

POWER IN THE GARDEN:  
EXPLORING THE LIVES OF MISSOURI FARM WOMEN  
AND THEIR VEGETABLE GARDENS DURING  
THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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A dissertation  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School  
University of Missouri-Columbia

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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AUGUST 2007

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

POWER IN THE GARDEN:  
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THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Presented by Allyn M. Mortimer

A candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Catherine Rymph

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of two remarkable Missouri farm women—Hazel Pipes Young and Mary C. Neth—whose lives inspired me to undertake this study of rural women. Hazel Pipes Young was the epitome of a progressive farm woman. She worked hard for her family and, during the Great Depression, for the Farm Security Administration helping farm women learn new ways to grow and preserve produce from their vegetable gardens and tend to their families. Mary was my dissertation adviser on rural women's issues, and her wise counsel helped me negotiate the challenges of dissertation research and writing. Her untimely death in 2005 has left me with the difficult task of producing a document that would rise to her high standards. I hope that this work would meet with their approval.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The list of individuals who encouraged me in researching and writing this dissertation is long and includes friends, family, and supporters both inside and outside the University. A partial list of friends includes Ann Breidenbach, Christina Vasquez Case, David Lind, Kathy Marquart, Bridget Murphy, Nancy Shepherd, and Kendra Yoder, whose conversation and company I value. A short, and incomplete, list of family members who helped, includes my in-laws, Eleanor and Larkin Langford, who patiently assisted in connecting me with women to interview and with detailed information about their parents' lives; and Betty Johnson, who lent me her grandmother's diary, which was especially useful. In addition, several friends, including Beth Gold, helped me locate several of the wonderful and talented women I interviewed for this project. To her and the others, I am indebted. I am most grateful to my husband, Dale, for his continuing support during this shared adventure.

I am also grateful to my committee members who guided me through this long process and were always responsive to my questions and concerns. I owe a debt of gratitude to Daryl Hobbs, J. Sanford (Sandy) Rikoon, Mary Jo Neitz, Elizabeth Barham, and to Catherine Rymph, who stepped in to fill the historical vacuum precipitated by the untimely death of Mary Neth.

The Garden Club of America's Douglas Dockery Thomas Fellowship provided me with financial support for my research, travel, and general subsistence. Without this generous award and their moral support, I would not have been able to complete my work. Travel funds for my research at the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City, the Library of Congress, and the National Agricultural Library were provided by a

Dissertation Research Travel Scholarship award by the University of Missouri-Columbia Graduate School.

In addition, since beginning my program in Rural Sociology, I have been fortunate to have worked as a graduate assistant for Joel Hartman's course, the Amish Community. Joel's generosity, good humor, and role model as a teacher have contributed immeasurably to my graduate school experience.

Archivists at the University of Missouri Archives, the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, and the National Archives-Central Plains Region in Kansas City also need to be acknowledged for their assistance with my research. I am very grateful to them for sharing their expertise with me. Mary Fritz provided me with a tour of and information about the German Four Square Garden. Her hospitality and generosity were very much appreciated.

Finally, this dissertation could not have been written without the help of the eight women and one man who were my key informants. They were generous with their time and candid with the information that they passed along to me. I was captivated and inspired by their memories and hope that I have done them justice in writing about their lives and the lives of their mothers, and other women who grew gardens during the Great Depression.

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**ABSTRACT**

Today, when fresh, canned, and frozen vegetables are plentiful and taken for granted, the home vegetable garden is regarded as something between a hobby and a luxury. But in the Great Depression of the 1930s, the household vegetable garden, which was primarily the responsibility of the farm woman, was an engine that helped many rural families pull through tough economic times. The home vegetable garden is an ideal place from which to explore women's agency, because it is not only a gendered site on the farmstead where women, particularly during this time period, were able to develop skills and knowledge to enable them to feed their families, but it also was a site that enabled them to participate in the economic welfare of the farm.

This study examines the Depression-era vegetable garden and its value in helping to keep farm families off relief rolls and remain relatively self-sufficient. It also examines the role of the professional women—Extension home demonstration agents—who worked with farm women to develop and improve their gardening and canning capabilities. It documents the material culture of the Depression-era vegetable garden in an attempt to make readers aware of the often taken-for-granted tools, skills, and knowledge that women needed to grow groceries in the garden.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Mary Meek Atkeson wrote a book entitled *Woman on the Farm* in which she talked about women's vegetable gardens among other things. She wrote:

The home vegetable garden on American farms is sometimes the woman's province, sometimes the man's, but always the home-maker is greatly interested in the growing of the vegetables with which she is to feed the family. Good vegetable gardening is a complete science in itself, as each kind of vegetable has its own needs and its own enemies... So important is the vegetable garden to the family farm that in the recent slump in farm prices, it has often been the saving factor. Different authorities have computed its value in different ways, but every farm woman knows, from what she has heard of city retail prices for vegetables that the products provided for her family by her home garden are equivalent to a very great deal of money (1924:71-73).

This was true in 1924 when her book was published, but this was particularly true during the years of the Great Depression as farm women's productive activities became a significant factor in enabling the family to remain on the land and to obtain an adequate diet. In addition, as the United States moved into World War II, the home vegetable garden, as manifested in the Victory Garden, became a symbol of patriotism and a space on the landscape that provided food for those on the home front, thus allowing more food to be shipped to the troops abroad (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Extension Service 1943:8-9).

At a time today, when fresh, canned, and frozen vegetables are plentiful and taken for granted, the home vegetable garden is regarded as something between a hobby and a luxury. But in the Great Depression of the 1930s, the household vegetable garden was an engine that helped many rural families pull through tough economic times. During the Depression, the vegetable garden not only provided the major share of the farm family's

food supply, but it also augmented family income with profits derived from selling chickens, eggs, butter, and fruit (Adams 1994; Neth 1995; Sharpless and Walker 2006). The home vegetable garden is an ideal place from which to explore women's agency because it is not only a gendered site on the farmstead where women, particularly during this time period, were able to develop skills and knowledge to enable them to feed their families, but it also was a site that enabled them to participate in the economic welfare of the farm. Farm women's social relations within the family, the neighborhood, and community were also mediated by the household vegetable garden as we shall see in this dissertation (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Women and children in their spring garden in southeastern Missouri. Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-014187-D, Dryden, 1934-1942.

### **Women During the Depression**

Economically and socially being on the relief rolls was morally debilitating, principally for the male head of the household, but it stigmatized the entire family. “Male dominance,” according to McElvaine, “was endangered in the Depression” (1993:181), but people did try to maintain traditional roles as more and more women entered the

workplace for the first time in efforts to try to keep their families together and overcome the increasing economic pressures. During the Depression, women's lives were less disrupted than were men's because when the husband became unemployed, his world changed radically, while the wife's world remained relatively the same (Ware 1982:198; Cohen 1990:247). Historian Susan Ware writes:

At the same time, women as a group made significant (and for the most part unrecognized) contributions to pulling the country through the Great Depression. By substituting their own labor for goods and services previously bought in the marketplace, women often provided the difference between making do and doing without for their families. This substitution represented a break from the general trend toward more labor-saving devices in the home and the removal of family functions to other economic and social institutions. During the Depression, women recaptured some of their vital economic roles within the family (1982:198-199).

Women made and refurbished clothing, returned to home canning, and female labor substituted for electrical appliances, whose sales declined (Kleinberg 1999:247). While women always prepared food for the family, their housekeeping and gardening skills during the Depression made a crucial difference in the lives of family members. Cooking shows on the radio helped women cope with scarce resources and became popular.

Women have always worked. However, women seeking wage employment probably were more pervasive in urban areas, whereas in rural areas women were obliged to continue and in most cases increase their productive roles on the farm. Ware notes that the lives of rural women "had continuities that transcended the economic dislocations of the 1930s.... Conditions had always been difficult on farms, especially for women. Rural women's lives were ruled by low income or outright poverty, overdependence on cash crops like cotton and tobacco, high fertility, isolation, and the lack of conveniences—all conditions which predated (and postdated) the 1930s" (Ware 1982:8-9). Reimer also

acknowledges the fact that women's farm labor was expended "on the preparation and maintenance of a vegetable garden, as well as the harvesting and preserving of the results, [and that this work] provides a direct subsidy to the operation of the family labor farm as an economic enterprise" (1986:145). The important productive work that farm women did will be discussed later in this dissertation.

In the past few decades, the scholarship on farm women has flourished. An important focus of this scholarship has been to examine the lives of women within a regional and community context. Some key midwestern studies have been Deborah Fink's work on rural women in Iowa (1986) and Nebraska (1988, 1992); Jane Adams' work in Southern Illinois (1994); Jane Pederson's work in rural Wisconsin (1992); Mary Neth's work on the foundations of agribusiness that focuses on North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Iowa, but also includes Missouri (1995); and Pamela Riney-Kehrberg's study of the dustbowl in southwestern Kansas (1994). Women in other regions of the country have also been the focus of scholarly work, including Rebecca Sharpless's study of rural women on cotton farms in Texas (1999); Melissa Walker's social history of upcountry Southern women, who lived in the eastern counties of Tennessee, northwestern counties of South Carolina, and the southwestern counties of West Virginia (2000); and Sarah Deutsch (1987) and Joan Jensen's (1991) work on the lives of Hispanic women in the American Southwest. Nancy Osterud has studied dairy farming families in upstate New York during the nineteenth century (1991). Three relatively new works about the lives of Southern women are *Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century* edited by Melissa Walker and Rebecca Sharpless (2006); *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South*, edited by Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-

Genovese, Theda Perdu, and Elizabeth Hayes Turner (1994); and Lu Ann Jones' 2002 book, *Mama Learned Us to Work—Farm Women in the New South*, which gives black and white farm women an opportunity to tell their stories through oral histories.

With respect to the Midwest, in a recent issue of *Agricultural History* Ginette Aley wrote that “The Midwest is often difficult to interpret in all of its complexity and contradictions. Homogeneity may, at first glance, appear to describe the region’s population, but in fact the lives and experiences of rural midwestern women have always been differentiated by such factors as class, race, ethnicity, age, and marital status” (2003:454). In her review article on the scholarship of midwestern women, she identifies a number of gaps in the research on rural women’s lives that my research might help to bridge. While there is some excellent scholarship in these areas, Aley suggests that there is (1) “a much-needed effort to synthesize the historiography of women’s experiences by state which, when recast with a focus on rural women, would then facilitate intra-regional analyses” (p. 461); (2) that “the central theme of a historical survey of midwestern women as producers for the home and commercial market, laborers in the fields, or of the ways in which they generally shaped rural life” could be augmented (p. 462); and (3) that more research could be done on “how rural women confronted national crises and developed strategies to bring their families through them” (p. 476).

Farm women’s experiences and work on the plains in Western Nebraska and Kansas, for instance, were similar in many respects but were also very different from the way women in the prairie states experienced the Depression. Timothy Eagn writes of how one woman living in the panhandle of Oklahoma at the center of the Dust Bowl planted her garden:

[Sadie] planted a garden, using a row of tin cans lined end to end, the openings cut out and half-buried as a primitive irrigation system. To keep the end from knocking down her plants, she put up a fence of sticks and canvas. From this little patch of ground next to their dugout, Will and Sadie grew enough to stay alive: cabbage and potatoes, onions and corn. But as a winter without rain dragged on, the blue northers wore them down and left them hungry, shivering in their dugout (2006:107).

Midwestern women's experiences and realities, as evidenced in Murphy and Venet's edited volume, *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads* (1997), were as diverse as the land they settled. Murphy and Venet's assessment of what constitutes midwestern distinctiveness is the idea that it is an unusual region because of its natural systems of communication via rivers and this system of communication has contributed to its cultural diversity. The Midwest is a "crossroads region," which is one of the most defining features and the one that presented challenges and opportunities for women. In their introduction Venet and Murphy write,

As migrants faced the challenge of adapting to a new environment, their cultural norms met those of other groups, were challenged, sometimes clashed, and often shifted as all groups made adjustments. As opportunities for work both within the home and in the marketplace, women challenged traditional gender roles. Their new environment, economic situation, and social position offered opportunities for community building and leadership roles (1997:4).

Although there have been an increasing number of studies of midwestern and Southern rural women, there has not been an equal amount of research and published literature on farm women in Missouri in the 1930s. Recently, LeeAnn Whites, Mary C. Neth, and Gary R. Kremer (2004), edited a book entitled, *Women in Missouri History: In Search of Power and Influence*, which has been a very important resource for my work. Additionally, Mary Neth's groundbreaking book, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Communities, and the Foundation of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940*, contains numerous references to Missouri farm women and their activities. There have also been a



number of important local and community studies coming from University of Missouri graduate students, who have contributed extensively in this area. Randall C. Hill, for example, wrote about an Ashland farm family in 1929; Helena Bailie examined the role of women in rural Hallsville in 1938; and Susan Neese studied four generations of Missouri women in Scotland County, Missouri in 1986. However, with these exceptions, there are very few studies that seek to specifically document the everyday lives of Missouri farm women especially in relation to their household vegetable gardens and in relation to one another during the Great Depression.

In addition to viewing this dissertation within the context of the scholarly work on rural women, my research also needs to be seen within the context of the “gardening” craze that swept the United States during the Depression. Community gardens in urban areas proliferated. The number and size of gardens on the farm also increased. One aspect of the gardening phenomenon that swept the country during the Depression was the effort by large businesses, for example the Ford Motor Company, to promote vegetable gardening. These were employer-based gardening programs, with Henry Ford taking the lead and insisting that his employees raise some of their own food. While these were not projects specifically affecting the people of Missouri, this idea apparently was part of a community gardening wave that swept across the nation and became important to individual families (Conkin 1959; Tucker 1993). These corporate efforts will be explored in Chapter 4.

### **The Active Vegetable Garden**

Although the arduous work that producing food from the subsistence or household garden entailed may have been obvious to earlier generations, today’s younger

generation rarely sees where or how their food is produced. Therefore, one objective of my dissertation research was to document the material culture of the vegetable garden during the 1930s, and to make readers aware of the often taken-for-granted tools, skills, and knowledge that were needed to grow groceries in the garden. Because the garden is so central to my dissertation, it actually becomes an active participant in my research as it mediates social relationships among family members, neighbors, and community, as it enables women to participate in society both as producers and consumers, as it offers women an opportunity to exhibit creativity and self-expression by preparing meals and winning canning contests, for example, based on its quality and productivity, and as it becomes the central focus in producing food for the war effort. The household garden is thus a place on the farmstead that in fact keeps giving season after season, day after day. And, it is a space that is largely under the control of women.

The description of the vegetable garden in Joan M. Jensen's book, *Calling This Place Home, Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850-1925*, depicts the typical garden in earlier times. She writes:

Historically, small garden plots or household gardens have been essential to the survival of both landed and landless households. Household gardens, usually women's major responsibility, supply what cannot be obtained through hunting, gathering, or field production. These small-scale home food production systems often include backyard animal production, frequently poultry, which are fed on kitchen and garden waste. Located close to the house, the gardens provide a convenient daily supply of root and leaf vegetables during the growing season as well as surplus for storage, gifts to kin and neighbors, and sale in small quantities at local markets (2006:100).

This familiar pattern changed somewhat during the Great Depression. During the time described in Joan Jensen's book a typical farm family raised from 40 to 60 percent of their food supply. Madge Reese of the Federal Extension Service noted in a radio address

that many farm families were raising 75 to 90 percent of their own food in 1933 (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Home Economics Papers, Miscellaneous, 1933-1935, C 993, File 23, radio address “Have Standards of Living Changed on the Farm?”).

As we will see in this dissertation, the household vegetable garden is a viable food strategy for farm families during the Great Depression in the United States, and for countless families throughout the world. Vera Niñez (1987) in her article, *Household Gardens: Theoretical and Policy Considerations*, identifies nine functions of the household garden, which have also been reported in one way or another in my dissertation. The household garden is characterized as “producing relatively large amounts of food with marginal labor on relatively small extensions of land unsuited for agriculture; supplying nutrition lacking in field agricultural production; providing directly food, including staples in non-farm settings to reduce high cost and distribution problems; backstopping during periods of crop failure or disruption of food flows; providing fodder for household animals and household-related needs (handicrafts, firewood, petty cash from sale of planned or incidental surplus); offering convenience and security through location relatively close to dwellings in time and space; experimentation with new plant genetic materials and cultivation techniques before implementation in field agriculture; diffusion of plant genetic materials and maintaining genetic diversity; and guaranteeing households a regular and secure supply of food, petty cash, and goods to trade (1987:181). Niñez takes a cross-cultural perspective in reviewing the literature of home gardens, and her discussion of the historical, cultural, and theoretical importance of the household garden resides primarily in the international arena, with some mention of gardens in the United States. Nevertheless, she argues, as I

do in this dissertation, that home or household gardens are a viable food strategy that can increase a family's food supply and reduce malnutrition, and in times of financial and material hardship, family gardens are able to ensure basic food supplies.

Michael Pollan's vision of the household vegetable garden reflects some of important characteristics that Niñez applies to the home garden, and ones that I attempt to develop in my research. In his recent book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan writes that in "the garden almost everything you encounter engages with you. Nobody hides; nobody means you harm; your place in the local food chain is established and acknowledged. Everything you sense in the garden—colors and patterns, the flavors and scents—is not only comprehensible but answers to your desires... It is as much as anything else this mutualism that makes the garden the most hospitable of landscapes, for everything in it is, in some sense an extension of ourselves, a kind of mirror. And we are in some sense an extension of the garden's plants, unwitting means to their ends" (Pollan 2006:386).

### **Study Objectives**

This research has four objectives. The first objective of my dissertation research is to explore, discover, analyze, and describe how the home vegetable gardens of farm women in general, and Missouri women in particular, mediated social relationships within the household and the larger community during the Great Depression. For example, many farm women considered gender relations of the farm as a partnership; on the other hand, as some feminist scholars contend, women's labor on farms was exploited and appropriated by the male head of the household (Fink 1986). Nevertheless, the vegetable garden in my study is viewed as a site that is a gendered space and a site that may be potentially empowering for women. It provides her with some control over

material assets (physical, human, or financial, such as land, people's bodies and labor, money and access to money); intellectual resources, including knowledge, information and ideas; and control over ideology, that is, her ability to sustain and institutionalize a specific set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Batliwala 2002). The garden is also a potential source of satisfaction and pride. In other words, I am using the vegetable garden as a space from which to examine the social and economic relationships that Missouri farm women had with each other, within their households and the larger community, and with existing institutions and organizations, such as the Extension Service, and the New Deal agricultural programs that proliferated during the 1930s.

The second objective of my research project is to document the material culture—the tools, seeds, spatial arrangements, and ideas—of the Depression-era vegetable garden. The material culture of the vegetable garden includes, among other things, examining what kinds of practices farm women employed when growing and preserving food to feed their families, what tools they used, how they laid out their gardens, and how they choose what to plant. The underlying premise for studying material culture is that “human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged” (Prown 1993:1). As an artifact on the rural landscape, the household vegetable garden can aid our understanding of the social and cultural history of a place and its people. The cultural geographer Peirce Lewis writes, “The man-made landscape—the ordinary run-of-the-mill things that humans have created and put upon the earth—provides strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and are in the process of becoming. In other words, the

culture of any nation is unintentionally reflected in its ordinary vernacular landscape” (1979:15).

In his major work, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (1995), Henry Glassie documents the life and material culture of this community in Northern Ireland, beginning with the everyday lives of the people. He writes that, “Action is history. Every gesture has precedent and consequence. As the hand grips the spade, slaps brick, or grates spuds, historical time flows through the fingers and writes its narrative into the land” (1995:603). Artifacts, he contends, are historical documents that enable the knowledgeable reader to study the social and economic history of a people. Studying things made by human beings, including gardens, is meaningful, and although the “past cannot be studied,” because “it has vanished, leaving scars, tracks, stains, we can as scholars, evaluate them as sources of evidence” (p. 649). Artifacts, then become “proof of social existence,” and become useful tools in storytelling (p. 651). The vegetable garden is such an artifact and I will argue that documenting the material culture of the vegetable garden as a tangible object on the vernacular landscape—the farmstead—provides us with a historical record of how women struggled to provide food for their families during the Great Depression and casts light on the social and institutional relationships involved in this process.

In addition, because a garden is a creative endeavor and is an expression of family and life, the material culture of gardening is especially important to document. Much has changed over the years, and much has been lost to time. Given the growing interest in organic and local food production and in securing a safe food supply, there may be pragmatic significance to keeping alive the gardening knowledge from the Depression.

By studying household vegetable gardens, therefore, we can also glimpse how farm women interacted with their social and natural environments and gain an understanding of their everyday lives. Therefore, a third objective of the study is to respond to what Carolyn Sachs' calls for in her book, *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture, and Environment*. She writes that because women have situated knowledge with respect to the local environment that there is a need for "in-depth studies of women's knowledge of land, plants, and animals, and social relations in various local contexts [that would] enhance feminist scholars' understandings of food and environmental situations" (1996:179). My research will try to understand how women learned from one another gardening practices that were based largely on their own and shared experiences.

Finally, my project is intended to make visible the often-invisible work that women do and to uncover and interpret women's past history. Women's work in agriculture has been generally invisible (Sachs 1983; Neese 1986; Bock and Shortall 2006; Walker and Sharpless 2006). Women worked both within the home and on the farm and in the fields, while men rarely, if ever, swept the house or cooked the family dinner. Farm women have always played multiple roles (Neth 1995) and while some scholars have acknowledged women's power and influence, albeit limited, in these roles (Whites, Neth, and Kremer 2004; Salamon 1992; Sharpless 1999), others have had a more circumspect view and have suggested that women's labor to some extent was being exploited (Sachs 1983; 1996; Fink 1986). My role as a feminist researcher is to attempt to recover the often invisible experiences of women by investigating taken for granted activities, such as raising and preserving food for the family. This study, therefore, will

explore and examine farm women's actual lived experiences and look at how these women made sense of their lives and the structures in their everyday world.

Another component of this aspect of my project is to examine the work of women who were employed by the Extension Service as home demonstration agents and the Farm Security Administration as home management supervisors and who were active in working with farm women during the Depression. This thread in my project is first a direct response to a footnote in Mary Neth's book, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940*, that "unfortunately, there are no studies of women in the Resettlement Administration, the FSA, or the USDA," and, second, to my longstanding interest in the work of the Farm Security Administration.

### **Key Assumptions**

This dissertation focuses on the lived experiences of the farm women who were engaged in agricultural production and who lived on farms during the Great Depression in the United States. Farm women generally struggled to maintain their families and remain on the land. The strategies that they developed were not only frequently affected by larger national and regional issues, such as government policies, but also climate and geography, use of technology, access to markets, and distance connecting them to neighbors and kin.

There are four key assumptions that underlie my research on these women. A major assumption of my work is that farm women made a substantial economic contribution to maintaining their farms and the family during the Depression, and in many instances, it was through their efforts that the family was able to continue farming



and enjoy a “reasonable” lifestyle compared to families that lived in urban areas (Neth 1995:31). By extending themselves to meet the challenges of the Depression years, these farm women became a force in history.

While some historians contend that women have always been central to history (Beard 1946; Lerner 1979), until recently, women’s roles in American society and history have rarely been examined in any depth (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998; Scott 1988, 1986). Many argue that history has been distorted or limited because questions about women’s roles were rarely asked. Moreover, it was not uncommon for women to be deliberately ignored or written out of history and sociology even when their contributions were laudable and recognized during their lifetimes (Reinharz 1992; Whites, Neth, and Kremer, 2004).

Feminist scholars and others are now trying to restore women to history and to uncover and draw meaning from their lives. As noted earlier in this chapter, restoring women to history has been especially evident in the writings about rural women over the past twenty years (Bernhard, Brandon, Fox-Genovese, Perdu, and Hayes Turner 1994; Deutsch 1987; Haney and Knowles 1988; Jensen and Effland 2001; Jones 1985; Jones 2002; Sachs 1996; Sharpless 1999; Walker 2000; Walker and Sharpless 2006). Much of this recent scholarship has focused on midwestern women and their families (Adams 1994; Aley 2003; Fink 1986, 1992; Mulligan 1996; Murphy and Venet 1997; Neth 1995; Pederson 1992; Riney-Kehrberg 1994; Salamon 1992; Whites, Neth, and Kremer 2004). Included in these scholarly works is some acknowledgement of how rural women fared during the Great Depression of the 1930s; however, this period in history is rarely the focus of their research.

The second assumption that directs this dissertation is the fact that farm women operated within the context of a male-dominated hierarchy and patriarchal society (Bock and Shortall 2006; Neth 1995:18). The farm was a place where traditional gender hierarchies were maintained and farm men generally set the labor priorities for the family. Operating within a patriarchal structure elicited different responses by farm women. Some women were able to negotiate a degree of mutuality within the patriarchal structure, while some had trouble dealing with conflict and subordination. Scholars of rural women hold different views on the extent to which women's and children's labor was preempted by the farmer and these views will be discussed further later in the dissertation.

The third assumption is that during historical periods of social and economic crisis there is an opportunity for gender relations to be modified or changed, albeit often for a short period of time (Neese 1986; Alston 2006). Such was the period of the Great Depression. I argue in this dissertation that women's caring and domestic roles became even more central to the survival of the farm family, especially with respect to home production of food for the family. Their knowledge, skills, and ability to work hard were important attributes that farm women had that were made even more evident during the difficult decade of the 1930s. These skills, particularly with respect to their gardening practices, become vitally important with the advent of World War II and the increased emphasis by the Extension Service and others on a continuous supply of fresh fruits and vegetables for the health of the nation and the overall wartime effort that is symbolized by the Victory Garden Program.

Finally, the fourth assumption is that in times of economic and social distress, the value of the household vegetable garden and household production increases in importance (O'Brien and Patsiorskovsky 2006). And, women are for the most part the ones who devote themselves to "their household agricultural production and sales" (O'Brien and Patsiorskovsky 2006:59). In their work on social and economic change in rural Russia from 1991 to 2003, O'Brien and Patsiorskovsky found that household production in the changing Russian economy increased and that with intensive labor, niche markets, for example in raising potatoes, emerged. These markets, in most cases were developed by rural women (2006:xvii). In many countries throughout the world, moreover, it is the woman's home garden that has always provided sustenance for the family and has brought with it a sense of economic well being for the woman who was able to sell or barter her produce and retain the profits (Niñez 1987).

### **Preview**

This dissertation explores the issues surrounding women and their vegetable gardens in the remaining nine chapters. Chapter 2 provides the underpinning for my work; in other words it identifies and discusses the key themes and discourses found in previously published literature, which provide the feminist perspective and empirical foundation for my research. Chapter 3 describes how the research was conducted. Chapter 4 provides a glimpse into the social and historical context within which farm women operated beginning with President Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission and its view of farm women's work and ends with a look at Depression-era Missouri. It also explores gardening during this time period as manifested in the corporate gardens of Henry Ford, and the Garden Club of Columbia, Missouri. The main

focus of Chapter 5 is a description of the material culture of the Depression-era garden and a look at the work of seedsman and entrepreneur, Henry Field. Chapter 6 explores the everyday life on the farm for women during the 1930s, including the perspective of Missouri farm women as uncovered in my oral histories and in diaries and farm journals. It also speaks to the opportunities that women had to connect with other women and share their knowledge, especially about gardening. Chapter 7 talks about the value of the home vegetable garden and supports the notion that growing and preserving one's food during this time period allowed the farm family to avoid government relief rolls, remain relatively self-sufficient, and receive an adequate diet of green leafy vegetables. Chapter 8 looks at one of the New Deal social programs, the Rehabilitation Administration (subsequently the Farm Security Administration), and the work that home management supervisors did with very poor farm families around the country, and specifically in two Missouri Counties—Perry and Lawrence. Chapter 9, “Plan, Plant, Preserve, and Prosper,” continues the analysis of farm women's everyday lives and their interactions with women who worked as Extension home demonstration agents. Extension home economics clubs and the social support and opportunities for developing leadership skills that they provided women at this time are explored. The final chapter focuses on how the past can serve as a guide to the present and how women's history and the history of the 1930s vegetable garden can be relevant to today's social and economic conditions, as exemplified in the increasing attention being paid to community gardens, heirloom plants, local farmer's markets, and to supporting endeavors that enable people to grow their own food.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHOD OF INQUIRY

For rural women, a vegetable garden was an integral part of their world as it provided the raw materials for feeding their families. In most cases, women who were able to establish and maintain vegetable gardens to help feed their families and possibly sell their surplus were in a somewhat better economic position than those who were unable to do so. However, it is evident from recent work that the realities of women's lives and thus their experiences during the Great Depression differed substantially depending on their race, class, and geographic location. While some rural women, for example, may have been able to sustain their families through the Depression by selling eggs, bartering their garden produce, or working for meager wages, other women, particularly those women married to tenant farmers, were forever moving, were expected to work in the fields, and suffered the economic hardships and insecurities associated with poverty (Hagood 1939; Jones 1988, 1985). The vegetable garden, nevertheless, was apparently one of the stable features on the farmstead no matter where one moved to. In most cases, the farm woman would simply cultivate the previously established plot of land used by her predecessor.

Before exploring the lives of farm women and their vegetable gardens in the early part of the twentieth century in Chapter 6, we must first focus on the two fundamental concepts that provide the underpinning for this research. First, it is guided by a feminist perspective and method of inquiry based largely on the work of Sociologists Dorothy E. Smith and Marjorie DeVault. Second, it seeks to explore the process of empowerment as farm women acquire the knowledge and develop the skills that they need to become

active participants in caring for the needs of their families, their neighbors, and their communities. These two ideas or themes are intricately intertwined and result in a method of inquiry, as Smith suggests, that avoids splitting theory and practice (2005; 1999; 1987).

### **A Feminist Perspective**

A feminist perspective, according to DeVault, shifts “the focus of standard practice from men’s concerns in order to reveal locations and perspectives of (all) women...[that is] to find what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed, and to reveal both the diversity of actual women’s lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible” and “a key method for doing so...has involved work with the personal testimony of individual women, especially through methods such as ethnography, qualitative interviewing, life history, and narrative analysis.” In addition, DeVault suggests that a feminist method seeks “a science that minimizes harm and control in the research process,” and supports “research of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women” (1999:31). This dissertation attempts to follow these guidelines as DeVault lays them out in her books, *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research* (1999) and *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (1991).

With respect to my research, one initial question to be addressed is how does the current scholarship on the Great Depression reflect the actual lived experiences of the female half of the rural population, especially with regard to providing food for the family? DeVault suggests that lived experiences are activities “conducted in material settings—what happens in people’s everyday lives—as well as the processes of

interpretation that give meaning to everyday lives” (1991:11). One aspect of women’s everyday life that is explored in this dissertation is the fact that throughout their lives women are connected to larger institutions and organizations, such as schools, clubs, stores, the state, and women’s associations. Smith’s concept of social organization, as envisioned in her methodological and theoretical approach, which she calls “institutional ethnography,” explains

...how women (and others) enter social relations, actively producing their own activities in relation to the activities of others. It points to the importance of shared understandings about particular settings, recognizing that these are subject to change through negotiation, disputation and improvisation, but that they are always relevant to human conduct (DeVault 1991:12).

In essence, Smith’s concept that the everyday world is problematic calls for an analysis that can help us understand how everyday lives are shaped by larger social relations. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Smith’s published works have stressed an approach to sociology that is woman-centered, and in her most recent writings a sociology that is people-centered. Her method of inquiry, as this suggests, begins with a woman’s standpoint in the actualities of her everyday and everynight life (1987). Smith is firm in her belief that a woman’s standpoint is a place to begin an inquiry into the social and it locates the knower in her body and assumes that she is an active participant in her work in relation to others (2005; 1999). However it should be noted that the woman’s standpoint is not subjective or an individual’s location, but is a place from which to view relations of ruling.

Among feminist researchers and theoreticians there are a number of scholars who support the tenants of beginning with a women’s standpoint. Recently, Naples and Sachs (2000) discussed how rural sociologists can use standpoint epistemology in their

ethnographic investigations, and review the various methodological strategies that have been developed by feminist researchers and scholars regarding its use. Standpoint as a method of inquiry is rooted in the realities of people's lives, in this case, in the lives of women, and in the belief that reality is socially constructed. In 1986, Sandra Harding in her book, *The Science Question in Feminism*, identified a number of scholars, including Dorothy Smith, who were working in a woman-centered tradition and categorized them under the broad rubric of "standpoint" theorists. Other feminist scholars from a wide variety of disciplines have also been identified with developing theories and methodologies from the standpoint of women. Nancy Hartsock, a political scientist, speaks about the nature of oppression and how it is not obvious to all women and that it is only through feminist analysis that the feminist standpoint can be revealed (1987). A critique of early standpoint theory is that it privileges the knowledge of women. Subsequent versions of standpoint moved away from this position, and in her article, "Situated Knowledges," Donna Haraway (1991) suggests that because there are multiple standpoints, there is no single feminist standpoint.

Another sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins, has a different notion still of what standpoint theory is. Collins, who is an African American, interprets standpoint theory as explaining how knowledge is central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power (Collins 1997). She is interested primarily at looking at group-based standpoints that de-emphasize individual experiences within the socially constructed groups. She suggests that standpoint refers to groups—in this case to African Americans—that have shared histories of oppression based on their common location in the hierarchical power structure. These shared "angles of vision," therefore, allow people in those similar



situations to interpret them in the same way. For example, Black women frequently find themselves in contradictory experiences—being a domestic in a white woman’s house and at the same time dealing with the realities of poverty—and thus, share a particular consciousness that emerges from these experiences. Collins has been credited with espousing a method of inquiry that looks at the interlocking intersectionality between race, gender, and class (Collins 2000). For her, looking at the intersection of race, gender, and class provides a way to talk about group-based oppression and power relations. She also believes that local knowledges—that is, the knowledge derived from unconventional and traditional sources of narrative form—provide a way to hear oppressed woman’s voices. This knowledge becomes a form of resistance to the dominant discourse. She sees her project as emancipatory, and like Smith, she offers an alternative method of inquiry rather than totalizing theory and critiques the positivist approach to acquiring knowledge (Neitz 2003).

Collins’ project is to produce knowledge dedicated to changing unjust systems of power. Dorothy Smith also sees her project as providing ammunition to activists to be used to change the relations of ruling and to produce social change (Neitz 2003; Campbell and Manicom 1995). Both Smith and Collins and Nancy Hartsock’s methods of inquiry were developed from a Marxist tradition where the oppressed groups possessed a special position on inequality. Smith’s approach also emerged from the consciousness raising experiences of the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and is derived from an ethnomethodological tradition of Alfred C. Shutz and Harold Garfinkle (Smith 1987). While she begins her method of inquiry from the standpoint of women, she has broadened her sociology to be more inclusive, and thus now writes about the “social”

being the work that people do. A number of Smith's students have worked with and documented her method of inquiry, including Marjorie DeVault (1991, 1999), and Marie Campbell and Ann Manicom, who edited a volume of Smith's students' works entitled, *Knowledge, Experience, and Ruling Relations: Studies in the Social Organization of Knowledge* (1995). As mentioned before, DeVault, in her books, *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research* and *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* builds on Smith's earlier works and in some ways clarifies her approach.

In *Feeding the Family*, for example, when discussing the application of Smith's work to her own, DeVault begins with the assumption that caring work is valuable, albeit invisible work, that requires a broad range of skills to produce a meal. DeVault begins in the home and looks at the everyday activity and significance and experiences of women feeding their families. Such work requires planning and coordination and women are constantly juggling their activities and organizing people to accomplish this goal. DeVault in her work wants to move beyond Smith's work, beyond a critique of sociology, and to build something new. Her goal, and mine as well in this project, is to excavate women's activities that have been rendered invisible or trivialized by social theory.

The intention of what Smith calls institutional ethnography is to discover the social relations that organize a particular setting. Institutional ethnographers borrow from a number of theoretical traditions, including ethnomethodological approaches that are useful for seeing and understanding how social activity is produced within a particular complex set of relations. The historical materialism of Marxist analysis is also important

in that the sociologist is concerned with how the settings of interest have emerged from a specific history, i.e., how has it happened that things are organized in one way rather than in some other way. Institutional ethnographers in the Smithian tradition are also vitally interested in the active text; they examine the relations of ruling in the production of texts in specific places and the uses of such texts in these settings (DeVault 1999). Texts, which are material in form, enable replication, and include such things as paper/print, film, and electronic media. In Institutional Ethnography they “enter into and coordinate people’s doings, and, as activated in the text-reader conversation, they *are* people’s doings” (Smith 2005:228). Smith’s approach, as previously stated, begins with the individual in their very world, and examines what they do in this world, and looks at the texts that are apparent in their world, and how the texts allow individuals to enter into institutions. In my own work, I examine texts that were produced during the 1930s by the USDA Extension home demonstration agents and others to assist farm women in increasing their production capability by helping them identify strategies to improve their gardening practices and canning techniques by instructing them on how to use a pressure canner, for example. These farm women, however, are historical actors who interacted, negotiated, and accepted or rejected these texts to create their everyday lives.

In her book, *Writing the Social* (1999), Smith describes six characteristics of her method of inquiry, which I attempt to follow in my research. The first is to acknowledge that the subject of inquiry, the knower, is situated in activities of her own living in relation to others. She is always located in a spatial and temporal site—a particular configuration of the everyday and everynight world. In my case, Missouri farm women are the subject of inquiry and they are situated on the farmstead and oversee the creation

and development of the family's vegetable garden, where most of the food consumed by the household is grown and preserved during the 1930s. The household garden is traditionally considered a woman's space on the farmstead and can be viewed as a location that mediates social relationships on the farm and within the wider community. Second, the social is not separated from the ongoing coordinating of individuals' activities. That is, a "farm woman" is not separate from the actual people and activities in which we find her. The women whom I interviewed, for example, were actively involved in their families, communities, and, some in the wider regional scene. Third, social relations direct attention to, and take up analytically, how what people are doing and experiencing in a given local site is hooked into and coordinated with multiple local sites where others are active. In other words, our farm woman and her activities with respect to her vegetable garden are linked to other local sites where others are also active; for example, working with other women selling produce at curb markets or interactions with county home demonstration agents. Fourth, this method calls for the avoidance of the split between theory and practice. Smith suggests that theory itself is practice and that by beginning with woman's standpoint it locates the knower in her body and in the lived world. She suggests finding out how to make active, present and observable the theoretical, conceptual, ideological, and other forms of thought.

The fifth aspect of her method of inquiry is that the text needs to be seen in material as well as in a symbolic aspect as the bridge between the everyday local actualities of our living and ruling relations. The text was described earlier and is a material object that brings into actual contexts of reading a standardized form of words or images that can be and may be read/seen/heard in many other settings by many others at

the same time or other times. In the context of my work, texts, for example, would include information produced for women by USDA Extension or the Farm Security Administration or the textual information found in nursery or seed catalogs designed to help women improve or experiment with new gardening practices. The text is particularly important in analyzing farm women's vegetable gardens. Finally, Smith's approach to sociology is not trying to explain people's behavior to others but attempting to be able to explain to them and ourselves the socially organized powers in which their lives and our lives are embedded and to which we both contribute.

Since my research begins with farm women and their vegetable gardens and through the vegetable garden enters into institutions from the position of the farm women who experienced them, Smith's institutional ethnographic approach is especially useful in my analysis.<sup>1</sup> Smith's method is also helpful in exploring the issue of empowerment and how farm women were empowered or disempowered as their everyday lives, as mediated by the vegetable garden, are shaped by larger social relations and by institutions.

### **Power in the Garden**

The second underlying concept in my study is women's empowerment. Batliwala (2002) defines power as that which accrues to those (1) who control or influence the distribution of material assets; (2) who control intellectual resources; and (3) who adhere to an ideology, or have the ability to generate, propagate, sustain, or institutionalize specific sets of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors. She also suggests that the process of empowerment involves giving women "access to a new body of ideas and information that not only changes their consciousness and self-image, but also encourages action" (2002:691). Just how the vegetable garden becomes a vehicle for elevating women's

economic and social status on the farm, in the household, and in the community is one avenue that is explored in this dissertation. Some of the key actors involved in helping farm women realize the importance of their work were women who were home demonstration agents who provided “expert knowledge.” Of equal importance to farm women were their fellow club members with whom they shared gardening experiences.

In my dissertation I am not using power in the conventional sense to mean domination over others or power as “an exercise of public political or economic agency” (Whites, Neth, and Kremer 2004:5). My understanding of power is based on Batliwala’s definition in an economic sense, but it also includes Nancy Hartsock’s understandings of power “that are creative and life-affirming, definitions that equate power with the ability to act, with strength and ability, or with action that brings a sense of accomplishment” (as cited in hooks 2000:90; Hartsock 1981). This concept of power is also reflected in DeVault’s *Feeding the Family*, when she writes “family work is burdensome and oppressive, but also meaningful because it serves as a means for connecting with others. This tension appears with special prominence in writing about food, so basic not only to survival but also to human pleasure as well. Women in all societies share long traditions of feeding others, and in many settings the work of producing, processing, distributing, and serving food provides a valued identity or a kind of power for women” (1991:232). These notions of power are also reflected spatially on the farmstead in that a woman’s ability to produce and preserve food grown in her garden often meant prosperity or poverty to the farm family during the 1930s.

Farm life and the practical skills that are needed in order to farm “give many women and their daughters a sense of resilience, competence, and self-esteem,”

according to Sociologist Sally Hacker (1980). In addition, she writes, that sons and daughters learn a wide range of “crafts as well as the agricultural skills directly related to food production, [and that]...homemaking entails useful and highly respected skills” (p. 237). As part of the skills required in food production, the household garden is potentially empowering for farm women because it provides her with some control over material assets, such as deciding what vegetables to plant and where and what to do with the money available from the sale of produce. It enables her to secure and control some of the intellectual resources needed to establish and maintain the garden through interpersonal exchanges of gardening ideas and practices with club members and other women or relying on new gardening information contained in farm journals and seed catalogs. It is a potential source of status and accomplishment within the family and the community, for example, in winning ribbons at the state fair for a canning project or by providing a nutritious meal for her family. It is also a space on the farmstead where she can be creative and experiment with new or traditional vegetables and medicinal or culinary herbs. Finally, for some women the household garden provides a sense of self-confidence and can be central to their own empowerment because they were able to help others and by “helping them, by listening and understanding, or by teaching others what they know” they were empowered (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1997:47). Examples of how women helped other women with respect to their vegetable gardens and providing food for the family are many and are described throughout this dissertation.

Farm women’s productive activities generally occurred within the perimeters of the farmstead. This area usually included the vegetable garden, the house lot, the chicken yard, orchard, housing for hogs, machine shed, corncribs, and yards for cattle (Trewartha

1948). In other words, the farmstead was a place on the farm where men and women's domains frequently overlapped. The vegetable garden, however, is a space traditionally managed by women. By constructing the garden and controlling the plants within it, women were able to deliberately manipulate the landscape and thus control the resources, i.e., food for the household (Rotman, 2003). Patricia Howard-Borjas (2001) writes that women throughout history have had a special bond with the plant world and as housewives and home gardeners are especially knowledgeable about food preparation, preservation, storage, and processing. She observes that the "kitchen is possibly the most undervalued site of plant biodiversity conservation" as women have been the gatekeepers of "food flows in and out of the domestic sphere" (2001:9-10). Food is consumed for its nutritional value, but also for its "emotional, ritualistic, spiritual, and medicinal values," and women have not only managed, produced, and conserved food depending on the culinary preferences of the culture, but have carefully transmitted this complex, in-depth knowledge to their daughters.

Home gardening work, which is relatively invisible because it usually does not enter the marketplace, is often "disparaged as 'minor' or 'supplemental' to agricultural production, which is men's work (Howard-Borjas 2001:15). She writes that while "gender division of labour in homegardening varies across regions and cultures, the close link between gardens and the domestic sphere everywhere ensures that women tend gardens...[and in that role] women hold the majority of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities in homegardening" (2001:15). For low-income people in much of the world, household gardens provide the basic nutrition in episodes of food scarcity and provide a substantial part of the total livelihood through sales of produce (2001:17).



During the Great Depression and World War II, she writes, “over 40 percent of all fresh produce in the United States came from homegardens and they were even more critical in Europe” (2001:17). The basic premise of Howard-Borjas’ paper is to suggest that women hold the key to preserving plant biodiversity and managing local plant resources worldwide. She writes “The simple explanation for this is that, throughout history, women’s daily work has required more of this knowledge. However, today, when it is perhaps more important than ever, women’s knowledge and management of plant biodiversity are under-estimated and undervalued” (2001:9). Having control of knowledge of this type as reflected in the vegetable garden relates directly to Batliwala’s concept of empowerment. Coming to some understanding of how farm women during the Depression obtained knowledge about growing and preserving vegetables and how they used or resisted new information from a variety of sources, including Extension home demonstration agents or Farm Security Administration home management supervisors, will provide clues to explaining their empowerment or lack of it. The extent to which farm women relied on local or traditional knowledge derived from shared practices or scientific knowledge, for example, from university experts, is also explored throughout this dissertation.

