett Evans, "Some Reminiscences of Pioneer Days in Lura Township," undated. Another woman who followed her husband from region to region was Abby Bucklin, "Just Indians," undated.

¹⁰ Carpenter to "Dear Cousin Lovell," Mar. 26, 1887, Carpenter Papers, and Livingston, "Notes."

¹¹ Moody, "Territorial Days"; Burns, "Bright Side of Homesteading," 14. Looking back, another woman thought that she had been happy before she had all the modern "conveniences"; Ida T. Skordahl, "Reminiscences," undated.

indicate that they clung to Old World customs including language, religion, holiday celebrations, clothing, and special foods. And some mentioned doing heavy field work.¹² But similar generalizations cannot be made about black women's work because their documents are few.¹³ 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.

¹² For a discussion of ethnic and black settlers, see June Drenning Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1981). For a Swedish woman who kept up traditional ways, see "Marie Sonander Rice" and for a Norwegian woman who did field work and other heavy farm labor, see "Bertha Martinson Sonstebj," both in MAMC, Biographies Project. That ethnic women did field work and native-born women did not is borne out by Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1981), 32-34, and Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 34-36, 66-69, 168-169, 192-201, 235. The work of ethnic women is also found in Theodore C. Blegen, ed., "Immigrant Women and the American Frontier: Three Early 'America Letters,'" *Norwegian-American Historical Association Studies and Records*, Vol. 4-5 (Northfield: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1930), 14-29.

¹³ Sources identified to date on black Minnesotans include "Charley Jackson—He Walked Freedom's Long Road," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Feb. 12, 1968, clipping in Mattie V. Rhodes and Family Papers; Anna Ramsey to "My Darling Children," Mar. 31, 1876, and to "My Dear Daughter," June 27, Dec. 8, 1875, Feb. 2, 1876 (about her black servant Martha), Alexander Ramsey and Family Papers; Patricia C. Harpole, ed., "The Black Community in Territorial St. Anthony: A Memoir," *Minnesota History* 49 (Summer, 1984): 42-55; "Pilgrim Baptist Church, A Brief Resume," ca. 1977, Pilgrim Baptist Church, Ladies Aid Society Records; and David Vassar Taylor, "The Blacks," in Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota*, 73-91.

¹⁴ 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 carful [*sic*] & not let her get your pants on for if you do it will make a fus [*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 changed more in nature than in amount. Women spent hours 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 in style. One woman near Jordan explained that although her grandmother had spun thread on a spinning wheel and sewed clothes 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.¹⁴ 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

SIGRID NEGAARD AT THE SPINNING WHEEL SHE BROUGHT FROM HER NATIVE NORWAY





THE KOLSHORN SISTERS OF RED WING; AGNES IS THE YOUNG CHILD SEATED AT LOWER LEFT.

ters at "\$1.00 a quart for family use," a real treat for former New Englanders. 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.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Minnesota Pioneer*, May 2, Oct. 24, 1850; Scott, Diary.

²⁰ Clara Rieger 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*, *Women'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 gazeteers, city directories, and newspaper advertisements, was the increasing numbers of rural women who sought paid employment outside their homes. Although they usually worked as domestics, 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

States Census stopped categorizing women as "Not Gainfully Employed" and asked about their paid employment. In that year, 10,860 Minnesota women (both rural and urban) worked as compared with 121,797 men; 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.²¹

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 women 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.²² 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.²³

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.²⁴

DURING postmarket years women's thinking about their work and lives began to show marked changes

ANNE G. BLAISDELL'S 1865 TEACHING
CERTIFICATE FOR DAKOTA COUNTY

Teacher's Certificate.			
I do hereby certify, That Miss A. G. Blaisdell			
having a good moral character, and having passed an examination with the annexed result, is hereby authorized to teach in the Public Schools of this County for one year, unless this License shall be sooner revoked.			
REQUIRED BY LAW.	No.	VOLUNTARY.	No.
Orthography,	5	Botany,	
Reading,	4	Natural Philosophy,	
Writing,	4	Geology,	
Mental Arithmetic,	3	Astronomy,	
Written Arithmetic,	5	Physiology,	
English Grammar,	4	Political Economy,	
Geography,	3	Chemistry,	
History,	3	Algebra,	
Given under my Hand, This Tenth day of May 1865			
Daniel F. Allen District Commr.			
Wm. F. Smith Commissioner District			
Dakota County, Minnesota.			
<small>Examiners are required to examine applicants only on those studies which are set down in the first column above, and will carefully mark the result—marking 5 as the highest number, indicating the greatest excellence, 4, very good; 3, medium; 2, poor; 1, totally deficient; 0, not examined.</small> <small>This certificate shows the Teacher's standing, and should be a perpetual incentive to greater excellence.</small> D. BLAKELY, State Supt Pub. In.			