### **Summary**

During the early part of the twentieth century, most rural people grew and preserved their own food for home consumption, but also to a large extent for the marketplace. The farmstead vegetable garden was a material feature on the rural landscape, which as mentioned before, is most frequently considered women’s space, and as such is an established cultural form that is shaped by social forces at work in society

(Hall and Neitz 1993:145). In this space that is the vegetable garden are reflected the values and identity of groups and individuals that contribute to these arrangements. In this study, the vegetable garden is one site for the activities that shaped farm women's everyday lives and gave them a certain amount of power within the family, the household, and the community. This power was economic in one sense, but also empowering in that women were given a sense of accomplishment by producing food for the family frequently under adverse conditions.

This chapter reviewed the work of sociologist, Dorothy E. Smith and others whose approach to the social is from a woman's standpoint, that is, analyzing women's actual lived experience as it is conducted in material settings. It is Smith's method of inquiry, as qualified by some of her students, most notably by Marjorie DeVault, which is used in this dissertation. The idea of empowerment (or disempowerment) of farm women is also described in this chapter and is associated with knowledge acquisition from experts and from experiential knowledge among other things. The notion of the text as an empowering factor in the lives of farm women is also a part of my larger project and will also be addressed throughout this dissertation. The idea that the garden as a feature on the farmstead and as a space from which women could derive a certain power is also one of the key themes to be explored in this dissertation.

The next chapter describes how this study was conducted and prepares the way for a look at the historical context of the Great Depression and some of the institutions and policies that affected the everyday lives of farm women.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Two very recently published books describing in more detail how to do institutional ethnography were not available to me when I was conceptualizing my dissertation research (Campbell and Gregor 2004; Smith 2005). Therefore, I am generally following Smith's method of inquiry as outlined in her book *Writing the Social*, and drawing upon the more recent books when clarification is needed.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

An overarching goal of my dissertation research was to explore farm women's productive role during the Great Depression. One aspect of that role was their increased effort to provide food for the family from the household vegetable garden under often unfavorable economic, social, and climatic conditions. The focus of the dissertation is primarily on women's vegetable gardens, but I am also aware that other farmstead activities, such as poultry and egg production, served farm women well. In much of the scholarly research, the vegetable garden has not been prominently featured and has played a lesser role in farm family subsistence than making butter or cheese, or selling and bartering chickens and eggs. Nevertheless, as my dissertation will show, the value of the vegetable garden economically, socially, and symbolically was very high indeed.

My research employed two principle methods of data collection. First, semi-structured interviews were held with eight women and one man who lived during the 1930s on farms in Missouri. The interviews focused in general on women's roles in producing, consuming, and marketing their garden vegetables, and specifically on their roles in providing food for their families during a socially and economically difficult period in American history. Second, I undertook a content analysis of documents found in archives in Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, and Washington, D.C. The intent of the archival research was to document the existing written history of women's relationships to their families, their vegetable gardens, the farmstead, and the wider society, and to provide a context for the personal interviews. Both conventional and unconventional sources of data were explored, including personal diaries, letters, records of Extension home

demonstration agents and local garden clubs, journal articles, including farm journals, the client files of the Farm Security Administration, and newspapers, including the very popular *Capper's Weekly*. Other sources of information were the Farm Security Administration photographs, the so-called Stryker Collection, located in the Library of Congress, fiction and non-fiction accounts of the Great Depression, such as Josephine Johnson's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Now in November*, and seed and nursery company records and catalogs. Additional key sources of information were documents from the Missouri Agricultural Extension Service Bulletins, which report on the activities of the College of Agriculture during the Depression, and includes the work of county agents and rural sociologists. I also found the USDA Yearbooks particularly helpful in providing the larger agricultural picture of the 1930s and beyond.

Although this dissertation is designed as a qualitative study, some of the data are presented in a quantitative supporting role. However, the essence of the study begins with farmwomen's actual lived experiences, which can only be adequately captured using a qualitative methodology. Employing a qualitative method implies that the study is concerned with meaning, that is, how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and structures of their everyday worlds. It involves the researcher as the primary data collector, and traditionally involves fieldwork, which the researcher interviews informants and observes them in their natural environment. It is descriptive and is interested in process, meaning and understanding a phenomenon through words and pictures (Creswell 1994).

## **Historical Method**

My study generally falls within the category of historical sociology (Delanty and Isin 2003; Skocpol 1984). It is also guided by and in keeping with C. Wright Mill's admonition that "...every well-considered social study requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials" and that "all sociology worthy of the name is historical sociology" (2000:145-146). Historical sociology involves critically examining the records of the past in order to understand and explain the past in terms of sociological models and theories (Mariampolski and Hughes 1978). Philip Abrams in his book, *Historical Sociology*, observes that historical sociology does more than provide a historical background for studying a particular aspect of society. It helps us to understand the process of social change—"...it is a matter of treating what people do in the present as a struggle to create a future *out of* the past, of seeing that the past is not just the womb of the present but only the raw material out of which the present can be constructed" (1982:8). With respect to my study, farm women during the 1930s were struggling and in many cases were living under harsher conditions than they had previously experienced. Many were moving from farm to farm trying to make ends meet, while continuing to provide food for their families. By analyzing their everyday experiences and activities, we can see how their lives were shaped by their relationships with other women, with institutions and organizations, and by the social and economic conditions that surrounded them.

Historical research relies upon cultural artifacts to learn about the lives of people in earlier times and is a process of critically examining the records and survivals of the past (Mariampolski and Hughes 1978:104). In order to fully understand what went on in these women's lives, I used a number of personal documents, including recorded

transcripts of interviews and a personal diary. A personal document is one that “reveals a participant’s view of experiences in which he or she has been involved...The document is generally written by the actual person, but careful interviews which omit the interpretations and biases of the interviewer may also be considered personal documents” (Mariampolski and Hughes 1978:104). My key informants’ transcripts of the interviews, therefore, can be considered personal histories.

### **Feminist Approaches to Data Collection**

While this research is historical in nature, it is also guided by the precepts of a feminist research approach. As discussed in Chapter 2, I followed the advice of Dorothy Smith, when she suggests that the sociologist begin

...in a world of activity, the doings of actual people, and finding the social as the object of sociology’s inquiry into how their activities are concerted and coordinated. It explores the social from within the same everyday/everynight world as we experience in its living. The subject/knower of inquiry is not a transcendent subject but situated in the actualities of her own living, in relations with others as they are. Whatever exists socially is produced/accomplished by people ‘at work,’ that is, active, thinking, intending, feeling, in the actual local settings of their living and in relationships that are fundamentally among particular others—even though the categories of ruling produce particular others as expressions of its order (Smith 1999:74-75).

One of the principle goals of my project as feminist research is to recover the unarticulated experiences of women (DeVault 1999). Data collection approaches were used that let the key informants speak for themselves as much as possible. In making women and their everyday lives and activities central to this dissertation and by allowing the informants to speak for themselves through personal interviews, their unique subjective experiences became evident. It is hoped that this dissertation has uncovered the personal experiences of women during this period and brought to light a part of their

social history that has been understudied, which includes women's local knowledge. For example, I learned something new from each personal interview about gardening practices or the historical context of the Depression. During one interview, an informant suggested a kind of green bean that she had found particularly wonderful, and said that she would never grow another kind other than Derby. I ordered seed for the Derby green bean from the Gurnsey's Catalog and also found this bean to be particularly hardy, delicious, and prolific. Green beans were available in the garden until late in the fall. In fact, many of my informants reported that green beans were canned in great abundance and were a favorite part of the meal during the 1930s.

Feminist research also puts the researcher within the context of the research. My interest in this topic stems from my gardening experiences here in Missouri where I now have the space to have a relatively substantial vegetable garden, and where I can put my knowledge to the test from having graduated from the Master Gardener program taught by University Extension. Feminist researchers look at documents other than records produced by public organizations because these have frequently been produced by men. Therefore, I have attempted to draw on other types of materials, such as fiction, letters to the editor's of farm journals, journal articles written mostly by women and some men, women's diaries, Farm Security Administration reports and letters written by Rural Rehabilitation home management supervisors, and personal documents. The later are especially valuable because they combine a unique combination of assets—they were unintended for strangers' eyes, and yet attempt to communicate something of the author's selves, i.e., they disclose women's consciousness.



## **Data Collection Procedures**

As stated above, I employed two principle research approaches that supported each other and helped uncover Missouri farmwomen's every lives during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They were (1) the collection and content analysis of archival data, and (2) the use of semi-structured interviews with nine individuals (eight women and one man) who lived during this time period.

### ***Archival Data***

The historical context in which these women operated was constructed through a review of newsletters, farm journal articles, local records, public documents and government archival material for two Missouri County files from the Farm Security Administration records, nursery and seed catalogs, personal-family documents, such as *Farm and Family Record* Books from the 1930s and a diary from the period, and photographs, in particular the Farm Security Administration photographs housed in the Library of Congress (Parker 2002; Fleischhauer and Brannan 1988). Examining historical documents created for and by farm men and women provided an entry point into their everyday lives.

In order to understand the broader social context in which these women operated, I did a content analysis of two Missouri magazines—*The Missouri Ruralist* (1929-1940), and *The Missouri Farmer* (1931-1940). Subscribers to these farm magazines were primarily rural residents. For example, in 1930, the *Missouri Ruralist* had a circulation of 157,701, with 71 percent of subscribers being on rural routes (*Missouri Ruralist* 72:19). Both of these journals had pages devoted to women's issues. *The Missouri Farmer*, in fact, had a specific column written for women who were members of the Women's Progressive Farmers' Association (WPFAs), an affiliate of the Missouri Farmer's

Association, for which *The Missouri Farmer* was the principal media outlet. The WPA files were also reviewed for this time period as they are housed in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in Columbia, Missouri. In addition, because the majority of the women reported that their families had received *Capper's Weekly* during the Depression, I paid particular attention to what they reported about this magazine, and reviewed *Capper's Weekly* from January 5, 1929 through July 30, 1938.

In order to recover the experiences of rural Missouri women, a context needed to be developed in which to situate them, which would allow me to subsequently begin to understand their gardening experiences. Among the most interesting historical documents reviewed were the nursery and seed catalogs produced by the Henry Field Seed Company of Shenandoah Iowa, the newsletters produced early in the Depression by Missouri state home demonstration agent Essie Heyle, and the historical photographs taken by photographers working for the Farm Security Administration.

Nursery and seed catalogs provide a window that allows us to see first hand and document America's farming and gardening past (Bria 2000). Catalogs, according to Wood (1999:19), serve as "scholarly resources for botanists, historians, statisticians, landscape architects, and archaeologists, among others." Through catalogs we are able to trace the development of methods for preserving, shipping, and cleaning seeds, and learn when certain varieties of vegetable seeds were introduced into the marketplace. Catalogs also show what gardening implements were available when, and offer insight into trends in landscape architecture. Seed catalogs were particularly useful for my project and the collection at the National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, Maryland, which contains over 170,000 seed catalogs, provided a glimpse into what was available to Missouri

farmwomen during the 1930s in terms of gardening implements, insecticides, gardening wear, seeds, and plants and instructions on how to garden.

In particular, while reviewing the seed company files for the 1930s, I was drawn to the catalogs of the Henry Field Seed Company in Shenandoah, Iowa. During my interviews I was surprised to find, as mentioned previously, that the majority of my key informants had purchased seeds from the company. Chapter 5 discusses in more detail the findings from my exploration of Henry Field the nurseryman and entrepreneur. It should be noted that Missouri was the company's second biggest market next to Iowa, with 188,700 catalog orders in 1928, compared with 147,135 from Kansas and 150,280 from neighboring Nebraska (Field Papers, Catalog Papers, 1915-1927).

The State home demonstration agent had among her responsibilities to correspond monthly with Homemaker's Clubs throughout the state on a variety of topics to help rural homemakers improve their lives and the lives of their families. Extension Homemakers Clubs proliferated during the Depression, as home demonstration agents were able to establish clubs in almost every county by 1938 (Lively and Almack 1939). The majority of the clubs were north of the Missouri River and along the Western border of the state, however. During the first half of the 1930s, the State home demonstration agent was Essie M. Heyle. From the newsletters that she wrote, one can glimpse what the perceived needs of the farm people were and how these needs were being addressed by Extension agents. These newsletters are archived in the University of Missouri Archives where I reviewed them. In addition, the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Columbia, is home to the records of the Extension Service Home Demonstration Papers, 1915-1953, and the Madge Reese Papers. Madge Reese, who was from Missouri, spent 41 years in

the Federal Extension Service as the home economics field agent, much of that time for the Western States. During her years in Extension, Reese wrote extensively about farm families and sought to educate and train farm women to help them better their lives. The work of the home demonstration agents in Missouri will be discussed in Chapter 9.

A number of excellent studies of rural women during the Depression have been done during the past twenty-five years (Ware 1982), and several of them have successfully used photographs from the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics files to support their text and to illustrate some of the specifics of these women's lives. Katherine Jellison in her book (1993), *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963*, uses historic photographs from these two federal government agencies to illustrate how rural women accepted or rejected new technologies, such as radios, washing machines, electric refrigerators, as they were introduced to help rural women ease the "burden" of domestic chores. Mary Murphy (2001) in her article, *Picture/Story: Representing Gender in Montana Farm Security Administration Photographs*, uses the FSA photographs to investigate the construction of gender in rural Montana during the Great Depression. Julie Boddy (1987) uses photographs by Marion Post Wolcott, which are found in the FSA collection, in conjunction with transcripts of interviews with Wolcott, public discussions of the FSA, the New Deal, and agricultural labor, novels written by women during the Depression, and other documents to (triangulate) examine the women's lives that Wolcott photographed during the 1930s. Since there is precedent for using these photographs in scholarly work, I include a few of them to illustrate some of the gardening and canning practices of Missouri farm women.

Using photographs and other visual materials to document events have several positive aspects. Photographs are good sources to document historical change; they may be particularly useful in conducting oral histories as reminders of the past to help informants talk about their memories; they offer us a reasonable facsimile of cultural construction about what was appropriate at the time (for example, construction of clothing, design of tools, styles of buildings, shape and construction of vegetable gardens, contents of vegetable gardens); and they may be aesthetically pleasing (Harper 1988). However, there are drawbacks that I had to be aware of as I examined the photographs. Murphy (2001:91) notes that the camera can lie and it contains partial truths. Information on the photograph needs to be corroborated by further inquiry or witness testimony. This is particularly important if the image was changed to meet a particular political end. The Farm Security Administration photographs, for example, were originally commissioned to report on the dire straits that many of the American people were living in, or in the case of the two FSA experimental farms in Missouri, showed an almost ideal farm existence as compared with clients' former situation. They were used to persuade a national audience of policymakers and voters that the country needed to be fixed and that the New Deal programs would eventually solve the country's problems. In looking at these photographs, I kept all of these caveats in mind.

### ***Key Informants***

The semi-structured interviews allowed my key informants talk about their experiences during the Depression, particularly those experiences related to their vegetable gardens and their relationships with other people and institutions in their communities. The interview schedule is in Appendix 1. One of the underlying goals of

my project is to understand women's social networks because they help to provide a context in which cultural behaviors are located. Thus, by describing the work of gardening in detail based on the information elicited from the key informants, I was able to corroborate the findings of other scholars and to paint a picture of Missouri women's farm life.

In addition to allowing the women to speak for themselves, these interviews told me how they felt about what they were doing and how they valued their activities. I learned, for example, what practices were valuable to them in their gardening experiences and who taught them to garden. The interviews were combined with a rigorous evaluation of personal and public historical documents that have allowed me to describe these farmwomen's world within the context of the Great Depression in Missouri.

Overall, I conducted nine interviews with eight women and one man, whose ages ranged from 84 to 98 years old, between March 21 and September 10, 2005. Appendix 2 contains a profile of each of the key informants. Their names have been changed to comply with their request. When I began my research, I intended to interview only women who were in their 90s (born earlier than 1920) and therefore, in their teenage years during the 1930s. However, because this population is becoming smaller I found that interviewing individuals who were in their 80s provided adequate information and confirmed the information that I had gleaned from those individuals in their 90s. The "younger" informants generally spoke about their mother's work in the garden, how they had worked with her and learned her gardening techniques, and how they learned to preserve and cook food. The one man that I interviewed was able to give me detailed information about his family's life during the 1930s in South Missouri. In particular, he

was able to describe his mother's everyday activities with respect to her gardening practices and household tasks, including her responsibilities for a vast chicken flock, and egg production and sales. While nine interviews is a small number, there was a point at which I reached data saturation. In other words, while the informants were telling about their personal experiences of gardening during the Depression, the overall experience of gardening and preserving food was remarkably consistent among all the informants although they lived in different Missouri counties during the Depression. While they all had lived on farms during the Depression, or some part of it during their life, a number of them owned their farms, several had moved from farm to farm as conditions warranted, and a few had lost farms to the Depression but managed to purchase another farm in a different location. My key informants lived throughout the state during the Depression (see Missouri map, Figure 2).

I used a standard interview form but allowed for elaboration and digression during the interview process. Each interview lasted one to two hours. Prior to the first few interviews, I mailed the questionnaire to the interviewee. However, this did not seem to make any difference as some informants reviewed the questions in advance, while others did not. After the first three interviews, I stopped this practice.

In preparation for the interview, each individual was given an oral consent form, which included the name of my advisor and the Institutional Review Board's telephone number and they were asked if they have any questions or comments. I also asked them beforehand for permission to record the interview; all of them consented. As mentioned previously, they assumed that all of the information would be presented in the dissertation anonymously.



**Figure 2.** This map indicates the counties where my key informants lived during the Depression. Perry and Lawrence Counties are also highlighted because they are the counties where the clients of the Farm Security Administration lived (see Chapter 8).

The individual interview was audio taped and I personally transcribed them nearly verbatim. I summarized in the transcripts some of the material that seemed marginal to my primary interests, but kept the tape recordings so that I could review the material if necessary. The transcripts were reviewed by me for accuracy and then sent along with a thank you note to the interviewee requesting that they also review it to be sure that it represented what they intended to report. After the informants looked over the transcript, I made their suggested changes, which usually were minor, and sent them a final copy for their family records. In actuality, only five out of the nine responded with clarifications.



The interview transcripts were then analyzed for similarities and differences in experience with the help of a content summary form, which was developed for each interviewee, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Broad themes and topics were extracted that represented the major experiences of the participants and the interviews were coded for important events and experiences related to gardening and food preparation. DeVault (1999) states that in her interviews stories emerged that ranged far beyond the topic at hand. She writes that she did not seek them, nor did she discourage them. I had a similar experience in interviewing as the women strayed from talking about their vegetable gardens to very vivid descriptions of killing chickens, accidents and illnesses that beset family members, and experiences with snakes, which seemed to be particularly memorable to many informants.

Because the key informants were elderly, identifying potential interviewees was tricky. Using the snowball approach, I was able to make telephone contact with a sufficient number of individuals who fit the two main criteria: (1) they lived in Missouri during the 1930s; and (2) they lived on a farm with a vegetable garden, which most people had during the first half of the twentieth century. In all cases identifying my key informants was facilitated by an intermediary, whether it was a granddaughter, a friend, a son, or fellow church member. In six cases, the facilitator was present during the interview, which had a number of positive effects. First, the informant presumably felt more at ease having someone in the room with whom they were comfortable. Second, in some cases the intermediary was able to help jar the informant's memory and ask follow-up questions based on her knowledge of this individual and her history. Third, the

intermediary also contributed specific information about herself that related to the discussion and thus added another dimension to the interview.

Key informants also provided the basis for some of my peripheral lines of inquiry; in other words, as I interviewed people, I followed up on the topics that were repeatedly forthcoming, such as the source of many of the seeds that were used by women during this time period. The majority of the women mentioned that seeds had been obtained from the Henry Field Seed Company in Shenandoah, Iowa. With this in mind, I was able to pursue this line of inquiry and explore the Henry Field Collection in the Special Collections Department at the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City.

In addition to the nine key informants, I conducted an interview with a woman who had useful information to contribute to the overall context of the Great Depression. She had worked for the Farm Security Administration and was an assistant to the Howard County Home Management Supervisor. She was able to tell me in general terms what the Home Management Supervisors did and how these women worked with FSA clients' wives. This interview was particularly useful as I read through the FSA client files from Perry and Lawrence Counties and extracted information on the Home Management Supervisor's interactions with her clients from these records.

While I was writing up the research, three of the key informants passed away. I am particularly fortunate in having recorded their voices and passed along transcripts to them and their families. Because I was dealing with an elderly population, timing seems to be critical.

### **Soundness of Research: Reliability, Validity, and Authenticity**

While the results of my study will be difficult to generalize to a wider population because it focuses specifically on farm women in Missouri, there are some methodological procedures that enable my qualitative approach to be seen as rigorous. For example, in considering historical documents and in reviewing the interview transcripts I remained skeptical. Overall, I tried to keep in mind, as I reviewed both the public and private historical documents and transcripts: Who wrote the documents and why might they be preserved as opposed to others? Through what institutional context have they survived? Have changes been made to the documents? How did the authors acquire their information? Was there important information left out? Are there contradictions in the document or with other historical information? Is one document more reliable than another? Of particular importance was the question of how accurately were the informants remembering their lives during the 1930s?

To address the issue of verification, Creswell (1994) insists that the documents be checked for internal and external validity. Internal validity means assessing that the information is accurate and matches reality. External validity assesses the generalizability of the findings from the study, i.e., asking the question, “Is this study a unique interpretation of events”? Qualitative studies tend not to be reproducible because the specific context mitigates against repeating the study in another context. Reporting a detailed protocol for data collection and providing “thick” descriptions (Geertz 1973) may help other scholars interested in transferability with a solid framework for comparison. A specific method for making sure that the historical information is as accurate as possible is triangulation. Some researchers also suggest allowing the

informants to give feedback on the transcripts, which I attempted to do, and to involve them in all phases of the study, which was not really feasible in this study.

Dibble (1963) and Mariampolski and Hughes (1978) recommend that for assuring reliability of a body of historical and personal documents, one must apply specific rules of testimony and suggest the following ideals. Testimony about specific details is likely to be more accurate than testimony about general conditions. The witness (or interviewee) is more likely to be unbiased and truthful when the truth of the statement is a matter of indifference or if the facts are common knowledge. Testimony recorded right after the actual event is likely to be more accurate than information recorded, for example, 50 years later, as in reminiscences or, in my case, interviews with women who were expected to recall instances from the 1930s. The witnesses who are nearer to the event both chronologically and geographically are more likely to be accurate. Because my key informants were remarkably similar in their responses to my questions, while I was still cautious about their answers, I was reasonably confident that they were not totally misremembering the facts.

Furthermore, it is useful to know the competence of the witness, her age, health, education, memory, and narrative skills. In many cases, the individuals who I interviewed had been teachers or involved with 4-H clubs or Extension, and seemed to be particularly responsive to my inquiries. As a general rule eyewitness testimony should be met with some skepticism, and one should accept as historical fact only that information that rests on the independent testimony of two or more witnesses (Mariampolski and Hughes 1978:109). Unwillingness to tell the truth may involve misstatements rather than omission of facts. If primary or eyewitnesses are not available, then secondary sources

should be used. When it is impossible to locate two or more documents recording the same fact, the researcher should resort to other forms of corroboration, such as the general reliability of the document, the reputation of the author for truthfulness, lack of self-contradiction within the document, and the way the document fits with and coincides with otherwise known facts. Triangulation of historical documents of various kinds, therefore, with existing journal articles, farm record books, diaries, and with personal interviews allowed me to produce a fairly accurate and rich historical sociological account of farmwomen's lives during the Great Depression.

One other bias or gap in the quest for historical documents that I kept in mind during my study was the fact that elitist bias is always present because literacy earlier in this country's history was a right of the wealthy. Poor people who could not write were left out of the discourse and it is up to the researcher to identify unconventional sources that can be used to uncover these people's voices. This is particularly a problem when dealing with uncovering the already smothered voices of women mid-century. Therefore, the personal interviews helped to bring out details of their lives that might not be found in archival material. As previously mentioned, however, a number of my informants had been teachers and several had a college education. Only a few did not attend high school. Therefore, I felt somewhat secure that while their narratives were relatively accurate, they did represent a certain class of individuals who during the Depression believed that they were poor, but in fact, while they probably did experience deprivation, were not among the group of people living in extreme poverty in Missouri.

## Summary

The design of my study is straightforward. Two primary modes of data gathering were used: semi-structured interviews with nine key informants and content analysis of public and private documents. This project was guided by a feminist method of inquiry; that is, it examines the lives of farm women from a multidisciplinary perspective and from their point of view and attempts to make women be at the center of the analysis. The general methodological approach is historical, and involves some of the characteristics that Theda Skocpol attributes to a truly historical sociological study. This study asks questions about social structures situated in time and space; it addresses processes over time; and it examines the “interplay of meaningful actions and structural contexts, in order to make sense of the unfolding of unintended as well as intended outcomes in individual lives and social transformations” (1984:1). Therefore, it falls under the rubric of historical sociology.

The following chapter, Chapter 4, describes in general some aspects of the Depression era that relate to farm women and gardening. The chapter begins with a look at the work of the Country Life Commission, which was established by President Theodore Roosevelt and which identified the burdensome life of farm women as a deficiency in rural life. The chapter goes on to look in some detail at Depression-era Missouri, then examines a program promoted by the Extension Service to encourage farm families to grow their own vegetables and can their own meat, and basically “live-at-home.” The chapter ends with a look at other gardening activities that took place during the Depression, that is, the focus on corporate gardening and on the work of garden clubs.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE DEPRESSION ERA: FARM WOMEN'S DISCONTENT?

In order to better understand how farm women functioned during this time period, it is important to have a context in which to visualize their activities. This chapter discusses some of the historical and social aspects of the Depression era, with particular emphasis on Depression-era Missouri. We can all empathize with Depression-era families and we have all heard the familiar stories and seen pictures of men in bread lines in cities and heard parents and grandparents telling stories about their jobs selling butter and eggs to make ends meet. "Making do," became a way of life, which is carried over into the daily lives of many of today's senior citizens.

Within the collective familiar, when thinking of the Great Depression various slogans may come to mind, in particular, the "dirty-thirties," which refers to the dust bowl on the plains of the United States, which has been recently written about by Timothy Egan in his book, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (2006). Other universal depictions of the Depression that are rooted in the American psyche include popular novels based on experiences of whole families during the 1930s, such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was published in 1939, and Josephine Johnson's *Now in November* (1934), or even the photographs of the realities of the Depression-era family, such as those taken by the New Deal photographers Russell Lee, Dorothea Lange, and Arthur Rothstein. These are images that seem to be foremost in our national consciousness when thinking about the Depression.

This chapter begins at the turn of the twentieth century, when President Theodore Roosevelt established the Country Life Commission, which, among other things, acknowledged that the success of country life depended to a very large extent on the farm woman whose lives in the view of the Commission tended to be monotonous and isolated. The chapter then goes on to look at Depression-era Missouri, the promotion of the “Live-At-Home” program, and ends with a look at how the lean years of the Depression spurred an interest in gardening, not only in rural areas, but also across the nation as well.

### **The Country Life Commission**

While President Theodore Roosevelt was not the first to acknowledge that women’s life on the farm did little to resemble the Jeffersonian ideal of an independent, spiritually enlightened mother, he was the first to officially investigate the country life situation of farm women. Earlier United States Department of Agriculture publications on the hardships of farm women cautioned men to “speak to her kindly, provide household necessities for her, offer help to her, allow her to visit her friends, and humor her during her monthly periods of ‘lunacy’” (Fink 1992:66). In 1909, Roosevelt’s Commission on Country Life found that women worked hard and were discontented and frequently frustrated by the knowledge that their work was undervalued and secondary to men’s work that produced cash for the family economy (Jellison 1993:1).

The Commission report referred to the often monotonous and isolated life that farm women lived and its authors believed that farm women needed more help and that a “cooperative spirit” in the home was essential to improving country living for women. If women had certain conveniences, such as improved and convenient sanitary houses,



running water in the house, good and convenient gardens, better means of communication and transportation, and access to women's organizations, not only would her life improve but she would also have some free time to participate in the vital affairs of the community (WHMC, Report of the Country Life Commission, 1909:47, Madge Reese Papers, C 2405, File 2). One of the routine and monotonous chores of women that was identified in the report was the fact that women had to prepare three meals a day. "This regularity of duty," they wrote, "recurs regardless of season, weather, planting, harvesting, social demands or any other factor. The only differences in different seasons are those of degree rather than of kind. It follows, therefore, that whatever general hardships, such as poverty, isolation, lack of labor-saving devices, may exist on any given farm, the burden of these hardships falls more heavily on the farmer's wife than on the farmer himself" (WHMC, Report of the Country Life Commission 1909:47, Madge Reese Papers, C 2405, File 2). In fact the report goes on to suggest that male rural organizations should be discussing homemaking subjects on a regular basis because the whole difficulty [with rural life for women] often lies "with the attitude of men" (1909:47). At the time the report of the Country Life Commission did not arouse too much excitement among the public at large, and since then has been widely criticized in the scholarly literature because it was perceived as patronizing, but, according to Nelson, "its significance lay in the fact that it was an official voice from the highest level of government, describing rural conditions and proposing a series of reforms" (Nelson 1969:12).

Recently in an article in *Agricultural History*, Scott Peters and Paul Morgan have reassessed the work of the Country Life Commission, and suggest that rather than being an example of a patronizing, sentimental, and technocratic effort aimed at urbanizing and

industrializing the countryside for the benefit of national and industrial interests, it was “one of the first high-profile, comprehensive attempts to outline a broad-gauge vision of sustainability in American agriculture” (2004:289), which is similar to the view held by Nelson. Peters and Morgan reviewed the critical interpretations of the commission and its report and recommend that the report should be detached from the Country Life Movement that followed. They then analyzed the report and its findings and suggest that despite some of its shortcomings, and “rather than being dismissed as part of the story of the development of an unsustainable industrial agriculture, it deserves to be placed at the heart of the story for the struggle for sustainability” (2004:313).

It should be noted, furthermore, that the academic discipline of Rural Sociology had its origins in this Commission, as did the creation of the national extension system. According to Nelson, although rural sociology had not been established as a discipline at this time, the Commission’s report paved the way for its emergence. The report of the “Commission on Country Life,” he writes, “must be recognized as the first important milestone on the way to the establishment of the rural social sciences” (1969:12). In fact, in his book, *My Drift Into Rural Sociology*, Charles Galpin (1938) notes that when he was looking for a textbook to teach courses in rural social problems at the University of Wisconsin’s College of Agriculture, he made the “Report of Theodore Roosevelt’s Country Life Commission the basis and outline of my lecture course” (Galpin 1938:20). Carl C. Taylor also makes reference to the Commission on Country Life in his book, *Rural Sociology* (1926), and quotes from Roosevelt’s introduction to the official report: “The problems of farm life have received very little consideration and the result has been bad for those who dwell in the open country, and therefore bad for the whole nation”

(1926:27). He goes on to say that since the report of the Commission, “every problem investigated or discussed by it has been the subject of many investigations, both official and private. Each of these investigations and its findings has served to further define the elements in the ‘Rural Problem’ and to make both urban and rural people conscious of this” (1926:27).

The Commission identified nine deficiencies facing rural life, which were: “insufficient technical knowledge of agricultural conditions and possibilities; lack of training for country life in the schools; the monopolization of rivers and forests and the withholding of great tracts of arable land for speculation; inadequate highways; soil depletion; the lack of good leadership; inadequacy of credit and the shortage of labor; the restricted and burdensome life of farm women; and the lack of public health services (Nelson 1969:11). As part of its remedy for the main deficiencies facing rural life, the Commission sought to “supply farmers with local knowledge developed from careful, collaborative investigation of all agricultural and country life conditions; [therefore, it proposed] a nationalized extension system designed to reach every person on the land with both information and inspiration, with the aim of forwarding not only the business of agriculture, but all of the interests of country life; and a campaign for rural progress, bringing together and uniting all professions with farmers to study and discuss all aspects of country life” (Peters and Morgan 2004:306-307). While this proposal was thought to be a vehicle for uniting the countryside and fostering leadership with a cooperative spirit, according to Peters and Morgan, “many of the experts and educators who ended up being employed in that system lacked the Commission’s democratic ideals and broad-gauged

vision of sustainability or were overpowered by conservative business interests that often influenced and shaped extension practice” (2004:131)

Progressive reformers in the Country Life Movement were quick to seize on the recommendations of the Commission to fully mechanize the rural household so that women would have the benefits of modern technology to help them with their daily chores. “According to this view, adoption of steam-and gasoline-powered field equipment, gasoline- and electric-powered household appliances, telephones, and automobiles would lead to a more efficient, prosperous, and stable rural society” (Jellison 1993:3). The key to improving stability in country life, they believed, was to recommend to farm women that they adopt the trappings of the urban, middle-class woman; that is, to begin to lighten their loads by using washing machines, electric lighting, indoor plumbing systems, telephones, and modern cooking ranges. According to Jellison’s interpretation, the all male Commission firmly believed that “the role of the urban middle-class housewife was appropriate for all women” (Jellison 1993:3). In this regard, they reflected the beliefs of those upper and middle-class women working with immigrants and who insisted that immigrant women unlearn their own cultural practices and adopt those aspects of motherhood measured in “terms of mothers’ assimilation of the cultural and ‘scientific’ child care standards advocated by nurses, social workers, and dieticians” (Mink 1995:55).

Underlying the goals of the rural reformers and possibly to some extent the Commission itself were the notions that an improved country life for women would help stem the tide of the increasing rural to urban migration, which was compounding the inadequate housing and unemployment problems of the cities. It would also lead to

efficiency in agricultural operations, thus producing cheaper food for the urban population. Finally, if women had more free time, it was argued, they could devote themselves to improving schools and health care facilities, and to working in voluntary organizations seeking to elevate and revitalize country life. This ideal was in some respects part of the Commission's vision that women be enabled or empowered to devote time and energy to serving the community, which would "help develop a stronger organizing sense for real cooperative betterment" (Peters and Morgan 2004:306).

Sidney Baldwin points out in his book, *Poverty & Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration*, the Country Life Commission did not offer any suggestions to deal with the inequalities within agriculture, but suggested that the "solution to the problems of agriculture...would depend on observance of the traditional virtues on education rather than organized political action" (1968:28). Furthermore, he observed that in effect the Federal government relinquished any responsibility for the plight of the small tenant or subsistence farmers, and concentrated its efforts on the needs of the larger, commercial farmers, who were producing efficiently and whose operations were keyed to business objectives (p. 29). These policies were played out in 1914, when the Smith-Lever Agricultural Extension Act was passed that created within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Extension Service. The modernization of a farm women's household was an integral part of the business conception of agriculture promoted by the Department of Agriculture, and by "bettering the lives of farm women, the Extension Service would thus improve the overall quality and efficiency of patriarchal farm life in the nation's rural communities" (Jellison 1993:64).

Women's interaction with local Extension programs, however, could be characterized as one of ambivalence, according to Neth (1995). In the end, farm women adopted, adapted, and resisted new practices offered by the government agencies and the government agencies created new conditions and reacted to choices and actions of farm people (Neth 1995). Farm families adopted parts of Extension programs that they found helpful, rejecting others. Adams (1994) wrote that Extension programs, which developed from an urban-based home economics and domestic science program, tended to not help farm women organize as producers because these programs were firmly committed to the doctrine of separate spheres and lacked the knowledge with which to think of farm women as other than domestic workers. However, as we will see in Chapter 9, many individual home demonstration agents worked incredibly hard on behalf of the rural women that they served and had the best intentions for farm families.

### **Depression-Era Missouri**

The Depression-era experience for individuals and families often varied depending on race, class, and gender. For farm families in Missouri as elsewhere, sharecroppers, laborers, and tenant farmers had the most difficult time. The subsistence farmer was somewhat better off, however, than the immigrant urban dweller who could not grow his own food and had to rely on government handouts or on local welfare organizations to pull through.

After the depression of 1921-1922, farmers in the country experienced modest prosperity; however, prices for commodities varied widely because of changing consumer demand and international surpluses, and not all farmers were able to reap substantial profits (Conkin 1992:39). The introduction of the tractor and other capital-

intensive equipment allowed the larger commercial farmers to gain some advantage, while many small farmers suffered. There were also regional differences as severe droughts, particularly in 1934 and 1936, hampered even the most profitable farms, including those in Missouri, causing local and regional misery. According to Conkin,

Although efficient, well-capitalized farms prospered, and able farmers enjoyed living standards above those of city wage workers, average farm income remained lower than any other major occupational group. The aggregate statistics encompassed millions of small submarginal or inefficient farm units that contributed very little to agricultural production and were, in fact, scarcely part of an increasingly sophisticated sector. In addition, millions of sharecroppers and farm laborers lived at the very margin of subsistence. The whole course of agricultural development, in both the twenties and thirties, would lead to more and more redundant labor, and thus to more stranded and hopeless rural families, particularly in the South and particularly among blacks (1992:39-40).

The shared experiences of Depression-era farm families are illustrated in Josephine Johnson's 1934 novel *Now in November*, which chronicles the debilitating effect of the Depression on three fictional families in northeastern Missouri—two were white and owned the land; the third was a black tenant family that lived on the margin of subsistence described above by Conkin. In one of the chapters Johnson describes the farm landscape during “the long drouth” as follows:

In August the smell of grapes poured up like a warm flood through the windows. But they ripened unevenly, with hard green balls all through the purple. The apples fell too soon, crackling in the dry grass—gold summer apples mushed and brown, and the sour red winesaps with white flesh. The creek stopped running altogether, and the woods were full of dead things—leaf-dust and thorny vines brittle to the touch. It was chill and quiet sometimes in early mornings, but the heat returned, the sun blasting and fierce as ever, and the red plums fell like rain in the cindered grass. In places the grasshoppers left nothing but the white bones of weeds, stripped even of pale skin, and the corn-stalks looked like yellow skeletons. Most of the garden was lost. Even potatoes were black as after a frost or fire. The cucumbers curled up and wrinkled. Tomatoes rotting, with pale and smelly skins. The beans bleached and colorless.

Day after day it went on. Hot wind, hot sun, hot nights and days, drying ponds and rivers, slowly, carefully killing whatever dared to thrust up a green leaf or shoot. Only the willows lived (1934:172-173).

Neth writes of this novel that “it distills the rural experience of the Great Depression into the lives of three families, but these experiences must be multiplied to approach an understanding of its true magnitude” (1995:269). While Missourians did not suffer the fate of those living in the “Dust Bowl,” clouds of dust did penetrate the state. And, like farmers elsewhere, Missouri farmers did indeed lose considerable topsoil due to soil erosion. Farmers, like everyone else, also felt the sting of hard economic times.

Missouri is a particularly diverse state culturally, socially, economically, and geographically. C.E. Lively and Cecil Gregory point this diversity out in their 1939 University of Missouri Research Bulletin entitled, *Rural Social Areas in Missouri: As Determined by Statistical Analysis of County Data*. This *Bulletin* attempts to “distinguish areas of homogeneity with respect to culture” in the state (1939:3). While they admit that the lines of demarcation of the cultural areas in Missouri are indistinct, they suggest that there are six major homogeneous units, four of which are subdivided, to make a total of 16 units in the 1930s. They based this classification on 87 factors, the major ones being population, family living, school and other institutions, conditions of agriculture, other economic, and professional service. For example, in describing Social Area A, which is made up of 11 counties in the northwest corner of the state and extends along the Missouri River to a point 60 or so miles east of Kansas City, they report that in the farm population in 1930, “approximately 80 per cent of the families had automobiles, about 75 per cent had telephones, and nearly one-half had radios. Electricity and water in the dwelling were reported by 18 and 17 per cent respectively, which the average value of the farm dwelling was about \$2,000...an index of farm families receiving relief indicates that



not more than 5 per cent received assistance in 1935” (1939:6). This compares with life in the 1930s in Social Area D, which is located in the extreme south central part of Missouri and consists of 11 counties, including the Ozark Mountains. They write that, “In 1930, about 2 farm families out of 5 had automobiles, 1 out of 5 a telephone, and only 1 out of 20 a radio. Water in the dwelling was reported by 1.3 per cent of the farm families, and electricity by only 1.9 per cent. The value of farm dwellings in this area averaged about \$500 each in 1930... Relief rates are higher in this area than any other section of the State. It is estimated that nearly one-third of the total population was receiving relief in December 1934, and that about one-fifth of all farm families received assistance during 1935” (1939:15). From this study, it is evident that there was significant social and economic disparity in Missouri at the time.

The diversity of the social and cultural landscape of Missouri can also be seen in this quote about food from The American Guide Series book, *Missouri: A Guide to the “Show Me” State*, written in 1941.

Missouri’s eating is as good as it comes. Boone County ham steaks and red ham gravy, ham baked in milk, barbecued ribs and backbone, authentic country sausage and genuine head cheese; fried chicken and baked chicken and chicken pie and dumplings and chicken soup, eggs from the henhouse and bacon from the smokehouse; sauerkraut with squabs, and turnips with spareribs, spring greens from the yard and roadside, and green beans with fat pork—bush beans as long as they last and then long pole beans until frost. Missouri tables are loaded with dish on dish of berries—strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, floating in cream; with Jonathans, Grimes Goldens, Winesaps, Black Twigs, Delicious; apple pie, apple cobbler, apple strudel, baked apples and fried apples; homegrown tomatoes and watermelons and horseradish grown in the country’s horseradish center; an endless number of pickles, always including pickled peaches and ‘end-of-the-garden’; vast varieties of jellies and preserves; persimmons sweetened and whitened by frost; popovers, wheatcakes and honey, piping hot biscuits and melting butter and molasses; fruit shortcake always with biscuit dough; cornbread from yellow meal without so much as one grain of sugar (p. 6).

In addition to giving us insight into the particular eating habits of Missouri citizens, this quote also suggests livestock that could be found on the farm and the wide variety of fruits and vegetables that were available at the time.

In addition to Missouri being socially, culturally, and economically diverse, it also varies geographically. Geographically, Missouri is a border state with a distinctive southern flavor as can be seen in eating habits described above. Missouri also contains sharp topographic and climatic contrasts from one geographic area to another, and it is, importantly, situated at the crossroads of trade, East and West, North and South. In general the state is characterized geographically as follows:

The topography of the State varies from mountainous in the south-central part to a rolling prairie in the north and southwest, and to a level lowland in the southeast. While approximately half of the population is rural and agriculture is the principal rural occupation, there are two large metropolitan cities and many industrial activities. The agriculture of the State also is varied in nature. Cotton farming on small acreages, accompanied by a system of share-cropping and day-wage laboring, predominates in the southeast lowlands, while corn, oats, and hogs are the chief products of the large units of the northwestern prairies. Between these diagonal corners are found fruit farms in the southwest, grazing in the Ozarks, truck farming around the cities, and general farming in the central and western parts (Lively and Gregory 1939:4).

In a 1928 issue of *The Bulletin of the Missouri State Board of Agriculture*, E.A. Logan identified nine diverse crop reporting districts of the State that correspond very roughly to the social areas described by Lively and Gregory. In the agriculture *Bulletin*, Logan described the social, economic, and geographic characteristics of each district at the time, and some of the most prominent agricultural products, many of which are no longer grown for the market, such as oats and flax seed, and some of which were gradually expanding in popularity, such as soybeans, which “has been found profitable, not only for seed and forage but as a soil builder and reconditioner” (1928:9). In addition,

tucked within the text are a number of statements of particular interest, such as, his acknowledgement that,

While much has been said and written of the pioneer men who opened up this wonderful country, all too little has been said and recorded of the unknown pioneer mother, who left the comforts of an older state to brave the perils and hardships of an unknown, untamed wilderness in order to make a home for her children. This precious heritage of these heroic women must live on in the progressive spirit of this and oncoming generations. The great labor and hardships; and the wonderful exploits of these early settlers, both men and women, who opened up these new lands, are dimmed by the vast farming operations of the present day (1928:4).

Furthermore, Logan refers a number of times to the importance of the home vegetable garden for Missouri farm families. For example, he says that, “The farm garden of about one-half acre grows a plentiful supply during the summer of vegetables for family use and a surplus to be canned for winter use” (1928:7).

Many people in the state did not own their own land so making ends meet by having a profitable vegetable garden was often hit or miss. In fact farm tenancy in Missouri was a considerable social and economic problem. In the state, the number of farms operated by tenants in 1920 was 75,727 compared with 89,076 in 1930 (Kirkendall 1986: 54). In the southeastern Missouri Bootheel, for example, most farms were operated by tenants who worked on cotton farms. Many of the tenants were African American. The New Deal Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which was intended to help poor farmers, had an unintended adverse impact on blacks, particularly black cotton farmers. According to McElvaine, it “...forced black landowners into tenancy, tenants into sharecropping, and many blacks off the land entirely. These effects were extremely significant. Some 40 percent of all black workers in the United States during the Depression years were farm laborers or tenants. A 1934 investigation estimated the

average annual income of black cotton farmers of all types at under \$200” (1993:189).

The situation came to a head in Missouri in 1939, when sharecroppers in seven Bootheel counties protested their poor economic status by camping out along the rights-of-way of Highways 60 and 61. These men, women, and children, who were mostly African-American were not prepared in the slightest for the January weather. An account of the protest in the *New York Times* [January 1939] (in Saloutos and Hicks) said that

Groups took turns sleeping in dilapidated automobiles. Others slept on corn-shuck mattresses or blankets.

A few had oil-barrel stoves and the familiar rural pot-bellied iron stoves to provide warmth and heat for preparing meals. Some of the more provident brought cooking chickens with them, but fat pork, bread and coffee was the fare for the majority of refugees (Saloutos and Hicks 1951:514).

Saloutos and Hicks write that the protest was more about mechanized farming and the increase in the South of preferring day laborers to sharecroppers, with whom the landowners had to share crop benefits. Renters were evicted in this widespread practice. Landowners, however, “blamed the situation on the rapid growth of farm population in Missouri, the curtailment of the cotton acreage, the shift from manual labor and mule power to modern motorized farming, and losses suffered by some operators under the share-cropper system” (Saloutos and Hicks 1951:515). In an attempt to deal with the sharecropper problem, in 1938, the Farm Security Administration had established a resettlement project at LaForge, Missouri, that was occupied by 100 families, who lived cooperatively on its 6,700 acres. This project, which was one of many federal social experiments that were undertaken in the 1930s.

Improvements in farming technology and the use of labor-saving devices caused friction among landlords and tenants, but also freed workers to move to the cities. In

1920, for example, over 35 percent of the state's population lived on farms; by 1930, only 30.7 percent did so (Kirkendall 1986:55). Indeed, the expanding use of tractors initiated a decline in the use of the Missouri mule and horses, which also declined approximately 30 percent during the decade of the 1920s.

With the coming of the New Deal, some farmers were aided in the state, especially by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), whose policies, however, were later declared unconstitutional. In the meantime Missouri farmers benefited slightly from the rise in farm prices for corn, wheat, cotton, and hogs, as farmers were paid for acreage taken out of production (Kirkendall 1986:164). In addition, the New Deal provided work for many unemployed Missourians with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) being one of the most successful and most popular in the state. By 1937, the CCC had thirty-seven camps in Missouri, including one in Howard County, and had enrolled over fourteen thousand mostly men between seventeen to twenty-three years of age. Three-C men worked on government and private lands promoting soil conservation and other forms of environmental protection for often severely compromised and eroded farmland. The men in the CCC camp in Fayette, Missouri, worked on conservation projects primarily for farmers in the area. They demonstrated for farmers "erosion control practices, such as gulley control by means of temporary check dams and natural vegetation, concrete dams on large drainage areas, and terracing, liming, strip cropping, contour cultivation and crop rotation to control sheet erosion" (Forbes 2004:6).

Throughout the decade, however, Missouri farmers continued to struggle, as farm prices remained low. In 1939, the value of Missouri farm products, which was about

\$260 million, was \$135 million lower than it was in 1929. The value of the average farm dropped by almost \$3,000 during the same period, a decline of 35 percent (Kirkendall 1986:228). While the value of farms declined during the 1930s, the piece of land on the farmstead that was reported to be most valuable was the vegetable garden. As we will see later in this dissertation, the household garden provided food for the family and in many cases the farm woman was able to produce a surplus and sell in for a profit, thus ensuring a small income. The vegetable garden was always an important feature on farm, but became even more important during the years of the Depression.

### **A Focus on Gardens**

The magnitude of the gardening frenzy during the Depression can be seen by looking closely at the corporate and local community response to the need for unemployed workers to provide for their families and the response by garden clubs everywhere. Whether corporate gardens were paternalism or just a practical approach to aiding families of unemployed or part-time workers, providing the opportunity and the means for them to grow their own food and become partially self-sufficient enough to loose a feeling of hopelessness was apparently widespread among the industrial establishment at the time.

### ***Corporate Gardening: Gardens for Workers***

Was it paternalism or a practical approach to improving a worker's ability to support his family when Henry Ford decreed that workers at his woodworking plant at Iron Mountain, Michigan, were required to have a garden big enough to supply their families with food for the winter in order to keep their jobs? Henry Ford's "shotgun gardens" were criticized in the press as "interference with his own workmen. Whether his

employees raise vegetables or not can have no effect upon their industrial efficiency” (*The Literary Digest* 110:10, September 12, 1931). One common refrain was what a worker does in his leisure time should not be dictated by his employer; however, Ford saw it differently when he wrote to the newspapers of the nation: “Next year, every man with a family who is employed at the plant will be required to have a garden of sufficient size to supply his family with at least part of its winter vegetables. Those who do not comply with the rule will be discharged. The man too lazy to work in a garden during his leisure time does not deserve a job. When the people of our country learn to help themselves they will be benefited far greater than they would be by employment insurance. If our agricultural plan is adopted throughout the country, the dole need never be thought of” (*The Literary Digest* 110:10, September 12, 1931). In the Detroit area thousands of acres of land were made available for Ford families, who planted at least 50,000 gardens large enough to supply enough vegetables for the family for a year (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* 35:496, 1933).

However, Ford was not the only corporate leader to insist that his workers raise gardens. Many corporations provided land for their workers to garden or promoted community gardening throughout the United States during the Depression. The railroads, for example, encouraged employees to plant gardens and in many cases provided land free of charge. In Indiana, according to a report in the *Monthly Labor Review*, business organizations, relief agencies, and Indiana University came together to develop a program whereby unemployed steel workers or those working part-time could plant gardens on land acquired by industry, “while seeds and equipment have been given by citizens; penal institutions have furnished small plants, such as tomatoes and cabbage

grown in their greenhouses for transplanting, and county agricultural agents have tested soils and given expert supervision” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review* 35:495, 1933). Over 43,000 gardens in 45 communities resulted from this program.

Other businesses cited in the *Monthly Labor Review* article included the B.F. Goodrich Company in Akron, Ohio, where a large cooperative gardening project—Akron Community Gardens—was established on a 275-acre plot to provide “opportunities for men on part-time work and those not employed to assure their families an adequate food supply by utilizing idle time. Workers will receive shares of the produce in proportion to the time they spend in raising it” (p. 496). There were other companies involved in similar projects, including the Batcheller Works of the American Fork & Hoe Company in Wallingford, Vermont, and the United States Steel Corporation, which provided a gardening plot for every employee who wanted one for a total of 73,511 gardens, of which two-thirds were community gardens and one-third small gardens. The estimated value of the garden produce for 1933 was \$1,840,000. In this case as in other projects, “Skilled instructors have been provided to teach housewives how to can fruits and vegetables for winter use and the program has been extended to teaching the housewives the almost forgotten art of home baking of bread—an economy measure favored by the low prices of flour” (p. 496). International Harvester also made “interest-free loans and plowed garden plots available to their workers” (Cohen 1990:240).

In addition to corporations, city and county efforts also aided unemployed workers in establishing community gardens and in raising foodstuffs for canning and immediate use. In Atlanta the Chamber of Commerce sent several families back-to-the



land, and in Muscogee County, Georgia, a local relief commission helped urban families in returning to tenant farming (Conkin 1959:29-30). During this time, there were unusual efforts by private citizens and organizations to relocate unemployed or impoverished people and place them on land where they could, in theory, become self-sufficient by growing their own food. Mills B. Lane, a Georgia Banker, for example, offered 4,000 acres of land, rent free, to unemployed workers who would plant farm crops that would put them on a self-sustaining basis (*Monthly Labor Review*, p. 497). The Society of Friends (the Quakers) worked with 20,000 Kentucky miners to help them raise produce and livestock, including cows, hogs, and chickens (p. 497).

This explosion of gardens on vacant land in cities accompanied by the back-to-the-land movement that encouraged individual and cooperative self-reliance was a private-sector response to reducing the ills that accompanied the great social upheaval of the Depression. Paul Conkin in his book, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*, traces the individualistic tradition of land use and observes that the social and economic changes brought on by the Depression appeared to subvert individualism and embrace the collective ideal that was manifested in many of the New Deal communities and cooperative farms, such as La Forge and Osage Farms in Missouri. As the decade of the 1930s progressed and the Depression became less severe in its social and economic consequences, the massive gardening effort was reduced to a simmer, but was duly resurrected as World War II ushered in a new phase in gardening and what was to become known as the Victory garden program (Tucker 1993). Garden clubs throughout the country also proliferated as people, primarily women, were eager to learn about vegetable gardening, and how to improve the beauty of the farmstead.

### ***Garden Clubs***

Garden clubs were active in Missouri and elsewhere during the Depression. While a few of my key informants belonged to Extension Homemaker's Clubs, and a few belonged to the Women's Progressive Farmers' Association of Missouri, none of them had joined a garden club during the Depression years because, as most confessed, they could not commit the extra time to become involved. The garden club movement in Missouri started at the beginning of the twentieth century in 1915, when the St. Louis Garden Club and the Rowena Clark Garden Club of the Associated Garden Clubs of Kirkwood were formed. The Kansas City Garden Association was organized in 1918, followed by the Columbia Garden Club in 1919, and the Kansas City Society for the Preservation of Wildflowers in 1924. In 1958, according to the *1933-1958 Silver Anniversary History Commemorating the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Federated Garden Clubs of Missouri, Inc.*, the Federated Garden Clubs of Missouri had 390 affiliated clubs with a total membership of 9,691 (WHMC, Columbia Garden Club Records, Loretta E. Edgington, compiler and editor, April 1958, C3622, Folder 31, p. 12).

Nevertheless, garden clubs around the country and in Missouri served an important function during the Depression years, especially as programs related to home beautification and vegetable gardening were encouraged by Extension homemakers clubs and others (Jordan 1937; Rocheford and Fitzgerald 1938). Some garden clubs operated in cooperation with States' Cooperative Extension Service. Others operated independently or in conjunction with local nurseries. In Ohio, for example, the Ohio Association of Garden Clubs was organized in 1932 in cooperation with the Ohio Extension Service (*Extension Service Review* 1932:94). About 6,000 individuals who had an interest in gardening were involved, including commercial and landscape nurserymen as well as

women. This group found that county-wide demonstrations of various landscaping features, such as rock gardens, lily pools, and perennial borders proved very successful (*Extension Service Review 1932:94*).

The Columbia, Missouri, Garden Club offered programs to help women with their gardens and during the Depression it sponsored a vegetable gardening contest in the local community. According to the club minutes for the April 22, 1932, meeting of the Columbia, Missouri, Garden Club, it was agreed that \$25 would be given to the Columbia Public Welfare Board (CPWB) for a garden project. Seventy families participated in the contest, 20 of which were African American. The CPWB furnished the garden tools and seeds. After the gardens were judged and prizes awarded; all seemed happy to have developed gardens to feed their families (WHMC, Columbia Garden Club Records, Minutes 1930-1931, C3622, File 3) In a follow up letter from the Columbia Public Welfare Board thanking the Garden Club for their \$25 contribution, Mrs. Creet Morris, wrote that the “prize winners were proud and happy to receive a prize of real money. Although there was keen competition among the contestants, there was also a friendly spirit among them and they all felt as one woman said, ‘I am very thankful for the prize and more thankful for the food I have in my garden.’ We feel the garden project was very worth while not only for the food value but it was a means of establishing a feeling of self-help and self-reliance among these people who have almost lost hope of being able to do anything for themselves. We hope we may have such a garden project again next year” (WHMC, Columbia Garden Club Records, Minutes 1930-1931, C3622, File 3).

The minutes also suggest that the club members discussed a number of important issues and were given programs on topics ranging from reducing plant diseases by plant growing practices, to controlling moles, to establishing an outdoor living room, to the desirability of having birds in the garden, to rock gardens, to eradicating weeds, such as buckthorn, plantain, and dandelion from the lawn, to Missouri wildflowers. A number of programs were presented by Extension personnel and instructors from local colleges and universities. For example, the program for the March 1939 meeting was given by Miss Minnie Mae Johnson, who was an instructor in Botany at Stephens College. She discussed wildflowers in and around Missouri and also shared a number of black and white photographs of native wildflowers (WHMC, Columbia Garden Club Records, Minutes, 1939-1940, C3622, File 7). Again on June 10, 1940, Professor Ralph H. Peck, who was a professor of forestry at the University of Missouri, Columbia, spoke on evergreens (WHMC, Columbia Garden Club Records, Minutes, 1939-1940, C3622, File 7). While the programs of the Columbia garden club were focused almost exclusively on gardening and garden design, USDA Extension promoted vegetable gardening as part of its nationwide Live-At-Home Program. This program essentially was an effort to ensure that individual farm families become self-sufficient by growing food in their gardens and raising livestock and chickens for home consumption.

### **The Live-at-Home Program**

One of the programs supported by the Extension Service was the Live-At-Home Program, which was implemented in Missouri and other states to encourage farmers to live off their land, if they had land, thereby staying off the relief rolls. The program placed special emphasis on subsistence gardens, the family cow, and the poultry flock, all

in the woman's domain, as a means of lowering the grocery bill. T.J. Talbert, Professor of Horticulture at the MU College of Agriculture, in an article in the December 15, 1931 issue of *The Missouri Farmer*, for example, discussed some of the key features of the Live-at-Home Program for Missouri farmers. He writes "To live at home farmers must grow food for the family, feed for the livestock, and food for the soil and avoid paying out money for all those things. Moreover, the Live-at-Home Program includes as the first business of the farm the production of crops for consumption on the farm. The second business of the farm may include the growing and harvesting of crops for sale where this is possible" (p. 29). He goes on to provide farm families with tips on how to plant and transplant some bush fruits, including currants and gooseberries, and to describe alternative mechanical procedures for drying apples. Homemade driers are easily made from readily available materials and he describes how to make them. More importantly, he specifically promotes the home garden. He writes that there is nothing more important on the farm than the profitable vegetable garden, for a number of reasons.

“1. The garden can be made to furnish an adequate supply of fresh vegetables from early spring until late autumn, and in addition all that are required for canning, preserving, and storage for winter use.

2. The garden may supply vegetables of high quality, crisp and fresh, and every day during the spring, summer, and fall, thus adding materially to the keeping down of expenses in the home.

3. The garden if planned and carried out properly becomes a source of education and inspiration instead of a drudgery and disappointment.

4. In dollars and cents a profitable home garden is a paying proposition” (p. 29).

The United States suffered one of the worse droughts in its history in 1934. The USDA Report of Extension work in agriculture and home economics for 1934 described it this way: “Seared fields and pastures, blasted grain crops, starving and thirst-crazy livestock—all these multiplied agriculture’s troubles....In Kansas alone approximately 500,000 head of cattle were purchased from farmers for a total of more than \$7,000,000” (USDA Extension Service Annual Report 1934:10). At this same time, the Live-At-Home program was no longer considered an emergency measure, but became an integral part of the total home demonstration program, thus elevating it in importance. Some projects that received renewed emphasis in 1934 were “adequate family gardens; greater home production of meats, dairy products, and poultry; preservation of vegetables, fruits, and meats; renovation and remodeling of clothing; home-made equipment; utilization of materials on hand for making rugs and other household furnishings; making mattresses of surplus cotton; and wise selection and economical buying of supplemental household and family supplies” (USDA Extension Service Annual Report 1934:18). In the May 1, 1934 issue of *The Missouri Farmer*, in an article entitled, “Garden Planning Good Business,” the benefits of Extension’s Live-At-Home nation-wide campaign were touted, and it was said that good planning allowed a surplus of garden produce that could be shared. “The farm family could manage to have abundant supplies of home-grown foods where a garden budget was used. Many households have not only filled their own cellars and pantries with stored and canned products, but have contributed generously to relief supplies” (p. 7).

Because of continued tight economic conditions, the Extension Service concentrated more on the Live-At-Home Program as part of its overall assistance to rural

people throughout 1935. By 1936, however, the emphasis for this program changed from stimulating farmers to supply themselves with sufficient food for farm consumption for the upcoming year to also encouraging “farm families to grow enough surplus to supply surrounding cities and towns” (USDA Extension Service Annual Report for 1936 1939:31). The home vegetable garden was an essential feature of the Live-At-Home Program, especially for the fact that it reduced the grocery bill.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was three-fold. First, it attempted to provide an overview of some of the programs that were at work during the Depression that affected the lives of farm women and their families, and to some extent the lives of women who lived in towns and more urban communities. These would be the Live-At-Home Program and the corporate and community gardening efforts that swept across the nation during the Depression. Second, the chapter examined the work of the Country Life Commission whose report issued at the beginning of the twentieth century precipitated the growth of the discipline of Rural Sociology and laid the groundwork for the nation’s Extension system within the land-grant universities. While the report did not directly affect the drudgery and monotonous work that farm women were exposed to, its message of providing them with some of the amenities accessible to women in the city was heard by the Progressive community and translated into the Country Life Movement, which worked toward this end. Finally, the chapter painted a picture of Depression-era Missouri and spoke to some of the social and economic issues that affected farm women who lived in the state at this time. One interesting theme in this chapter that is seen throughout this dissertation is the tension that existed between individualism and cooperation during the

Depression. While the independent farmer and worker are part of the American psyche, during these lean years, mutual aid and welfare capitalism were welcome commodities.

The next chapter describes the material culture of the Depression-era vegetable garden based on information reported by my key informants and on material found in the Henry Field Papers and in farm journals of the 1930s and early 1940s.



## CHAPTER 5

### MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE VEGETABLE GARDEN

One of the principal objectives of my dissertation research was to describe the material culture of the Depression-era vegetable garden so that some of the traditional practices would not be lost to history and, in fact, might inform our current gardening practices. Additionally, this chapter by describing what was known about women's gardening practices on the farmstead during the Depression will make visible the frequently unseen and often creative physical and mental work involved in establishing and maintaining her vegetable garden. Much of the description of the material culture of the garden is drawn from interviews with my key informants and from the analysis of materials from farm journals and from other agricultural publications.

According to Prown, material culture is the “manifestations of culture through material productions. And the study of material culture is the study of material to understand culture, to discover the beliefs—the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society at a given time. The underlying premise [being] that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them, and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged” (1993:1). Simon Bronner suggests that “a craft, a house, a food, that comes from one's hands or heart, one's shared experience with other people in a community, one's learned ideas and symbols, visibly connects persons and groups to society and to the material reality around them. That interconnection is material culture.” Material culture, he notes, “is made up of tangible things crafted, shaped, altered, and used across

time and across space. It is inherently personal and social, mental and physical” (1992:3). Given these notions about what makes up material culture, I submit that the vegetable garden and the practices that were developed to make it productive are an integral part of the material culture of the Depression era in the United States and worthy of study.

### **Beginning the Garden**

It was the men who generally plowed the garden in the Spring. Elizabeth recalled that “my husband would work it up, get it tilled and ready and then he was done with gardening.” Hettie remembered that her dad “would always plow the garden and get the soil ready and then he never went back. He went on to things on the farm. But my mother took care of it.” Josie’s father plowed in the Spring with a one-horse plow. He would then hook the harrow behind Old Doll and smooth it down. However, it was not that women could not handle the plow. Nettie’s father sometimes “plowed the garden to prepare it in the spring, but my mother and older sister could also plow.” Their plow horses were named Frank and Charlie.

Bailie’s informants, who lives in Hallsville, Missouri, reported that the husbands or some other relative “usually does the plowing and heavy digging for her. The men may also help in caring for the gardens throughout the summer. But supervision is usually exercised by the homemaker; and it is the homemaker also who prepares the food-stuffs once they are raised. In years of poor weather conditions, she may have to depend on what she has preserved in a former season, if there is any left, or else go to the stores for fresh food.” (1938:103).

Only a few of the people whom I interviewed said that they sat down early in the year and actually drew a diagram of the garden, laying out which vegetables would be

planted where. Elizabeth recalled sitting at the kitchen table and laying out a plan. She said, “well I had my potatoes here and this year I’ll move them somewhere else. I don’t put them in the same place that I planted them the year before. Kept them rotating. Tomatoes didn’t go back in the same place that they were the year before. I had kind of a chart of where I had planted everything one year; I planted them somewhere else in the same garden.” This practice of crop rotation is environmentally sound because it helps to reduce the chance that the vegetables will become infected by pathogens that would cause serious problems. For example, one should avoid planting vegetables of the same group in the same location more than once every three years, i.e., Chinese cabbage should not be planted where any of the cabbage family, such as broccoli, was planted there before (Donald 1995). Paul Dempsey in his book *Grow Your Own Vegetables* also recommends that the rotation of crops is advisable to control pests and to help the vegetables use the “plant foods in the soil.” But he writes that “by furnishing sufficient food and organic matter each year, you need not worry about the effect of continuous cropping on the soil. Many gardens are still producing excellent vegetables after more than fifty years of cultivation” (1944:13).

Most home vegetable gardens were planted on level ground, were near the house on the farmstead, and were generally rectangular in shape.<sup>i</sup> This notion was reinforced in an article in the April 1, 1939, issue of *The Missouri Farmer*, where it was suggested that the vegetable garden deserves far more attention than it was currently getting on many Missouri farms. In fact, the article suggested that some of the toil experienced by farm women could be eliminated by “making the vegetable garden large enough to be worked with a one-horse plow. Cultivation with a horse-drawn 5-shovel plow can be made more

efficient if the enclosure is long and narrow rather than square in shape, so that not too much turning will have to be done at the ends” (31:10). However, one enterprising gardener in Harrison County, Missouri, was written up by Cordell Tindall in the October 28, 1939, issue of the *Missouri Ruralist* because he had been planting his garden on the contour to save moisture and fertility. Homer Morrison’s curved one-quarter acre garden not only included vegetables, but also raspberries, strawberries, and “Wonderberries,” as well as less well-known vegetables, such as cauliflower. Morrison reasoned, according to the article, that if terracing was beneficial for pasture, that it should also benefit the home vegetable garden (80: 6).

### **The Old Hoe**

The material culture of the vegetable garden throughout the twentieth and into twenty-first century has changed dramatically, as the horse and plow were replaced by the modern motor driven tiller or garden tractor. The hoe, however, is still used widely even today to cultivate the garden. The hoe remains a favored tool of the gardener perhaps because it serves to connect the individual in a very unique way to the earth that is being cultivated and helps contribute to producing the family’s food. The hoe has changed little in appearance. What other gardening tool has withstood the test of time so well? In his turn of the century book, *Buffalo Bird Woman’s Garden*, Gilbert L. Wilson talks about the bone hoe as one of the two key garden tools used by Hidatsa women until traders eventually brought them iron hoes, which they almost universally adopted. Buffalo Bird Woman told him that, “corn and weeds alike grew rapidly”[and that] “we women of the household were out with our hoes daily, to keep ahead of the weeds. We worked as in planting season, in the early morning hours” (1987:26).

The principal tool used by every one of my key informants or their mothers was also the hoe. Emma remembered that her mother did not want the children to go out and hoe the garden for fear that they would upend the plants; her mother used the hoe and the children got down on their hands and knees and pulled the weeds. Lonnie said that in addition to his being the principal weeder in his family and using the hoe often, his father would “often go out before breakfast in the morning and hoe in the garden until mother would call breakfast. So he did a lot of cultivating in the garden.” Usually, however, the farm woman was in charge of cultivating the home garden. Fannie recalled that “hoes were just about all you had. We did have a little hand spade and things like that. After dad used the team to plow and rake it down and get it suitable, hoes were just about the only thing you had for garden use.”

An additional tool that seemed to be particularly useful in the home garden was the wheel hoe. In an article in a 1938 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*, A.G. Leonard suggests that the family garden become a cooperative venture involving all family members. He wrote that the farm head (read man), while he is waiting to cultivate his fields, help cultivate the home garden with his farm equipment thereby relieving the homemaker who had to toil with a hoe. He, furthermore, suggested that “a wheel hoe is all but worth its weight in gold and no gardener should be without such an implement. The wheel hoe with its numerous attachments is a time and labor saver and must be the invention of a gardener wearied by the unending labor of hand hoeing” (79:27). According to Tucker in his book *Kitchen Gardening in America*, the wheel hoe became popular in American gardening practices as the use of English beds declined. English beds were raised square beds with grass cross walks. These beds were easily weeded

from the walkways and produced vegetables earlier because they warmed up quickly in the spring. They also could be brought into condition for planting with hand tools.

Flowers and herbs were frequently planted alongside the vegetables.

This type of gardening was traditional in Europe and was practiced into the twentieth century in America, especially in urban sites, by immigrants. It was also practiced in rural areas, but with the increasing use of a horse-drawn plow and cultivator, raised English beds quickly became obsolete. Thus as Tucker recounts, “With no beds to bar the way, a horse and plow could move straight across the garden...[in addition] All fencing—whether stone, picket, or evergreen—had hampered horse-drawn cultivators, which required some ten to twelve feet of turning space at the end of each row. So the horse hoe remained out of the garden until the 1880s,” but with the invention of barbed wire fencing to keep the livestock out, farmers were able to now plow and cultivate the household garden unimpeded” (Tucker 1993:88-89).

The wheel hoe was invented in the 1840s, but was little used until the English beds were replaced with straight rows. Tucker writes that while traditionalists were reluctant to give up the ancient hoe that they felt provided them with a sense of tranquility as they hoed weeds in their gardens, advertisers, such as Henry Field in his catalog and horticulturalists, “emphasized that the new tool not only weeded rapidly but also saved moisture for vegetables by creating a dust mulch that checked evaporation and captured new rainfall” (Tucker 1993:90). The wheel hoe, therefore, became “the tool of all tools for the home gardener...a perfect substitute for the horse-hoe, and the one piece of garden equipment which more than any other makes garden work effective and pleasant” (from *Country Life in America* magazine, as quoted in Tucker 1993:90).

Several of my informants acknowledged they used a wheel hoe in their gardens. Elizabeth said she used “the old hoe,” but also had a little plow that had one big wheel on the front of it and two handles that you pushed along (Figure 3). It had two shovels on the bottom and “we would use it to plow between the rows.” Lonnie also remembered that in addition to a hand hoe, his mother used a wheel hoe. Theirs was all steel including the handles. Otherwise, they did not use any other special tools in the garden.



**Figure 3.** Henry Field made the wheel hoe an indispensable tool of gardeners in the 1930s. Source: Henry Field’s 1935 Catalog. Henry Field Company, Shenandoah, Iowa. p. 2.

### **The Garden as a Woman’s Space**

As a space on the farmstead, the garden was largely controlled by women, although it was expected that children and other family members would help plant, cultivate, and harvest vegetables. In their book, *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* (2001), Mona Domosh and Joni Seager differentiate the notions of space and place. They write that space is a particular location

where actions take place, that is, a location for the patterning and organization of our material lives. Place, on the other hand, is a particular location in which we invest meaning; and they suggest that space can become place when we invest it with personal meaning and association. A woman's vegetable garden, it seems, is thus a space on the farmstead, which becomes a significant place because it is a location from which farm women derive food for their families, a caring activity that is full of meaning for them. The importance of the vegetable garden can also be seen in its close proximity to the house.

The garden as a space is exemplified by the activities that organized and structured the lives of farm families. In a 1920 article by Florence E. Ward, entitled "The Farm Woman's Problems," which appeared in the *Journal of Home Economics*, was a chart that indicated that an average of 56 percent of farm women cared for the garden. In the Midwest, the figure jumped to 67 percent, while in the east and west the numbers were lower, 41 and 57 percent, respectively. These data were derived from a farm home survey of over 10,000 farm women conducted by home demonstration agents throughout the country. In Randall C. Hill's 1929 study of the Missouri farm family, he found that 43 percent of farm women were primarily responsible for the vegetable garden. But, he and others (Neese 1986) also found that husbands and other family members, mostly children, also participated in weeding and other gardening practices. Bailie also reported that in three quarters of the open-country (rural) farms, the homemaker was assisted by her husband, children, or other family members in caring for the garden (1938:99). Nevertheless, one-seventh of the women in her study who lived in open-country said that they did all the work. However, when it came to picking fruit and canning produce, Hill's



study found that women bore the primary responsibility 56 and 91 percent of the time, respectively.

The vegetable garden as a place is exemplified by the notion that many of my key informants expressed, and that is, that they learned to garden by imitating their mothers and that learning to garden was for them associated with mostly fond memories. The skills that they learned were especially important during the Depression era, since producing food for the family was at such a high premium. In fact because the children, especially the girls, followed their mother into the garden, they were able to learn her gardening practices and reproduce them when they needed to establish their own gardens later in life. Among my key informants, all had worked in the garden alongside their parents at one time or another. Fannie, who learned to garden from her mother, recalled going into the garden and working until about 11:00, and “then mother would say, ‘now you go in the house and get lunch’; and I would say, ‘well, what am I supposed to have for lunch mother?’ And she would say ‘surprise me!’ And, I think now that was as near to eating out as my mother ever got because she was home every meal.” Lonnie remembered that “all the kids had to help in the garden, sometimes unwillingly, but we did. I don’t think people went hungry in those days, during the 30s, we had something to eat.” Hettie recollected that she just went with her mother into the garden; “I just followed along and anything she did, I thought that was great. I just thought that my mother was wonderful and that she could do anything and I could help her.”

In my study, however, two out of the nine key informants learned to garden from their fathers. This was quite unusual, although not unexpected since in one case the mother died young and the father was left with the young children; in the other,

apparently the father was in charge of the garden, although the mother canned the resulting produce. Gardening to both of these women was a source of pride and a tradition that they maintained into their adult years.

### **Moon Signs**

In *Henry Field's Seed Sense for April 1938* (22:7) was a small article and a detailed chart on planting by "moon signs." He writes that "I'm not going to argue with you if you believe or don't believe in moon sign planting dates. Some people do and some don't and that's that. But for those who are interested, I'm setting down here the dates when the moon is in the right sign for planting the following: muskmelons and water melons: May 3 and 4, also May 11 and 12. Corn: April 6 and 7; also May 3 and 4. Potatoes: April 14, 15, and 16." He concludes by suggesting to the reader that she save the published chart because it will prove useful. As a Depression-era entrepreneur, Henry Field knew his customers. Seven out of the nine people who I interviewed reported that they and their mother's planted by the signs and used one of the many available farmer's almanacs to make sure that they got it right. Several of them were true believers, while one said that she planted by the signs sometimes, but usually planted when the "ground was right."

Farmer's almanacs were also a source of moon signs. Lonnie said that while his mother always kept a farmer's almanac, he couldn't be sure that either of his parents thought much of moon signs. "I think that they poo pood that nonsense about the moon." On the other hand, "We always believed that you should plant potatoes in the dark of the moon and plant corn in the light of the moon, and I don't know whether that makes any difference or not. I believe in that, but we didn't always follow through." However, many

women extensively used farmer's almanacs provided by insurance or seed companies as textual sources of information for planting their gardens. For example, Hettie, reported that they had a farmer's almanac and used it extensively because it told us a lot of things that we didn't know. "We went by it a lot. And that was the thing that always told about the soil at such and such a stage and really it was quite helpful. We had farm meetings that my parents went to where they learned a lot of things."

### **A Variety of Vegetables**

My informants and their mothers grew a wide variety of vegetables and because they did not have access to the hybrids that we have today, they were able to save seeds from one year to the next. Like the early German practice of having two discrete gardens, in addition to their "kitchen" gardens, a number of informants also had truck patches where vegetables were grown next to the cornfield. These truck patches could provide food for the family to consume, or be a space where additional vegetables were grown to be sold in the marketplace. Among the common vegetables raised were Irish and sweet potatoes, green beans, peas, sweet corn, tomatoes, lima beans, cabbage, carrots, rhubarb, asparagus, onions, spinach, turnips, lettuce, cucumbers, and okra. While these were generally what were grown, seed companies offered dozens of varieties of, for example, beans. The 1931 Henry Field Seed Catalog offered seven different yellow or wax podded bush beans; four different green podded bush beans; and seven varieties of pole beans, including improved Missouri Wonder and Kentucky Wonder. He also offered five varieties of lima beans advertising them as being "big fat limas, rich in protein" (Field Papers, Seed Catalogs, 1929-1934, Spring 1931 Seed Book, p. 2-3). In the same catalog, he also offered 15 varieties of early, midseason, and late peas (1931, p. 8). With respect

to peas, one informant indicated that his father did not have a high regard for this vegetable. Lonnie reported that his mother pretty much made the decisions about what kinds of vegetables to plant and that it didn't make much of a difference to his father. He recalls, however, that "while his father did not like garden peas, they raised them every year! He did eat almost everything we raised, but he didn't eat the garden peas." In her diary for the months of September during the 1930s, Pearle Henderson Pipes wrote that she canned butter beans, black-eyed peas, pumpkin, and lamb's quarter, in addition to the variety of vegetables mentioned above (Pipes Diaries, 1931-1937).

Some of the stories that my informants told portrayed important gardening practices, such as pruning and companion planting. Clara's stories exemplify both of these practices.

"When we were first married [in 1938] we planted a garden and I made a sweet potato ridge down through the garden and I've never seen sweet potatoes do so good in my life. Pretty. I had about 45 plants left, so my husband put them out in a truck patch and every time they'd get any vines on them, our neighbor's old cow would eat the vines off, and I said to my husband, 'If you don't fix a fence around them you aren't going to raise any sweet potatoes.' Then we dug my sweet potatoes, and we had nothing but roots and he [in the truck patch] had some that wouldn't even fit in a gallon bucket! The cow had kept them so all the growth went to the potato. Mine went to the vines and none of them got big enough to eat."

In another story, she realized the importance of companion planting and the notion that some plants interact in a harmful way with other plants.

“One time I planted potatoes and right down below the potatoes I planted cucumbers. Well those cucumbers just bloomed and bloomed and never set a cucumber on it. I couldn’t figure out what was wrong because the vines were so pretty. When we dug our potatoes, then those cucumbers set on. I couldn’t figure that out. Then, I got a magazine one time, I think it was *Capper’s Weekly*, and it said that cucumbers didn’t like potatoes and potatoes didn’t like cucumbers. But now potatoes made potatoes, but my cucumbers never did set. I went out there a long time after we dug potatoes and I never thought about the cucumbers and I never saw so many yellow cucumbers laying on the vines in my life.”

### **Watering the Garden**

Bailie reported that the women in her Hallsville study, especially the women living in open-country, had to go distances of between thirty and sixty feet from the kitchen door to draw water for home use (1938:90). Using this water for the garden obviously would be very labor intensive. For a number of different reasons, nearly all of my informants reported that their vegetable gardens were not watered even during the severe drought years of the Depression in Missouri, which were 1934 and 1936. Even when water was available from wells, the garden was usually too far away to water it and it was too big an effort. Josie reported that “Nobody watered their gardens. We always seemed to raise food in spite of the handicaps.” This seemed to be the general impression of all those who I interviewed. Elizabeth remembered that they “just had to depend upon rain coming.” Emma, on the other hand, recalled that when it got really dry, they watered the vegetable garden: “We just took a bucket; each one of us [there were 9 children] and

she [the mother] would water it herself. We didn't get to do that. She did the watering herself."

When asked if because the garden was not watered during the droughts whether or not the family had enough to eat, Hettie responded, "A lot of it we lost. It would just get too dry and die. But we aimed to have out enough that we'd have some left." Nettie remembered that they had a 125-foot well where they drew water and would water the flowers, but not the garden. Even in drought years, they wouldn't water the garden, but they also didn't run out of water, she recalled.

In my study, not watering the vegetable garden was the most common response when my informants were asked whether they watered their gardens during the Depression or not. However, among the women that Deborah Fink studied in Nebraska during the 1930s when the rain failed, one woman told of how "her mother put a barrel of water on runners and dragged it out to the garden so that they could water" (1988:60). A similar approach to watering was taken by a woman who lived on a Texas cotton farm. Sharpless writes, "The Texas heat and the almost inevitable water shortages limited summer crops. Janie Kasberg Winkler, who cared deeply about her garden and spent 'every spare moment' tending it, with her children hauled water from their tank, hitching their mules to a slide with a barrel on it. Some women utilized their left over water from laundry and bathing to water their gardens" (1999:124).

### **Fertilizer**

With respect to special fertilizers for their gardens, the most universally used manure was from the farm chickens. Since chickens and other poultry were generally found in large numbers on Depression-era farms, the chickens produced an abundance of

easily accessible fertilizer for the gardens, as well as eggs for the market and meat for canning or frying. All of my informants had chicken stories of one kind or another, some of which will be documented in the next chapter. With regard to using chicken manure in the garden, Elizabeth recalled that they used an “awful lot of chicken manure. We had a lot of chickens. We had three big laying houses of chickens and sold eggs by the dozen, by the case. A nursing home took 30 dozen cases a week. In later years, the chicken manure had more nitrogen in it than the cow manure had, but when we had all those chickens we would clean the litter out of the houses when we were putting a new bunch of chickens in one house, why that house was cleaned thoroughly before the pullets went into it. And that was all put on flowers and garden. And that would be the litter and the droppings and everything out of that house. And then that would decay and was good nitrogen. There were about 250 laying hens to a house, why the litter was also pretty rich in nitrogen. We always had bales of straw that was our litter. The chickens would just scratch in that. The older it got why it would just pulverize the straw.”

Nettie, who lived in the Missouri Ozarks during the 1930s, remembered that they used fertilizer from the barnyard and the chip yard, i.e., they put rotted chips around the plants. Lumber mills were a common site in the Ozarks as timber was an important product. It was pointed out by the informants on several occasions that cattle and horse manure was not as rich in nitrogen as chicken manure and that it also contained more weed seeds than the chicken manure. Thus the chicken manure became the preferred natural fertilizer for these women’s home garden.

## **Insect Pests**

Today we seem to be obsessed with keeping insect pests off of our plants with all sorts of petroleum-based insecticides. During the 1930s, the Henry Field catalog advertised any number of different powders and sprays for pest control, however, my informants generally said that they removed insects from plants by hand or that they did not remember the garden pests being as bad as they are now. Some reported that insect sprays cost money, and that since money was scarce during the 1930s, their families did not invest in them. Josie, for example, recalled that they raised cabbage and that cabbage worms were a problem, but that was “a bug to pick off. Some days you would get quite a few bugs, mostly during the dry weather. During the dry year you would have more bugs.” Lonnie reported, “We didn’t have the great variety of insecticides that we do nowadays. I do remember an insecticide that was called black leaf 40. It was a tobacco product, derived from nicotine and it was used on some vegetables and would kill most everything. Of course, tobacco still does; it kills people too.” Hettie recalled that her mother dusted the vegetables with some kind of a powder—a bug killer of some kind. Another recipe for insect control was proposed by Nettie who recalled that they put flour on their cabbage to get rid of insects and put wood ash on tomatoes to get rid of the blister beetles. She said “they had to improvise all the time.”

In a 1935 article in the *Missouri Ruralist*, by L.J. Whitlow, six insect pests were identified and their treatment prescribed by the Missouri College of Agriculture. The article recommended having on hand the following materials: a small hand duster, one or two pounds of arsenate of lead; one or two pounds of calcium arsenate; a few pounds of hydrated lime; and a few ounces of nicotine sulphate (1935:10). In 1940, the treatment for these insect pests was essentially the same. For example, an article in the April 13



issue of the *Missouri Ruralist* listed a number of insect pests recommending that arsenate of lead-lime in combination with calcium or sulfur be use to control the Flea beetle, Cabbage worm, Corn ear worm, Blister beetles, Colorado potato beetle, and Striped cucumber beetle. Hand-picking was recommended for the Harlequin cabbage bug, while planting seed free from weevils was recommended for protecting against weevils. Traps were suggested for moles (1940:11).

### **Saving Seeds**

Because vegetable seeds cost money for the seeds themselves and for shipping, it was a traditional practice among farm women, especially during the Depression, to save seed from one year to another. This was possible because hybrid seeds, which do not grow true were not invented or widely available yet. Nevertheless, there were a number of large seed companies, including Henry Field, which advertised in journals, such as *The Missouri Ruralist* and the *Missouri Farmer*. These companies included, R.H. Shumway Seedman of Rockford, Illinois, Earl May of Shenandoah, Iowa, Lancaster County Seed Company in Pennsylvania, Condon Brothers Seedsman of Rockford, Illinois, Burpee Seeds, and, of course, Henry Field's seed company. Nearly all of my informants said that they saved seeds at one time or another. Most saved at least sweet corn seeds. Lonnie recollected that "they would go out in the crib and pick out good ears and shell it out and plant them. That was the way we created our corn, year after year. This was true for both field and sweet corn. Of course, with sweet corn you'd have to save that the year before because you don't keep it all winter you just have to save a few ears during the sweet corn season and shell them off and plant them."

Hettie reported that it was a common practice for people in the neighborhood and at club meetings to exchange seeds. “When we had quilting parties that they went to every month and different ones would say, ‘I have a lot of such and such kind of seed, would you like some?’ They divided things in this manner.” Nettie’s mother saved seeds from year to year but would also sometimes buy seeds from a local store, as did a number of the other informants. Nettie’s mother would let the seeds dry on the plants in the garden and then hang them up in a cloth bag after they were dry. But unlike some informants, her mother did not trade seeds with neighbors.

Saving seeds had been a traditional gardening practice. But with the advent of commercial seed companies in America and the surge in mail order seed catalogs, saving seeds quickly lost its appeal. However, during the Depression, many farm women resorted to seed saving of particular crops, such as corn and beans, because of financial considerations.

### **The Home Orchard**

While the home garden was critical for survival of the farm family during the Depression, many families also maintained orchards that provided additional nutrients for the family diet. In the October 17, 1936 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*, for example, Professor T.J. Talbert of the Missouri College of Agriculture suggested that the farm orchard was doable and was as profitable as the home vegetable garden. He provided a detailed plan for an orchard of about 3/4-acre, which he contended was of sufficient size to be adequately cared for by the family. In this space, he recommended planting “12 apple, 12 grape, 25 blackberry, 13 currant, 12 gooseberry, 6 cherry, 3 plum, 4 peach, 4 pear, 8 nut trees, 50 raspberry and 25 dewberry” (77:3). Some of my informants’

orchards contained a few fruit trees, mostly commonly apples and peaches, with grapes growing near the garden. Others had larger orchards with fruit trees bearing pears, cherries, quinces, and plums. A few who did not have cultivated beds of strawberries, reported gathering wild strawberries, in the timber. Some also gathered blackberries and gooseberries, which were canned and used during the winter months for pies. Fannie recalled that her father would take a team and flatbed wagon to a local orchard and get the bed filled with apples. They would then make applesauce, but would also put the apples in their cellar and when the cellar was full they would bury the unused edible apples in pit or a hole in the garden that was lined with straw or hay. This would protect them and enable them to keep the apples as long as possible.

Another aspect of the material culture of vegetable gardening is the nursery and seed company catalogs, which everyone likes to read and dream about in February as the garden is being planned. One of the principal seed companies in the Midwest during this time was the Henry Field Seed Company, based in Shenandoah, Iowa. This company has been referred to a number of times previously. The following section describes in more detail what the company was about and how through Henry Field's correspondence, we can see how he became an entrepreneur and seedsman.

### **“Dear Folks All”: The Henry Field Seed Company**

This section looks at the work of the Henry Field Seed Company, which like other seed companies, provided information in their catalogs about the household garden and how to perfect it. The company sought to educate women concerning their gardening practices, among other things, with the goal of improving them thus enabling these farm

women to increase their productive capacity in providing food for their families during the Depression.

### ***Nursery and Seed Company Catalogs***

In addition to the radio, educating the public about gardening were seed and nursery company catalogs. Seed catalogs in addition to offering a wide selection of vegetable seeds and gardening implements, aimed their literature at providing information helpful to the gardener. David Tucker in his book, *Kitchen Gardening in America: A History* (1993) reviews the development of seed companies in America beginning in the eighteenth century when seed stores imported a small number of seeds from Europe. With the increasing commercialization and marketing of seeds by seed companies through catalog sales, more and more gardeners were enticed to switch from seed saving to purchasing seeds through catalogs. Saving seeds, as we saw in the previous section, was universally practiced among gardeners during the Great Depression. Collecting, drying, labeling, and storing the vegetable seeds was a practice that required considerable knowledge and attention to detail, but by the middle of the nineteenth century, according to Tucker, seed company catalogs were in high demand and companies had taken advantage of direct mail. Not only did customers receive catalogs in the mail, but they were encouraged to place mail orders with the promise of receiving better quality seeds than those obtained in bulk from local merchants (Tucker 1993:76).

Improvements in transcontinental rail service and in mail delivery enabled seed companies in America to grow their own seeds and to market them nationwide. Seed companies, such as W. Atlee Burpee, offered free catalogs and frequently enticed individual sales through prizes. Advertising in farm journals also increased a company's

exposure. For example, in the February 1, 1931 issue of the *Missouri Farmer*, there is an advertisement for Henry Field's great seed and nursery book, free! According to this small advertisement, it has hundreds of wonderful bargains and offered a special prize packet of flower seed with the order (23:10). Two pages later in the same issue, there is an advertisement for Burpee seeds with a picture of their catalog. The advertisement read, "The vegetables and flowers you would like to see growing in your garden—read all about them in Burpee's Annual Garden Book. Write for your free copy" (23:12).