²¹ United States, *Census, Population*: 1870, 1:670; 1890, part 2, p. 302; 1910, 4:111. For the story of a hotel maid in Renville, see Louisa Wanner, *Diary, 1903-04*, in Elizabeth Hampsten, comp., *To All Inquiring Friends: Letters, Diaries and Essays in North Dakota, 1880-1910* (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota, 1979), 275-283. For the presence of milliners, seamstresses, and needleworkers, see, for example, *Minnesota Pioneer*, Feb. 5, 1852. For an account of a seamstress, see Abbie T. Griffin, *Diary, 1882-85*; of a tailor and seamstress, see Daisy Barnard Schmidt, "History of the Jacob Zed Barnard Family, 1817-1960"; of a dressmaker, see Bernice P. Jenkins, "Life of Jennie Atwood Pratt," 1949. For an account of several teachers, one of whom was also a part-time milliner, see Sloan, "Reminiscences"; for another teacher's experiences, see Hattie Augusta Roberts Eaton, "Reminiscences," ca. 1934. The minister was Josephine Lapham; see Susan B. Anthony Letter to "Dear Friend" (Josephine Lapham), June 22, 1868. On women doctors, see Winton U. Solberg, "Martha G. Ripley: Pioneer Doctor and Social Reformer," *Minnesota History* 39 (Spring, 1964): 1-17; Nellie N. Barsness, "Highlights in Career of Women Physicians in Pioneer Minnesota," 1947.

²² Advocates of women as teachers stressed their capacity for affection and maternal instincts, qualities that would create greater rapport with students than would be possible or proper for "the other sex," as men were often called during the 19th century. See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: Norton, 1976), 113-115, 168-183; Polly Welts Kaufman, "A Wider Field of Usefulness: Pioneer Women Teachers in the West, 1848-1854," *Journal of the West* 21 (April, 1982): 16-25, and *Women Teachers on the Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Sloan, "Reminiscences"; Maude Baumann Arney, "Earliest History of School District Number 64," undated, in M. B. Arney Papers. For a Swedish woman who moved her family to the loft so that a school and its teacher could occupy the lower level of their home, see MAMC, Biographies Project, "Mor Hetteen."

²³ U.S., *Census, Population*: 1870, 1:677, 689; 1890, part 2, p. 319; 1910, 4:123.

²⁴ U.S., *Census, Population*: 1870, 1:675, 687; 1890, part 2, p. 319; 1910, 4:120-121. On Minnie Mary Lee, see Henry S. Wood, "A Woman of the Frontier," undated.



STAFF MEMBERS OF THE MANKATO FREE PRESS, PHOTOGRAPHED IN FRONT OF THEIR NEWSPAPER PLANT ABOUT 1890

²⁵ On women's enjoyment of farm work, see Johnson, "Memoir." A description of a women's group to help settlers is found in Bucklin, "Just Indians." On an early church relief group, see Marine Sewing Society Minute Book, 1857, First Congregational Church, Marine, Minn., Papers. Another early group, which claimed to be the state's oldest philanthropic organization, was the Woman's Christian Association of Minneapolis, Minutes, 1866-67, in WCAM Records, 1866-1980. The Civil War spurred the formation of a number of other such groups; see "Pioneers of Mankato, Minnesota," typescript of interviews, ca. 1943. Quotes from Helen E. Howie, "The Historical Background of the Dundas Methodist Church," 1955, p. 5. For another ladies' aid society, see First Universalist Church, Minneapolis, Bylaws, 1878.

²⁶ Described in Hebrew Ladies' Benevolent Society, St. Paul, Minutes, 1891-99. For a Jewish woman's account of life in Dubuque and St. Paul, see Florence Shuman Sher, "Reminiscences," 1976. For the Minnesota WCTU, see Minutes, 1866-67, Minnesota Women's Christian Temperance Union Records, 1866-1983. For the Scandinavian WCTU, see Minute Book, 1885, Scandinavian Young Women's Christian Temperance Union of Minneapolis, Minnesota, Papers; for a Minnesota temperance colony, see "Story of the National Colony," ca. 1943. On the Schubert Club, see Zylpha S. Morton, "A Brief History of the Schubert Club 1882-1962," 1963. For accounts of a few of the numerous other women's clubs, see "The Woman's Club, Fergus Falls, 1897-1925," undated, in Elmer E. Adams and Family Papers, and Mrs. E. L. Lowe, "Short Sketches of Several Clubs in Anoka Co.," 1927; "Some Special Dates and Events, 1954," in Minnesota Federation of Women's Clubs Records; Alvin Gutttag, "Mrs. Margaret Jane Evans Huntington"; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 18, 1925, sec. 6, p. 8. See also MAMC, Biographies Project, "Mrs. Anna Partridge."