Securing safe vegetables seeds was also promoted by the agricultural colleges. The March 1, 1940 issue of the *Missouri Farmer*, contained a small article by an expert at the Missouri College of Agriculture, who urged gardeners to get garden vegetable seed from reliable sources, such as from well established "seed companies that are in the business to sell good seed to discriminating customers—the same customers year after year" (32:11). In addition, this particular article recommended that customers ask for seeds packaged at the seed house when dealing with a local retailer rather than buying seeds from bulk bins.

One particular seed and nursery company whose mail order business was extensive in Missouri and who was mentioned by most of the people who I interviewed, was the Henry Field Company located in Shenandoah, Iowa. In fact, Missouri patrons were second only to those in Iowa for catalog sales from this company. Therefore, in an effort to pursue lines of inquiry that were uncovered by my interviews, I went to the Henry Field Collection, which is housed in the special collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City, to learn more about this seedsman.

In addition to looking at selected Field catalogs from the 1930s for their content and gardening tips, I reviewed the text of letters that Henry Field wrote to his colleagues in Shenandoah from his retreat and experimental farm in the Missouri Ozarks. While seed catalogs are part of the material culture of the period, looking at the textual material and correspondence of Henry Field can also be illustrative and provide us with a glimpse into the extent to which his marketing practices affected women during the Depression. One of his merchandising circulars (1931) was entitled, “Housewife’s Biggest and Most Important Job.” To encourage home canning and presumably sell pressure cookers, this circular touted the benefits of home canned foods and informed the consumer that the price of a pressure cooker was at its lowest ever. The circular goes on to say that

Canning is always one of a housewife’s most important jobs. It means so much to have those many cans and jars of delicious home canned foods ready at a minutes notice. It’s so convenient...These are times when all of us must do everything we can to cut expenses. And Home Canning does cut living expenses. IT pays to Can your own groceries. Besides the superiority of Home Canned Foods—and in addition to the wonderful convenience of having Home Canned foods on hand—besides that, you have the satisfaction of knowing you are saving money... Of course we will be glad to sell you Canned Goods next Winter and Spring. But we are sure you’ll save money by doing your own Canning. And, we know you will have finer foods for yourself and family if you do it. We have tried to do our part by lowering our prices on the things you will need to buy. The National Pressure Cooker is selling now at the lowest price we have ever quoted—and other things, too, are priced low on the following pages.

Women were thus encouraged to grow groceries in the garden and can them using seed and merchandise from a number of different sources, including seed companies.

While Henry’s correspondence describe the lived experiences of a Depression-era gardener in the Missouri Ozarks, the company’s seed catalogs also help build a more complete picture of this nurseryman’s life and times and how he was able to create a community of gardeners and consistently tout the economic value of the household

garden. In his 1932 Catalog, for example, he writes that the average garden should produce \$100.00 worth of vegetables with about 50 to 75 hours work during the growing season. In his introductory comments in this catalog, Henry reminds his customers that a vegetable garden and a cellar full of canned goods can't be beat.

This past year ought to be a lesson to all of us and that lesson is sure made plain by lots of letters I am getting from our Garden Seed Customers. One woman wrote that she didn't know what she would be doing this winter if she didn't have a world of things she canned off of her big vegetable garden this last summer... When times are slow and money scarce there isn't any better thing to do than dig right in and get back to old times by raising every bit of food you can. Plant a good big, old-fashioned garden—plant enough to give you a lot of surplus to can for next winter. Of course, I want to sell you the seed and my seeds are good, reliable, healthy seed that will live and grow and yield heavy. But I am serious about this and want you to have a good garden and a big garden whether you order your seed from me or the other fellow” (Field Papers, Seed Catalogs, 1929-1934).

How Henry Field built his seed company is an interesting story and one that begins in the nineteenth century with a boy who sold packets of seeds.

### ***In the Beginning***

Henry Field (1871-1949), entrepreneur, seedsman, and gardener, built a sense of community among gardeners and clients through his seed company, his publications, and his pioneering radio station—KFNF—in Shenandoah, Iowa. At one time his seed company was one of the largest in the nation and by the time of the Great Depression thousands were listening to his homey and instructional programs on KFNF—“The Friendly Farmer Station.” In addition to seed catalogs, Henry Field edited and published, *Seed Sense*—“*For the Man Behind the Plow*,” which was in essence a merchandising tool in booklet form in which Henry personalized his products and provided information on modern cultivation methods and helpful gardening techniques, advice on profitable gardening methods, words about his special picks of flowers, fruits, and vegetables, and

his personal philosophy on gardening. These entries were combined with excerpts from letters of endorsement from primarily midwestern customers, photographs of Henry and his family, and his wife's favorite recipes. In addition, *Seed Sense*, which was provided free to customers, contained numerous references to his Ozark vegetable and flower gardens and orchards and to his experiments with various fruits and vegetables. Henry tried hard to personalize his merchandise; for example, the cover of the March 1940 issue shows Henry surrounded by a great variety of vegetables that were grown at his Ozark home.

The history and growth of the Henry Field Seed Company and radio station as found in the Henry Field Papers, 1846-1955, is described by Janice Friedel in her 1986 article in the *Annals of Iowa*. Briefly, Henry began to sell seeds at an early age, and by the time he was a teenager was working for the Livingston Seed Company in Des Moines for \$3.50 a week. At twenty-one, he had a large local trade in strawberries and began to expand out into the seed business in a limited way. In 1899 he printed by hand his first catalog and price list, which was four pages; a year later his catalog had grown three-fold and contained pictures. Within two years, he opened his first seedhouse with his name across the front—**Henry Field: Seedsman and Gardener**. And, in 1907, he incorporated the business with the help of friends and built a larger seedhouse and eventually acquired more large buildings for labeling and processing seeds and for printing his catalogs and other written material. Henry seemed to be inspired by his customers' requests and suggestions and encourage people to write to him. Customers asked him to expand his merchandising line, which he did, to include among other things, Field's Famous Coffee (4 pounds for \$1.00); Field's Famous Shell Horsehide Work Shoes (Ladies' Garden



Show only \$1.98 postpaid); and items for the home and person, such as pressure cookers, inner spring mattresses, jewelry, wall paper, and water gardens.

Henry was one of the first retailers to grasp the significance of the radio as an advertising medium and as a means to develop a personal relationship with customers. In 1924, he began broadcasting on his own radio station—KFNF—and increased his seed customer base by increasing his public visibility. According to Friedel, “Henry’s plain, friendly voice was warmly welcomed into the home of the prairie farmer. It made the world a smaller place to live, and brought city and country folk together. KFNF also transformed the Henry Field Seed Company from a comfortable business to a booming enterprise. In 1925, total sales were \$912,211; by 1927, sales had risen to \$2,571,526, and almost 1.6 million names were on the Henry Field Seed Catalog mailing list” (1986:309). Despite ostensible success, the Depression took its toll on agriculturally-related businesses, including Henry’s seed business, which in 1933 was lost to foreclosure, and ownership of the company passed to the bondholders (Friedel 1986:309). However, Henry continued to play a vital role in its growth and enthusiastically continued to edit *Seed Sense*. His radio station and the Henry Field Stores, Inc. were separate entities from the seedhouse and thus continued under Henry’s control. Today (2007) the Henry Field Spring Catalog has a small picture of Henry on its inside cover and a quote attributed to Henry that states, “Take my advice. Order your Field seed RIGHT NOW!!... My seed is good honest seed, the kind you will wish you had if you don’t get it.” The company is now headquartered in Aurora, Indiana, and the catalog contains only snippets of any direct relationship to the Depression-era Field catalogs by

infrequently quoting from old *Seed Senses* and providing endorsements from satisfied consumers.

### ***Correspondence from the Ozarks***

In addition to giving his customers down to earth gardening advice in his seed catalogs, his radio programs, and in *Seed Sense*, Henry Field's correspondence during the Depression years from his home in the Missouri Ozarks to his colleagues and friends in Shenandoah contains information about his experiments with various fruits, flowers, and vegetables, his contact with neighbors, friends, and family, and a description of what they were eating from the garden. For example, in his letter of September 26, 1936, he wrote about growing fall pansies and what he learned about using burlap to protect the seeds. "I learned something about getting pansy seed to grow this fall. In August, before the rains, I planted a lot in dry dirt to come up when it rained, but the first rain was a very hard one and the ground crusted, and I got a poor stand. But at one end of the bed I spread some old burlap, and kept it wet down every day till the plants started to come up, then took it off. On that little spot I have a thick stand of strong plants. The next time, I will cover the entire bed with burlap or something of the kind and keep it wet down" (Henry Field Letters, 1929-1936).

He reports on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July watermelons that he planted experimentally in his garden. In his letter of July 8, 1937, he writes that he put in "one row of the '4<sup>th</sup> of July' watermelons of ours as an experiment. I believe they will ripen yet." In that August, he writes that, "We are eating lots of watermelons. Field's '4<sup>th</sup> of July,' and the Japanese sorts. Our melons were all late planted—about June 1<sup>st</sup> and the big sorts are not ripe yet, but these small ones are very plenty, and the best eating melons I ever saw. Good clear to

the rind and it only about 1/4 inch thick. The Japs are even earlier and sweeter than the ‘4<sup>th</sup> of July,’ and are “apple seeded.” They should be in every garden. Will bring some home when we come if they are not all gone by then” (Henry Field Letters, 1937).

Using some of the materials at hand, Henry experimented with using sawdust as mulch and writes about it in a letter dated March 5, 1937. He suggests that sawdust mulch used on his strawberry patch was quite successful. “Dear Folks All—Planted potatoes, peas, onion seeds, carrots, beets, parsnips, radishes, lettuce, and cabbage plants—and plenty of them... We also took off the mulching on the pansies and shook up the mulch on the strawberries and took off some where it was too thick. You remember I told of trying sawdust for mulch on part of the strawberries—well, they look the best of any so far” (Henry Field Letters, 1937). Earlier we saw that Nettie, who also lived in the Missouri Ozarks used sawdust or rotted chips as mulch. With respect to growing extraordinarily large turnips, he writes on November 4, 1938, “The reason I had turnips when no one else did, I drilled them in rows on good ground in my garden where the onions had been, then I thinned them to a foot apart in the row, so I got a perfect stand and every turnip with a whole square foot of space. They were all large and smooth and even in size (about a pound a piece)” (Henry Field Letters, 1938). Finally, in a letter dated, September 20, 1938, he reports on his approach to saving seeds. “I picked my seed beans yesterday—pole beans. I had Banana beans, Mo. Wonder, and Hopi pole limas. Picked the pods off the vines on the poles, tramped them out, and winnowed them. Had about a gallon of each. The Banana bean has an enormous wax pod, supposed to be as wide and long as a banana. Somebody gave me the seed” (Henry Field Letters, 1938).

Throughout the letters are many references to visitors who he entertains at his Ozark home, and to the food from the garden that he sells to the local CCC camp. Depending on which vegetables are available, he and his son-in-law, Kermit, may sell turnips in November or tomatoes, peaches, or melons in August. Peaches are spoken about reverently and frequently in his letters and he notes in his August 27, 1937, letter that they “got up early this morning and got 14 qts peaches all canned by 9 a.m. They were so large and perfect they were easy to work. They averaged only 6 peaches to a quart... Incidentally, on the peaches, the J.H. Hale is proving to be much better than the Elberta. Larger, heavier yield, better flavors, better looks, and a little earlier.” Two days earlier on August 25<sup>th</sup>, he wrote

I have always liked peaches and like to grow them, and I have been planting them steady for over 50 years—but in all that time I never had such good peaches or so many of them. It has always been my ideal and ambition to be able to go out and pick delicious ripe peaches any time in the summer and fall—and now I have achieved that ambition. We have had peaches steady since June 20, and will have them till October 1<sup>st</sup>. Plenty of them all the time, and the finest I ever saw—every one perfect. I leave them on the tree to ripen naturally, till they are just ready to drop, then go over them every morning and pick the ripest ones. They gain about 50% in sweetners, flavor, and size that extra 3 or 4 days they get to hang on (Henry Field Letters, 1937).

Both the J.H. Hale and the Elberta peaches were sold in the 1931 catalog; today, only the Elberta is offered.

In addition to peaches, many letters make reference to the Missouri Giant Blackberry, which he considered quite a prize. In his letter dated August 23, 1937, Henry writes, “Say, tell people to go the limit on that Mo. Giant Blackberry. We have now canned 20 pints off of that one 3-year-old bush, besides having them on the table every day for a month. And they are still bearing. Some of the 1-yr bushes are bearing on the new wood, something I never saw a blackberry do before. They stand drouth perfectly.

Don't seem to affect them at all. It is still dry here. Two showers but not enough to do any good" (Henry Field Letters, 1937).

Henry's wife, Bertha, was also an avid gardener and established both a wildflower and a rock garden at their home in the Ozarks. In his letter of May Day, 1940, Henry writes about Bertha's gardens and about the lovely characteristics of the wild geraniums and blue bells growing in the area.

Bertha has been getting a lot of flowers up back of the acre garden too. Mostly timber phlox, anemone, spring beauty, and ferns. The Polemonium (ever blooming bluebells) are blooming lavishly. The more I see of it the better I like it. Every plant lived, both in sun and shade, and they are all making big clumps. Hope you can all try it next year. It can be set either fall or spring. I think it is the finest wild flower of all I have collected here." [He goes on to talk about other flowers that they collected.] Found a big patch of dutchmans breeches and several others which are not very common. Lots of wild geranium. (By the way that's a flower we ought to list in the catalog. Its a hardy wild flower that blooms about now, looks like a tame geranium but more graceful, grows in either shade or sun, and lives for years. Think I will try to collect some and grow it out in my garden.) (Henry Field Letters, 1940).

In addition to sharing Henry's passion for gardening and hiking in the woods, Bertha spent a good deal of time preserving and cooking the food that they grew in their gardens. Henry writes on September 29, 1936, how he "gathered some okra in the garden today, and we had a gumbo-chicken stew for dinner and it was so good we had what was left for supper. It was chicken, okra, green peppers, onion, sweet...and a little tomato and plenty of seasoning. We had baked Cushaw squash with it, and plenty of good homemade bread and home made butter and home canned peaches. I got my pansy bed weeded today—it was quite a job. No more now—want to listen to the President" (Henry Field Letters, 1929-1936). The following year he had this to say about Bertha's gardening and culinary endeavors in a letter dated March 5, 1937. "Bertha has been busy with her flowers and rock garden, cleaning up and transplanting, and weeding. Lots of flowers

come up volunteer from seed dropped in the fall especially larkspur, pansy, poppy, and pinks. She had her fingers in the dirt all day. But she did take time off to cook a good country dinner and supper—and how we did eat! Potatoes and canned fruit from the cave, milk and cream and eggs and meat from Ruth's [his daughter], and bacon and Field's Famous Coffee we brought with us, and some fresh baked bread and a glass of jelly. We sure didn't go hungry" (Henry Field Letters, 1937).

In his correspondence we also come away with a good idea about the variety of fruits and vegetables that he grew over the years and how he prepared his garden. For instance in his letter written on May Day 1940 Henry says,

We certainly have been making the dirt fly, and have got things pretty well caught up and cleaned up. Looks a lot different from what it did when we came. Got the whole garden cultivated over with the wheel hoe, some of it twice—most of it weeded—the strawberries re-mulched—the blackberries pruned—tomatoes set, also peppers and groundcherries and lots—of flowers—beans, sweetcorn, okra, melons, etc., planted in the garden (will plant bigger lots in the field over the wall later)...collected and set out a lot of new wild flowers—lined out a lot of seedlings of timber phlox—set the cannas and dahlias—planted the Scarlett O-hara moonflowers along the fence, also the big marigolds with them—made a sweetpotato ridge and got it set—reset and straightened up the everbearing strawberry bed in the garden—moved the stray pansies into orderly beds or rows—dusted the potatoes for potato bugs—set new stakes for the diamond vines and the clematis by the wall—set new pole wigwams for the hop vines and the moon-flowers—finished planting the artichokes—fixed the old fence so the pigs cant get though into the log cabin yard.—Well there are a lot more things we got done, but this is a sample. By the time we get supper over we are so tired we go to sleep trying to listen to the radio (Henry Field Letters, 1940).

While this is the effort that they put into getting the gardens prepared, his letter continues and he describes how they continue to eat well out of the garden.

We are eating mostly out of the garden and out of the cave. Have new asparagus, rhubarb and onions in the garden, and canned everything in the cave. Eating lots of rhubarb sauce (we cook it with seedless raisins). Have canned peaches, sweetcorn, beans, tomatoes, chicken, peppers, strawberries, groundcherries, blackberries, and cherries, from the cave and have tried all of them since we came down and they're all good. Had chile-con-carne last night for a change and I ate

most too much. Bertha bakes new white bread nearly every day, but we've had Missouri biscuits twice (Henry Field Letters, 1940).

In his Ozark garden, Henry uses the products sold in the catalog. For example, in his letters of May 30 and June 3, 1936, he writes that he succeeded in conquering a number of common garden insect pests using bug dust. "Hope orders are coming in good for the bug dust, and that you can keep them filled. It sure does the business. Not a bug of any kind in my garden (except cut worms). Melon bugs, squash bugs, and potato bugs, all wiped out." And, on June 3<sup>rd</sup> he wrote, "No bugs on the potatoes at all. Bug dust did away with them. Found a few striped melon bugs on the cucumbers, late comers or second crop. Gave them a shot, and they are gone now."

In the midst of the Depression in 1933, the year that the seed company was transferred to its bondholders, the catalog appeared with a comparatively plain cover—with a subtitle "Back to Calico Again!" This idea not only reflected the state of his seed business, but also the state of the nation. Once again, Henry connects with his customers in a straightforward manner, and one that reflects the tenor of the times. On the cover of the catalog he writes,

Most years my catalog is all dressed up in pretty colored pictures and I suppose some of you are going to be disappointed not to find the usual colorful illustrations. Well, in these times we have had to cut all the frills and fancies. I have been chopping off expenses in my business the same as you have had to cut corners in your home and one of the big items is the pretty cover for my catalog. So I fixed up this one instead... The truth is we have all got to get back to earth again and now is the time to get started. Begin at home. In the garden. Begin by 'raising your own groceries.' In the old days a family raised everything they needed to eat all summer and fall and then put up hundreds of jars of fruit and vegetables and berries to boot. We need to do it that way again. The sooner we do the better off we will all be.

On page one of the catalog, next to a picture of the Field family, Henry addresses his customers in a small article dated January, 1933—Another Year Gone.

I'd rather say it however that another year is coming. And of course we all hope it will be a better year, and I really believe it will. We've sure got a good place to reckon gains from. And we've learned our lesson and got down to earth, and are ready to say again 'Thank God for a Garden.' The man or woman with a good garden and plenty of vegetables and fruit and some flowers can be independent and busy and happy and well fed whether you have a job and a lot of money or not... Whether you live in town or country, whether you are on a farm or a town lot, whether you have room for an acre of garden or only a patch as big as a bedquilt--you can have a garden and pretty near feed the whole family off of it. If you're out of work, you can make a job or our garden. Work for yourself. Be your own boss. Grow your own groceries...And be sure to plant a big garden. Go through this book and make out your seed order. I've put prices down with the times (Field Papers, Seed Catalogs, 1929-1934).

With these words, Henry is not only promoting (perhaps inadvertently) Extension's Live-At-Home Program, but he is also speaking to his customers as individuals; individuals who have the potential, and with his help, the knowledge, to provide food for their families even during these lean years.

Not only do the catalogs reflect the times, they are a valuable source of data about the plants or seeds that were widely available at the time. Tomatoes, for example, were ubiquitous in the home garden and heavily promoted by Extension home demonstration agents. The Field catalogs offer a wide variety, although the numbers of kinds vary from year to year. For instance in the 1929 catalog there were 18 varieties of tomatoes, including bonny best, marglobe, and pink early june. In 1933, 21 varieties were offered, but by 1935-1936, only 16 and 15 varieties, respectively, were available. In 1936, the Rutgers tomato was first offered in his catalog and it continues to be found in the 2007 catalog. In 1937, 15 varieties of tomatoes are offered, and Henry recommends the Scarlet Cluster (not available in 2007) as the finest tomato grown because it has everything "that all other good sorts have and a lot more good points that many do not have. Good size, round, brilliant, scarlet red color throughout. Thick flesh with small seed cavity and very firm. This tomato ripens perfectly up to the top. No hard streaks or core, and no cracks.



Good for canning or any way you want to use it. Price: pkt. of 25 seeds 20 cents” (Field Papers, Seed Catalogs, 1935-1941). As the Depression lessens, the number of tomato varieties being offered gradually increases, so by 1940 and 1941, eighteen varieties of tomatoes are available again, including a new grape tomato.

In a special catalog edition for January 1, 1940 is an advertisement for buffalo grass for lawns. “There is something new under the sun after all—and we have it right here in this beautiful new lawn grass—buffalo grass. The picture shows it growing down at our No. 2 warehouse. Did you ever see such a beautiful flat carpet? It grew like that from about two hundred little plants we set out a year ago. It loves dry weather, spreads by runners, never gets tall enough to need mowing, holds its green color over all the dense mat it makes on the ground. 1 sq. foot of sod (275 plants enough for 200 sq. feet \$1.00 postpaid)” (Field Papers, Seed Catalogs 1935-1941). Buffalo grass, which as his advertisement suggests is drought resistant, is widely advertised in seed catalogs today for all of the characteristics described above.

As a public figure and despite his intensive love of gardening and his enthusiastic efforts to educate and promote the Depression-era vegetable garden in every home, Henry did realistically reflect on his life and the drought that parched the countryside. Writing in the July 1934 edition of *Field Family Circle*, he said, “The biggest news here [in Iowa] is that it is terribly hot and dry. Corn crop is a total loss in all of southern Iowa, and in fact all points south and west of Omaha. No corn crop at all. Garden all gone. No hay and not much fodder. It is worse even than the newspapers tell. Southern Missouri where Ruth and Georgia are is better than here, but not at all good...I suppose it is a sign of age—but I dread public life more and more every day I live. What I want is to be a

private citizen, with a garden and some fruit and timber, and a quiet life. I'm old and tired. Tired of the hurly burly, and the forced smiles, and the simulated energy, and all of the rest that goes with being a public character. I've had 50 years of it and feel like I've had enough" (Field Papers, Family Circle, 1933-1935).

### **Summary**

Through his infectious homey personality, his publications, and his radio station, Henry Field was able to educate, inspire, and create a Depression-era family of gardeners, primarily throughout the Midwest, but also in other parts of the country. His catalogs not only give us a glimpse into the history of horticulture and the change over the years in the promotion of different fruits and vegetables, but they also provide us with a window for examining the material culture of gardening at that time. The use of the wheel-hoe, for example, was featured prominently in several of my key informants' gardening experiences and was useful to Henry Field in his own gardens. Henry also encouraged and received letters from his customers, which were used as endorsements throughout the catalogs. He seemed to enjoy hearing from individuals and in having them visit his business establishment in Shenandoah and his home in the Missouri Ozarks.

While the Field catalog reached thousands of Missouri farm women, and many women bought seeds and gardening tools from his business, there were also some women who could probably not afford to buy seeds from a catalog and continued to purchase seeds from the local farm store. Despite the efforts by nurserymen and seed companies, women also continued to save the seeds of certain vegetables during the Depression.

The Henry Field Seed Company marketed its seeds and other merchandise through catalogs and radio broadcasts. Henry Field through these means reached a broad

audience of women who lived in rural and urban areas and who were encouraged to plant vegetable gardens to feed their families. We can see through the letters that he wrote to his colleagues that Henry was constantly experimenting with new plant material at the same time that he was commenting on the plant and tree offerings of the company.

In this chapter I also attempted to blend the information about gardening practices as told to me by my key informants with excerpts from Missouri farm journals, one farm woman's diary, and some of the University of Missouri College of Agriculture's publications. The chapter looked at the garden as a woman's space, seed saving, moon signs, watering the garden, and other practices that contribute to the look and feel of the Depression-era vegetable garden. The following chapter also draws on the information given to me by my key informants to paint a picture of farm life during the Great Depression.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Another garden shape that fosters a particularly productive garden is the so-called German Four Square Garden, which was brought to this country by German immigrants in the 1830s. While not practiced by any of my informants, this gardening tradition warrants inclusion here because it may have been practiced by Germans living in and around Hermann, Missouri. According to Erin McCawley Renn, German immigrants of all classes combined the traditional kitchen garden with the decorative flower garden. "The kitchen garden had a tightly structured underlying plan," she writes, "but the garden's framework allowed plants to be intermixed freely, and little or no effort was made to segregate flowers from the vegetables and the herbs, It was a happily jumbled mixture. The garden's traditional layout kept everything more or less under control, and the combinations of plants was felt to be beneficially synergistic" (1995:6). Among the plants grown in this garden were "vegetables, cooking herbs, flowers, medicinals, and plants with magical attributes such as house leeks (said to protect against building fires) (1995:7). The common garden layout was a rectangular plot, which was divided into four equal sections bounded by wide permanent paths made out of fine gravel, pebbles, flagstone, sand, brick, or tanbark, which met in the center. These gardens were fenced with "woven wood, palings, pickets, or similar poultry-tight and hog-proof wood fencing" (1995:7). In Germany, for winter food production, a second garden was usually established in the fields, where bulk crops such as potatoes, turnips, carrots, and

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cabbage were raised for people and livestock. This practice was transferred to the Missouri countryside where Germans settled, and only a limited number of these bulk food items would have been found in the kitchen garden. Among the crops grown for livestock were mangelwurzels, which were found in Henry Field's seed catalogs, and turnips.

The Germans planted a wide variety of vegetables, according to Renn. These included, "rhubarb, onions, leeks, garlic, chives, shallots, white cabbage, red cabbage, kohlrabi, kale, broccoli, peas to be eaten fresh and peas to be dried for winter soups, runner beans, sorrel, cresses, various lettuces, radishes, Brussel sprouts, celery celeriac, and tomatoes. By the later Nineteenth Century many Germans in the Hermann area were raising endive and celery cabbage (the same thing sold as Napa cabbage today)" (1995:11). Today, an example of this type of garden can be found at the Deutschheim State Historic Site in Hermann.

## CHAPTER 6

### **“IT WAS TO BE DONE”: THE ROLE OF FARM WOMEN DURING THE 1930s<sup>1</sup>**

It is generally acknowledged that women were essential if a farm was to succeed, especially during the 1930s. As a French peasant saying reminds us: “No wife, no cow, hence no milk, no cheese, neither hens, nor chicks, nor eggs...” (cited in Pederson 1992:161). Rural women’s lives during the first half of the twentieth century were dramatically different from those of women who lived in cities. Farm women were intimately integrated into the productive and reproductive life cycle of the family farm, unlike working urban women who tended to work on place and live in another. During the Depression, for example, women’s vegetable gardens not only enabled the family, and sometimes the extended family, to sustain themselves, but it also allowed women who had surplus produce to enter the marketplace and make a real economic contribution to the survival of the farm. Fink (1986) has observed that farm women in Iowa, for example had three kinds of relations to the household and market. The first two were particularly relevant to farm women during the Depression.

First, women have worked within the household or farm to produce the food, clothing, and personal services that have, to varying degrees, sustained the rural population. Second, still working within the household economic operation, they have produced goods (such as butter and eggs) that they have exchanged for other goods outside the household. Third, they have worked outside the household economic operation to earn money to support the household (p. 46).

This chapter has two principal goals. The first goal is to describe the everyday life of farm women in the United States during the Depression, generally from 1929-1941, and to look at the position that rural women held within the household and the marketplace. The first section, therefore, will review the traditional and sometimes surprising role that

women played on the farm by drawing on the existing historical, anthropological, geographical, and sociological literature. It also draws on the lived experiences of Missouri farm women during the Great Depression based primarily on information gleaned from my interviews with the nine key informants for this study. Although my sample of informants was small, their experiences during the Depression were similar to each other and reflected to a large extent the farming and gardening experiences of each other and of the women in neighboring states as described in the academic literature. It should be noted that eight out of the nine informants' families were native Missourians, whose relatives had originally come to Missouri from the states of Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee in the 1800s. One woman, Fern was in fact a fifth generation owner of her family's farm, the land having been given to them in 1813 after the New Madrid earthquake in the Missouri boot heel.<sup>2</sup> Several of my informant's families had owned their own farms, but when the Depression hit the bank recalled their loans and they became renters, some moving from farm to farm during the 1930s.

Most of the farms that the informants lived on in the 1930s were between 60 and 80 acres in size; although with each succeeding generation more acres were added in some instances. Bailie in her study of the Hallsville, Missouri, community found that the average farm in open-country varied in size from 40 to 600 acres, but that the majority were 80, 50, or 60 acres, with an average being 108.51 acres (1938:98). This is consistent with the findings of my study. Fannie, for instance, said that her family's farm was a small 80-acre farm, but that was all you "needed when you farm everything with horses. I can remember him [Dad] walking all day long following a team and a cultivator that you walked behind to plow that corn; but I could always hear him singing. He would sing

church hymns.” Several farms, however, were larger; for example, Lonnie’s family farm in Dade County was about 320 acres or a half-section; Clara’s farm in Callaway County was originally 173 acres to which they added 40 acres later on. Both of these farms were owned by the family during the 1930s and were rather more than subsistence farms in that they had profitable poultry flocks, as well as raised crops and livestock for the marketplace.

A typical Missouri farmstead in the 1930s most often included livestock, such as milking cows, workhorses, poultry (turkeys and chickens), beef cattle, and hogs. Several of the informants remembered fondly their pony, which they rode into the pastures carrying water to the threshing crews. One family owned goats, which were used for meat. Among the crops that were grown at this time were oats (especially to feed the horses), corn, wheat, barley, and hay. Some families sold their crops, such as corn; others used what they raised to feed the livestock.

Overall, my research aims to explore women’s lived experiences on the farm, particularly with respect to the tasks that are traditionally viewed as women’s work in order to begin to understand how these women’s lives were shaped by their larger social relationships and also their relations with other women. Dorothy Smith’s notion that the everyday world is problematic will help us to understand the social relations that rural women engaged in as they interacted with their families and communities, particularly around their vegetable gardens, which is the focus of my research. Hopefully, by using the vegetable garden as a lens to examine the actual lived experiences of the female half of the rural population during the Great Depression, the chapter will, as Marjorie DeVault suggests in her book, *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research*, try to “...find

what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed, and to reveal both the diversity of actual women's lives and the ideological mechanisms that have made some many of those lives invisible" (1999: 30-31).

The second goal of the chapter is to look closely at the ways that women were connected to other women during the Depression. In this regard, we will look at the role of the radio and at an organization that promoted the general well-being of farm women and rural living—the Women's Progressive Farmers' Association (WPFA) of Missouri. This chapter will look at the role of the WPFA in helping support farm women in their everyday activities and encouraging them to become politically active individuals, especially by working for peace in the United States as World War II loomed in Europe. In Chapter 9 we will look at home demonstration agents who also worked with farm women during the Depression through home economics clubs, but which were in greater abundance and perhaps a little less politically active than the WPFA.

### **Gendered Division of Labor**

In the September 1, 1931, issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*, the editor, John F. Case, wrote about the tenor of the times with this relatively optimistic assessment of rural life, and the relative importance of women's work on the farm.

Farm folks have been hard hit. There is no denying it. The price paid for farm products is distressingly low; the things we must buy, many of them, still are alarmingly high. We must have more money for what we produce or our farm dollar must buy more. Either that or agriculture, which has breasted every storm, will eventually go down. Yet there are no bread lines in the country. In the South the lesson of food production for home use has been learned. In Missouri we have enough and to spare. Mother has said it with canned goods, with dried fruits and corn. And there will be hams and bacon in the smokehouse and vegetables in the cellars and caves. The wolf will not howl at farm doors. In the cities one meets hungry men; honest, hard-working heads of families who must ask charity for their loved ones. God, how that must hurt! At least we of the farms have food. And, after all, food and shelter is the most basic need of life. With the turn of the



tide we will have more. But in this uncertain year the family head who can look with faith and confidence to the winter and say “No real necessity, no little luxury will be wanting in my home” had something to be very thankful for (73: 4).

The traditional early 20<sup>th</sup> century farm family has been described in detail by Mary Neth in her book, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940*. Drawing on diaries and oral histories of midwestern farm men and women, Neth portrays the family farm as being sustained by the labor of its inhabitants: “on the family farm, there were no separate spheres for women and men...Family space joined economic space. [And] family farming did not separate the jobs of men, women, and children; it tied them together” (1995:17). While the farm enterprise was generally dominated by the male head of the household, women’s labor was necessary for the family-owned farm to succeed. Neth continues: “although the structure of agriculture favored men, the practices of family farming not only made men dependent on their families for success, but also encouraged them to define their success in familial terms... Family members’ return for their labor came not through an individual wage, but through a share of the living the farm provided and an assurance that the farm would be a resource for the family’s future” (1995:18).

My study builds on the work Neth and others. This section explores the lives of farm women who lived in Missouri during the Depression and who, like farm women in other regions of the country, gardened to put food on the table for their families but were, in addition, responsible for the smooth running of the household, which included sewing, cooking, doing laundry, maintaining flower beds, caring for the children, and supervising any household help. The gendered division of labor where men were responsible for working in the fields and women in the house and surrounding environs met in the

barnyard (Neth 1995:19). Women in many instances were primarily responsible for the poultry flock and sometimes helped with the livestock, including milking cows.

However, the men rarely, if ever, participated in any of the housecleaning or cooking activities or what was considered women's work.

The mutual relationships that had to be developed and maintained for the overall sustainability of the Missouri family farm has been the subject of a number of academic publications (Neese 1986; Bailie 1938; Hill 1929), as well as Neth (1995) and Pickle (2004). An example of this interdependence of the farm family continues to this day among the Old Order Amish, as they live their lives much like mainstream Americans did at the turn of the twentieth century. Among the Amish the social roles between husband and wife are severely demarcated with the wife generally taking care of the children, cooking and cleaning, preparing food for the marketplace, making the family's clothing, preserving food, and gardening. According to John Hostetler in his book, *Amish Society*, the woman's status is related to the extent to which she produces economic goods—“Goods produced on Amish farms, such as fruits and vegetables, meats, and dairy products, help to support the family. Women are productive because they are engaged in subsistence agriculture and they also produce children needed for work on the family farm. They preserve large quantities of meat and vegetables for the family... Women who live on farms are accorded greater economic importance than Amish women who live in other settings. The Amish on the whole recognize the important contributions women make. Men cannot farm without wives and vice versa” (1993:150).

### **On The Farmstead: Always Plenty of Work**

According to Mary Neth, “Most studies of agriculture have paid little attention to women’s labor, but it proved crucial for improving farm families’ standards of living.” [And] she goes on to say, “Food production constituted a major contribution to farm incomes” (1995:31). A discussion of women’s vegetable gardens and how they maintained an elevated farm income and generally provided a balanced diet for the farm family is found later in this chapter. The present discussion will focus on some of the other aspects of the farm woman’s daily life and productive labor as told to me by my informants and as described in various documents about farm life in Missouri during the Great Depression.

The purpose of this section is to paint a picture of the nature of women’s work on the farm and to examine the everyday aspects of their lives during the Great Depression. Specifically, the section discusses how farm women managed to be both household producers and consumers, especially with regard to their vegetable gardens and other productive activities. It should be acknowledged, however, that the realities of farm women’s lives and thus their experiences during the Depression differed substantially depending on their race, class, and geographic location.

While different gardening and poultry raising practices frequently yielded different results, there were a number of responsibilities common to farm women throughout the Midwest. Deborah Fink in her book *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* suggests that within family limits, farm women were responsible for “housework, subsistence production, production for exchange, and personal care of the members of the household. . . Only a minority worked outside of family business operations. Although there was a division of labor by sex, women in her study spanned

what is usually called the private sphere (home) and the public sphere (commerce)” (1986:45-46). In Fink’s study of Nebraska farm women, while it was acknowledged that plains farming would not have been possible without women, she found that “their indispensability was embedded in the institution of the nuclear family, which limited and constrained any power they might have garnered through their economic activities...[and in fact]...the mainstream of public (male) discourse reemphasized farming as the soul of the country and identified women’s sacrifices as critical to the survival of farm life” (1992: 190).

Women who remained on farms during the 1930s undertook new responsibilities in caring for their families. Self-sufficiency was the hallmark of the family farm during the Depression, and woman probably intensified home production in order to survive (Fink 1986). Madge J. Reese of the Federal Extension Service in a radio address on May 17, 1933, delivered on the Land Grant radio program, acknowledged the hard times of the Depression and paid tribute to the increase in household production accomplished by farm women. She said,

Rural America can always be depended upon to rise to meet situations in time of adversity. Several millions of the six million farm families are making themselves the masters of their own destiny, intelligently studying living problems and hitting upon a sensible solution, in spite of the low price of farm commodities. With an adequate garden, poultry flock, ample storage or home cured and canned meats, and a full pantry of canned fruits and vegetables for winter, planned by a balanced canning budget, if you please, farm families are facing the world with confidence...Raising from 40 to 60% of the food supply has been about the rule on good farms in the past. Many farm families are now raising 75 to 90%. In 1932, farm women in 33 states increased family incomes by conducting 505 cooperative markets selling \$1,150,000 of farm home products. This income helped to keep the family automobiles running, children in school, pay taxes and buy groceries (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Home Economics Papers, Miscellaneous, 1933-1935, C993, File 23).

In addition to household tasks, women's farm work frequently included milking the cows, but always included processing the milk for home use and "cleaning the milking equipment and washing the blades of the centrifugal cream separator" (Fink 1986:51). In between their other chores, milking cows and making butter were done by a few of my key informants. Cleaning the cream separator was a job that was tedious and was assigned to various members of the family but most often was done by the farm woman herself. Lonnie recalled that his family had a DeLaval separator, which was a standard household item. "Milk was run through the separator and cream was siphoned off. The skim milk was sent out to the hogs because nobody would think of drinking it; we drank the whole milk. Mother cleaned the separator. It was a whale of a job with all of those little disks. I helped with it many times." Elizabeth washed the separator in her household: "Well, I guess it took a lot of patience. You had to take every one of those 24 little discs that were in the center where the milk goes through. Take them individually and wash them good or you've got corrosion that forms between them. They have to be washed properly or you won't get it clean." Fern recalled that her mother also cleaned the separator and that she never said anything about it. "She'd just get into something and she just did it. She didn't fuss about it." Josie remembered that she and her mother washed the separator, which she still had. "It was a laborious and long task. No one liked to wash the separator."

Sales of butter, eggs, and cream provided income for many farm households; this work was always done by the women. A Nebraska farm wife in the 1930s reported that she "raised chickens and sold eggs. We milked cows and so once a week we went to town with the cream and eggs. Then I bought my groceries" (Fink 1992:107). Fink found that

similar stories abounded. Another woman who ran a grocery store that swapped groceries for butter and eggs said, “People used their eggs and cream money to buy groceries. It was their only means of income. They never paid cash” (1992:107).

Farm women did a lot of sewing, and feed sack dresses were common during the hard times of the Depression according to my key informants. Josie recalled that her mother made all of her own clothes and clothing for the children. “We bought feed for the chickens and they were in print sacks. So that’s what we made our dresses from. So mother, when she would buy she would try to find the same print to match so you would have at least three sacks alike. The clerks used to say, just as sure as a lady came in she would want the one on the bottom and they would have to move the whole stack to get to the certain one [that matched].” Other informants also remember having dresses made of feed sacks that were worn all the time. In the March 1, 1938 issue of *The Missouri Farmer* was a small article entitled, “Don’t Waste Your Flour Bags,” which suggested that if there are children in the home, making flour bag clothing for play was a means of saving pennies and providing them with attractive clothes. The article also gave the recipe for removing the stamping from the bag, which involved “applying lard or kerosene to the bags overnight, and then washing in lukewarm water” (30:19).

On Mondays farm women did laundry; on Tuesdays they ironed. Laundry was an exhausting affair because water was often hauled from long distances and they had to rely on their own home-made lye soap to wash with. Some fortunate women had gasoline powered washers as did Josie’s mother. “She did the laundry. Our washing machine was one that had a gasoline motor. You had to tromp on the thing to start the motor. Before the washing machine mother just used a washboard to scrub the laundry. She used lye

soap that she made herself and she would put the white clothes in the boiler (a big tub) and boil them on top of the stove. Every once in a while she would punch the clothes down with an old broom handle that had been cut off. They always came out looking nice. She would pick the clothes up one at a time on that broomstick and let it drain. Then she'd put it over in cold water and then ring it out there and then put it through another rinse water. They had bluing—little balls of blue—that you tied up in a cloth and it made your water blue. It helped to make the clothes white.”

Providing nutritious food for the farm family was a primary caring responsibility of the farm woman. Some of the informants reported that they and their mothers sometimes relied on cookbooks or on recipes that were exchanged at club meetings, or recipes that were clipped from *Capper's Weekly*. Some farm women at this time many have used cookbooks periodically, but more had recipes stored in their heads that were passed down through the family; they just knew how to cook, plan, and coordinate the family meal, or eventually learned how through trial and error. Clara learned from her mother-in-law, but most came to understand what their family members' preferences were and complied with them. As was noted earlier, not all of my informants used cookbooks, nor did their mothers as many of them mentally recalled family recipes and produced meals based on experiential knowledge. A number of women in my study reported that they exchanged recipes with fellow club members, or that they tried recipes found in farm journals or *Capper's Weekly*. Elizabeth, for example, said that she tried new recipes found in *Capper's Weekly* and in the *Missouri Ruralist*, which has a women's page that always had some recipes in it. Some of the recipes from *Capper's Weekly* and the Missouri farm journals are found in Appendix 3.

Many informants reported on such favorite family recipes ranging from sauerkraut, to green beans, to canned meat, to breakfast biscuits. Fannie remembered that her mother never measured anything and didn't even own measuring cups and measuring spoons. On the other hand, she made the best biscuits and yeast bread imaginable and served them for breakfast every morning. "I've never tasted anything better. She had this big bread wooden dough tray, she called it, and the flour was in that, and you put in a pinch of soda, and you put in a pinch of baking powder, and put in so much of whatever. She'd say 'put in a dab of that. Really, I don't feel like I learned to cook until I took home economics and learned the proper measurements of things.'" But, of course, my grandmother raised a big family and that's the same way they cooked, you know....I love to cook. I remember the first thing that I bought mother was measuring cups and spoons and tried to educate her on how to cook. And dad would always take up for mother. He's say, 'Now don't you mess up mother's good biscuits.'"

Like Fannie's mother, other mothers also cooked by feel. Emma went so far as not to wanting to eat anything but her mother's cooking. "She was a good cook. We would go to picnics or family dinners and I wouldn't eat anybody else's food but my mothers. I would not eat anybody's food. My mom would say, 'Emma, go get somebody else's food to eat.' And I would say, 'I don't want it mom, I want your food.' I think that she was a little aggravated even though it made her feel good."

Farm women always had to keep in mind the food preferences of the family. for example, one of my key informants, Lonnie, reported that although his mother was sensitive to the fact that his father did not like garden peas, they continued to be part of his mother's garden plan. Another informant said that her mother stopped raising peas



because her father disliked shelling them. Many informants reported that their mothers made meals and especially deserts that were appealing to them as children, and that many meals were based on a special family recipe. Clara, for instance, said that she was an old-time cook and did not make fancy dishes, but ones based largely on her German heritage. Among the meals prepared by her mother that were personal favorites were bean and tater soup, snitzels, and those meals that included her mother's special recipe for sausage. Several other informants indicated that their mothers could cook anything and it would taste good. Green beans were a favorite in Hettie's family. "Of course we had potatoes. We'd cook the little potatoes with the green beans and that was always good, particularly good for my husband."

Emma reported that her mother's gooseberry pie was delicious and that she would do anything to get a piece. She recalled a time when "my sister and I were playing and I fell off and hit my head against the corner of the house. Knocked me unconscious and I remember my mom was making gooseberry pie just before I went out to play. And when I came in I was unconscious; Thelma laid me down on the cot. In the meantime, the folks ate supper. The first thing I said when I woke up was 'Did you save me some gooseberry pie?' And mom said, 'We saved you some pie.' That's all I could think about was that gooseberry pie. You had to go out in the timber and pick gooseberries."

Geographic location during the Great Depression often predicted a farm woman's lifestyle. The reality for white tenant farm women in the South depended upon the type of farming occupation of her husband. Because women usually shared the occupation with their husbands, the type of farming determined "whether they will spend a considerable part of the year in chopping, hoeing, and picking cotton or in planting, suckering,

worming, 'saving,' and 'stripping' tobacco" (Hagood 1939:5). During hard times when tenants lost all their stock or the gardens were ravaged by beetles, some tenant families' diets were wholly inadequate resulting in dietary deficiencies that caused illnesses in the children, including pellagra and rickets" (Hagood 1939:103). While field work was expected of Southern tenant farmer's wives, farm women living in the Midwest also participated in farm commodity production.

The extent to which woman labored in the fields, however, appears to have depended on ethnic origin and the relative prosperity of the farm. More prosperous farmers were able to hire men to do field work and chores, most subsistence farmers were not. Having hired hands, however, did not lessen the women's work because workers had to be fed, and in many cases, hired hands' laundry and mending were part of the women's responsibility. African American women historically always worked as unpaid laborers in the fields, especially "where sharecropping was the primary mode of production" (Sachs 1983:24). While it is a matter of status that white men can keep their women in the home, there were some white women who preferred working in the fields rather than remaining in the home doing housework (Hagood 1939:89) Not only did it allow a woman to work closely with her husband, it also provided an avenue to socialize with other women and possibly neighbors.

Neese (1986) in her study of Missouri farm women found that the women she interviewed recognized their important contribution to the farm in their productive roles as workers and their roles as homemakers. In her study of rural Wisconsin families, who were mostly of Scandinavian descent, Pederson (1992) discovered that these women knew that their work was essential to their family and household economy, and they took

pride in the fact that they were equal to the challenges and tasks they faced. Through their work, these farm women claimed responsibility and power within the farm household (Pederson 1992:185). Using oral histories, farm journals, and government publications, Dorothy Schwieder showed that South Dakota farm women played “significant, perhaps even crucial economic roles in keeping farm families on the land and in providing food and clothing for family members” during the Depression (1985:6).

In her book, *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women*, Joan Jensen writes that, “recent research all indicates the importance of women to the economic history of America. Most farm women have always believed in their fundamental contribution to the welfare of their families and community, but we need to document that contribution. Women have not always received confirmation of their importance” (1991:82). In addition, the notion of power and responsibility is frequently reinforced or changed during times of social and economic upheaval, such as the Great Depression, as women tended to break out of their traditional roles and assume new or intensify old responsibilities (Fink 1988:60; Neese 1986:149; O’Brien and Patsiorkovsky 2006).

### ***Household Beautification***

In various publications, including the *Missouri Ruralist* and in club newsletters, farm women were encouraged to beautify the outside of their homes by planting shrubs and flowers, including local wildflowers transplanted from the woods (Brazelton 1939:13; Heyle and Muilenberg 1928; Jordan 1937). Flower gardens were important to my informants as well and many exchanged seeds at club meetings; some also exchanged seeds with neighbors and friends. While none of these women planted their flowers in the vegetable gardens, many tended flower beds at the edge of their gardens. Elizabeth

recalled that her flowers were in separate beds: “I think that I had about every color of Iris there were; I had daylilies, beautiful daylilies. I had jonquils and daffodils, and paper white narcissus; and I had Japanese Iris (both a dark, dark purple and a white) and Persian Iris, which was a light purple Iris.” Lonnie remembered that his mother always had flowers; she raised cosmos, zinnias, bachelor buttons, marigolds, morning glories. Her flower beds were around the edges of the yard, near the house. She didn’t integrate flowers into the garden, but there would also be some flowers along the edge of the garden. Emma’s mother also had flowers at the edge of the garden, including zinnias and gladiolas; and she would frequently bring them into the house in a bouquet, but mostly she liked to see them out there in the garden. It is interesting to note that Paul Dempsey in his revised edition of *Grow Your Own Vegetables* (1944), suggested that growing flowers, particularly zinnias, marigolds, gladiolus, and dahlias, added “a touch of gaiety to the more humdrum vegetables, give you a profusion of cut flowers for your home, and will probably do even better than the ones in your regular flower garden” (p. 178).

### ***Educational Material and Publications***

One of the Depression-era publications that was taken by most of my informants’ families was *Capper’s Weekly*. According to Randall Hill’s 1929 study of Missouri farm families, “Of the 154 farm papers read, the *Missouri Ruralist* and *Capper’s Weekly* were each read by more than one-half of the families,” followed by *Successful Farming* with 41 percent (p. 98). In addition, he found that more than one-half of the families also read an additional farm journal, which included *Dairy Farmer*, *Capper’s Farmer*, *Farm Life*, *Wallace’s Farmer*, *Farm Mechanics*, *Farm & Fireside*, *Missouri Farmer and Breeder*, *American Poultry Journal*, *Live Stock Farmer*, *Live Stock Producer*, *American Fruit*

*Growers' Journal, Farm Production, Farm Journal, and Stock and Home Journal.* Some of these farm journals had women's pages or departments. With respect to women's magazines, of the 70 families studied, 45 of them took women's magazines, including *Household, Better Homes and Gardens, The Ladies Home Journal,* and *McCall's Magazine* (p. 98-99).

Many gardening ideas and recipes came from *Capper's Weekly*. Elizabeth recalled that she loved that paper. At one home economics achievement day she said, "My neighbor and I put on a little play for the Fairview club and she was the man. She dressed up like a man; I was a lady and we had our charts there and I told them when to plant and I got this out of the *Capper's Weekly*. I just had read it and that lady sent in a notice and it said that if you want to use your onions as green onions, plant your onions kind of deep and you get more white on your onion. If you are making them to keep, don't put them very deep and you don't have that much white on your onion. I thought that was good advice and I used it an awful lot. In that demonstration (I told my husband), now Hazel don't put these deep because we want these to harvest. I explained to him that you put them deep when you want a lot of white. There was a man from the University there (I don't remember his name), but he was down for our achievement day. He laughed about that one; he got up afterwards and said that he didn't know that. I got that idea out of *Capper's Weekly*. It was a regular in our house during the Depression. I like the little homey letters that were written in to it. It was things that you were experiencing yourself. Lots of the recipes came from *Capper's Weekly*; the *Missouri Ruralist* had a home (women's) page in there that always had some recipes in it." Josie also remembered that her family subscribed to *Capper's Weekly*: "that's an old, old

paper. Mother and daddy had *Capper's Weekly* during the Depression years. People at that time would trade a hen or an old battery, they'd trade something if they didn't have cash. *Capper's* gives the monthly review of planting days—good planting days, poor days, seed will rot.”

In addition to providing information about planting dates, *Capper's Weekly* also had a woman's page called “In the Heart of the Home—The Homemaking Side of Things” by Kate Marchbanks and contributors. There were also weekly features, including “The Poultry Woman,” “The Story Tellers,” “Stamps and Coins,” “These Times,” by Arthur Brisbane, “The World's Doings,” by T.A. McNeal, “Abel Teaser's Boys and Girls,” and serialized stories, which included “The Sea Wolf,” by Jack London. A letter from Senator Arthur Capper commenting on the political and farm scene was also included in most editions. Issues published from January though June also contained a feature, “Flowers, Fruits, and Garden Sass,” by Fred B. Lee. Topics covered in this column included how to grow dahilas, growing early tomatoes and cabbages, drawing a garden plan when the catalogs begin to arrive, reporting on new gardening ideas, such as paper mulching, identifying the best all-around tomato (which he sees as Marglobe), and suggestions for insect control, including using wood ashes around melons, squashes, and cucumbers. In his January 26, 1935 column, Fred Lee touts the benefits of the home vegetable garden. He suggests that when the garden is properly managed it “may be made to supply an astonishingly large variety and quantity of produce at far less than the same quality and quantity of purchased food would cost. And such gardens may contain small fruits and often flowers. The food value of vegetables should not be under-estimated because they supply certain thins needed by the body but not obtainable from meat or

grains...The home garden insures freshness which, with many vegetables, is essential to their best condition for the table” (60:5).

Senator Arthur Capper paid tribute to the important family and community work that women do in the December 1929 issue. His speech, which was delivered on October 30, 1929 at Washington over 22 radio stations of the National Broadcasting chain, was entitled “Woman’s Part in Rural Life” and was reproduced in *Capper’s Weekly*. In essence he attributes all that is good on the farm and in the community to the work of women. He writes that “The male pioneer is an adventurer. He may discover—he does not build. It requires the influence of women to build up a permanent type of life. Especially is this true in rural life. Without women we could not have developed the great Middle West as it is today. The farm is different from every other business in that it is not only an economic enterprise, but a home partnership...[A woman] guarded her family from famine, from disease, from human enemies, from moral influences...In every predominantly rural state we have always found women on the side of progressive legislation...The thing that is outstanding in all of these activities of rural women is their combination of the practical and the idealistic” (*Capper’s Weekly* 54:2).

The next two sections describe two of the farm women’s major producing roles, that is, poultry production and growing and preserving food for the family from their vegetable gardens. These two critical responsibilities are ubiquitous in the literature and in the stories told to me by the individuals who I interviewed for this study. In many cases, these two small-scale production activities, which were intensified during the Depression, enabled the farm family to remain on the land and maintain some level of an adequate diet.

### ***“Mother Raised Chickens”***

Learning how to raise chickens was a skill that many women learned from their mothers. It was generally agreed that engaging in a profitable poultry enterprise required a significant amount of skill and knowledge as well as hard work (Schwieder 1985:12). Increasingly throughout the 1930s, poultry advice became more specific in *Dakota Farmer* and in other publications, including Extension Research Bulletins and farm journals.<sup>3</sup>

Like most midwestern farm women, Martha Friesen, who lived in Southwestern Kansas, was responsible for the “money-making” poultry flock (Riney-Kehrberg 1993). In 1935, for example, sales from her chickens and egg enterprise netted a profit of \$181.91, which was \$47.91 above the profit from her husband’s sales of wheat (p. 189). Without the poultry operation, which was largely considered woman’s work, many farms would not have survived the Depression. “Daily chicken chores consisted of feeding and carrying water and gathering eggs....Farm women did the work of cleaning and processing the chickens which were to be consumed on the farm. Sometimes men would do the unpleasant task of actually killing the chickens; but plucking, cleaning, drawing, and cutting up the butchered fowl were woman’s tasks” (Fink 1986:50-51).

South Dakota farm women faced some of the same environmental and social challenges in providing food for their families as did women in Kansas and Nebraska. Poultry and egg production of farm women in South Dakota during this time also brought in extra cash that could be traded for staples and clothing at local shops. According to census figures and other sources, during the 1930s in South Dakota, many women raised large flocks of chickens containing over 400 birds; while others had between 500 to 600 chickens in their flocks (Schwieder 1985:11).



Fink (1988) found that women during the Depression intensified their production for local exchange. The *Nebraska Farmer* reported that women sold garden plants, baby ducks, canned goods, cottage cheese, butter, hooked rugs, and made yeast cakes to earn extra money. Other women reported providing room and board to local teachers to get added income. In addition to poultry production and other entrepreneurial activities, women were primarily responsible for the family vegetable garden and for processing its products.

In Southern Illinois, Jane Adams found that women in her study became petty commodity producers and produced a wide variety of products for home consumption and the urban market. They raised poultry for meat and eggs and sold dairy products as whole cream, butter, and cottage cheese, in addition to supplying the regional market with dried apples, flowers, and duck and goose down (1994:88). During the later years of the Depression, one woman in Adams' study dressed chickens and brought them into town to her regular customers, which included providing about thirty-five to forty dressed chickens for a local hotel each week (p. 89). Another woman in Adams' study, Clara Davidson, ran a 1,000-hen operation with her brother. They supplied the Union County Hospital with eggs for twenty years (p. 91). Large poultry flocks were also common among Missouri farm women. In fact, Missouri was one of the largest egg producing states at the time. In 1929, for example, 180,349,976 dozen chicken eggs were produced in the State. This number fell considerably as the Depression worsened and in 1934, only 118,283,536 dozen eggs were produced. Production increased somewhat during the 1930s and by 1939 124,586,595 dozen eggs were produced in the State (U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1942, p. 233).

Some of my informants used their extra garden produce and eggs to barter for selected groceries at the store, or to sell at local “farmer’s markets.” Elizabeth recalled bringing extra produce every Saturday to the fairgrounds. Others sold eggs in exchange for groceries. Josie’s mother would take eggs into town and she’d buy flour and sugar and coffee. It was mainly at the grocery store that she’d exchange her eggs for the groceries. Hettie recalled that they didn’t have a big flock of chickens, but that she sold eggs to the grocery store. “We’d exchange eggs for groceries. It just went in on the ticket and you’d pay what was left.”

The importance of raising poultry to the purse of the farm woman cannot be overemphasized. In the February 1, 1931, issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*, the profitability of the farm flock was noted in the “In Our Homes” section in an article entitled “Your Poultry will make your pin money for you.” This particular farm woman wrote in about raising chickens and how they have increased the farm income and what she was able to purchase with this so-called pin money.<sup>4</sup> “I use my money to furnish my house, buy shrubbery for my lawn; also to buy a few clothes. Each year I plan just what I want to buy with the money I make that year, and I have nearly always accomplished what I started to do, until this bad year. But I did manage to buy me a new Perfection coal oil range” (p. 10). The monies that this farm woman worked for were assets that she controlled and that she allocated to improving the efficiency and beauty of her household.

In the same article, another woman wrote that she had a new modern twelve-room house that she was trying to help furnish with the money that she had earned from her poultry flock. “I have furnished two bedrooms completely. Papered every room except kitchen and bath. I enameled them, bought a new linoleum for the kitchen, rugs for

floors, and drapes for the whole house; also a lot of small articles, such as a vacuum sweeper, pressure cooker and other cook vessels. This year I am helping send one of my daughters to school. All these things I have done with money from my chickens” (p. 10).

In Bailie’s study of rural Hallsville women, all of the open-country women kept chickens and all sold eggs. In the Spring, they sold between 5 and 45 dozen eggs a week (1938:101). The women in open-country in addition to raising chickens as broilers for home consumption would also take a “few chickens to the village store, or even to Columbia or Centralia, and exchange them for other supplies” (1938:102). Women in my study also sold eggs and raised chickens for home consumption and the marketplace. The number of chickens cared for by the women in my study ranged from a few dozen that supplied the family and some neighbors with eggs and meat to hundreds of chickens that supplied local institutions with eggs and meat and provided an income for those farm families.

Lonnie recalled that his mother raised both broilers and laying hens. “She’d buy them as baby chicks, or hatch the eggs. We had an incubator in the house and if we didn’t have eggs that were fertile, which we didn’t often have because she didn’t want to keep roosters with her hens, we’d often buy the hatching eggs and incubate them at home. It takes 21 days for a chicken egg to hatch and I can remember so well—she would have to turn those eggs every few days. It takes 3 weeks of a warm environment with moisture to hatch an egg. Then after they are hatched, we’d put them out in a brooder house; if they were laying Leghorns, the hens, of course, were kept for laying and the Cockerels were sacrificed for fried chicken. We also raised broilers. She had a couple of broiler houses.

We'd usually buy those as chicks; they were heavy breeds, chicks and raise them up to about 3 pounds and sell them by the truck load. We hauled them to town to sell."

Lonnie continued speaking about his mother's chicken enterprises. "She had two laying houses for laying hens; it was usual practice to let the hens out in the afternoon and let them graze around. Dad would plant wheat or oats near the chicken houses and they would graze that in the afternoon. Then they would go into their house at night. They were always locked up at night. The broilers, of course, were never let out at all. They stayed in their house or an adjacent fenced yard. They never got very far from the house. She would raise about 400-500 broilers each year. As long as I remember she [mother] had broilers. We moved the broiler houses in fact. There were two square houses and daddy cut them in half and moved a half on a truck and it took two loads to each make one house and we moved two houses from Capplinger Mills to Greenfield, 30 miles. That was our broiler houses; we didn't move the laying houses because they were too big. But she built two laying houses at the new farm. It was the first thing we did."

Fern's mother also raised chickens and turkeys. Fern remembered that her mother had a big pen out close to the grapes and people would come and buy her turkeys. One of the most concrete benefits of poultry was using their manure to fertilize the vegetable garden. The next section describes the processing and storing of vegetables grown in the garden as reported to me by my key informants and as found in various magazines and publications of the times.

### ***Vegetables for Home Consumption and Exchange***

While family members worked in the garden during the growing season, it was the farm woman's job almost exclusively to preserve the fruits and vegetables. Like

gardening practices, many canning techniques were passed down from mother to daughter. During this period, women canned about everything that it was possible to can, and canned it in the least possible time from harvesting to canning. In fact, it was generally recommended that the vegetables be fresh and that if they are not canned that day, they are not fit to can (Ahlquist 1935). Canning and preserving garden produce as it matured in the garden was one of the principle chores mentioned in Pearle Henderson Pipes' diary. In October 1932, for example, she wrote the following entries: "October 22: Today I have spent in the garden; finished gathering butter beans. October 26: I have hulled butter beans all day. Hardly knew what to do first. I processed 4 quarts of butter beans. Fannie helped me shell butter beans this pm a while. October 27: I shelled butter beans this am; got 6 quarts processed and ironed this pm. Was so tired by the time night came." During the next seven years, she was still active in her garden. During a typical May, for example, she would pick or gather and can asparagus, rhubarb, strawberries (for most of the day), peas and some berries, and end the month by making strawberry preserves. During the following month she canned spinach, mustard, asparagus, beets, chard, and beans, and made raspberry preserves and applesauce. In August, tomatoes, butter beans, and corn were canned; in September peaches, more tomatoes, grapes and kraut got canned. On her 59<sup>th</sup> birthday, September 21, 1935, she worked in the garden all day gathering beans and butter beans; two days later she was back in the kitchen canning beans, tomatoes, black-eyed peas and grapes (Pipes Diaries, 1931-1937). Her diary entries are interesting because they show the variety of vegetables that were grown in the home garden and the rhythm of the seasonal work that preserving the produce entailed. They also indicate what was important to her and what she wanted a record of.

Before the pressure canner farm women canned vegetables using a hot water bath method, which involved putting filled jars into a large container or boiler on top of the stove and keeping the water boiling steadily for a prescribed amount of time. Another method frequently used was to preserve vegetables was to cold pack them. Canning was a time consuming endeavor, especially since it was recommended that the “vegetables for canning should be fresh, tender, and sound. Thirty minutes from garden to jar ready for processing should be the ideal to work for. If it is not possible to can a vegetable soon after harvesting, it should be kept cool. Loss of vitamins and minerals start from the time the crop is picked” (Dempsey 1944:147).

Canning with a pressure canner was promoted by Extension home demonstration agents and facilitated by farm organizations, such as the Farm Bureau. In the April 1, 1939 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*, there was a small story entitled, “Pressure Cookers for Rent.” Apparently, the Stoddard County Farm Bureau purchased two pressure cookers and a tin can sealer for use of the women of the county. The pressure cookers and sealer was used by the home demonstration agent for demonstration purposes, but could also be rented by women throughout the county for 10 cents a day or 50 cents a week (1939:13).

Clara recalled that when “we were kids we canned in a big wash bowl. There were 14 quart jars that set in it and we set them on the cook stove. We did not have any electricity or anything. We set them on the cook stove and boiled them. We had to boil them three hours.” A pressure cooker was the first thing she bought for herself after she began working in the local shoe factory. “The first thing I bought was a pressure cooker

and I gave \$8.75 for it. And, I still have that pressure cooker. Last year (2004) I canned 473 quarts of beans.”

The pressure cooker virtually revolutionized canning and freed women from considerable drudge work. One of the most unusual canning stories was told to me by Elizabeth. “I’ll tell you, my mother passed away the 28<sup>th</sup> of December of 1919, and I was 12 years old. I was the oldest girl of 7 in the family. Dad thought that he could kind of help us a little bit, but he had never done much in the kitchen. It just come on that it was up to us girls, dad helped us when he could. I think back that he was trying to help me cook sweet potatoes to fry them. It was the only way he knew about fixing sweet potatoes. Of course, they browned on the outside but they were not cooked on the inside. He didn’t know very much more about cooking than I did. I was very pleased that my mother always let me do in the kitchen. I made cornbread and I made my first pies when Naoma [her sister] was born in 1915.”

Elizabeth finally learned to can. “This was before there was ever a home agent in any county in Missouri. In the summer of 1920, this lady was just going around to different towns showing people how to cold pack canning. That was the beginning of cold pack canning. I don’t know how dad found out, but he heard that they had a school in one of those towns. It was blackberry season. We’d go early morning and pick them and then in the afternoon we would can them up. We didn’t have a good storage place, so we was putting them underneath the floor of about a 12 by 14 smoke house sort of a thing, back underneath that, under the floor there on the ground. Every few days after we had canned them, the cans would explode and it would break up the cans. The jars would break open and we were losing them and not getting any berries to stay. We had a few. I

think dad took an interest in that because he was having to buy extra jars that he didn't need to, and we weren't getting any headway. My sister was 10 years old and I was 12 years old, and we didn't know that much about canning. Anyway, he heard about this and found out that they were going to be at Campbell, Missouri, on a certain date. So my sister, Alice, and I rode 10 miles on horseback from the farm into Campbell and attended this school at the high school. Anyway, Alice and I went in there and when the lady that was demonstrating it, she told about when the water got to boiling. I spoke up and said, I want to see how the water jumps. It was jumping to boil. She said well, your mother will show you how. One of the lady's there told her that our mother had just passed away. She says well, 'I don't have a place to be tomorrow and I will come out to your farm and show you how to can blackberries.' She did that. That was not on her schedule to do that at all. That sold me on Extension. Her generosity with her time that she would come out there. Two little girls trying to learn something. She and I stayed at the house and she showed me how to clean a hen for dinner and we made chicken and dumplings for dinner out of that hen. So I learned from Extension how to clean and cut up a hen."

Once canned, the product would be stored in a cave or some type of cellar that usually had shelves. Emma remembers that her mother had row after row of canned goods in their cave, which was just dug out of the ground. It was nice and cool down there and all along the edge would be food and vegetables. I can remember "going down to that cave and I'd see those rows of food; I'd get so hungry."

One food item that was common to most farm families during the Depression was sauerkraut, and many of the informants helped me to understand the process of making "kraut." Fannie said that her father was the "kraut" maker in the family. "The kraut



wasn't sealed or canned or anything. It was made in a five gallon stone jar. The cabbage was shredded and put in there. The main ingredient was lots of salt. Dad had a special weight with a handle that he would push that cabbage down and down and down to get as much in that jar as possible. And, then when it was finished, they would put a piece of white-like sheeting material or something over that jar and then they would put an old plate or something that would fit in there and a rock on top of it to hold that cabbage down. That went into the cellar to ferment for so long before it was used.”

In her study of farm women in Hallsville, Missouri, Helena Bailie (1938) found that rural homemakers had garden plots that averaged one-half acre in size, and that the homemaker was often assisted in her gardening efforts by her husband, children, and other family members. According to her study, in a normal year, the women she interviewed canned between 25 and 600 quarts of vegetables, fruits, and meat, with most families averaging 200 quarts. Her farm families produced almost 75 percent of their food at the time of her study in 1938. On average, before the Depression, the farm family raised from 40 to 60 percent of their household food supply, but as pointed out earlier, many farm women increased household production and were raising between 75 to 90 percent of the family's food supply (WHMC Missouri, University of, Home Economics Papers, Miscellaneous 1933-1935, C993, File 23).

The situation during the Depression in the Plains states was significantly different than in states such as Iowa, or perhaps even Missouri, where “farms offered subsistence and refuge from Depression hardship” (Fink 1988). Women in the Plains states had to contend with seemingly unending drought conditions, the ravages of dust storms, and insect infestations. As letters to *Dakota Farmer* indicated, as the Depression worsened

and “the state suffered increasingly from drought, heat, and grasshoppers, farm women relied more heavily on their gardens to produce most of the family’s food supply” and in some cases the extra produce provided a small needed income (Schwieder 1985:9). However, some women in South Dakota were able to raise a large, even expanded garden. One letter to the *Dakota Farmer* told of a woman who raised an extra large garden and canned “50 quarts each of most vegetables, preserved beets from the garden by packing them in sand, in the root cellar, and had put away 1,400 pounds of potatoes to last them through the winter” (Schwieder 1985:10). Other women exchanged cabbages for fruit and were also able to can vegetables although they were often not from their own gardens. Nevertheless, the prolonged drought forced many women to buy vegetables, including potatoes, which were a family staple throughout much of the country.

In Nebraska, Fink (1988) found that women during the Depression continued to rely on their poultry and cream businesses and that they were extremely resourceful and skillful in adjusting to changing conditions. For example, the *Nebraska Farmer* detailed the story of one woman’s efforts to provide food for her family from her labor and good management skills with respect to her vegetable garden.

In addition to grinding their own grains for flour, breakfast cereal, and cornmeal, she had raised 100 pounds of pinto beans; she canned 22 quarts of string beans, 40 quarts of tomatoes, 200 quarts of cherries, 50 quarts of apples and 40 quarts of beef and pork; she cured 6 hams and rendered 70 pounds of lard. By cutting out tea and coffee and substituting her labor for money, she had reduced her grocery bill, which was \$700 in 1929, to \$249 in 1932 (p. 61).

Women in Iowa also spent a good deal of time in their gardens and canning their produce for home consumption. Potatoes were a major garden crop and were grown as a hedge against food shortage when “money, time, or energy ran low” (Fink 1986:48). In addition to potatoes, Fink found that on most Iowa farms women’s gardens contained

cabbage, onions, cucumbers, corn, squash, tomatoes, and peas. Some farms had orchards, which were frequently tended by other family members, and included apple, plum, and cherry trees. Rhubarb, strawberry, and raspberry plantings were also common. Fink observed that

Harvesting this produce was only the end of the beginning of the work. With their own fruits, vegetables, and meats as raw materials, farm women spent many hours washing and chopping up the foods and making pickles, relishes, sauerkraut, applesauce, and jams and jellies, all of which they packed in glass jars and processed in boiling water (p. 48).

During the Depression year of 1937, Martha Friesen, who was mentioned before and who lived in Southwestern Kansas, preserved approximately 20 gallons of peaches, 18 gallons of tomatoes, 28 jars of jams and jellies, a gallon of peach butter, 16 jars of dill and bread and butter pickles, and 49 cans of assorted fruits (Riney-Kehrberg 1993:189). Another Kansas woman, Mrs. Dunns of Haskell County, was able to can 69 half gallon jars of beans, 49 half gallon jars of pears, 20 half gallon jars of beets, and 75 gallons of cucumbers from her relief garden (Riney-Kehrberg 1994:78).

Because the upper western district of the Midwest was largely settled by immigrants from Scandinavian countries, the nature of women's work was influenced by their cultural beliefs. Farm women in Wisconsin, for example, believed that "the workplace and the home were one," and that women and children "played central roles as producers" (Pederson 1992:159). In addition, women shared with men the many tasks that needed to get done to sustain their daily necessities. Norwegian farm women in America typically continued to farm alongside their husbands in the fields, but were like other midwestern women, in that they were primarily responsible for animal husbandry and the preparation of food and clothing. Ella Hanson's canning experience during eleven

days in August, 1928, was probably typical. During that time she canned 3 quarts of watermelon pickles, 2 quarts beets, 11 quarts beans, 16 quarts of sweet pickles, 16 quarts of dill pickles, 4 quarts sliced pickles, 5 quarts of apple pickles, 4 quarts of blackberries, 2 quarts of juice, and 28 glasses of jelly. And, she grew and canned hundreds of quarts of blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries. Apples, cherries, plums, and cranberries were grown or supplied from local orchards. While she did not make her own butter, she did bake her own bread, cakes, and cookies, often in concert with relatives who were frequent visitors (p. 175).

The Southern farm tenant mothers that Hagood interviewed were proud of their canning efforts, although she found that some had not canned at all in preparation for the winter months. These women frequently complained about how insects ruined their vegetables, and how there were no fresh fruits or berries on the farm. The process of canning, she found, was done with simple equipment and, “since the canning season coincides with the time for summer field work, much of it is done at night or before breakfast. Soup mixture, tomatoes, and beans lead the list” (Hagood 1939:104). Because of the arduous nature of growing and processing their vegetables, an abundance of full quart jars was a considerable accomplishment. Hagood writes that “Many a woman when speaking of canning added, ‘and I didn’t have a single one to spoil last winter,’ or ‘I’ve never lost but two quarts of tomatoes,’ impressive records when one considers that only a very few of them were members of home demonstration clubs or had any notions of applied bacteriology. Since most of the homes have no cellars, the jars are stored in kitchens or bedrooms, which are heated, to prevent freezing” (1939:104).

Throughout the 1930s, their knowledge, skill, and hard work enabled farm women to manage their households, some more skillfully than others, and to face drought, grasshoppers, epidemics, and general crop and livestock failures with a sense of accomplishment. As the Depression worsened “workloads became more onerous and their farm production became more significant” (Schwieder 1985:17). Neth summarized the situation as follows

A woman’s work identity centered on her ability to save, make do, and produce family necessities on the farm. In the 1930s, women’s cash saving work often spelled the difference between survival and failure on small farms. This labor, generally respected by farm men and women alike, helped women negotiate claims to mutuality within the farm family. Their work was integral to family farm survival (1995:241).

While farm women in many parts of the country struggled to maintain their families and communities, the Federal government’s response, particularly after 1932 and the institution of New Deal social programs, was often aimed at larger commercial enterprises and not the small subsistence farmer who may or may not own his land. Farm women were frequently encouraged to become more like urban middle-class women by a wide variety of institutions and their spokespersons. Farm women, who generally learned their gardening practices from their mothers, were given “opportunities” to learn “scientific” gardening and poultry raising practices from county Extension agents, including home demonstration agents, and others who supported a more formal approach to improving the farm diet and helping women become more productive.

Some women, however, were not contented with farm life. Women’s formal and informal organizations, such as the Women’s Progressive Farmers’ Association (WPFA), helped them to exert some power within their families and communities. Mary Neth suggests that farm women “built the economic and social base of informal community

life, they also built the economic and social base for local rural institutions through their formal women's organizations," including clubs, church groups, and general farm organizations, such as the Farmers' Union and the Farm Bureau. (Neth 1988:341; 1995). While the lives of white woman tenant farmers in the South was by some standards dismal, many southern women took pride in their abilities to strip tobacco more efficiently than their husbands. According to Hagood, one woman bragged "of how she had plowed, cut and mauled wood, harrowed, and done everything a man could do before her sons were old enough to work" (1939:89). Nebraskan mothers in Deborah Fink's study, however, seemed to have little social or economic power. She writes, "Mothers controlled neither the society nor the households in which they raised their children. If they wanted better schools or better libraries, they could exert little power to get them" (1992:187). Nevertheless, during the Depression farm women's lives and "moral capital" were tested. Some left the farm, while others endured, but all were affected (Fink 1988). As women were able to build connections to each other through clubs and other community activities, their isolation was somewhat reduced.

### **Women's Networks**

The material reality of farm women's lives revolved around kinship networks and community. Informal exchanges and social activities with neighbors formed the cornerstone of the rural community. According to Mary Neth, "Farm neighboring integrated the work, trade, and social lives of farm people. Farm people exchanged work, traded produce, and gave favors and gifts to neighbors. These exchanges helped redistribute the resources within a farm community....Because neighbors visited and built emotional ties, trust and shared values could emerge from the consistent repetition of

friendly interaction” (1988:340). Women, of course, played a key role in building links with each other and within their communities. Exchanging vegetable and flower seeds, plants, and canned goods was a traditional way that women maintained personal contact with one another. The garden, therefore, not only becomes a place on the farmstead that connects farm women to others’ personal histories, but also is a social place for sharing and a setting for creativity (Bhatti and Church 2001:380).

Fink suggests that a woman’s interaction with other women both inside the family and within the social setting helped to consolidate her base of social power. She further observes that a woman’s social space can be seen as a “series of concentric circles representing household, (extended) family, church, the farm or town community, and Open Country as a whole” (1986:77-78). By establishing informal and formal ties with other women in their communities, farm women helped to reduce the feeling of isolation that came from living on a farm separated from other farm families and from people living in cities or in rural towns. In Nebraska, women who lived on relatively prosperous farms were more likely to be able to visit neighbors because they were in a position to hire help with domestic work. Poor women, however, were less likely to do so. Nevertheless, most women tended to value their relationships with other women and would walk long distances to visit one another (Fink 1992:54). Hagood wrote of the tenant farm mother’s life that, “Few reported ever resting during the daytime...[but]...the wish for rest was freely admitted by several to be one reason for giving a cordial welcome. ‘I like *any* kind of company because it gives me an excuse to stop and rest,’ said one who insisted upon leaving her work and entertaining the visitor in the front bedroom” (1939:107).

While the introduction of the telephone helped to stem the tide of isolation, rural women's loneliness remained an issue. Men frequently went to town on business or to visit neighbors, while their wives remained at home bound by their child rearing and domestic responsibilities (Fink 1992:55). Other women did not go to town because they were often embarrassed by their worn out clothes. Compared to women living in rural Iowa, which was relatively densely populated, women living in the Great Plains states, such as Nebraska, which was sparsely populated, could become incredibly lonely. "Dirt roads became impassable for long periods in winter and spring. When women could use the roads, their travel to visit other women or to town was more time consuming and expensive than it would have been had they had they had shorter distances and better roads to travel. Working-class women were forced to stay home more often than women living on economically stable farms" (Fink 1992:55). Traveling to visit neighbors was a particular hardship for poor women; feelings of isolation were also greatly increased by poverty. Because these women tended to move from place to place with some frequency because their husbands often were tenant farmers or sharecroppers, by the time they established connections within one community, they had to move again.

Dorothy Schwieder (1985) found that women overcame their sense of isolation by reading the letters to the woman's page in the *Dakota Farmer*. Not only did these letters provide information about what other women were doing to manage their households and increase food production (thus facilitating woman to woman knowledge), these letters also served as a kind of social support network. South Dakota was particularly hard hit during the 1930s, with intense drought, grasshopper epidemics, and crop and livestock failures. These women, however, wrote encouraging words to each other not to loose



hope. One woman wrote of experimenting with five different types of tomatoes, while another woman wrote that by following her mother's gardening practices, she was able to maintain her garden even in 100-degree weather. In addition, other survival strategies were discussed. For example, cheaper than raising ducks in South Dakota, raising turkeys kept the grasshoppers off the land and helped pay the taxes at the end of the year and for one woman, switching from chickens to turkeys, enabled her to put her two children through the state university (Schwieder 1985). The idea of women writing into farm journals about their gardening successes is further explored in Chapter 7.

### ***Hobos, Cornbread, and Fried Chicken***

There were a lot of displaced people during the Depression. Families moved from one farm to another, families moved from one state to another, and individual family members traveled around the country in search of gainful employment and the next meal. When asked whether or not they knew of families who did not have enough to eat or whether they shared food with neighbors, all of my key informants said that they or their mothers always helped others to the best of their ability. If tramps or hobos came to the house, Nettie recalled that her mother would always give them corn bread. Josie also remembered that there were hobos who used to come and ask for food. "Mother always had something that she would give them. She wouldn't let them in, but she'd give them something to eat and they could either sit and eat it or take it with them. We did share food."

Looking back, Elizabeth said that she was sure there were neighbors in need, but she didn't know of any first hand. In fact, she recalled, "we were really poor people and we managed our own, like our forefathers did. They lived with what they could produce

and we always were pretty fortunate because we always had our milk there, we had our cows that we milked and we used the milk. We made our own butter; we made our own cottage cheese.”

Neighbors also shared food. Fannie recalled that, “In fact we had a family that lived close to us that had several children and we knew that they didn’t have what they should. They were on the top of a little hill and they didn’t have much farming space and mother called them many times to come over and get garden. Nothing was wasted.” Fern shared a similar experience, “If somebody had a lot of eggs they would just bring it to you. You don’t say I want you to bring me some, they just turned up with something that they had.” She also remembered that an African-American family lived on their farm. They, too, raised a big garden, so “when my mother didn’t have something, they had it; when they didn’t have something, we had it. So there were two gardens going here—big ones.”

Hettie recalled that “we used to fix up things to take to a family or two that we thought didn’t have enough. [And] we would exchange vegetables in the country among neighbors.” Emma reported that there were probably other families in the neighborhood who rationed food like they did. She remembered one or two families who didn’t have too much, but they “made out all right, they didn’t starve. I don’t think that we ever were close to starving, but food was limited. All the neighbors shared. One old couple that had only a daughter, they shared their vegetables with us.”

Visiting family and neighbors was a common on Sundays and it frequently involved sharing food. While some of my informants visited nearby relatives, especially

on holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, or in the summer time, every farm woman seemed to be prepared to deliver a Sunday meal to the occasional visitor. Emma recalled that about every Sunday loads of relatives would come to visit. “My mom would cook up a good dinner.” Fannie remembered that they had relatives who came and visited. “In those days nobody called and asked if you would be at home or if it suited you, they’d just stop by and maybe they stayed overnight and maybe they stayed two or three days. My mother always on Saturday would dress an extra one or two fried chickens and cut them up and take them to the cellar just in case somebody appeared for lunch that she wasn’t expecting. And she always baked pies on Saturday.” This pattern of cooking was echoed by Pearle Henderson Pipes in her 1930s diaries. Saturdays were her day for dressing chickens and baking cakes. For example, on Saturday, April 23, 1931, she wrote: “Today has been spent in the kitchen. Dressed two chickens. Then made potato chips; cheese straws; made pie dough and fixed dried apples for fruit pies; am so tired do not know what to do.” Again, on September 8, 1935, she dressed 4 chickens and baked a cake.” While she did not identify the type of cake that she baked on every Saturday, she did write down four cakes that she baked over the years, including lemon cake, white coconut cake, burnt caramel cake, and fruit cake (Pipes Diaries, 1931-1937).

Hettie recalled that when somebody would be coming for supper, “I could go out in the yard with my little hook and hook me a chicken and wring its head off and dress him right there and put him in cold salt water and fry him for supper.” She then described the process. “The hook was just a wire, a heavier wire, and it had a crook on the end of it. You catch that around the chicken’s leg and you’ve got him. After you get him by the leg, you wring his head off. You heat your water while you’re doing all the other stuff

and you put the chicken in a pan or a bucket and you douse the chicken up and down in there and you take him out and pick the feathers off. I've done that lots of times, but I wouldn't know how to start now."

Nettie remembered that because her father was a blacksmith, when people showed up and were waiting for their horses to be shod, they would come up and visit at the house. Nettie's mother was rather unusual in that she was a skilled healer. She would help with doctoring sick people in the community. "She'd sit up with them all night. She used turpentine on their chests; fluxweed to help with stomach problems in calves and people."

One important technological advancement that helped connect farm women to other women through the airwaves was the radio, which when introduced did not depend on electricity.

### ***The Radio***

The radio offered another means of lessening the sense of isolation that many rural women felt. Radios were important to farm women and their families. Bailie found that in Hallsville almost three-fourths of the total group of 76 families had radios at the time of her study in 1938; even in the poorest group, one third had a radio (p. 93). All of my informants remembered the first family radios, many of which were crystal sets. Josie recalled that their radio in the 1930s was "what they called a crystal set. They are a little square box; there was no speaker, there had to be headphones. We had two headphones, so two people could listen. Or what we did was to take the headphone off and hold it in your hand. So my brother and I shared, and mother and daddy shared. There was no electricity, it had a coil and there was a dial and you could pick up different stations along

that coil. We listened to Fibber Magee and Mollie, which was one of our favorites.” Fern remembered that her family’s radio was in the kitchen and they usually listened to the weather. Emma recalled their first radio because she bought it for her parents in 1940. However, her first recollection of hearing a radio was at her uncle’s house. “He was pretty well to do, and he was the only one in the community that had a radio. Oh my goodness, we thought that was the greatest thing that ever happened. And he couldn’t get the stations very well; that was right when radio first came in. I can remember going up there and thinking that was the greatest thing ever. We were probably listening to the news, which was about all we got.”

Not only was the radio a means of entertaining people, but it also served as an educational tool. It was quickly recognized as such by the United States Department of Agriculture, which established a Radio Division early on. By 1930, according to Craig, 214 stations were broadcasting USDA prepared programs on agricultural and home economics topics (2006:6). Extension was one of the first agencies to understand the importance of radio in expanding its sphere of influence. Madge J. Reese of the Federal Extension Service, who was discussed earlier, was one of the first women to take advantage of this medium because her papers are filled with numerous radio talk show programs. For example, she went on the air to support the work that home demonstration agents were doing with a radio broadcast on November 9, 1938 where she said that “We believe one of the most important things that farm women are accomplishing with home demonstration guidance is that they are making themselves creators of circumstances and are not just creatures of circumstances” (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Home Economics Papers, Miscellaneous, 1937-1938, C 993, File 26, radio address “Urbanism

Influences Rural Living”). Her speech was in broadcast during the home demonstration period on the National Farm and Home Program, which was carried by 99 stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

Most rural families bought their radios during the Depression years and thus were able to hear President Roosevelt’s fireside chats, as well as learn about local happenings. Steve Craig in his article in *Agricultural History* entitled, “‘The More They Listen, the More They Buy’: Radio and the Modernizing of Rural America, 1930-1939,” explores how advertising on the radio helped to promote a modern consumer lifestyle. He writes that prior to the Depression and half of the farms in rural America had automobiles, about a third had telephones, and fewer had electricity and radios. However, while the number of telephones declined substantially during the Depression, the number of automobiles remained steady, but the number of radios tripled, and by the early 1940s, “more farm homes owned radios than had telephones, automobiles, or electricity” (Craig 2006:2).

Listening to the radio was one of the three new forms of recreation enjoyed by rural people. Radios provided entertainment in the home and clearly “fit in with rural patterns of work and sociability” (Neth 1995:253). Radio programming generally supported rural values and served rural interests by the broadcast of shows promoted by USDA, such as *The National Farm and Home Hour*, and other programs related to agriculture such as market reports, weather reports, and cooking programs. However, many rural listeners tuned in to be entertained by such programs as *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*, a comedy variety show, or *Kraft Music Hall*, which starred Bing Crosby (Craig 2006:6-7). Pamela Riney-Kehrberg chronicles how the radio affected the life of one Kansas farm woman in her article, “The Radio Diary of Mary Dyck, 1936-1955: The

Listen Habits of a Kansas Farm Woman.” To Mary Dyck the radio “was more than merely a source of information. It became a daily companion and a source of endless entertainment, a marketplace, and a source of spiritual comfort. By the mid-1930s, when Mary Dyck began her diary, her writings indicated that radio was a central organizing element in her life” (Riney-Kehrberg 1998:68). The radio, therefore, to farm women represented a lifeline to the outside world and “for middle and lower-middle income families in the midst of the Great Depression, ‘radio is the primary source of entertainment and culture, because of limited budgets’” (Riney-Kehrberg 1998:76). Radio homemaking programs, in particular, linked women in isolated communities to a national audience.

Smethers and Jolliffe document what they call a “programming phenomenon” – the “radio homemaker”—that dominated the airwaves of the midwestern stations for half a century (1998-1999:138). They argue that the radio homemaker was essential to helping radio stations succeed in reaching people in sparsely populated sections of the country. In fact this was because

She identified with the plight of farmers struggling to make ends meet in the area’s erratic agricultural economy; consequently her programs contained vital information designed to keep rural households operating. The radio homemaker epitomized rural values and reflected her local culture in practically everything she did. She was truly a cultural phenomenon: a local icon of the ideal woman and, simultaneously, a powerful force in shaping listeners’ lives (Smethers and Jolliffe 1998-1999:138).

Because these programs were produced locally and featured women from the community, many were farm wives, the radio in essence “became a major influence in reflecting and defining issues important to rural women and farm families and promoting the agricultural lifestyle. The community-related contents were all part of the hosts’ own

way of life, which they passed on to their audiences” (Smethers and Jolliffe 1998-1999:145). For example, in 1929 in Shenandoah, Iowa, Helen Field Fischer, sister of seed company entrepreneur Henry Field (whose work was in the previous chapter), went on the air as host of the program “Mother’s Hour.” Another of Henry Field’s sisters, Leanna Field Driftmier, became the host of the popular “Kitchen Klatter” program in 1939 (Smethers and Jolliffe 1998-1999:140; Birkby 1991). In 1937, Kitchen Klatter took on another form when Leanna Field Driftmier began publishing *Kitchen-Klatter Magazine*. The magazine was published monthly and contained articles and pictures of her extended family and their lives, poetry, recipes, advertisements, home remedies, gardening tips, and the list of radio stations that carry Kitchen-Klatter, which include two in Missouri.

Program content varied but primarily consisted of the homemaker sharing her first hand experiences with the audience and suggesting recipes, cooking tips, nutritional information, and ways to decrease the hardships of household chores (Birkby 1991). For example, homemaker Jessie Young, whose show was carried on KMA, “made a point of giving recipes for canning and smoking meat,” because many households during the Depression years and the years leading up to World War II did not have electricity and were thus not able to have refrigerators. By the end of WWII, homemaker programs were on the decline in the Midwest. Smethers and Jolliffe suggest that four trends contributed to this decline: broad social changes in the roles that women played beginning with WWII and the 1960s feminist revolution; the advent of television; a decreased emphasis on talk shows with an increased emphasis on music formats; and finally, the deregulation of broadcasting in the 1980s (1998-1999:143). In any case, Neth writes that the radio “introduced farm people to new forms of mass culture, leisure, and consumer goods, but



it did not destroy their rural way of living” (1995:255). The radio was thus one way that women received information about homemaking and gardening and were able to remain in touch with each other through the air waves.