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.²⁷

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.²⁸

MARGARET JANE EVANS HUNTINGTON,
PRESIDENT OF THE MINNESOTA
FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS



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?²⁹ 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 probably 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.³⁰

²⁷ Ely's graduation is reported in *Winona Daily Republican*, June 9, 1875, clipping in Orrin Fruit Smith and Family Papers. Another example of a woman who attended college (Carleton) is Olsen, "Memoirs." A few educated women went on to become college instructors, including Matilda Jane Wilkin of St. Anthony, who became an instructor at the University of Minnesota, and Margaret Huntington, who became the Lady Principal, or Dean of Women, at Carleton College; see Wilkin, "Autobiographical Sketch," 1923, and Gutttag, "Mrs. Huntington."

²⁸ Horace Austin to "My dear Madam" [Mrs. W. C. Dodge], Mar. 14, 1870, in Horace Austin and Family Papers. Accounts of two suffrage workers are found in Sloan, "Reminiscences," and Eugenia B. Farmer, "A Voice from the Civil War," 1918; Susie W. Stageberg Papers and MAMC, Biographies Project, "Susie W. Stageberg of Red Wing."

²⁹ For a discussion of interpretation in public history facilities, see Michael Wallace, "Visiting the Past: History Museums in the United States," in Susan P. Benson, Stephen Briers, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 137–161.

³⁰ Donald Ostrowski, "The Historian and the Virtual Past," *The Historian* 51 (Feb., 1989): 201–220; Jeffrey B. Russell, "History and Truth," *The Historian* 50 (Nov., 1987): 3–13. See also Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry* (Revised ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

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.³¹ 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

the virtual, rather than the actual, past. Its proponents argue that because we cannot know the literal truth about the past, we can, indeed we must, interpret the past in light of current issues and understandings. We must read the past from the perspective of today's needs and concerns. In this view, rural women's history is a useful and logical handmaiden to feminism.³²

Historians who accepted this approach might conclude that postmarket rural wives began to earn significant amounts of money that gave them increased power in the family; that rural women were knocking down the psychological walls of their homes by seeking employment and forming associations; and that such actions showed that they were chafing against their workloads.³³ And, by focusing on women who performed heavy farm labor, worked at a "man's" job, or got involved in politics, historians can present far better role models to women and men of the late 20th century than by emphasizing women's domestic side.

One danger in this approach is the possibility of devaluing rural women's domestic labor. If men's work becomes the normative standard against which we judge the worth of women's work, do we not demean the historical kitchen? Although it is tempting to want to advance the feminist cause by focusing upon evidence of women breaking gender-oriented bonds, it is important to avoid the unintended result of devaluing women's domestic work.

Despite the pitfalls, proponents of each side seem absolutely convinced that their way is the only way. At a recent conference, I heard a speaker inform his audience that if historians were not interpreting the past in light of present issues and concerns, they were not doing history. I also heard another historian express his rage after the session was over. What I did not hear was anyone exploring whether there might be room for both approaches.

Clearly, it is increasingly a burning question whether our historical past will serve a comparatively abstract scholarship or assist a contemporary cause such as feminism. Should scholars call it as they see it only from the sources available to them? Or should they enlarge our understanding of the past by applying current perspectives? Or is there yet another choice: can historians who espouse different approaches learn to coexist and derive value from each other's interpretations?

The illustration on page 66 is from the author's collection; all others are in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

³¹ One woman even masqueraded as a man in order to get a more remunerative job to support her two children; Kathryn A. O'Connell, "A Lanesboro Report of 1864," 1965, in Julia F. R. Underhill Papers. For other recent descriptions of gender separation, see John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986); Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative Perspective of Women of the Prairie and on the Plains* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988); and Carolyn E. Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totawa, N.J.: Rowman & Allenheld, 1983).

³² See Russell, "History and Truth," 5-11. For an example of the clashing of the "objective" version and a "feminist" version of a past event in Minnesota history, see Thomas A. Woods, "Varying Versions of the Real: Toward a Socially Responsible Public History," *Minnesota History* 51 (Spring, 1989): 178-185.

³³ For the argument that gender roles were followed less often than usually thought, see Anne B. Webb, "Forgotten Persephones: Women Farmers on the Frontier," *Minnesota History* 50 (Winter, 1986): 134-148. See also Nancy Grey Osterud, "'She Helped Me Hay It as Good as a Man': Relations among Women and Men in an Agricultural Community," in Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *To Toil the Livelong Day: America's Women at Work, 1780-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 87-97.



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