### ***Electricity***

Amenities in rural homes before the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 were relatively primitive compared to households in urban areas. Not having running water or electricity affected all aspects of woman’s work from taking care of household tasks, such as cooking, bathing, washing laundry, and child care, to watering gardens and tending flocks of chickens. The coming of electricity enabled more women to purchase “labor-saving” devices, such as irons, refrigerators, and washing machines. While some farm households got electricity in the middle of the Depression, Nettie’s and Lonnie’s families did not get electricity until after 1942. In a commentary on the coming of rural electricity, *The Missouri Farmer* in the May 15, 1936 issue noted that while Missouri farms that had electricity increased by 496 percent in the last 10 years, there were still over 238,000 farms in Missouri at the beginning of 1935 that had no electricity at all. The article suggested that this was a “staggering commentary on the backwardness of rural life in the State...[and observed that on these farms] feed must be ground or cut by hand labor, or by less convenient gasoline power; where churning butter is a household drudgery and milking cows by hand a chore; where even full use of the radio is denied and hair curlers must be heated over smoky kerosene lamp chimney when ma and the girls go to town; where life’s greatest convenience is still in the stage of the 1870’s. Small wonder that people drift from the farms to the towns under such conditions” (28:6).

When asked what was the first household item that was purchased after electricity was installed in their houses, my informants had a wide range of responses, but each was enthusiastic about their new purchases. Elizabeth bought a refrigerator because they were selling coffee cream to restaurants in their local community and were “using an old time refrigerator that held a 25 pound chunk of ice in the top of it to keep our coffee cream sweet to be delivered the next morning. The new refrigerator was a lifesaver.” In addition to the refrigerator, Elizabeth also reported that their workload with her chickens was decreased after they got electricity because the chickens got up earlier with the newly installed lighting instead of the sun. “We only had the one laying house before the electricity. When we had our electricity, and got the timer clock set on the kitchen cabinets in the house and it went out to the chicken house. The lights come on in the chicken house at 4 o’clock in the morning and in the summer time when the windows were up and you’d hear the chickens. It was not long after those chicken houses were lit up that you could hear the chickens a calling, and a singing, and just going on. We get them up early and by the time we would get up and have breakfast and go and milk the Jerseys, then I would light into the chickens after that. And many a time from 4 o’clock until about 9, I would have a three gallon bucket full of eggs to bring in.”

Fannie recalls that she was at an Extension Club meeting the day the electricity came through. “Just down the road at a neighbor’s house and we had been told that it might be turned on that day. Of course, everybody had their houses wired and ready. That afternoon right in the middle of our meeting the lights came on. You never heard as much hollering and clapping and celebrating in your life. That was the biggest thing that had happened in the county. And our hostess, when we finally quieted down and got back to

our meeting that we were supposed to be having, I remember the hostess looked up at her ceiling and she said, ‘Oh, I didn’t know that the ceiling was that black.’ Well, every home had this big old coal stove in the middle of the room and when you put coal in the stove, you raised that top off and if it was blazing you were all right, but if it was still just smoldering and smoking, all that smoke came up on your paper. Well of course she couldn’t see it because with our kerosene lamps you couldn’t see. She didn’t realize that it was that black and she was really embarrassed when she saw how black her ceiling was. But there were many of the rest of us that had ceilings just like that too.” The first thing that Fannie bought was an iron.<sup>5</sup> “I couldn’t imagine anything that would be more help than not having to stand....The way we ironed, have you seen irons that we used? And we had to have that old hot stove going to heat those irons, and it didn’t matter how hot the day was, you had to have that hot fire to get those irons hot and I’ve stood at that ironing board and ironed so many hours that I just couldn’t imagine anything being more help than an electric iron.” Theoretically, electricity helped ease farm women’s burdens and gave them more time to participate in outside activities, such as clubs and community events. One organization dedicated to assisting farm women was the Women’s Progressive Farmers’ Association on Missouri, which was affiliated with the Missouri Farmer’s Association.

### **Women’s Progressive Farmers’ Association**

One organization that was dedicated to improving the social and economic lives of Missouri farm women was the Women’s Progressive Farmers’ Association, which was the woman’s subsidiary of the Missouri Farmer’s Association (MFA).<sup>6</sup> To better serve rural women, the Extension Service in Missouri cooperated with other agencies and

organizations, including the State Board of health, the Missouri Farm Bureau Federation, and the Women's Progressive Farmer's Association. Extension home demonstration agents will be discussed in Chapter 9, but it should be noted here that the Women's Progressive Farmers' Association was the cooperating agency for making arrangements for home economics extension work in at least 15 Missouri counties during the early 1930s (Missouri College of Agriculture, Agricultural Extension Service , Annual Report for 1930, Circular 269, 1931:65).

The Women's Progressive Farmers' Association (WPFA) was organized primarily for the purpose of improving rural life in Missouri. It was incorporated in 1928 and disbanded in 1985. Its objectives were to offer "service and loyalty to the Missouri Farmer's Association (MFA) by supporting its marketing agencies, to lend strength to its legislative program, and to carry on various community activities such as beautifying country homes and cemeteries, improving rural churches, and contributing to worthwhile causes" (WHMC, WPFA of Mo. Inc., C 3726, File 1). While there was not a club in every Missouri County in 1935 and while the number of members was not as great as those members of Extension Homemakers Clubs, the State Secretary-Treasurer, Mrs. T.E. Holliday of Shelbyville, Missouri, reported that there were WPFA clubs in 55 counties with a total membership of 5,000, which is not insubstantial. Some women, I suspect, like my key informant, Elizabeth, were members of both clubs, especially because in the early years of the Depression the WPFA was the organization that worked cooperatively with Extension to help club work.

The 1933-1934 *Annual Bulletin* stated that that the WPFA was the only organization "purely of farm women. [And] Therefore, we are hoping to get all farm

women in the State to concentrate their force in this wonderful Organization” (WHMC, WPFA Annual Bulletins, 1931-1942, C3726, Folder 6). By this time, the statement was probably true but earlier in the century there was another organization of women farmers, the Missouri Women Farmers’ Club. The origin of the club and its efforts to help women farmers overcome the barriers they faced as they tried to professionalize their work on the farm was recently described by Rebecca Montgomery.<sup>7</sup>

By affiliating with the Missouri Farmer’s Association the WPFA was able to organize local farm clubs that included all farm women no matter what faith and creed, although there seemed to be a Christian overtone to some of their literature. In the 1933-1934 *Annual Bulletin*, for example, the State WPFA Vice President wrote that “our greatest need of today is to save the Christian farm home; to live and rear our families closer to God than ever before. In our great hurry of the last few years, have we forgotten God? In a way I fear, we have, and I believe that fact is largely responsible for the economic struggle through which we are passing” (WHMC, WPFA Annual Bulletins, 1931-1942, C3726, Folder 6). In the Women’s Department, which was found in *The Missouri Farmer*, and which was dedicated to the WPFA of Missouri, the Christmas message for December 15, 1937, included a synopsis of why every farmer and his wife should belong to the MFA and the WPFA. This article written by Mrs. W.A. Beal, who was the Secretary-Treasurer at the time listed four reasons to belong to these organizations: (1) the Missouri Farmers’ Association is the only organization of any kind in Missouri that is concerned about the unfair burden of taxation placed upon farmers, and is trying to do anything about it; (2) the MFA is working to secure better prices for what the farmer has to sell; (3) no other farm organization in the state is fighting for laws

to protect the farmer; in fact, “we have others who claim to do so but we find the laws they fight for lead directly into the pockets of big business who are directing their work;” and (4) the MFA is the only farmers’ organization in the state, owned, operated, and controlled by dirt farmers, and that is “bringing in thousands of dollars to the farmers each year which no other organization in the state is doing” (29:26). In addition to supporting the work of the Missouri Farmers’ Association in its column, the Women’s Department during the 1930s and early 1940s reported on club activities throughout the state, recommended a program of study for monthly club meetings, and generally brought items of interest to the attention of the readers of *The Missouri Farmer* and WPFA members.

The programs of the WPFA were wide ranging, but aimed to be relevant to farm women’s everyday lives. The programs developed in early booklets continued to be relevant during the Depression years. The 1924 program booklet, for example, listed twelve organized programs of the organization ranging from horticulture, to community hatchery (establishing a non-profit cooperative egg hatching association), to conservation of farm products, to cooperation to keep the children interested in the home and farming, to sociology (including a section on the Farm Homestead), to farm and home improvements, and finally, quality cream. These programs were designed to help local clubs plan their programs and make club meetings interesting. For example, the horticulture segment was designed to teach women about the planting and care of trees and small fruits that might be contained in the home orchard. The program spoke to planting, spraying, controlling insect pests, pruning and training, care of the fruit (picking, handling, storing and transporting), and suggested varieties of fruit trees that do

well in home orchard. For apples, Yellow Transparent, Dutchess, Wealthy, and Maiden Blush were recommended; for early winter apples to late-keepers, Grimes, Golden, Jonathan, Delicious, Staymen, Winesap, York Imperial, and Ingram were suggested. The leading varieties of cherries included Early Richmond, Mont-Morcency, and English Morello; plums included Chabot, Burbank, Wild Goose, Wayland, and Damson. Peaches, which grow well in Missouri, included varieties such as Early Wheeler, Carmen, Elberta, Krunnel, and Heath Cling; pears included Seekel, Anjou, Lincoln, and Keiffer (WHMC, WPFA Program Committee Publications, C3726, Folder 11). Some of these varieties are grown today, but most are not available. Lists like this give us a picture of the varieties of fruits that were once grown in Missouri, but are now lost to history.

Over the years there were many study programs featured in the Women's Department on horticulture and gardening. For example, in the April 1, 1933 issue of *The Missouri Farmer*, the study program was on the trees of Missouri—ornamental trees, useful trees, the preservation of trees, and readings about trees. It was also noted that because most rural schools were out by this time (which gives us a clue about the length of time students remained in school in the 1930s), that children could learn how to plant and tend vegetable gardens, a very practical idea during the 1930s. The story said that, “This will give them something to make a little spending money for themselves, at the same time teaching them something which is useful, the love of nature, and keeping them out in the open air” (25:10). These ideas regarding children and gardening are being repeated today in Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2005). This book that suggests that children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are detached from the natural world and therefore are susceptible to physical,

emotional, and spiritual ills that could be remedied by among other things, allowing them to garden.

The notion that children should be immersed in nature is also seen in this same issue of *The Missouri Farmer*, where Mrs. H.D. Brownlee of New Cambria submitted a poem entitled, "Preserving Children." It was written in the form of a recipe: "1 large grassy field; 6 children, all sizes; 3 small dogs (rat terriers preferred); Deep blue sky; Narrow strip of brook (pebbly if possible); Hot sun; Flowers. Mix children with the dogs and empty into the field, stirring continuously. Sprinkle the field with flowers. Pour brook gently over the pebbles. Cover all with deep blue sky and bake in hot sun. When children are well browned, they may be removed. Will be round right and ready for setting away to cool in the bath tub" (25: 10).

In subsequent issues of *The Missouri Farmer* the study program was on vegetable gardening, flowers in the garden, and gardening to beautify the home, farmstead, and roadside. The efforts by the WPFA and Extension Homemakers Clubs to encourage women to beautify the landscape were, I suggest, a response to the overall oppressive economic and social conditions that prevailed in the country. By bringing a little bit of beauty into the lives of their families, these farm women were helping to lift up the spirits of their family members and make their environment a little less dreary.

In addition to gardening programs, the desire of these women to promote world peace was clearly evident in the pages of the Women's Department as the war in Europe heated up. The study program published in the November 1, 1939 *Missouri Farmer*, for instance, spoke to this issue in no uncertain terms. During the roll call at the beginning of the club meeting it was suggested that each member tell what she could do to help



promote world peace. A further commentary on the ongoing war in Europe and the disapproval of WPFA members to become involved in it was made abundantly clear, as it was passionately written, "I know there is not a Mother among us who has a son of war age, who will not study this lesson with a heavy heart...But I may ask of all W.P.F.A. Clubs in the State that they study the above lesson to pledge themselves to never speak of the United States entering the war again except in the strongest negative terms...Let us pledge our willingness to see our men folk stand against invasion of the United States to the last man, but with equal force pledge ourselves that we will never again willingly see them 'cross the pond.' May we let our United States Senators and Representatives in Washington know our sentiment and that we will hold them accountable for any move that will force us into the present war" (31:10). The association made a sincere effort to help farm women become politically active and be aware of the issues that affected rural life.

The Women's Department of *The Missouri Farmer* also reported on the activities in district and county conventions; it promoted the exchange of bulbs and seeds among members; it commented on how to best preserve food grown in the garden; and it was a venue for the sale of the WPFA Cookbook, which raised money for the organization. The first *Pure Food Cook Book* was published in 1923 and sold 10,000 copies for 50 cents each. Ten thousand copies of the second edition were published in 1930; ten years later 10,000 more were published with most of the old recipes and many new additions. It too sold for 50 cents (January 15, 1940, 32:10). Recipes were printed in farm journals and in the Women's Department. Some of the recipes from the *Missouri Ruralist* and *The Missouri Farmer* are in Appendix 3.

## Summary

In this chapter I attempted to blend the stories that my informants told me about their experiences living on a farm during the Depression with excerpts from Missouri farm journals, the scholarly literature on rural women, one farm woman's diary, and some of the University of Missouri College of Agriculture publications. We saw how farm women produced, preserved, and shared food with neighbors and strangers. Food was also at the center of family meals and we saw how at least one woman caught and processed a chicken for supper and how sauerkraut was made. In addition, this chapter looked at the coming of electricity to Missouri homes and what that meant for farm women's household labor, and how it improved the egg production of one of my key informant's chickens. We also looked at the radio and how it was used by Extension for educational purposes, and by rural farm families for entertainment and as a link to the outside world. Clubs also connected women to other women and to national events. One such club was the Women's Progressive Farmers' Association of Missouri, which was the woman's section of the Missouri Farmer's Association. The woman's page of *The Missouri Farmer* was one outlet for the club's activities, but it also informed members about political events and on a more mundane level, on the production of the WPFA cookbook.

The following chapter looks at the value of the home garden in terms of its economic worth to the farm family during the Depression. It also looks at the increasing emphasis by Extension and others on the dietary needs of children and how the vegetable garden can help satisfy those needs by providing green leafy vegetables. During this time, more research was being conducted on vitamins and how they affected health, thus the emphasis on the household garden as a source of nutritious foods. The chapter also looks

at how the garden and its products helped farm families attain some level of self-sufficiency and were able to stay off the relief rolls.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The title for this chapter is a phrase used by Elizabeth, who recently died at the age of 98. It refers to the challenges and inescapability of the work that she and other farm women did for their families during the Depression.

<sup>2</sup> After the New Madrid earthquake that began on December 16, 1811, and continued with a the succession of shocks that continued into 1812, the Federal Government issued New Madrid Certificates that entitled displaced landowners to new acreage in the Louisiana Purchase territory. Many of the displaced came to Howard County to settle.

<sup>3</sup> After World War II, as “modern” methods of raising poultry through mass production became available and scientific knowledge became more widespread, women’s poultry flocks on family farms were superceded by large poultry-producing enterprises generally managed by men.

<sup>4</sup> Pin money is a misnomer and actually belittles the important work that women do for their families and communities.

<sup>5</sup> In the 1940 USDA Yearbook of Agriculture, *Farmers in a Changing World*, it was noted that with respect to electricity in the farm home, the iron was the first appliance purchased after electric service was installed, followed by the radio, the washing machine, and the refrigerator.

<sup>6</sup> The Missouri Farmer’s Association (MFA) was founded by William Hirth in the 1914. By the 1940s when he died the MFA had become one of the State’s biggest businesses with sales of about \$60 million. Hundreds of cooperatives throughout the state were established, which saved Missouri farmers millions of dollars. In addition, the MFA was politically active and Hirth worked for legislative reform and against bossism and machine politics. He was also publisher of the *Missouri Farmer*, which I quote throughout this dissertation. Because of its cooperatives, the MFA was accused by some as being a communistic organization, but it served Missouri Farmers and pushed for agricultural progress (*The Missouri Farmer*, 32:1&4, 1940).

<sup>7</sup> The Missouri Women Farmers’ Club was formed in 1911 and was the only organization of its kind in the country, i.e., it was an organization dedicated “to establishing commercial agriculture as a viable option for all rural women” (2004:181).

## CHAPTER 7

### GARDEN VERSUS RELIEF: THE VALUE OF THE HOME VEGETABLE GARDEN

This chapter builds upon the insights and understandings about gardening and gardening practices gained in the previous two chapters, which spoke to women's labor on the farm, that is, their unending physical and caring work and the production and preservation of garden produce, the contact that farm women had with others, and their generosity, even in hard economic times, in sharing food with both extended family and those in need. Those chapters placed special emphasis on farm women's attention to the vegetable garden and its productivity, but they also looked at the importance of poultry flocks and women's other productive activities to the Depression-era farm family. This chapter explores the value of the home vegetable garden to the farm family, both its economic value and its value to the farm woman in terms of the satisfaction that it provided them as they worked to make the family self-sufficient. The first part of the chapter discusses the value of the home garden in terms of meeting the dietary needs of the farm family. The next section cites some examples of the strictly economic benefit of the home garden. Using examples from Missouri and other states, some of the programs that were put in place by USDA home demonstration agents to encourage the use of the home vegetable garden and enable farmers to get off the 1930s relief rolls are discussed. Finally, the home garden, while contributing to the self-sufficiency of the farm family, also provided a site on the farmstead where the farm woman could presumably experience some sense of freedom from the never ending demands of her labor. The final section of this chapter, therefore, pays tribute to the vegetable garden as a place where one could find beauty in nature and as a site to enrich the soul.

## **Every Farm Woman Can Be An Alchemist**

The *Missouri Ruralist* and *The Missouri Farmer* for the decade of the 1930s revealed how women not only made “pin” money from their gardens, but also how their vegetable gardens provided an adequate diet for their families. If farm women and men were fortunate enough to have garden surplus or believed that they had an outstanding garden, they frequently wrote to the editor of the two farm journals to share their success stories with others, and share their gardening knowledge. Many of the letters and articles addressed the dietary needs of children and the farm family and suggested that good nutrition began with a well-developed vegetable garden. Some of the articles were in fact based on information provided by home economists or other university experts who were aware that the dietary needs of many families had not been met up to this time.

In the April 1, 1932 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*, for example, was a short story that got at the heart of farm women’s caring activities with respect to providing nutritious food for their families. Alchemy, it read, is the process of turning the baser metals, common materials, into gold; it has through the ages been a fascinating pursuit. “Men dedicated their lives to it, sold their souls for it and never did they attain. But every farm woman can be an alchemist. She can take peas and spinach and carrots and transmute them into the rosy cheeks and sturdy limbs of little children...The farm woman can take a rather unpromising little house and by the diligence of her hands and the alchemy of her love make of it a home embowered in trees and vines and flowers that will draw the hearts of her children thru the years” (73:7). The idea of a farm woman being able to turn home-grown vegetables into nutritious meals for her children indicates that she had the ability and knowledge to do so, which in itself attests to their having a certain amount of power.

One of the main concerns of Extension home demonstration agents and others was promoting the value of eating a wide variety of vegetables, which could be grown in the home garden and which could fulfill the dietary and nutritional needs of the farm family. This concern was echoed in numerous publications and in articles during the 1930s. In the October 15, 1937 issue of *The Missouri Farmer*, for example, in an article entitled, *Food Value of Vegetables*, Miss Margaret McPheeters, a government food specialist, is quoted as saying, "Our knowledge of nutrition today shows a definite relation between food and health, and points out especially the importance of vegetables in a well-selected diet" (29:6). She goes on to report on the various vegetables that supply the body with the necessary food elements, such as calcium, sulphur, and vitamins A, B, and C. In the one column article, she summarizes nicely the overall benefits of fresh vegetables and suggests that in a garden of one-half to one acre the average size family can be supplied with enough potatoes, green or yellow vegetables, and tomatoes "to be used fresh, canned and stored," for a year. She recommends, therefore, that "in general, there should be yearly for each person, aside from fresh produce, about 50 quarts of canned vegetables, 5 medium heads of cabbage, and one and one-half bushels of mixed vegetables stored, besides potatoes" (p. 6). The overall health benefits of these vegetables are touted in the article. She writes that these vegetables "help build a well-formed body and keep that body in a good healthy condition. They furnish important minerals and vitamins for body regulation, building material, and aid in the resistance to diseases. They furnish bulk, held to regulate body temperature and eliminate waste. They aid in preventing constipation, overweight, indigestion, colds and acid condition of the system. They aid much in making the meal appetizing by giving color, texture, flavor, and

variety” (p. 6). However, given the number of advertisements for laxatives designed to relieve constipation throughout these farm magazines, one might wonder whether or not Miss McPheeter’s recommendations were heeded to their fullest extent.

In a January 1, 1940 article, *Farm-Grown Foods*, in *The Missouri Farmer*, Bureau of Home Economics specialists are quoted as saying that few really appreciate the “nutritive contributions of farm-furnished food to the family diet—nutritive values worth more than the amount of money involved and not ordinarily purchased even when there is plenty of money. If, as studies indicate, relatively more farm families than city and village families have diets that can be rated as good, this must be attributed to the use of home-produced food” (32:9). The nutritive value notwithstanding, the article goes on to note that the Bureau of Agricultural Economics estimated that farm families nationwide produced about \$1,250,000,000 worth of food and fuel for home consumption in 1938 (32:10).

Food preferences and traditions of the American people are also described in Richard Osborn Cummings’ 1940 book, *The American and His Food: A History of Food Habits in the United States*. He observes that with the outbreak of the first war in Europe, it was crucial that even a non-engaged nation such as the United States keep up an adequate nutritional level because, “as no nation is stronger than its people, maintenance of an adequate level of nutrition is fundamental to national defense” (p. v). In light of how a balanced diet contributes to good health and physical characteristics, Cummings’ book address trends in food consumption of the American people from the late eighteenth century when people were generally farmers to 1940, when he describes some of the food programs developed by the federal government. In between, he writes about how the

Depression of the 1930s affected the American diet, and how with the development of certain foods, for example, white flour, refined sugar, and ready to eat cereals the “health record of rural dwellers may have been adversely affected by substitution of purchased cereals and flours for locally produced products” (p. 171). However, during the early years of the Depression when money was tight, the consumption of refined flour and sugar decreased, while consumption of fruits and vegetables grown on the family farm increased (p. 181). “Depression conditions of themselves,” he writes, “made for improvement of farm diet in places where farmers with market outlets closed turned to growing produce for home use. Home-demonstration agents extended their efforts to raise the level of nutrition by education” (p. 181). While food habits of rural families seemed to improve during the 1930s, the food habits of city dwellers likewise improved. Cummings notes that “The prosperous were little affected by depression conditions, and, so far as the employed were concerned, if wages fell, food prices fell too. More adequate food relief aided the unemployed in solving their problems” (p. 182). It appears that we as a nation have come full circle and are tending to desire a diet that contains limited refined white flour and sugar and to purchase fruits and vegetables locally through food cooperatives and circles, and at local farmers’ markets.

Improving the nutritional adequacy of the American diet through educating relief clients and consumers in general was a goal of home economics and nutrition experts. The USDA’s Bureau of Home Economics produced vast amounts of educational material and “tried to increase public knowledge by cookbooks, buying guides, and radio broadcasts” (Cummings 1940:108). The land grant schools of Agriculture also participated in educating the rural population. Efforts made by Missouri’s home



demonstration agents and individuals employed by the University of Missouri Agricultural College will be discussed specifically in Chapter 9. Overall, through these efforts the consumption of so-called protective foods—milk, fruits, and leafy vegetables—increased during the early 1930s (Cummings 1940). Farmers were encouraged in numerous local and national publications to plant gardens and many responded. In the Live-at-Home Program, promoted by the USDA Extension Service, for example, producing ones own food was paramount. This program was described previously in Chapter 4.

### **Growing Groceries in the Garden<sup>1</sup>**

Home gardens were a necessary fixture on the farmstead and sometimes in towns in rural communities. To measure the value of the home vegetable garden during the 1930s in purely economic terms reveals that it was exceptionally productive, but its value to the farm family in terms of providing an adequate diet, status within the community, and an increase in self-esteem was immeasurable. It is clear that raising a garden for home production gave the family some food security and improved that family's overall health and well-being.

What was the home garden worth on average to the farm family in economic terms? There are numerous detailed descriptions by experts and readers of the economic ramifications of having a home vegetable garden found in two farm journals, *The Missouri Farmer* and the *Missouri Ruralist*. During the Depression, articles and letters were written by readers and also by experts from the Missouri College of Agriculture. In the early years of the Depression, articles and letters touted the economic value of the home garden by detailing the financial rewards that the garden gave the farm family.

Horticultural advice from the MU College of Agriculture also appeared in these journals as gardening tended to become more scientific with suggestions coming from experts or extension specialists rather than from the readers themselves. However, in the March 23, 1935 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist* farm women from across the state of Missouri shared their gardening experiences with others readers. The stories were printed under the title, *What We Expect of Our Gardens*. Several spoke about how the vegetable garden cut the grocery bill as exemplified by a story from a woman from Moscow Mills who wrote that her garden had been providing food for her husband and herself for eight years and in that time they have only bought “1 dozen cans of pork and beans, and 4 cans of kraut” (76:6). Another woman told about her experience with trading surplus vegetables with her city relatives, and another wrote about her garden supplying enough for her family, with a surplus to sell and give away. This woman also grew flowers for the sick and home, and recommended cultivating frequently using “bright, sharp tools” and if “one garden fails, plant another and you will be amply repaid in better health and happiness, and your pocketbook will be fuller” (76:6). Bessie Ipock of Hartville, Missouri, wrote from her Ozark farm that her garden was worth at least \$200 for the acre. She gives a rough estimate of the value of her garden in terms of root crops stored for human and livestock consumption, for canned beans, tomatoes, pickles, corn, preserves, pumpkin, and for vegetables consumed during the summer, as well as dried beans for a total of \$187.50. She continues that “Cool slices of melons served on hot summer days were worth considerable, and left-over vegetables fed to poultry and hogs are worth mentioning” (76:6). This woman is clearly proud of her garden and the work that she put into it and

the fact that she made a profit from selling her produce and had enough left over to help feed the livestock may endow her with a certain amount of satisfaction and power.

During the Depression years, letters and articles about profitable gardens appeared on women's pages in farm journals. The following are several examples of these writings submitted by farm men and women who lived in Missouri and desired to share their gardening experiences with other readers. In the *Missouri Ruralist*, for example, the "In Our Homes" section for July 15, 1929 contained a letter from Mrs. Statia Brannan of Butler County. She wrote, "Dear Editor—I enjoy raising vegetables so every year I plant more than we can use at home. I put out 2,000 to 3,000 cabbage plants, hoe and care for them. They usually bring \$25 to \$50 in addition to the cabbage and kraut we use ourselves. Then I plant lettuce, radishes, and peas early, and the surplus is sold. I start my tomatoes and sweet potatoes in a hot bed. My tomatoes usually bring \$75 or more each year. The sweet potatoes usually bring \$25 to \$50 and we keep what we need. I plant Valentine Beans also Kentucky Wonders and their sales usually amount to about \$15. Pop Corn and roasting ears bring in \$20 to \$25 each year. I raise these myself even to plowing the ground. I also have a sow and 10 pigs to feed, 5 cows and two calves to care for, in addition to a small flock of chickens. I help in many ways but I feel that I help most by raising a garden" (72:18).

In the April 1, 1930 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*, a reader wrote that "One way that I have profitably added to my income has been by selling the surplus vegetables that I canned for our family's use, to a small list of town acquaintances. Every year we see the prices of food going up, it is more difficult for a farmer to feed his family. But if we grow vegetables in our gardens and can more than most of us do, it will help us a lot with our

bills for living expenses” (76:36). The vegetables that she caned and sold were: Green string beans, beets, corn; and cucumbers, pickles; cabbage made into sauerkraut, and horseradish relish. For her own use she also canned spinach and beet-top greens.

In the early years of the Depression, Extension encouraged farm families to keep accurate records of their home gardens. In 1931 records were kept on 54 home gardens throughout the state of Missouri. The average value of the vegetables grown in these gardens was \$107.03; while the average cost outlay was only \$8.49. The average labor return was \$1.32 per hour with an average person spending a total of 75 hours in their garden. The average size of these gardens was one-third of an acre. The statistics collected further revealed that the gardens that actually produced the largest amount of vegetables were on one-half an acre tracts. These gardens returned \$316.99 worth of food with a cash outlay for expenses of a mere \$14.50 (*Extension Service Review* 3:91, June 1932). On the same topic, one reader wrote into the *Missouri Ruralist* in May 1933 that “after all the vegetable garden is about the best-paying plot on the farm. Highest returns come from intercropping, or growing short-season plants between rows of long-season crops. Plant lettuce and radishes between the rows of potatoes and cabbage. It makes the ground twice as valuable. Succession cropping, that is, following one crop with another on the same ground in a single season helps. These two systems keep every foot of ground busy in spring and summer, and provide fresh vegetables until late fall, with plenty for canning, drying and storage. Results at the agricultural experiment station, from 1919 to 1921, show that a 1/4- acre garden produced \$134.34 worth of vegetables. It paid \$1.79 an hour for labor. Returns from one-twentieth of an acre were \$47.28, or \$1.63 an hour for labor. From 37 similar gardens in 1932, that averaged .47 of an acre, average

returns were \$97.99, or \$1.38 an hour for labor. Pretty good wages for these or any other times” (74: 3).

Mrs. Marshall Macklin of Hale, Missouri, wrote in the March 15, 1933 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist* about “A pickle idea worth \$85”—From 3/4 acre of cucumbers we picked and sold 135 bushels for \$85. The ground was well plowed, disked and harrowed, making a good seedbed. We bought 1 1/2 pounds of the Boston pickling variety at \$1 a pound, planted them May 20, in rows 3 feet apart with the corn planter, using a bean attachment. As soon as they were thru the ground and with two to four leaves, we began to fight bugs. The little striped cucumber beetle was our worst enemy. For these we dusted the plants and around the plants with gypsum, calcium, arsenate and nicotine early in the morning before the dew was gone. This was done at least once a week. Weeds were kept down with a cultivator until vines began to run, then we used the hoe. When the vines started to bear, cucumbers were picked every day. After the first few pickings we got from 4 to 4 1/2 bushels a day. These were sorted into three grades. The small ones brought \$1 a bushel, medium 75 cents, and large or dill, 50 cents. We sold to customers in town” (74:3).

Another *Missouri Ruralist* customer reported that his tomato crop was worth \$700. In the January 15, 1934 issue, Mr. W. C. McClure of Jackson County writes that “Being dissatisfied with raising hogs and corn, I added truck farming in 1933. Knowing little about it, I teamed up with a man who knows the job well. We worked together making hotbeds. Money being scarce I bought an old greenhouse and we made our sash. By February 8, we planted our tomatoes, about May 1, we had 8,000 plants in two beds 120 feet long. June 30 brought our first picking that sold for \$6 a bushel. This price held

quite awhile. This being a bad year the crop was short and we had a market at home until frost. Our lowest price was 50 cents a bushel and we cleared about \$700. We had cantaloupes that paid well, too. This crop can be rushed by hot-bedding. The knowledge I gained makes 1934 look better to me” (75:3).

“After failing with an early garden, due to wet weather, Mrs. Pansie Howard, Vernon County, planted 50 cents worth of seed on July 4, last year. From this garden she sold \$6.55 worth of pumpkins and squashes, gave away \$2 worth and kept 12 squashes and 14 pumpkins for home use. She canned 51 quarts of green beans, sold 75 cents worth, and had all the family could use on the table for 3 weeks. She also sold \$1 worth of tomatoes, canned 13 quarts and gave away several bushels of green tomatoes, besides those used for sandwich spread. She also had several messes of good sweet corn from the patch” (77:13). This was just another example from the *Missouri Ruralist* where a woman’s skills at canning and gardening produced a profit from her garden.

During this time, women were considering a number of ways to add to the family income with gardening produce. Winning contests was one way. Another way was to earn money by taking exhibits to fairs. Mrs. Eugene Christman wrote in the August 24, 1937 *Missouri Ruralist* about her experiences at the fair. Because she had a car she was able to attend several fairs and display her products. “She specializes on bread, cakes, butter, canned goods, vegetables, etc,” the article said, “rather than on needlework, as that takes a good deal of time and seldom receives a greater award than a loaf of good bread. Collections of flowers, wild and cultivated, receive excellent premiums. While she cans and makes jellies and preserves, the choicest is set aside for the fairs, and in this way the exhibits are ready and it takes very little work at the last...If you have successfully canned

meat, greens, tomato or kraut juice, these are unusual. Study the fairs and plan your exhibits to cover the departments that have few entries. Display your exhibits in an attractive way and select the best you can. Attach a card with your address with prices if you wish to take orders” (78:10). This was certainly one specialized way to increase the family income by producing products for sale, while you worked to produce products for home consumption.

In an April 1, 1939 article, entitled, *Gardens Pay Big Returns*, in *The Missouri Farmer*, J.W.C. Anderson of the Missouri College of Agriculture is quoted as saying that Missouri farmers “can receive a return of \$130.09 from a cash investment of \$7.23 and the use of one-half acre of ground” (31:18). He goes on to say that farmers are becoming aware that the family garden is of great economic value and that they should be part of their farming system. “Not only is the family garden of tremendous value in cutting down food costs but it will provide a constant supply of fresh, crisp, tender vegetables throughout the growing season. With a variety of such tender-flavored and nutritious food constantly at hand, the housewife can feed her family appetizing meals that will do much toward maintaining and improving the health and physical well-being of the family, and raise the food standard of living” (31:18). He suggests that if the farm family’s garden not now located in the most fertile part of the farm, then it should be given one is looking to get the highest yields of high quality produce.

Cash income gleaned from the farm vegetable garden and truck patch was also seen in Bailie’s 1938 study of Hallsville, Missouri, farm women. In her study, Bailie found that “much depended upon the enterprise of the individual woman in determining what her role in producing and preparing food might be. The cash income which she was

able to obtain from the sale of small food-stuffs, eggs, and dairy products frequently went back into the family purse to help feed the family and obtain a variety which the home garden did not provide. Several homemakers estimated that they received between \$3.00 and \$5.00 a week from this source. When the income derived from the farm-operator's efforts was large enough to support the family she used this extra money for herself or the children. But during recent years, when the farmer has been producing poor and small crops, the food of the family has been obtained largely through the homemaker's efforts, with the aid of the other members of the household" (1938:104). This idea that women's surplus money will be reinvested in their family's well-being is at the heart of the micro-loan system currently advocated by some economic experts, which makes low-interest loans primarily to low-income women in mostly developing countries to support their entrepreneurial activities (Madeley 2002).

While Extension's Live-At-Home Program, as seen in Chapter 4, encouraged farm women to raise a garden each year, other programs were undertaken by relief workers in Missouri and throughout the country that attempted to use the vegetable garden as a means by which farm families would stay off of or get off of the government relief rolls.

### **From Relief to Subsistence**

Working with Extension home demonstration agents (both White and African American) and with other local and regional relief workers, farm women were encouraged and enabled to establish or improve their home gardens through local contests, educational garden tours, county and local demonstration gardens, and improved practices, such as subsoil irrigation with tiles and securing good seed.



Capitalizing on the garden and home orchard, farm women were able to grow and preserve an amazing amount of food, frequently producing excess, which could then be sold at curb markets or canned and often given to less fortunate families. Therefore, as these women improved their gardening skills to produce more food to feed their families and families on relief, their status within the community and household undoubtedly increased.

To aid the rural poor and the unemployed, the Federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the Red Cross, as well as some local relief organizations provided money for seed and other gardening-related expenses. Herculean efforts were made by extension agents and others to train inexperienced gardeners. According to an article in the November 1933, *Extension Service Review*, entitled “Subsistence Gardens Flourish,” agents in Southern states, for example, gave demonstrations and appointed local leaders to follow up with individuals, both experienced and inexperienced, instructing them in gardening and canning. Surplus produce was canned at community canning centers, thus giving the subsistence gardeners an opportunity to preserve their own food. These newly educated individuals, who were mostly women, who had depended in the past on charity and “...who had no assurance of how long this aid would last, are now proud of the shelves of food, canned and grown by themselves, which will guard them against the perils of the coming winter. They are the ones who can tell of the aid of the county agent and the home demonstration agent” (4:109). These comments resonate with the opinions about home demonstration agents voiced by several of the women who I interviewed. Specifically, Fannie reported that the women who worked as home demonstration agents

provided a life line for farm women in Howard County, Missouri. The work of home demonstration agents in Missouri will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Other examples of the extent to which home gardens were valued and the willingness of individuals to plan and plant them come from across the country. In neighboring Kansas in 1933, 63 of the state's 78 counties had developed plans for subsistence gardens and over 16,000 families took advantage of the plans. In West Virginia's mining country an estimated 89,000 subsistence gardens produced over \$6,000,000 worth of food. In 55 counties in Colorado, 25,000 families grew subsistence gardens in which the food value was estimated to be over \$2,000,000. In addition to the large amount of food set aside for the winter, families that planted gardens were able to regain some sense of self-esteem. The women learn "that they can in a way support themselves, that they can have better food and as a result better health. It has given them a freedom from the charity rolls, and it has given them physical action which in turn has its effects upon their mental attitude" (*Extension Service Review* 41:110, November 1933). In this way, women, particularly those who were not well off, were able to improve their lot by growing food for their families, which not only tended to increase their self-esteem but also to enhance their sense of accomplishment.

One of the ways to encourage participation in subsistence gardening programs that appears to have met with some success was the garden contest. For example, garden contests were begun in 1928 by the Oklahoma Extension Service. By 1935, 4,596 gardens were judged compared to only 2,155 in the first year of the contest. During this period more than \$5,500 was awarded in prize money to the contestants. The April 1936 issue of the *Extension Service Review* that reported on this contest also reported that the

importance of the home garden in Oklahoma was expanding as could be seen from the following figures: In 1928, 498,157 quarts of vegetables were canned compared to over 1,159,000 in 1935; the estimated value of vegetables consumed in the fresh state was \$278,300 in 1928 compared to \$610,000 in 1935; finally, the estimated value of the vegetables stored in the fresh state in 1928 was \$139,150 compared to \$213,500 in 1935 (7:62). As part of this contest women were also encouraged to grow at least two new vegetables each year that they had not grown previously. Among some of the new vegetables grown were: wilt-resistant tomatoes, edible soybeans, Chinese cabbage, New Zealand spinach, and tender-green Swiss chard. One of my informants, Nettie, who did not participate in any local contests, reported that she was inclined to experiment with new things and plant something new each year when she planned her vegetable garden.

Contestants were also able to participate in garden tours as part of this program. This gave the women an opportunity to exchange ideas, see the results of their neighbors' gardens, and become familiar with new vegetables. The *Missouri Ruralist* published a number of articles about contestant winners during the 1930s. They ranged from women who won canning contests to woman who won recognition for writing the best letter about their gardening practices. These contests not only provided a financial award in many instances, but also assured the recipient of a good deal of social status within the community. News about contests appeared in journals before the Depression, but seemed to take on a more important social and participatory role in the 1930s.

Young people in Missouri were also encouraged to participate in these contests. Ruth Mae Buoy of Fayette, a 4-H club member, received state-wide recognition for canning pears and carrots and was awarded \$20 by the Hazel-Atlas Jar Company

(*Missouri Ruralist* 79:11, 1938). The *Missouri Ruralist* article goes on to report that “Ruth Mae’s canning doesn’t stop when her project is completed for she works along with her mother as they try to can the correct number of quarts of fruits, vegetables and meat for the family....Among Ruth Mae’s recent awards have been four blue ribbons, eight red and one white ribbon” (79:11). While young people participating in 4-H club work were acknowledged, the *Missouri Ruralist* garden letter contest for 1939 was won by a farm woman, Mrs. John W. Frazer, from Palmyra, Missouri. She apparently got more than vegetables from her garden: “She makes her garden a hobby and obtains a lot of pleasure and satisfaction,” according to the editor (80:5, 1939). Her letter provides a text-book strategy for planning, planting, and harvesting an abundance of vegetables (and flowers) from her home garden. One of the key aspects of her success is the fact that she keeps a notebook of her gardening activities and to it she adds clippings from magazines and papers that appear relevant. The second prize winner offered several secrets for her gardening success; for example, keeping rabbits from eating the plants—just powder the plants with red pepper. She also “risks the frosts” and plants her green beans, peas, radishes, lettuce, and onions early, having “saved an abundance of last year’s seed” (80:5, 1939). The fourth prize winner, Sadie Gardine Lasley also gives helpful tips, especially with respect to seeds. She writes that, “Good seeds are essential. If in doubt, we make tests of germination. Our home-saved seeds are labeled with date, correct name and brief—card—description of our experience with the variety. When thoroly dry, they are stored in tin cans, punched with nail holes for ventilation. We buy a good many seeds. Science has ‘streamlined’ our old favorites so they are more disease and pest resistant as well as of superior quality” (80:5, 1939). It is interesting to note that this letter is the

longest letter among the four prize winners and is the letter that is most filled with common sense gardening tips.

In addition to getting information about other's gardening practices through magazine articles and contests, farm women received information from demonstration gardens. Demonstration gardens were increasingly established by Extension workers in communities throughout the country. These gardens were one way to introduce rural women and farm families to the new and increasing varieties of vegetables, to methods of subsoil irrigation, to the proper selection and arrangements of vegetables in the garden, and to new techniques to extend the growing season and defy the weather. In Texas, for example, frame gardens (cold frames) were able to extend the growing season for farm families in the 1930s. The frame garden story began with a farm woman who moved from the Midwest to the Texas plains where the winds and blowing sand made growing vegetables difficult. She experimented with using a cold frame in which to grow her vegetables. Beginning with one cold frame, her operation eventually expanded to cover her entire back yard. She was thus able to grow a wide variety of vegetables, including asparagus, beans, cabbage, carrots, chard, kale, lettuce, endive, Chinese cabbage, dandelion, sorrel, mustard, English peas, yellow squash, beets, radishes, tomatoes, salsify, and onions. Covers for the cold frame were made from glass, cello-glass, and muslin. This idea was picked up by the local home demonstration agent and others in the woman's club, and members were encouraged to adopt this method of raising an early garden (*Extension Service Review*, 11:20, February 1940). In another Texas frame garden, sixteen varieties of vegetables and seven kinds of flowers were planted in February 1935 in a cold frame that measured 15 feet wide and 42 feet long (*Extension*

*Service Review*, 11:20, February 1940). This idea became so widespread that by 1938, over 3,000 frame gardens were reported in various Texas counties, especially after a publication entitled, *Frame Garden Suggestions* was published and promoted by extension agents.

In Mississippi as in other states, including Missouri, spring and fall home gardens were heavily promoted and demonstration gardens were begun in many communities. Competent garden leaders working with home demonstration agents were placed in charge. These gardens, according to the November 1931, *Extension Service Review*, “Served as a guide to what and when to plant, how to cultivate and otherwise operate a model garden” (2:163). Overall, because of intensive efforts on the part of extension agents, the numbers of home gardens in Mississippi increased two-fold in 1931.

Clubs also promoted gardening and gave women the opportunity to share ideas and exchange seeds. The New Mexico Farm Women’s Cooperative Club at Roy espoused the slogan, “A garden on every farm.” These club members lived their slogan as they exchanged surplus garden seeds and plants and supported the notion that the garden should be economically viable, as well as provide food for the family. At one of their meetings in March 1930, these women exchanged dill, wax beans, squash, and pumpkins seeds, in addition to 116 ever bearing strawberry plants, 12 tomato plants, 15 rhubarb roots, 76 gooseberry bushes, 24 black currant bushes, 1 quart of winter onion sets, sage, parsley, and wonder berry plants (*Extension Service Review*, 1:39, July 1930). Women’s clubs in Missouri actively promoted seed exchanges among club members. This was a means that enabled farm women to expand their repertoire of garden vegetables and experiment with new varieties that seed companies were offering.

In South Carolina, helping tenants who lived on plantations cope with providing the necessary food requirements for the family became a priority for some home demonstration agents, especially in 1933 when the cotton-acreage reduction program took effect. Working with plantation owners and tenants, home demonstration agents served 24 White and 87 African American tenants in six counties in 1936. The plantation demonstration program was designed to aid tenants in producing food to feed themselves, thus reducing expenditures at the store and improving their diets. It also appeared that some of the agents believed that the tenants had “so little that they would be willing to work with the extension agents on a food production program” (Landrum 1937:99). Extension agents identified the minimum supply of food necessary for nutritional requirements for each family; tenants were instructed on canning vegetables and meat; and fall and winter gardens were encouraged. A poultry specialist discussed taking care of poultry, how to feed chickens for egg production, and the necessity of cleaning, repairing, and building chicken houses and coops. Tenants were also expected to make minor repairs to their homes and improve their outbuildings. As a means to retain the tenants’ interests in the program, they were required to participate in farm tours of the other participants’ homes. At each farm the men and women were asked to “meet the land-owner, the home agent, and other interested people at an appointed place on the farm. The group was then asked to go from home to home and to see each tenant’s food supply. Each family was asked to arrange a food exhibit on the kitchen table and to have their record of the year’s work placed with it. They were asked to put out all canned products, a peck of meal, a bag of flour, a peck of sweet potatoes, a dozen eggs, a pound of butter, a gallon of sirup, a peck of dried peas, a peck of beans, and a peck of peanuts.

They were also requested to keep the chickens and cows shut up so that the agent might see the livestock during the visit to each home” (Landrum 1937:102). This program clearly appears to have made improvements in the living conditions of the tenants, and they seemed to appreciate the interest that was being taken in them.

One poignant story of a woman living in the Missouri Ozark hills who overcame adversity to provide food for her family and stay off relief rolls was written by John F. Case and published in the February 18, 1939 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*. Lured to Missouri by an unscrupulous land agent, she found the soil barren with only a few acres of tillable land. Undaunted, with the help of her children, Martha Sanderson “wrested a few acres from waste land. Too poor to own even one horse, the Sanderson’s spaded that garden plot, carried compost from a far-away farm, and carried unending water supply from a spring as drought tightened. To Martha Sanderson, to her children as the once-strong father slowly faded before their eyes despite loving care, that kitchen garden meant the difference between the pride of self-support and acceptance of the bread of charity....Foot by foot, yard by yard, acre by acre, Martha Sanderson and her growing children, reclaimed their farm....But always that kitchen garden stood as a protector, a haven of refuge when stores ran low; of cash there was none” (Case 1939:16). As more and more women learned to plan their gardens, grow vegetables, and preserve produce during the Depression years, the health of their families was also improved and many they were freed from relief rolls.

### **Keeping Body and Soul Together**

As Martha Sanderson knew, having a productive vegetable garden meant keeping body and soul together. In an article from *The Missouri Farmer* in March 1938, an



anonymous author encouraged all farmers to plant vegetable gardens not only for the innumerable health benefits or for the substantial reduction in the grocery bill, but also because, “most of us eat too much bread and meat, and too little leafy foods, and thus luscious vegetables not only save store bills, but doctor bills as well, and finally there is the satisfaction of producing with our own hands the things that keep body and soul together; millions of city people envy farmers because they can have fine gardens, and yet not one in ten of us makes the most of this opportunity” (30:10). This author also goes on to recommend that hollyhocks, peonies, and iris be planted along one side of the garden to bring beauty to the area as the years pass. With regard to the spiritual aspects of gardening, the writer asks the reader, “What is more inspiring for old folks than puttering around in a garden—what will do more to maintain their interest in life?...I know of an old white-haired farm grandmother who works a splendid garden from early spring till the frosts of autumn, and thus a fine garden not only saves a lot of money, but enriches our souls as well” (30:10).

In their book, *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place, and Action*, Francis and Hester (1999) include a section on how gardens are restorative and help people to heal. This may be more relevant to those who lived in towns rather than on farms, but the restorative aspects of gardening anywhere have been well documented in the Francis and Hester volume and by others (Rodale 1987). In their chapter in the Francis and Hester volume entitled, *Restorative Experience: The Healing Power of Nearby Nature*, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan provide empirical evidence that gardening has important benefits other than the tangible outcome of producing one’s own food to cut the grocery bill. They point out that gardens have both psychological and restorative benefits. In today’s world

that demands coping with hassles and a sometimes grueling existence apart from nature, they report that gardening in addition to the tangible benefits also brings great satisfaction to individuals. Among these benefits are working in the soil, wanting to see things grow, and liking to be outside. Gardening also provides one with a diversion from routine, a valuable way to spend time, an opportunity to relax, and the potential to achieve a feeling of tranquility (p. 239-240). As a restorative environment, the garden enables an individual to recover some of the humanity that might be eroded as one faces the demands of every day life especially in an urban environment, but also on the farmstead. Thus, as they suggest, the garden can provide a feeling of being away, of escaping, while at the same time contributing to a healing restorative experience.

In the same book, Charles A. Lewis also speaks to the healing and restorative aspects of gardening in his chapter, *Gardening as Healing Process*. While plants play a very unique role in providing remedies for diseases, living plants in, for example, the vegetable garden, act on the mind as well as the physical body. Lewis writes that “Today, however, we seek a healing quality in gardens and gardening that acts primarily on mind, not body—medicine not to be taken orally but rather perceived sensually, to heal scars on the human psyche” (1999: 244). Both Lewis and the Kaplans are concerned with how gardening helps to mitigate the anxieties and tensions in today’s fast paced environment. I would argue that these insights would also apply to farm women who lived during the Great Depression. Although farm women were ostensibly surrounded by nature, albeit a manmade landscape—the farmstead—they also needed an escape from the lack of peace and quiet that they experienced during this tumultuous time. Indeed several of the women who I interviewed talked about the therapeutic aspects of gardening.<sup>2</sup> Several of my key

informants observed that their gardens helped them deal with impending deaths in the family. Elizabeth and Clara both spoke about how their gardens helped them cope with the illnesses and ultimate deaths of their husbands. Elizabeth recalled that when her husband was sick and in the hospital, she spent all day with him. When she got home to relax she would go out and pull weeds out of the flower beds, which was the best thing she could do for herself her doctor said.

### **Summary**

Through articles in farm journals, U.S. Government publications, and through information given to me by my key informants, this chapter painted a picture of the value of the home vegetable garden during the Great Depression. The garden was valuable not only for its tangible benefits, such as providing a nutritious diet for the farm family and reducing the grocery bill, but it was also valuable as a place on the farmstead where women could ostensibly find some peace and tranquility from the every day hardships of farm life and reconnect with nature. Farm women were able by selling surplus products from their household gardens enabled to purchase amenities for their homes and refurbish household items, or send their children to college. This extra income, which they controlled, allocated to them a sense of power within the household because they decided how it would be spent. In addition, the chapter looked at some regionally specific projects promoted by home demonstration agents that helped farm women make their gardens more productive.

The following chapters explores the extent to which farm women were or were not influenced by a number of national and state-wide institutions, including the USDA Extension Service and academic institutions, to change or modify their gardening

practices. The work of Missouri home demonstration agents will be highlighted in Chapter 9, while the work of the Rural Rehabilitation home management supervisors who worked on behalf of clients of the Farm Security Administration, will be examined in the next chapter, with particular emphasis on Perry and Lawrence Counties.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The December 21, 1940, issue of the *Missouri Ruralist* contained an article entitled “Grows Groceries in Garden,” from which the title for this subhead is taken. By growing a considerable amount of fruits and vegetables and then canning some of them for use during winter, a farm family can “live at home,” believes W.C. Sheets, of Wayne County. During the past year this family produced more than 85 per cent of its living on their farm and spent only \$52 for food not produced on their farm. This past summer the family canned 573 quarts of fruits and vegetables (81:7).

<sup>2</sup> Information on the therapeutic aspects of gardening can be obtained from the American Horticultural Therapy Association. Their web site is: [www.ahta.org](http://www.ahta.org).

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **FARM WOMEN'S NEW DEAL**

This chapter and the next look at two different federal agencies designed to work with farm families during the Depression. The Farm Security Administration (formerly the Rehabilitation Administration) was one of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal social programs that addressed the needs of poor farm families through relief, rehabilitation, and resettlement and is discussed in this chapter. The next chapter, Chapter 9, examines the activities of the USDA Extension Service home demonstration agents who worked throughout the states with women through clubs and community demonstration activities. The Farm Security Administration's purpose was to alleviate rural poverty by making small loans to farmers, which it did with some success from 1937 until it was abolished with passage of the "Farmers Home Administration Act of 1946" and a new agency, the Farmer's Home Administration, was created in its place. According to Sidney Baldwin some of the former programs remained in place, but "anything that suggested 'sociological experimentation' was vigorously avoided" (1968:402), and that included the two experimental farms that were established in Missouri.

The first section of this chapter briefly looks at President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs and their relationship to women. The second section looks specifically at the Farm Security Administration and its relationship to clients in general, and to clients in Missouri, in particular.

## **Women and the New Deal**

President Roosevelt's New Deal relief programs were directed at both urban and rural populations. In farm areas, however, the New Deal agricultural programs provided relief for some subsistence farm families and tenant farmers, but long-lasting programs tended to promote capital-intensive agriculture among wealthy farm survivors. In fact, some of the agricultural policies promulgated by the new Federal government agencies, in particular the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), tended not to provide assistance to tenants and sharecroppers, and according to Theodore Saloutos, "reduced numbers of low income groups from tenants and sharecroppers to farm laborers or push them off the land completely" (1990:403). With these tenants and sharecroppers went their livelihoods and any security provided by their wives' vegetable gardens.

The New Deal attempted to provide work programs for rural and urban women. Overall, the work programs that included urban women were consistent with patriarchy in that they did not offer women opportunities for career training, but merely reinforced the idea of women's work, by teaching women to become household aids, maids, seamstresses, and clerks (Rose 1990:35-42; Wandersee 1986). This notion was evident in even some rural programs of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA)<sup>1</sup> projects in Iowa, where in the mid-1930s the largest activity for "unskilled" women was in the sewing rooms, with over 2,000 women participating. According to Noun, "A variety of clothing and household items was produced in these sewing rooms; these were turned over to the county for distribution to welfare clients" (1999:19). Library work, recreation, and doing household chores were also projects for women, but they never involved the number found in the sewing rooms (Noun 1999:12).

However, some women were fortunate enough to obtain professional positions in New Deal programs; for example, Jean Stillman Long, who worked for five years as the State of Wisconsin's Recreation Director for the rural segment of the Works Projects Administration (WPA) Workers' Education Program. After the WPA program ended, she was able to use the organizational and public speaking skills she developed and worked as an organizer for Central Cooperatives Wholesale and then as Farmers' Union state education and youth camp director (Neth 1995:348-349). Women who had professional positions with the Farm Security Administration also were able to develop the skills they needed to work with farm women, and were able to carry those skills with them into other endeavors.

Eleanor Roosevelt was a particular force within her husband's administration on behalf of women's issues. She was especially influential in bringing the progressive women's agenda to Washington. In 1933, for example, she convened a White House Conference on the Emergency Needs of Women. Many of her earlier associates assumed influential roles within the cabinet and the government (Chafe 1993). Historian Susan Ware writes that "the New Deal provided opportunities for women in politics and government that make the 1930s one of the most creative and exciting periods for women in twentieth century political history" (Ware 1985:113). Indeed for those women who were among the elite in the top policy-making positions in the Roosevelt Administration, such as Ellen Sullivan Woodward, who headed Women's and Professional Projects for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Frances Perkins who was Secretary of Labor, Grace Abbott and Katherine Lenroot at the Children's Bureau, and Mary Anderson at the Women's Bureau, these were heady times. However, Ware also points out that ordinary

women who were influenced by New Deal relief and welfare programs did not fare so well (Ware 1985:115).

Such is the case of the camps for unemployed women, based on the model of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for men. While over 2.5 million men were enrolled in camps and worked in reforestation and other infrastructure programs, only 45 camps for 8,500 women were set up nationwide (Ware 1985:124-125). Lois Scharf (1980) writes that 86 camps were set up for 6,400 women. While there seems to be some disagreement as to the scope of this project, the financial compensation for the men versus the women is noteworthy—women received only fifty cents per week, compared to the men, who received one dollar a day (Scharf 1980:122). Many New Deal programs were not supportive of women, although Eleanor Roosevelt's efforts on behalf of all women are notable.

### **Rural Relief and Rehabilitation**

Some New Deal programs aided farm families, particularly very poor ones, in establishing farms or keeping hold of what they already had. The Resettlement Administration (RA), and its successor the Farm Security Administration (FSA), were programs that had a profound affect on rural poverty and on the lives of poor farm women. By June 1936, over two million poor families were actively participating in Resettlement Administration rural rehabilitation relief programs. "Relief of human suffering, permanent self-sufficiency, preservation and reinforcement of the family farm, achievement of a more rational man-land relationship, full utilization of manpower among low-income farmers, and wider participation in democracy" were emphasized in the agency's focus on rural rehabilitation (Baldwin 1968:107).



The Resettlement Administration had at the core of its programs “a view to prompt alleviation of distress among farm families in need of public aid” (Tugwell 1936:36). In fact, Conkin writes that among New Deal agencies, the RA was one agency that supported equal rights for African Americans. In addition, as it was “concerned with farm labor, it set up migratory camps and tried to alleviate the plight of the ‘Okies. But in most cases it loaned funds to small farmers for needed equipment or vital necessities and then supervised their farm program, protected them from exploitation, and took a percentage of their crops as repayment.... It was not only one of the most honest but probably the most class-conscious of New Deal agencies” (Conkin 1992:61). In 1937 the Resettlement Administration was subsumed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and became the Farm Security Administration (FSA); however, the primary interest of the agency remained relatively intact and it sought to deal with some of the economic and social structure in society that appeared to be responsible for rural poverty (Eaton 1943:101).

In April 1935 the Resettlement Administration was created by Executive Order for the purpose of aiding poor rural people with a program of land use and resettlement and by rehabilitating their lives as farmers. Because the fields of operation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension Service and the Resettlement Administration (RA) overlapped to some extent—both were concerned with the rural population, particularly with educational work—the two agencies signed a memorandum of understanding on June 7, 1935, to delineate their tasks and coordinate their programmatic activities (Tugwell 1936:35). Up to this time, Extension personnel to some extent were already working cooperatively with other federal programs to provide emergency relief services

to rural people. This memorandum of understanding in effect stated that final authority for carrying out the resettlement and rehabilitation program rested with the Resettlement Administration, while acknowledging that the Extension Service “is the established and recognized public agency for extending technical and informational service in the field of agriculture and home economics” (Tugwell 1936:35). At the time he penned this article, Rexford Tugwell was the Under Secretary of Agriculture and Administrator for the Resettlement Administration.<sup>2</sup> According to Paul Conkin, Tugwell was not overly fond of the Extension Service, and in effect set up his own farm organization, “with its own agents, but one dedicated only to the exploited and underprivileged” (Conkin 1992:61). Under Tugwell’s administration, the Resettlement Administration sought to purchase land (more than 9 million acres across the country was bought) and convert the land “into forest areas, grazing land, game preserves, parks, and other beneficial public uses” (Tugwell 1936:36). Specialists in land use planning were to work cooperatively with agents at state agricultural colleges and state agencies to bring this part of the plan to fruition.

A second component of the RA was rural resettlement, which meant that farm families would be transferred from unsatisfactory farming situations to locations where a successful farming operation could be achieved. A number of types of farming situations were planned, including cooperative farms, such as the two in Missouri—Osage Farms in Pettis County and La Forge Farms in New Madrid County.<sup>3</sup> Individual farm families who were relocated were probably already familiar with county agents who were promoting farm and home management plans to help farm families regain their economic and social foothold and become rehabilitated. In addition to rural families the RA also resettled

“urban slum dwellers in autonomous garden cities,” which included three suburban greenbelt cities; for example, Greenbelt, Maryland. Rehabilitation was the third prong in the Resettlement Administration’s program. An indication of the success of this part of the program was whether or not and to what extent the farm family increased food production and instituted better management practices for both the farm and the home following the tenants of scientific agriculture.

Like many Nebraska women during the Depression, farm women in Southwestern Kansas were encouraged by government programs, including the Farm Security Administration, to become more self-sufficient and to raise chickens and gardens (Riney-Kehrberg 1994). Many of the farm families in this region were dependent on the federal government as their sole source of support. In exchange for \$15 a month, farmers were required to keep more accurate records, improve their farms by diversifying crops, keeping livestock, and participating in other subsistence activities. In some counties, clients were encouraged to participate in cooperative markets. While some FSA program clients were successful, as exemplified by the farm woman who canned 600 quarts of food and produced enough meat and vegetables to support her family through the winter months, others were not so lucky and never achieved the prescribed self-sufficiency. Some Kansas families, for example, had to purchase food from Colorado truck farmers and most ended up eating their chickens because of lack of feed.

At the turn of the century Hispanics living in New Mexico were able to survive as subsistence farmers until Anglo settlers, lured by the promise of land, filtered into the state. Typically, Hispanic women during the first half of the twentieth century were in charge of the farm. According to Joan Jensen, they “plastered their adobes each year,

raised hollyhocks and put geraniums in the windows, planted melons, beans, and squash in the garden, dried peaches, chiles, strips of meat and spirals of apples, raised chickens, sheep, and perhaps goats,” while the men sought employment as day laborers. However, as wage labor became scarce, subsistence farms were sold and the farm families moved to cities (1991:86-87). During the Depression the Farm Security Administration and other relief programs were minimally successful in New Mexico with Hispanic families, because rural Anglo families received the lion’s share of public assistance (Jensen 1991:92). Nevertheless, relying on intricate kinship ties, Hispanic families were able to stave off starvation and help each other at least through the early years of the Depression (Jensen 1991:93). Jensen writes of the farm women, both Anglo and Hispanic, that they “showed amazing strength and competence in their work, whether picking cotton or managing small farms” (1991:95). For landless Hispanics in the Southwest, New Deal job programs did not help to create new employment patterns, but reinforced old gender labor patterns, which tracked women into the clerical, teaching, and health professions (Deutsch 1987). In addition, Chicanas joined the growing number of women who sought housework and went into domestic service during the 1930s.

The Farm Security Administration, however, attempted to eradicate some of the fundamental causes of suffering among its rural clients. Sometimes the client’s poverty was so dire that the FSA had to bring them up to a “minimum level of living, health, education, and socialization” before they became capable to taking hold of an opportunity to help themselves” (Eaton 1943:101). One aspect of the rehabilitation effort was providing the client with farm-management and home-economics specialists who could teach them how to make the most out of their limited resources. Few clients had

extensive formal education and few had “any notion of good farm practices, such as the use of soil conservation methods, diversified crops and purebred stock. Their wives have never learned how to prepare well-balanced diets, make their own clothing and use other little household economies” (Eaton 1943:103). Such was the work of the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisors. These women were sent to aid the rural homemaker who often found herself in an untenable situation. The work of the home supervisors is laid out in the FSA client records through letters, memoranda, home visit reports, and the ubiquitous federal forms that were required. By examining client records for Perry and Lawrence Counties, we can come to understand how this agency undertook its work in Missouri.

### **The Farm Security Administration in Missouri**

By 1939, about 20,449 Missouri farm families had been assisted by small emergency loans and through farm and home management plans prepared by FSA staff. The work of the Farm Security Administration in Missouri is captured in a 1939 letter to Governor Lloyd Stark from the State Director of Rural Rehabilitation, Stephen C. Hughes (WHMC Lloyd Stark papers, C4, File 5249). In this letter Hughes cites a variety of reasons that these Missouri farm families needed assistance. He writes, “Some of these families have suffered reverses through no fault of their own, depression, floods, fires, sickness, drought, poor land, lack of satisfactory tenant landlord relationships—many similar reasons over which the individual has had little or no control. Many others have, through their own mistakes, found themselves in unfortunate circumstances. Unwise use of credit or lack of sound management ability are some of the causes coming under this heading” (p. 1). The FSA was the last resort for many farmers because it would only

make loans to farmers who could not secure credit from another lending institution.

Although the FSA's program was divided into three components—rural rehabilitation, resettlement, and tenant purchase—the largest number of people were served by the rural rehabilitation program. This phase involved farmers who were tenants or owners and who had land for farming, but who needed credit or assistance with management problems.

Small loans were given out to purchase livestock, equipment, seed, and to cover other operating expenses. Loans were made up to five years at five percent interest on the unpaid balance. Since the FSA began making loans in Missouri, according to the Hughes letter, “a total of \$12,994,271 has been loaned. To date (August 26, 1939) \$2,831,997, or about twenty-one percent has been repaid. We consider this a good record in view of the fact that most of the loans were made on a five-year basis two years or less ago” (p. 2).

One item that was frequently bought with these small loans was a pressure cooker for the farm woman. The cost of a 7-quart pressure cooker at that time was about \$12.00, but the value of the pressure cooker to the farm family could be measured in the increase in canned produce to supply the family with food for the winter months and a minimally well-balanced diet. In general, the FSA client farmer was to receive a “wagon, a plow, a tractor, a mule, improved feed and seed, a new farm house, a terraced hillside,” all symbols to relieve chronic poverty. His wife was to receive

screens for the windows, a new cook stove or refrigerator for the kitchen, running water and indoor privies, and fresh milk for the children. Pressure cookers—client wives call them ‘precious cookers’—with which to preserve fruits and vegetables for the winter table became badges of liberation from the old ways, and colorful glass jars of preserved fruits and vegetables were proudly displayed in the family's parlor as testimony of achievement (Baldwin 1968:107-108).

In 1938 the Farm Security Administration staff in Missouri undertook a survey of 12,700 farm families who had rehabilitation loans. The results of the survey were

reported by Hughes in his letter to Governor Stark. “While increase in net worth is one indication of progress, we believe that the efforts of these families to increase their standard of living are graphically illustrated in their progress toward production of foods for home use. At the end of 1938 these 12,700 Missouri families had increased the number of quarts of fruits and vegetables canned for home use by 2,143,174 or an average of 169 quarts more than they canned annually previous to coming into the program” (p.3). The same held true for milk produced for home consumption as well as meat, eggs, and fruit, tubers, and roots produced for home use. All of these food products increased substantially after the family joined the program, and with the increase in home production came an added benefit, improved health because the farm family was getting a balanced diet. Another indicator of progress was record keeping. According to the Hughes letter, “Other figures show that approximately 56 percent of these families kept satisfactory farm and home records in 1938. I believe this is very significant since it is my feeling that one of the quickest ways these families can check the leaks and find the places where they can make improvements in their farm and home activities is by keeping records which will show them exactly what has been done” (p. 4). An FSA client’s success depended in large part on the work of the farm woman. First, she was charged with increasing the family’s food production by expanding her gardening and canning efforts. Second, she was responsible for household record keeping, which was a task enthusiastically encouraged by the FSA home management specialist.

A farm woman’s relationship with the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisors, especially with respect to their gardens and canning, can be seen by closely examining the FSA client files for two Missouri Counties—Perry and Lawrence Counties.<sup>4</sup> The

FSA clients, as noted earlier, were definitely some of the hardest hit farmers in Missouri during the 1930s. Many were tenants and sharecroppers who were looking for a small loan to help them get over crop failure resulting from the drought years; others were looking to the FSA for loans which would enable them to purchase a farm. The purpose of delving into the FSA client files was two-fold. First, I wanted to get a snapshot of those farm families who were indigent in comparison with the farm families generally served by Extension Homemaker's clubs and home demonstration agents as well as the individuals in my interview sample, who were as a group not the poorest of the poor. Second, I wanted to get a feel for how the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisors' jobs compared with the work of Extension home demonstration agents in Missouri.

Of the seven families whose client records I reviewed all had household gardens ranging in size from one-half an acre to two acres. Every family had at least one hoe, others had rakes, spades, and garden plows. Canning equipment included jars (pint, quart, and half-gallon jars), lids, and rubbers. Some women were fortunate enough to own pressure cookers; others were able to purchase them with their FSA loans. After receiving their loan, Mrs. Mattingly in a letter dated May 13, 1938, ordered her Peerless case aluminum pressure cooker, 7-quart mason jar capacity, from the Western Mercantile Company of Kansas City, Missouri (NARA, Mattingly, RG 96, Box 254). The importance of the pressure cooker to these women and to the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisors can be seen in the chattles list for this farm family and others, where the pressure cooker is included as an asset listed with farm machinery, such as a John Deere cultivator, a hay rake, a farm wagon, a J.I. Case corn planter, and livestock. Teaching women how to use their newly acquired pressure cookers was of the utmost importance



as it was the topic of a number of letters to homemakers from home supervisors. For example, Lois Ruff wrote to one of her clients that, “On Tuesday afternoon, May 31, 1938, Mrs. Margaret Hinote your new Home Supervisor will be with you to show you how to use your cooker. Since you have peas that are ready to can I suggest that you have these peas shelled. Will you also wash and boil your jars and lids. Mrs. Hinote will be with you probably about 2:00 o’clock p.m., Tuesday afternoon. Of course should the creek be up you know not to expect her” (NARA, Zahner, RG 96, Box 256). This was a typical letter to the homemaker and it shows the extent to which the home supervisors went to individually demonstrate to farm women how to can their produce, and thus improve their lives and the lives of their family members. Neighbors were also frequently mentioned in these letters as being invited to attend the home demonstration.

Learning how to can corn and tomatoes was often at the top of the list of requests for assistance from the home supervisors. For example, Mrs. Barnes of Lawrence County noted on her “Canned Food Supply for 1940” form that three quarts of her 40 cans of corn had spoiled, thus instigating her request for remedial instruction (NARA, Barnes, RG 96, Box 241). Another woman received instruction on cooking dried beans in the pressure cooker. In addition to basic canning demonstrations in individuals’ homes, the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisors also gave demonstrations on how to make cheese.

The household garden along with the production of cheese, milk, eggs, and butter were expected to reduce the family’s food budget considerably. FSA clients were encouraged to follow the “Live-At-Home” program, which was also part of Extension’s work. For example, in 1938 the Rural Rehabilitation home supervisor in her annual home plan for the Mattingly family of seven estimated that they would be able to save \$200

from living off of the farm. This included the household garden, poultry, eggs, potatoes, fruit, milk and hogs, all produced at the farmstead (NARA, Mattingly, RG 96, Box 254).

In the home management plan for 1936, the Murray family of five from Perry County was projected to save over \$165 from farm-produced food, and only have to purchase \$62 worth of groceries for the year. This was during a drought year in which Mr. Murray was not able to raise grain and the little grain that was produced went to fatten his hogs. In April 1936 when the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisor visited the Murray family to make the plan, she assessed the clients' attitude toward the program and the Rural Rehabilitation workers as good and acknowledged that Mrs. Murray had made progress with her garden program. According to a report that was used by the FSA to evaluate the perspective client, the Murray family has apparently "solicited our help of their own accord and they welcome the opportunities that the Rural Rehabilitation Program offers...[they] will adopt such new practices as are proven of value to him [and] those knowing them predict success with the aid that the rehabilitation program offers them and that they will within a short time be on their feet" (NARA, Murray, RG 96, Box 254). After a number of stress filled years, and promissory note renewals, the Murrays made the final payment and were out of debt to the Farm Security Administration by August 1943.

Farm Security Administration clients, like women in Extension Homemaker's Clubs, were encouraged to grow, eat, and preserve leafy green and yellow vegetables. In her one-half acre garden, Edna Tucker produced \$100 worth of vegetables to feed her family of three. She also produced cheese, butter, and eggs, and raised poultry, which amounted to a \$47 savings in the family's food budget in 1939. Based on the information

from the family's client file, Edna purchased some tomatoes and fruit for that year and she planned to can 90 quarts of vegetables, 60 quarts of tomatoes, 60 quarts of fruits, and 30 quarts of meat. In her garden, it was suggested that she raise the usual vegetables, including radishes, lettuce, peas, spinach, carrots, onions, cabbage, mustard potatoes, beets, sweet corn, green beans, Swiss chard, sweet and Irish potatoes, tomatoes, and cucumbers. On the Tucker's farm they had peach trees and various berries to can, but would be purchasing oranges, bananas, lemons, and apples (NARA, Tucker, RG 96, Box 256). With their FSA loan, Mrs. Tucker intended to purchase a pressure cooker to help her achieve her canning budget (Figure 4). The Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisor wrote that "Mrs. Tucker is an energetic, ambitious woman, who is anxious to improve her methods of homemaking. She has always lived on a farm, and realizes the value of canning and storing home produced food. In order to conserve time and energy in canning, Mrs. Tucker is planning to buy a pressure cooker. She has an adequate supply of fruit jars. The house is in good condition, with screens for both windows and doors. Mrs. Tucker economizes by making her own soap. She also has a 300-egg incubator, which she sets for neighbors in exchange for eggs to set for herself. I believe, that if this loan is approved, Mrs. Tucker will co-operate 100%, and will do her part in helping to make the loan a success" (NARA, Tucker, RG 96, Box 256).



Figure 4. Completed farm homes in the FSA Southeastern Missouri project for the rehabilitation of farm labor. Home Supervisor demonstrating the use of a pressure cooker in a client's home. May 1940. Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF-34, Negative No.61006-D. Photograph by John Vachon.

The farm and home management plan for the Burke family of six, who lived in Lawrence County on a 76-acre farm, revealed that they planned to produce \$243 worth of food for home consumption from the farm, including white and sweet potatoes, fresh fruit (apples and blackberries), leafy green and yellow vegetables and other vegetables, including tomatoes. Mrs. Burke also produced cottage cheese, butter, eggs, and planned to use 50 fryers during the year beginning in October 1940. The Burkes, it would appear, were originally thought not to be a family that should be a Rural Rehabilitation client. Not only were Mrs. and Mrs. Burke above the norm in educational attainment,<sup>5</sup> they had completed 11<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades respectively, but they also, according to the Narrative Supplement to their loan application, were, "...in our simple phrase, 'on a higher plain' than most of our borrowers.... I believe the only thing that has retarded this family is lack of planning. They live comfortably some seasons and depressed at others. After working at length on the farm and home plans to adjust the income and expenses to fit the farm and family, it was very evident that the family had never realized before that family planning should be done" (NARA, Burke, RG 96, Box 243). In addition to being more educated than the typical FSA client, Mrs. Burke was also the only farm woman, among the records that I reviewed, who belonged to an Extension Homemaker's Club, which could account for the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisor's comments that her records were in good shape and that she planned to have a fall garden, all components of Extension's Live-At-Home Program. A farm visit report in June 1941 notes that Mrs. Burke had canned 40 quarts of vegetables; her record books were in fine shape and that because the chickens are excellent they have sold \$198 worth of eggs to date even though the farm plan only calls for selling \$195 worth for the year. Both the Burkes are

enthusiastic FSA clients and apparently had a very cooperative attitude (NARA, Burke, RG 96, Box 241).

Other FSA client families were perhaps less fortunate than the Burkes. In 1936, Edward Thompson of Perry County wrote in his quarterly farm progress report to the FSA that because there was not enough rain he did not get the yields that he had anticipated and that he had to sell all his pigs and the cow and that his “garden did not do so good” (NARA, Thompson, RG 96, Box 256). Daniel and Urthel Zahner were also tenants and farmed 160 acres in Perry County. They had six children ages 14 to 9 years old. They requested a loan from the Resettlement Administration because, like all clients, they could not get credit from another institution. In the first visit to make the home plan for the Zahner family, Mrs. Lois Ruff, the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisor, recommended that plenty of spinach and mustard be sown for canning and that Mrs. Zahner put out Marglobe tomatoes (NARA, Zahner, RG 96, Box 256). In a later supervisor’s farm visit report, Mrs. Ruff wrote that Mrs. Zahner while using her pressure cooker for canning vegetables satisfactorily, had not yet started to keep the farm and home account books. Mrs. Zahner was also advised to count and store her canned food and fill out her canning record, as well as to use her pressure cooker to cook meals in the winter. “Dried beans can be cooked in 30 minutes at 15 lb. pressure...if they have been soaked,” wrote Mrs. Ruff in 1938.

As the likelihood that the United States would enter the war in Europe became a reality, Farm Security Administration clients were required to sign a pledge of cooperation to adjust their living expenses and to increase the household production of food for the war effort. These farmers’ pledges ranged from digging a cellar for storing

canned food and other vegetables, to planting successive vegetables in the garden, to increasing egg production, to increasing the size of the garden by one-half an acre, to adding 10 more hogs to the farm. The pledge that the farmer and farm women signed said that in order to do their “share in winning the war, we want to put our farm in the Food for Freedom program. We agree to raise more food, feed, and other needed crops in order to feed our family better and make more farm products available for war needs” (NARA, Murray, RG 96, Box 254). Much of this increase in household production fell to the farm woman, who was expected to increase among other things her garden and poultry production.

With the FSA Food for Freedom program and Extension Homemaker’s Clubs’ programs, which will be discussed in Chapter 9, combined with efforts by garden clubs and nursery and seed companies, farm women and men doubled their efforts to produce enough to feed their own families and have a surplus to barter or sell to those less fortunate or to people living in towns. I would argue that by looking at the material reviewed here, it can be demonstrated that the work of the women who were Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisors was instrumental in helping the nation maintain food security during World War II. I would also argue that the farm women who responded to the national emergency and increased their household production were, as much as those women who began to work in factories during the war, responsible for contributing to a cooperative national spirit and for adhering to Extension’s motto, “plan, plant, preserve, and prosper” that enabled this country to feed itself.

Tucker (1992) and others (Warner 1987) indicate that the growth in gardening during the Second World War, as well as the First World War, was a response by

individuals living in urban areas to food shortages and to the increase in canned food prices because of the war effort. In fact, Tucker suggests that the Department of Agriculture was reluctant, even stubborn, in its refusal to acknowledge that people could grow vegetables without proper instruction during World War I and II. In spite of the government's reluctance to support Victory Gardening in World War I, the public led the way and by WW II, the Department eventually gave in and began to sponsor Victory Garden programs, especially in urban areas where vacant lots and backyards were cultivated. During the early years of the Depression gardening at all levels and in all places was encouraged. As the Depression lessened, intensive vegetable gardening and canning of home produce declined, only to reemerge when the need arose during World War II to preserve food on the home front to support the troops and the war effort. As we have seen, the productive role of farm women in this effort cannot be underestimated.

### **Summary**

One purpose of this chapter was to briefly look at how women interacted with or were employed by some of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs. In essence, while some women achieved a very high profile within the administration, most notably, Francis Perkins, Secretary of Labor, many women who worked on relief rolls were given positions commensurate with their experience as homemakers. This can be seen in some of the sewing programs in Iowa and other states (Noun 1999; Rose 1990). The second purpose of the chapter was to examine how the Farm Security Administration carried out its work with farm families, and how that work affected farm women and the women who were professionals within the agency. The Farm Security Administration was one agency within the Roosevelt Administration dedicated to the elimination of rural



poverty. By looking at the client records of two Missouri Counties—Perry and Lawrence—we can surmise that in most cases the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisors were able to maintain contact with farm women whose husbands had signed for loans with the FSA and to teach them many skills that they needed to improve and increase their productive work on the farm.

We can also see by examining these records that one of the first items that the farm women bought with these loans, and in some cases it was considered an asset in assessing the farm equipment, was a pressure cooker. The decision to purchase a pressure cooker and garden seed by the farm women rather than use that money to buy farm equipment or seed for the crops, may tell us something about her status within the family at this time. The pressure cooker also became the focus of attention by the home supervisors as they made a concerted effort to instruct these women on how to can. They also apparently spent a great deal of time with their clients in helping them prepare canning budgets, instructing them on home management techniques, and in trying to impress upon the women the importance of keeping accurate records.

The next chapter, as suggested earlier, will examine the work of Extension home demonstration agents as they aided farm women through extension homemakers clubs. These clubs not only provided social support for farm women and a safe space in which to learn and practice new skills, such as assuming leadership responsibilities, but also offered them the opportunity to exchange information about gardening and canning practices and to learn up-to-date practices in this regard.

From the evidence presented on FSA clients in this chapter it appears as though the Rural Rehabilitation Home Supervisor's approach to working with clients was a more

individual, one-on-one activity. The Home Supervisor met with the farm woman (and perhaps a neighbor or two) to demonstrate how to use a pressure cooker, for example, or to develop a canning budget or home management plan. The Extension home demonstration agents, on the other hand, work with women on a collective basis, and appear to be carrying out their work within the tradition of women's associations, which as Ann Firor Scott notes in her book, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*, are at the "heart of American social and political development" (1991:2). While her book generally speaks to women's associations early in the twentieth century, some of the common characteristics of the organizations and the social consequences of club work can apply to Extension home economics clubs, as we shall see in the following chapter.

The clubs, for example, emphasized collective action and this enabled women to possess influence that they might not otherwise have as individuals. Within the club structure, they learned "how to conduct business, carry on meetings, speak in public, manage money" (Scott 1991:2). In addition, they were exposed to a wide range of social experiences; they developed talents and "inspired others to believe in themselves" (Scott 1991:3). Scott also writes that these women's personalities changed and that "values and attitudes were developed reinforced by the collective experience" (1991:3). Membership in associations "provided careers for many women, careers from which the income was psychic rather than material. In their own groups women learned to be professionals before the traditional professions were open to them, and developed a recognizable female style of professional behavior that relied heavily on cooperation" (1991:3). Finally, membership in these clubs and associations fostered a sense of community

responsibility and manifested itself in a changed rural landscape. Scott writes that “by the 1930s the landscape was covered with libraries, schools, colleges, kindergartens, museums, health clinics, houses of refuge, school lunch programs, parks, playgrounds, all of which owed their existence to one or several women’s societies” (1991:3). Neth also acknowledges the fact that women were community builders (1995). All of the social consequences laid out by Scott will be seen in the work of the farm women who belonged to Extension home economics clubs in the next chapter.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The WPA was called the Works Progress Administration until July 1, 1939; afterwards it was called the Works Projects Administration (Noun 1999:2).

<sup>2</sup> In January 1937, the Resettlement Administration became part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In September 1937, it became the Farm Security Administration (Conkin 1959:7). During World War II it was replaced by the Farmers’ Home Administration.

<sup>3</sup> These two resettlement projects brought together tenant farmers who had been in dire straits to establish cooperative or collective farms where they shared labor and were given an opportunity to restore themselves into productive farmers. Osage Farms was a combination of cooperative dairy farms and individually operated but closely supervised government farms. LaForge Farms operated as a cooperative with cotton its chief crop. LaForge Farms was occupied by 100 sharecropper families (60 white families and 40 African American families), with no individual farmsteads. These experimental farms were begun in 1937 and were liquidated beginning in 1943. See *The Missouri Ruralist* articles about these projects written by George F. Jordan and John F. Case (November 27, 1937 and September 14, 1940, respectively). See also the O.R. Johnson papers, C3483, File 772, housed in the WHMC. The letter dated November 4, 1940 from Hans H. Baasch to G.G. Schmitt, Department of Agronomy, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, gives a brief summary of the status of the LaForge Farm families.

<sup>4</sup> There is a wealth of information on clients in the FSA files, which are housed in the National Archives. With the exception of Perry and Lawrence Counties, the bulk of the Missouri client files are housed in the Chicago branch of the National Archives. Due to time limitations, I chose to review the files of clients in Perry and Lawrence Counties, which are located in the Central Plains Region of the National Archives in Kansas City. Because I did not have time to review every file, I randomly picked client files from randomly selected boxes in both counties. In the end, I reviewed a total of seven client files on one day, November 11, 2005. In some cases, it was difficult to make any strict

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comparisons among the clients because when Rural Rehabilitation clients were transferred to the Farm Security Administration, the forms changed.

<sup>5</sup> The grade completed for other FSA clients, whose records I reviewed, ranged from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade for husbands, and the 6<sup>th</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup> for their wives. Generally, the wives had more formal education than the husbands.

## CHAPTER 9

### PLAN, PLANT, PRESERVE, AND PROSPER

This chapter speaks to the influence of the USDA Extension Service, specifically home demonstration agents, on the everyday lives of farm women during the 1930s. Home demonstration agents worked directly with farm women through an extensive network of local clubs throughout the states, including Missouri.

A thread in the institutional web of knowledge available to farm women was information about homemaking, including gardening, that was presented by the women who were Extension home demonstration agents. The programs that were presented at club meetings and in publications were designed to help women work more efficiently around the house and with their farming chores. Programs were also developed to aid farm women in realizing additional farm income, instruct them on how to beautify their homes and farmsteads, and educate them about the importance of providing nutritious meals to help prevent disease. In addition, Extension homemaker's clubs offered women an opportunity to interact with other women, and a safe space to share their problems and concerns about farm and family. While not everyone in my interview sample was a club member, those who were expressed their gratitude to the women who were home demonstration agents and for Fannie and Elizabeth, the home demonstration agent was a life saver.

In the first section of this chapter, I will present an overview of the scholarly research on Extension home demonstration work throughout the country in the 1920s and 1930s. Part of this discussion involves the critique of this work and why some scholars feel that it perpetuated class, race, or gender divisions (Fink 1992; Hilton 1994; Jellison

1993; Jones 2002; Rieff 1994). A central point in this debate is the extent to which the realities of farm women's lives conflicted with the urban-based standard of living promoted by Extension home economists (Babbitt 1993:83). Some scholars, however, note that farm women partially resisted a domestic reform program during the Depression and attempted to remain focused on farm production and shaped programs according to their own needs, resources, opportunities, and racial sensibilities (Hoffschwelle 2001; Neth 1995). The second section of the chapter looks at the work of home demonstration agents in Missouri, especially through the work of Essie M. Heyle, who was the Missouri State Home Demonstration Agent during the early part of the 1930s.

### **For the Betterment of Home and Family Living**

In her book, *It's Up To The Women*, (1933) Eleanor Roosevelt wrote "The present crisis is different from all the others but it is, after all, a kind of warfare against an intangible enemy of want and depression rather than a physical foe. And I hold it equally true that in this present crisis it is going to be the women who will tip the scales and bring us safely out of it" (1933:ix). In the context of the Depression she was referring to not only to homemakers, but also to the professional women who were available to help them. In speaking to women on the farm, in villages, or in the city, she acknowledged the importance of planning and budgeting time. To assist women in gaining greater efficiency, she suggested that they take "advantage of extension courses carried on by the state college of agriculture in practically every state" (1933:54). In addition, she assured women that "the home economics department will help her to arrange her kitchen and her house generally so as to require as few steps as possible. They will also advise her as to the type of furnishings to buy, things which will be strong and sturdy and yet not too

costly. They will show her the best methods of mending and doing over old things that she may have and will help her with the beautifying of her home and at the same time show her how to get things which can be kept clean easily” (1933:54). To make these suggestions more concrete, Mrs. Roosevelt included in her book suggestions for a balanced diet—sample menus and recipes—which were prepared for the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration by the New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell University. The healthful menus will feed a family of six, she wrote, and they have “been worked out under the direction of experts on home economics and will serve as a sample for balanced, inexpensive home rations” (1933:65). Appendix 3 includes a few of the sample daily menus found in the book and the instructions on how to prepare some of the suggested dishes.

### ***What Did Farm Women Want?***

Safeguarding the health of the family and developing money-yielding home industries were two issues of concern to women identified in an early twentieth century survey of farm women conducted in 1919 by home demonstration agents and reported by Florence Ward in *The Journal of Home Economics* in 1920. These two issues were also important as the country moved into the Depression. The purpose of the survey was to learn from the women themselves what their real problems were so that Cooperative Extension might do its part to help alleviate them. The survey, according to Ward, presents “convincing evidence as to actual living and working conditions under which farm women are meeting their responsibilities as partners in the farming business, and unmistakably point to certain definite kinds of assistance which the cooperative extension service can extend to rural homes of the northern and western states” (1920:437).

Furthermore, she writes that up to this time the educational extension movement has focused less on rural farm women and more on farmers, “although the farm woman’s work has as great economic importance and calls for as high a degree of skill and as wide a range of information and judgment as does the work of the farmer whose equipment and methods of farming have been the subject of many studies made by our agriculture institutions” (1920:450). Although these findings came from a survey done in the northern and western states, based on the literature, these two issues were of concern nationwide. Ward’s report was one of the first surveys of farm women and their desires for a productive rural life. In fact, as Extension programs developed they did follow up on the results of the survey and attempted to emphasize productive projects in programs during the 1930s in many states.

In Tennessee, for example, an agent’s approach to domestic reform was to emphasize “productive projects such as canning, poultry, and fruit production for market sale, which increased a woman’s cash contribution to the farm income...[because] their constituents did not and would not have the financial resources for the water systems, appliances, and furnishings deemed essential to the ideal rural dwelling unless they could earn their own cash income” (Hoffschwelle 2001:53). The desire of rural women to produce and market traditional crafts in New York State became a point of contention with extension. Home demonstration agents initially balked at the idea that women wanted to include traditional crafts, such as rug-hooking, basketry, and caning chairs in their extension programs. Rug-hooking was seen by the rural women as a family document as they incorporated family events into the warp and woof of the rug; whereas home economists viewed the craft as having unscientific overtones. Nevertheless,



according to Babbitt, during the early years of the Depression, “the Cooperative Extension Service in Home Economics was a very reluctant midwife to the rebirth of a rural arts and crafts movement in New York State” (Babbitt 1993:97). Rural women relied on their handicraft work to bring them and their families through the economic hard times of the Depression. But as the Depression wore on, support for crafts instruction was downplayed in New York State ostensibly because extension could not find a sufficient number of instructors with adequate training. However, Babbitt suggests that the “real reason was that rural women’s interest in crafts threatened the expertise and professional status of county home demonstration agents. By 1935, arguably the worst year of the Depression, New York State’s Extension Service in Home Economics had no crafts instructor and no program in handicrafts for its Home Bureau members” (Babbitt 1993:97).

Although farm women in the earlier survey wanted to increase their productive capacity on the farm and local agents responded to this need in large part, this was not the ideology promoted by U.S. Department of Agriculture staff in Washington, D.C., which promoted the use of labor-saving devices as “part of a campaign to convert farm women into rural homemakers” based on a middle-class urban ideal (Hoffschwelle 2001:53). Nevertheless, emphasizing economizing measures and helping farm women increase their productive capabilities continued in many states, particularly during the Depression. In Iowa, according to Dorothy Schwieder, “with money in short supply, women were anxious to remodel hats, coats, and other articles of clothing. Women canned more meat during the 1930s than before” (1986:211). Caning chairs in Iowa did not seem to be the contentious issue that it was in New York State, as the two most practical projects were

caning chairs and refinishing linoleum; and in at least one case, it was reported that “as a result of the project work [one woman in Iowa was] able to make extra money for her home by the caning of chairs” (Schwieder 1986:212).

North Carolina’s home demonstration agents also helped women use the resources at hand and instructed them on how to improve their yards with native shrubs and flowers, how to remake old clothing into fashionable designs, how to rearrange their home workspace to be more efficient and less tedious, and to improve the look of their kitchens with a coat of paint and a linoleum floor. Throughout the South, and North Carolina in particular, agents encouraged farm women to produce a surplus and sell their produce at curb or roadside markets, thus increasing the value of their labor. Jones writes that, “home demonstration leaders recognized that the country home represents a ‘producing as well as a consuming center’ that contributed ‘to the income of the farmer’ and often measured ‘the difference between profitable and unprofitable farming.’ Increasing farm incomes was the first step toward raising a family’s standard of living and fostering community improvement projects. Home demonstration agents organized cooperative marketing of farm women’s goods and in the 1920s they inaugurated curb markets that linked club members with buyers in town” (Jones 2002:21). Curb markets seemed to be successful in North Carolina, and because of this success, home demonstration agents in Missouri sought to replicate them in the state. I could not find any evidence, however, that there were formal curb markets in Missouri.

As a step to increasing a farm family’s standard of living, home demonstration agents in North Carolina and elsewhere were responsible for bringing modern methods of public health to farmsteads and into rural communities, and in some cases they supported

providing hot lunches to school children. Lu Ann Jones writes that agents in North Carolina were instrumental in identifying children suffering from pellagra and taught women how to prevent the disease and helped them get the required nutritional food to cure it. In addition in the 1930s in North Carolina and throughout the country, home demonstration agents increased their efforts to help women grow and can vegetables and fruits (Jones 2002:20) and promoted the use of “protective” foods, such as milk, fruits, and leafy vegetables (Cummings 1940:4).

During the bleakest years of the Depression, income generated from women’s various enterprises kept the bills paid, put food on the table, and clothes on the children, and in some cases saved the farm. North Carolina home demonstration agents reported that “a woman who sold at the Alamance County market said that the \$500 she earned in 1932 ‘has helped us to keep Old Man Depression away.’” Another agent remarked that there is no way of knowing, “just how much the market aids in paying taxes and buying school supplies” (Jones 2002:73). During the Depression, home demonstration agents appeared to have responded to the production needs of their constituents in some regions more than others and developed local programs accordingly. In responding to the needs of local farm women, however, agents also had to contend with overcoming racial barriers.

### ***Racial Differentiation***

There were differing approaches to programs along racial lines. Home demonstration agents who worked in rural Southern states in the African American communities were generally African American themselves and had a somewhat different agenda and more limited financial resources than those white agents who worked in the

South or other parts of the country (Hoffschwelle 2001). Kathleen Hilton, in an article on race and gender as it played out in USDA policy in the South, describes the attitudes and activities of black and white demonstration agents and how, for example, black agents acknowledged the “vital contributions of women to the economic survival of rural black families” (1994:129), while white agents tended to uphold the USDA philosophy of instructing women on how to be better homemakers based on an urban model of middle-class values. Between 1907 and 1929, Hilton documents the activities and challenges that faced black home demonstration agents in Virginia in particular and how USDA policies helped to sustain gender and racial hierarchies in this work. However, she notes that while racist policies “made black women’s work a subset of ‘black’ work rather than of ‘women’s’ work...African American agents enjoyed remarkable latitude to shape a practice program that increased land ownership and raised living standards” (Hilton 1994:133). There is no reason to believe that these policies changed during the 1930s.

Lynne Rieff also writes about the critical work black home demonstration agents did, particularly with respect to increasing the domestic productivity of the wives of African American farmers in Alabama from 1914 through 1940. But like Hilton, Rieff writes that, “gender and race divisions within the Extension Service raised the first barriers to reform” (1994:137). This fact was apparent in the differential in salaries. White male agricultural agents, for example, were given preferential treatment over white female agents with larger salaries and more money appropriated to aid them in implementing their programs. Black agents, including home demonstration agents, were severely underfunded programmatically, with comparatively meager salaries. When local

funds limited the number of extension agents who could be supported, inevitably it was the white agricultural agent who was preferred (Rieff 1994:137).

Additionally, in the South, black agents had to work hard not to disrupt the prevailing class system by challenging white landowners. Instead they found that they had to secure the support of the white farm operators in order to work with the poorest constituents—the tenants and sharecroppers. In working with these poverty-stricken farm women and their families, black and white home demonstration agents frequently had to set aside their preconceived notions of rural life in order to adequately address their constituents' needs. Pamphlets and other written supplemental material proved to be ineffective in some cases because the club members could not read and preferred to be shown in face-to-face demonstrations. In addition, “agents discovered rural women often lacked, and could not afford, basic supplies and equipment used in demonstrations (cooking utensils, stoves, sewing needs, garden implements)” (Rieff 1994:142).

Nevertheless many black agents in Alabama and other Southern states overcame the challenges wrought by the system and were successful in improving the lives of many individual club members. By 1940, according to Rieff, black home agents served in 32 of 67 Alabama counties and reported that 13.7 percent of rural African American women belonged to a home demonstration club; whereas, white agents operating in all 67 counties reported that 17.4 percent of rural white women were club members (1994:148).

It was reported in the Missouri College of Agriculture Annual Report for 1939, that Extension work among African American families in Southeast Missouri focused on home canning, and many women canned for the first time, with a total of approximately 32,000 quarts of fruits and vegetables processed for winter use. Black agents also focused

on giving instruction on making cotton mattresses, which were absent in many households (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1939, Circular 420, June 1940, p. 51).

Jones describes black home demonstration agents as women caught in the middle. She writes that these agents collaborated with club women to “fashion programs that served political as well as personal ends. What appeared to be innocuous lessons in nutrition, sanitation, and household management became part of an assertive strategy to obtain better living conditions. Helping women grow more of their own food, for example, weaned them from dependence on commodities purchased on credit at inflated prices...Participating in a home demonstration club inspired interest in the world beyond the neighborhood and cultivated the skills that one needed for leadership” (Jones 2002:154). In effect these club members were resisting the established social structures in their communities. In addition to learning leadership skills, participation in home demonstration clubs by white and African American women also contributed to an improvement in their personal and social skills, as well as in the practical skills involved in gardening and canning. While scholarly work on home demonstration agents is often critical of the fact that they reinforced existing gender, race, and class structures, the women who were involved in the programs as agents and as club members did benefit substantially in many obvious and not so obvious respects.

### ***Benefits of and Resistance to Club Work***

One obvious benefits of black and white clubs was that they created a female space in which participants felt free to exchange ideas, learn new techniques, and socialize with other women. There they could “affirm the value of their work, continue

their educations, develop their talents, and shape their communities,” according to Jones (2002:138). The clubs also provided information on nutrition, clothing remodeling, housecleaning, gardening, canning, and health care that was relevant to women who had very little money to spend (Babbitt 1993:89). They were given scientific instructions on vegetable gardening and planted a wide variety of vegetables. Most valued the advice given about their poultry flocks and how to make them more profitable. Many in leadership positions went on to assume positions at the local and community levels (Jones 2002:21-22).

In addition, markets for poultry and eggs, traditional crafts, butter, canned vegetables and fruits were also established by home demonstration agents as women’s productive and previously unpaid labor was seen as valuable (Jones 2002:21). Perhaps more valuable and somewhat intangible was the fact that a farm woman who produced items for sale developed a sense of self-esteem and control in that her “labor provided goods that were important to a particular segment of the marketplace where the quality and aesthetic beauty of her products were valued and commanded a high price” (Babbitt 1993:86). Developing one’s talents, leadership skills, and the means to ensure that the family had nutritious food for the winter also enhanced a farm woman’s social status with her family and within her community.

Nevertheless, club members felt free to adopt or reject the new methods that were demonstrated. According to Hoffschwelle in Tennessee, “Home demonstration workers accorded women a pivotal role in rural programs at the end of the 1920s, but their hopes that farm women would initiate widespread domestic reform had in fact met a mixed reception. Many farm women simply ignored the extension service’s offers of home

improvement advice and stayed focused on female farm production” (2001:63). Frequently, new methods were not adopted because the credentials of the home demonstration agent were in question. Most of the club members had learned various household and gardening practices from their mothers and grandmothers and gained their knowledge through experience. Some came to see scientific home management techniques as book learning and they adopted some practices and rejected others. In New York State, Babbitt writes of an experience of one home demonstration agent, who was demonstrating how to prepare food to a group of women: “ During the demonstration, each time the home economist gave the scientific reason for a change in practice, a farm woman interrupted her to explain at length the way her mother had taught her to do that particular task, and why. This happened repeatedly, with numerous women interrupting the demonstration. Finally, the agent had to leave before the demonstration was finished in order to catch her return train. After she had gone, one of the interrupters said in a loud voice to her companion, ‘I bet we taught her a lot today,’ to the applause of the entire audience of women” (Babbitt 1993:89).

Women’s resistance to the teachings of the home economists was also based on a number of perceived differences between themselves and their instructors. In addition to being college-educated and young, most demonstration agents were single and from the perspective of the farm women they lacked the experiences of child-rearing, marriage, and household and farm management shared by all rural women. Additionally, home demonstration agents were usually not from the assigned counties, while most rural women were born and raised there (Babbitt 1993:88). As a role model for rural women, therefore, many agents fell short, but as Hilton notes—“The very presence of women



who had achieved expert status and uncommon visibility within the rural South as agents also modified the social environment in which young women learned housekeeping tasks” (Hilton 1994:125).

Other obstacles that agents had to overcome were the prejudices of rural people, especially tenant farmers, who distrusted them because they were employed by the government and just might have been sent to spy on them by their landlords. Some rural women, especially those who were poor, were reluctant to join clubs because they did not have time to socialize, they moved frequently, or they were frankly ashamed of their tenant status and possibly “unacceptable” rural homes. Still others wanted to initiate change to improve their homes, but expected that the landlord would not compensate them (Rieff 1994:144). Other women were unable to join clubs because of the immense work that was involved in keeping the household functioning. This was particularly true of younger women who could not leave because of childcare responsibilities; the irony was that these were the women who would greatly benefit from club work.

Toward the end of the 1930s and early 1940s surveys were done by state Extension offices to determine the demographics of club members. A survey of farm women who belonged to home demonstration clubs in 20 Indiana Counties in 1940 found that 15 percent of women were under 30 years old; 26 percent were between 30 and 39 years old; 31 were between 40 and 49 years; and 28 percent were over 50 years. The number of children in the family suggested that membership in these clubs might be related to the number of children in the households because 38 percent of households had no children; 26 percent had one child; 18 percent had two children; 10 percent had 3; 4 percent had 4 children; and 4 percent had between 5 and 10 children (*Extension Service*

*Review* 11:118, 1940). However, a 1941 study of 695 homemakers in selected areas of Massachusetts, Washington, South Carolina, and Indiana suggested that poor health, no transportation, unfamiliarity with Extension, uninterest in any organization, care of small children, no contact with Extension and housekeeping duties were responsible for women not participating in these activities. The survey was interpreted by Extension personnel to mean that women thought of Extension in terms of meetings rather than an overall program centered around problems of home and community where solutions were offered that were attainable and practical (*Extension Service Review* 12:78, 1941). This study was conducted after the worse years of the Depression, and it is interesting to note that poor health and lack of transportation were the two major factors for womens' nonparticipation. Care of small children came in fifth.

While it is useful to understand why women did not participate in Extension homemakers clubs, the State home demonstration agent for North Carolina, Mrs. Jane S. McKimmon, conducted a survey of 300 women during the early 1930s and asked why they did attend home demonstration club meetings. Eight reasons were given: (1) subjects taught (clothing, cookery, child care, parental education); (2) community improvement; (3) inspiration, new ideas, and vision of what is possible for the homemaker of the future; (4) social, involving meeting with neighbors; (5) self-improvement (growth in self-confidence, speaking in public); (6) recreation, including release from the daily tasks; (7) economic gains (marketing information for home produce and savings in the home); and (8) personal admiration of the agent (*Extension Service Review* 2:71, 1931). It is interesting to note here in 1931 that economic gains from marketing home produce was not among the top two programmatic issues as it was in 1919.

### ***What About the Agents Themselves?***

Overall, most home demonstration agents were respectful of the rural farm women with whom they worked and sincerely made an effort to improve their lives and the lives of their families. In a time when home economics was struggling to become professionalized and be treated as a legitimate area of study, it was incumbent upon these newly graduated women to uphold the teachings for which they were trained. Jones writes that the women who were among the pioneering cohort of home demonstration agents “counted physical stamina, fearlessness, dedication to service, and an ingenious ability to solve problems as characteristics necessary for success” (Jones 2002:113). They also needed to be women of character who would be conscious at all times that their private and public lives were being scrutinized. In addition, home demonstration agents needed to have tact and diplomatic skills to deal with local political elites, who paid their salaries, as well as tenant farmers’ and sharecroppers’ wives. Basically they needed to have compassion and the social skills to respond when their scientific methods were challenged by rural women.

Many home demonstration agents began their careers as teachers, and when they joined the extension service they created the new profession of home economist and “claimed a key place among Progressive Era reformers who viewed more knowledgeable wives and mothers as central to a better society” (Jones 2002:116). As the profession of home economics became more established in the colleges and universities, academic training and academic standards for agents rose. As standards rose, agents’ responsibilities increased, as did the amount of paperwork. Agents began to write articles for publication in extension magazines and newspaper columns and to do radio broadcasts. As we saw in Chapter 6, Madge Reese did many radio broadcasts and was a

very prolific writer on behalf of farm women. The scope of agents' programming also increased, moving from basic instruction in gardening, canning, and marketing, to health care and nutrition, landscaping, interior design and textiles, and home management. They also encouraged club members to become politically active (Jones 2002:117). During the Depression, some extension personnel gave up their home demonstration work and were tapped to coordinate state and federal relief efforts.

The work of extension home demonstration agents was varied and frequently difficult. It took a certain type of person to be successful and earn the respect of the rural women. In addition to being tactful, resourceful, and flexible, these women were expected to be exemplars in the new profession of home economics. As discussed earlier in this section, their constituents, the rural women, did not accept *in toto* the scientific methods being demonstrated and written about by the home economists, but many women did and found them useful. Additionally, the middle-class urban values and consumerism that extension agents attempted to inculcate into farm women did not necessarily jibe with the realities of their everyday lives. Nevertheless, demonstration projects, according to Hilton, altered the material and social context within which farm women lived. Windows were screened; privies became more sanitary; food was preserved for the winter months; and fall gardens were established. Labor-saving devices demonstrated at club meetings altered women's work patterns. The fireless cooker<sup>1</sup> (which seems to be a precursor to today's crock pot) was demonstrated by both white and black agents and became a favorite time-saving device for farm women because they could cook a hot dinner while they worked in the fields or in the home (Hilton 1994:124).

Involvement in homemakers clubs also affected the way women interacted with the outside world and it increased the status of women's work within the household and the community. County fairs, for example, gave women the opportunity to display the products of their labor, win prizes, and gain status. Selling produce at curb markets allowed farm women to use this income for home improvement projects (Hilton 1994: 124-126). (See Chapter 7 for a more complete discussion of the value of the home vegetable garden and the changes that were wrought within the home and community when women had access to and control of their own cash.)

### **Home Demonstration Work in Missouri**

In their University of Missouri-College of Agriculture Research Bulletin, C.E. Lively and R.B. Almack (1939) identify the most widely established social agencies and institutions serving rural Missourians. They divide the primarily non-economic agencies into six functional categories: educational, religious, health, welfare, socio-economic betterment, and social and recreational. The organizations included in their survey, for example, ranged from schools, to public libraries, to rural churches, to the State Social Security Commission and the American Red Cross, to the Farm Bureau Federation and the Missouri Farmers' Association, to fairs and agricultural expositions, to the Boy Scouts of America and the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The purpose of their study was to describe the objectives, functions, and recent accomplishments of these agencies and organizations, as well as indicate their geographic distribution and size within the state. For the purpose of this chapter, one program—Home Economics Extension Clubs—are of primary interest. As noted in the Lively and Almack research bulletin, the objectives of these clubs were threefold: “(1) to teach skills and the most

approved practices in home making; (2) to furnish a means of personal development through adult education; and (3) to give training and experience in leadership in local community organization” (Lively and Almack 1939:14).

According to Lively and Almack, by 1938, Missouri had 1,988 Home Economics Extension Clubs with a combined membership of over 38,000 women. Clubs were located in all counties with the exception of Stone and Warren. This was not always the case, however. In 1930, there were only 818 clubs; and in 1929 there were 232 fewer clubs in Missouri. The increase in the number of clubs and membership was quite an accomplishment in 1930, given that there were only 16 home demonstration agents serving 17 counties with a total budget of \$51,936.15 (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1930, Circular 269, February 1931, pp. 64 and 91). Club programs continued through the 1930s to included work in “clothing and textiles, foods and nutrition, home management, child development, health, gardening, poultry, handicrafts, and music appreciation” (Lively and Almack 1939:14).

Lively and Almack describe the development of the Agricultural Extension Service in the nation and in the state. In several Missouri counties, extension work actually began several years before the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914. The Smith-Lever Act, which established the agricultural extension service, was the legislation that authorized cooperation between USDA and the land-grant colleges and provided funds for farm and home demonstration agents for localities that could appropriate matching funds (Jones 2002:15). The principal goal of the county agent was to bring the scientific principles developed in the agricultural colleges to bear on the farmers and encourage them to modernize their agricultural practices. The home demonstration agents

organized women and girls into clubs and attempted to teach scientific principles to club members so that they could then apply them to their domestic and farm labor. Early on, as we have seen, women were instructed in gardening, cooking, canning, sanitation, the use of new labor-saving devices, and marketing (Jones 2002:15).

Government support for home economics education created new job opportunities for women in Missouri and elsewhere. In 1917 provisions in the Smith-Hughes Act, which provided high school training in agriculture and home economics, stimulated demand for college curricula and prepared people to fill these rolls (Jones 2002:116-117). Expanded professional opportunities for graduates in home economics in Missouri can be seen in a letter from August 1935 that Mabel V. Campbell, Chairman of the Department of Home Economics, wrote to alumni of the department. She wrote, “The demand for well trained workers is greater than ever before in the older fields, as teaching, home economics extension, and dietetics. There is also a big demand in other fields. You may be acquainted with the rural rehabilitation program. At the present time, workers are being selected in this field. The indications are that a large number will be needed in the near future. There is also an immediate demand for workers in various Works Progress Administration projects...Every student and graduate of the Home Economics Department of the University [of Missouri] has an opportunity to give real service at this time—a service to the University and to the state” (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Home Economics Papers, Correspondence, 1935-1936, C993, File 4, p. 7).

### ***The Organization of Home Economics Extension Clubs***

In 1939, there were well over 200,000 rural families influenced by home economics work in the state of Missouri. There were 2,182 clubs with a total membership

of 42,357 active members. This was a sizeable increase in the number of clubs and in membership since, for example, 1928, when there were 450 clubs and a total membership of 8,169 women (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1939, Circular 420, June 1940, pp. 51-53). Throughout the decade of the 1930s, there was a steady increase in the membership of these clubs that roughly correlated with the increase in the number of home demonstration agents that the state and counties were able to support. However, this increase was relatively small as a 1932 editorial in the *Missouri Ruralist*, by the editor, John F. Case, reveals.

Writing to the editor, a Linn county farm woman protests that so far as expenditures for extension services goes in Missouri, women are 'only getting the crumbs that fall from the table.' She points out that only 14 counties have been served by home demonstration agents whereas 74 have had county agents and that in some counties the man agent is paid as much as \$1,000 a year more than the woman receives. In checking salaries paid state employees as listed in the Blue Book she finds that watchmen at the capitol building are paid almost as much as home demonstration agents receive. She feels strongly that farm women are entitled to more than they are getting and concludes, I think it is about time we were demanding a seat at the table (73:4).

By 1939, 113 counties had organized home economics extension clubs that were supported by 70 home demonstration agents. The big increase in the number of agents came in 1936, when the number of agents increased two-fold. This increase is exemplified by the fact that the women of Howard County finally got their own home demonstration agent as described in a small article in the December 28, 1935 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*. "Farm women in Howard County will have their own home demonstration agent in 1936. Such was assured after Mrs. Warren Hammond, representing the 35 home economics clubs of the county, presented their case to the Howard county court. this number of clubs is among the highest of any county in



Missouri, and represents 629 farm women and 138 girls enrolled in 4-H clubs. The county court appropriated \$600 for the year as the county's share of the cost" (76:16).

As the number of agents increased, so did the number of local women leaders, the number nearly doubling between 1936 and 1939, from 10,048 to 20,962 (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1939, Circular 420, June 1940, p. 51). Home economics extension work in the state was largely carried out by an extensive network of women who serve as volunteer leaders of neighborhood clubs organized around community centers. These women, who serve as presidents and other officers (including game and song leaders), attended extension training schools at regular intervals, and return to their clubs with new information. State specialists and county representatives of the Extension service trained the volunteers. Many of these club leaders were undertaking this responsibility for the first time and had never served as leaders in any capacity. One such leader was a Mrs. John Smith of Holt County. In a letter dated December 2, 1931, Agnes L. Barnett, the home demonstration agent from Holt County, wrote to Essie Heyle, the State Home Demonstration Agent at the time, suggesting that Mrs. Smith was worthy of being singled out as an outstanding club leader. She wrote,

Mrs. Smith is one of the most sincere, dependable woman that I have ever met. The other day I attended club at her home and had the opportunity to see her in her natural setting. We slipped off a few minutes to visit her cellar, for there were the results of part of her summer's work. I stood back and marveled at the accomplishments of Mrs. Smith. I am enclosing a picture that will more clearly tell you of this phase of her work. The canned products on the table to the right are different canned vegetables, soup, relishes, etc. To the left are canned fruits. In front of the tables are fruits and vegetables in storage, eggplant, celery, cauliflower, pumpkin, squash, etc. Mrs. Smith raises all these products herself. Besides canning for her family, she cans for a sister and brother who are married and do not have their own products.

Mrs. Smith was president of her club for the past two years and was always present and on time. Often, I have seen her driving her horse and buggy in town to deliver her products before coming to a leaders' Extension meeting. She finds time for all worth while things and does them well. The community has been enriched by Mrs. Smith having lived in it (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Agricultural Extension Service, Home Demonstration Papers, 1915-1953, C 3331, Folder 3, Letter to Essie Heyle, December 2, 1931).

This letter provides us with some insight into the particular talents, capabilities, and skills that farm women who became club leaders developed. The characteristics described in this letter certainly gave these women a sense of empowerment as they helped other club women and helped to build their communities.

The Missouri State home demonstration agent, whose work will be discussed later, was responsible for producing the monthly newsletter to club presidents about food production and gardening, child health and development, recreation, the selection, making, and care of clothing, and home management, among other things. The club presidents, in turn, pass the information on to their membership at monthly meetings throughout the year. In this way, club members receive and are able to put into practice new helpful ideas. Club women, however, did not stop at attending to the needs of their families, but expanded their work into the community and especially during the Depression, helped their less fortunate neighbors. According to the Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1932, "Through the organized efforts of women in 457 neighborhoods, needed families were supplied with food, clothing, bedding, medical care, and many other forms of assistance. This work included financial aid to families in economic distress, to those whose homes had burned, and to those who were sick or injured and without means to provide adequate care (Circular 302, pp. 47-48). Other community work done by clubs included their support for local bands, providing furnishings for community halls, beautifying schools and church

grounds, handling circulating libraries, contributing to the hot lunch program at elementary schools, and organizing Sunday schools (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1939, Circular 420, June 1940, p. 48).

### ***Testimonials for the Home Demonstration Agent***

Groups of women who met and organized around extension had various names for their clubs—home demonstration clubs, homemaker’s clubs, or home economics extension clubs—but they all had similar purposes. In 1932, the women in Missouri decided to call their organizations “home economics extension clubs,” rather than the designations used prior to that time (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1939, Circular 420, June 1940, p. 54). During the Depression, thousands of local volunteer leaders joined the county home demonstration agent in getting extension information disseminated to the largest number of women in the State. It was felt that a demonstration conducted by a local farm woman in her own home was the most effective means of ensuring that extension’s message was heard and that these new scientific practices were adopted.

Entwined in the work of demonstration agents are some obvious and some less than obvious benefits that Missouri farm women received as a result of their interaction with local leaders, extension workers, and fellow club members. These benefits can be seen in the literature and in the Extension Service files, some of which are housed in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in Columbia, Missouri. The importance of the home demonstration agent to Missouri farm women is readily attested to in letters of support that club members from a number of counties wrote in the 1930s about what their county home demonstration agent does; what she means to the women of the county; and

what she means to your family and to the community (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Agricultural Extension Service, Home Demonstration Papers 1915-1953, C3331, File 2, Sillers Letter). These letters, while ostensibly solicited from women who would tend to write only a complementary response, i.e., they were mainly from individuals who were club presidents and club officers, nevertheless pay tribute to the important work of agents in building and strengthening communities of women, helping them to improve the efficiency and beauty of their rural homes, teaching them about planning and executing a well balanced meal, helping them plan and plant their spring and fall vegetable garden, helping them improve their clothing, as well as demonstrating the use of the pressure cooker and modern methods of canning. Excerpts from a number of letters supporting their county's home demonstration follow.

Mrs. Frank Cotterell from Bates County wrote that her county home demonstration agent is "my ideal woman and I respect very highly her advice and words of comfort and council. I can't tell you what she means to my family unless you mean through me which means that I can take to them some of the things I learn from her. She means a lot to our community of women for I know we all look forward to her day with us and some have said they don't care so much about the meeting only when she is with us, however, they are gradually taking up the work more and more and responding wonderfully to the programs that our program leader is giving us" (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Agricultural Extension Service, Home Demonstration Papers, C3331, File 2).

Mrs. Frank B. Fulkerson from Higginsville, wrote that her home demonstration agent "teaches the fundamental objectives of rural life, proper standards of living, how to

make the most of home resources, develop artistic sense in the home and outdoor surroundings. She teaches women to value themselves properly, to have time for leisure by using simple conveniences in their work. Through the leadership of the home demonstration agent, rural women have learned to plan their leisure time to include recreation and culture. It is difficult to express the feeling we have for our Home Demonstration Agent. One who constantly brings good things and never discourages, is an ever welcome guest” (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Agricultural Extension Service, Home Demonstration Papers, C3331, File 2).

The letter from Mrs. J.W. Nash of Gower, Missouri, attests to the significance of the home demonstration agent in understanding what farm women need. Mrs. Nash writes, “She not only understands the country woman’s problems but is able, because of her special training which many farm women lack, to help solve those problems. She teaches the farm woman not only what a more attractive home is but helps each individual to make her own home more attractive; she shows how the grounds may be improved; she helps each in their clothing problems; she demonstrates the modern methods of canning; she helps the mother with her child nutrition problems; she organizes 4-H Clubs; she organizes Pre-School clinics. In short she is able to help the country woman in any phase of her work. The value of a Home Demonstration Agent then will not be shown in one year’s time nor according to one year’s salary in Dollars and Cents but in the improved exterior and interior of our farm homes, in better groomed farm women, in healthier boys and girls because of proper nutrition and physical defects corrected” (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Agricultural Extension Service, Home Demonstration Papers, C3331, File 2).

In January 1932, Mrs. A.H. Orr of Saline County summarized the letters she received regarding their home demonstration agent and what club work meant to the women of her community. She writes, “Practically all of the letters called attention to the fact that in this time of depression, their members were proud to be able to put into practice the bits of economy learned through the club and were especially proud to be able to make and fit their own clothing, thus being able to go out with confidence, knowing that they were neatly and properly dressed. Some of the letters told of how in some communities the religious and political hatchet had been buried. The women were too busy working together for their own good and the welfare of the community to nurse ill feelings and discuss what ticket to vote and what church they belonged to...Practically all of the writers agreed that bringing the women in contact with each other in club work has developed talents which otherwise would have lain undeveloped. One woman said, ‘It has assisted the timid women to have more confidence in themselves and become speakers and leaders, where they were afraid to be heard or even seen in public activities before.’ [Another woman in her club wrote] ‘Club work has created a spirit of cooperation and the joy of working together. It helps us to keep step with the progress of modern civilization’” (WHMC, Missouri, University of, Agricultural Extension Service, Home Demonstration Papers, C3331, File 2).

This cooperative spirit was also reported in the Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture Annual Report for 1933, under the heading, “Many Intangible Results.” While farm women saved money, had an abundance of high quality food, mended and modernized their old clothes, fixed worn out furniture and made their home grounds more attractive, all with the help of local leaders and home

demonstration work, they also were given opportunities through their clubs to socialize. “The social contacts, good times, and sense of progress from working together to solve common problems and from learning new methods gained by these women did much to help maintain the splendid spirit exhibited by them during these trying times” (Circular 310, February 1934, p. 42).

In essence, these Missouri club women saw their home demonstration agent as a person who helped to unite their community, as a role model, as a person who because of special training was able to teach them about nutrition and meal planning, how to beautify their homes and the surrounding landscape, and how to use limited resources, and as a person who enabled many of them to overcome their inherent shyness and become club leaders. Therefore, through home demonstration work these farm women became empowered to undertake activities to improve their communities, the environment of the farm family, and ultimately overcome perceived personal limitations. Some of the specific ways in which home demonstration agents were able to operate and work with club women can be seen in the Extension Home Economic Monthly letters that the Missouri State Home Demonstration Agent wrote to club presidents and members.

### ***Letters to Homemaker's Clubs***

In the early 1930s, until 1936, the State Home Demonstration Agent was Miss Essie M. Heyle. In 1936, it was announced in the State's monthly letter that Miss Amy Kelly would take her place because Miss Heyle married and became Mrs. H.L. Kempster.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned above, the Extension Home Economics Monthly Letters, which are found in the University of Missouri Archives, were a vehicle for providing farm women information about gardening practices and canning, and for encouraging

them to become politically active and take an interest in the new farm legislation that was being passed at the time. In addition it responded as best it could to their needs, particularly during the drought conditions of 1934 and 1936. Common articles offered advice on planning the family budget and suggested menus for restricted diets when food was scarce. They also provided homemaking hints, such as how to prevent fires, alter clothing, and make jelly. While there is admittedly some considerable repetition in the material that was sent out monthly, such as the suggestion to plant a fall garden, the newsletters are a good source of what was important to farm women, at least as interpreted through the lens of the Extension system.

Essie Heyle and the other home demonstration agents made good use of the monthly letter to keep club Presidents and members apprised of new extension circulars, as well as homemaking hints. By examining the content of these mimeographed letters written from January 1930 to December 1939, we can ascertain what Extension believed were some of the practical needs of Missouri farm women as they struggled to maintain home and family during the unpredictable weather, and in difficult social and economic times. In addition to reviewing these letters, I also examined the published Annual Reports of the work of the Agricultural Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture from 1930 to 1939, and information from these reports will be used to supplement or clarify material from the letters as they involve home demonstration work in the state. Since this dissertation is focused on farm women's gardening practices and how the vegetable garden was part of the productive side of the farmstead that was generally controlled by women, the content analysis of these annual reports and letters will primarily address this issue.



As we have seen, the vegetable garden was not only a space on the farmstead that provided food for the family, it was an experimental plot in which the farm woman could grow new and sometimes untested vegetables; it was a place where she could invest time and a little money and produce a surplus to sell in the market place or barter for other goods or services; it was a place that enhanced her social status and self-esteem within the family and community; and it was a place that required the use of simple hand tools and some level of skill and knowledge.

The household garden and the produce that was preserved for use by the Missouri farm family during the winter months and supplied the family with nutritious food the rest of the year was therefore addressed in some form or another by Essie Heyle in most of the monthly letters that were sent out during the 1930s. In the April 1930 and May 1931 issues, for example, she recommends two extension circulars that specifically were developed to meet the needs of Missouri gardeners—*Planning and Planting the Vegetable Garden* (Circular 291) and *The Home Vegetable Garden* (Circular 270). In addition, she suggested that farm women, “Experiment this year [1930] by planting at least one vegetable you have not grown before.” Green Sprouting Broccoli was suggested (Monthly Letter, April 1930, pp. 4 & 5). In the 1931 issue, she wrote that leaders should “remind club members that growing a good vegetable garden with at least 22 different varieties of vegetables, six of which are leafy vegetables will contribute to health and be a paying investment. A vegetable garden returns more money per hour of labor than any other crop” (Monthly Letter, May 1931, p. 1).

To ensure that club women were knowledgeable about the varieties of vegetables that could be grown successfully in Missouri, Essie Heyle printed the list suggested by

Mr. J.W.C. Anderson, Missouri Extension Truck Crops Specialist, in the February 1931 issue of the Monthly Letter. In addition, she suggested that when women were placing their seed orders that they should consider buying seed “of broccoli and New Zealand spinach for summer vegetables, and of Chinese cabbage, corn salad and Siberian kale for the fall gardens” because these are “some of the new attractive vegetables that grow well in Missouri” (Monthly Letter, February 1931, p. 2). Other issues were also discussed in 1931, including the war in Europe (WWII) and how to bring about peace and end war, packing the lunch box, and cod-liver oil for babies.

*The Farmer and the College* was the title of the 1931 Missouri College of Agriculture Extension Service Annual Report. Home demonstration work for that year included food preparation meetings, which were attended by 4,364 people representing 97 organized groups or clubs, meal planning which improved the meal planning practices of nearly 2,000 families by using more tomatoes and other home grown fruit and leafy vegetables, and garden planning and management. According to the annual report, “More than 700 families improved their health through garden planning and management coupled with a far-sighted program of food preservation, insuring year-round supplies of healthful, home-grown foods...In additional canning campaigns, nearly 1,000 homes used pressure cookers for the first time, nearly 600 families canned a great variety of foods than ever before, 536 families canned enough vegetables to serve three times a week till fresh vegetables come again, and 676 families canned enough meat to serve five times a week throughout the year” (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1931, Circular 285, February 1932, pp. 58-59)

By 1932, the number of women who were members of Home Economics Extension Clubs reached 20,292, in 1,099 clubs, a new high mark (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1932, Circular 302, January 1933, p. 47). The Annual Report for 1932 also notes that having a more satisfying diet, and thus improved health, comes from planting a bigger and better home vegetable garden. Over 2,316 families were able to improve health and benefit from the savings that cutting down on food costs by gardening allowed. The Annual Report indicated that winter greens were planted by 4,333 families and a better fall garden was reported by 1,345 (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1932, Circular 302, January 1933, p. 58). These statistics are reflected in the monthly letters sent out by Essie Heyle, who avidly promoted growing groceries in the garden, by especially planting a fall garden.

The 1932 letters contain helpful hints regarding vegetable gardens in general, how to deal with insect pests, canning problems, fall gardens, canning tomatoes and tomato juice, canning culled non-laying hens to save feed, preventing farm fires, saving garden seeds, and the adequate storage of vegetables. The April 1932 issue revealed that the cold weather conditions had spoiled many spring gardens, but that there was hope because the cold spell also killed many insects that might damage the vegetables during the summer growing season. The topic of insect pests and how to control them was also prominent in the June 1932 issue. The College of Agriculture's circular, *Insect Pests of Garden Crops*, was recommended to help facilitate the discussion of this topic at club meetings. Controlling or eliminating the bugs when they first appeared was emphasized. Poisoning the various sucking and chewing insects was suggested, and "driving by switching or

throwing dirt at them for such beetles as blister or old-fashioned potato beetles that are not killed by stomach poisons” was also recommended (Monthly Letter, June 1932, p. 3). Picking bugs off of plants and disposing of them was yet another alternative practices by many of my key informants.

In that same newsletter directions were given on how to make strawberry preserves and it was suggested that during roll call each woman speak to one of several topics, such as “Something I have learned from the Depression;” “The radio program I like best;” “A point in good jelly making;” “Something I am going to plant in my fall vegetable garden;” or “The hot weather meal my family likes best” (Monthly Letter, June 1932, p. 3). Each of these five topics allowed the club woman to talk about a personal experience that would be relevant to her world. One topic says something about the concerns that farm women might have in providing summer meals that appealed to all members of the family; one indicates that radios were in some farm homes; and one allows women to think about the suggestion that extension has repeatedly made about planting a fall garden and how she should respond.

Saving seeds for next year’s garden was done by almost every farm woman as we saw in Chapter 5. The October 1932 issue of the Extension Home Economics Monthly letter addressed this important task in a small article by Professor T.J. Talbert, who suggested that in addition to being a profitable practice it was also relatively easy. He recommended saving seeds from such common vegetables and truck crop plants as salsify, turnips, cabbage, rutabaga, parsnips, carrots, parsley, beets, radishes, lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, squash, peppers, peas, okra, mustard, cantaloupes, eggplant, cucumbers, corn, beans, and asparagus (p. 4). He also advised harvesting the seeds when

they were ripe and mature; then placing them in “envelopes or cloth bags” that are “carefully and accurately labeled” (p. 5). Talbert continues, “Moreover since there is danger of injury by mice and insects, the seed packages should be placed in tight fitting containers. All seed should be thoroughly dried before storing” (p. 5). While most of the women who I interviewed saved seeds from one year to the next at least for some vegetables, some also purchased seeds from seed companies. Seeds purchased from companies, such as Henry Field’s, could ostensibly be shared among women at club meetings or with neighbors, thus giving more women access to new and improved varieties and expand the biodiversity of their vegetable gardens.

In this same issue (October 1932), the improper storage of vegetables is addressed, and suggestions are made about storing different vegetables in different conditions. The newsletter begins by noting that, “There is nothing more discouraging than to work to produce food, to preserve it in some way, and then to have it spoil. Many homes lose some food through not understanding how to store it properly” (Monthly Letter, October 1932, p. 3). The article goes on to discuss the proper storage methods for Irish potatoes, late cabbage, onions, squash and pumpkins, and sweet potatoes and suggests that mimeographed material No. 283 *The Home Vegetable Storage* is available for club meetings.

In 1933 as the Depression worsened, Essie Heyle began her January letter with the thought that: “History seems to teach us that the greatest achievements are usually made in the periods of greatest difficulty” (Monthly Letter, January 1933, p. 1). As the Missouri Legislature adjourned that year, the June letter reported that nearly all State agencies serving Missouri farm homes would continue their activities, but that their work

would be seriously curtailed because of small appropriations. Nevertheless, the College of Agriculture, the Missouri Library Commission, and the State Board of Health could be consulted if help was needed (Monthly Letter, June 1933, p. 1). Later in the year, she encouraged club members to take an active interest in the new farm legislation, i.e., the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and discuss among themselves how it would function under local conditions. Members were also reminded to keep abreast of events by reading newspapers and listening to the radio (Monthly Letter, September 1933, pp. 3-4). In this way, it was hoped that these women would become politically active.

In an effort to address farm women's desire to increase their productive capacity, the June newsletter in 1933 noted that the University's Dairy Department was creating circulars on Farm Buttermaking and Farm Cheesemaking. This was good news for women as the circulars were to be made available to county agents in late summer or fall. Since there were no letters in July and August, homemaking hints for these months were included with the June letter. Topics included how to decrease the menace to health from flies, how to achieve a successful canning season, how to can gooseberries and cherries, and how to make summer salads, whole wheat crackers, and cucumber pickles. The *Missouri Family Food Budget* circular was recommended to club members, as was the suggested amount of vegetables to be canned for each person in the family. The farm woman, for example, would be expected to can about 20 quarts of tomatoes or tomato juice, 20 quarts of other vegetables preferably of ten different varieties, 40 quarts of a variety of fruits, and to store 1 1/2 bushels of potatoes and about 40 pounds of ten other vegetables for each individual in the household (Monthly Letter, June 1933, p. 3).

There was also a small piece regarding canning contests, which were open to women or clubs during 1933. The contests ranged from an international canning contest at the Chicago World's Fair to state contests open to counties that had at least 5 women's clubs entering. Awards were to be made to "clubs on the basis of perfection in canning and number of women filling canning budgets" (Monthly Letter, June 1933, p. 2). One can only imagine the prestige that winning a canning contest at the World's Fair would bring to the lucky Missouri farm woman.

In the September letter for 1933, Chinese cabbage and kale were once again suggested as two vegetables that should be grown by Missouri farm women in their winter gardens. The household hints portion of the letter spoke about reducing crystal formation in grape jelly, how to can tomato and fruit juices, canning sauerkraut and soup mixtures, and making apple sauce. In addition, there was a notation that club women should be mindful of the fact that a neighbor might need guidance in developing her canning technique. Essie Heyle wrote, "A student made the astounding statement to me the other day that many of his neighbors lost half of the stuff they put up, and I was filled with pity for the long hours of hot, hard work that they put into canning this stuff which did their families no good" (Monthly Letter, October 1933, p. 6). This situation is reminiscent of the canning difficulty that my informant Elizabeth had early on with canning blackberries (See Chapter 6).

The ever present danger of home fires and how to prevent them was discussed in the October 1933 letter as was how to substitute lard for butter in making cakes and cookies. Fall yard work activities were listed and women were alerted to the fact that they should be keeping informed about prices as wholesale and retail prices were going up

because of a processing tax on wheat and cotton. A short primer on bartering to secure things one might not have the funds to purchase was also given: “There are city or town people unable to pay for what the farm woman has in abundance and could spare and for which they would gladly exchange services or the materials which they have on hand. While this may not be the ideal way to get along, bartering does offer an opportunity to get what is needed with mutual advantage to both the town and country family. The country family may have such things as—poultry, milk, cream, butter, cheese, vegetables, sorghum, honey, meat, sausage, canned goods, rugs or other home made articles, fertilizer, fuel, or vacation facilities to trade for music lessons, dentistry, books, lumber, wall paper, etc.” (Monthly Letter, October 1933, p. 4). As mentioned earlier, while curb markets in Missouri did not appear to be as widespread a phenomenon as they were in North Carolina, for example, the suggestion that farm women barter their goods with town and city people served somewhat the same purpose, exchanging farm women’s productive goods in the marketplace.

The monthly letter to Extension club presidents and members was mentioned in the 1933 Annual Report from the Missouri College of Agriculture as a means whereby “the Extension Service gives instructions to the officers of the clubs and places in their hands information of value to all members of clubs and to neighborhood women who are not members. This letter contains information on new bulletins issued by the College of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Agriculture; information on the loan envelope service; timely suggestions on gardening, canning, food preservation, clothing work, furniture repairing, care of children, health, and recreational programs. The president of each of the 1,099 clubs reads this entire letter to the membership of her club at the



monthly meeting, and there the suggestions are discussed, demonstrated, and relayed to neighbors who are not members” (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1933, Circular 310, February 1934, p. 44). These letters, apparently, were considered an important way of distributing the “scientific” information prepared by the College of Agriculture to a community of gardeners.

In addition to noting the importance of the Monthly Letter, the 1933 Annual Report also reported that more women were canning throughout the state and canning a greater variety of vegetables. In 724 women’s Extension clubs in 1933, for example, over two million quarts of fruits, vegetables, and meats were canned according to the methods recommended by the Extension Service (p. 53). This increase in canning and home vegetable production may have been a response to the increasingly hard economic times as the Depression wore on. The annual report also stresses that club women were making well informed buying choices, increasing home production of household supplies, budgeting for food canned and stored for winter use, and helping the less fortunate by furnishing canned goods and other foods, clothing, and bedding and assisting women who were not club members and who were “less skilled or less fortunate neighbors...with gardening, canning, or other homemaking problems” (p. 44).

The drought in 1934 increased the financial and material plight of the Missouri farm family and the ranks of Home Economics Extension clubs swelled to 25,236 members in 1,240 clubs (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1934, Circular 319, March 1935, p. 41). This year also marked the largest urban relief rolls, and the first time that all the State’s 114 counties were served by regular county agents or emergency workers (p. 6). In the February 1934 letter Essie

Heyle informed readers that County Emergency Home Economics Workers were in almost every county in Missouri. There were also Emergency Public Health Nurses and County Emergency Recreational Workers in most counties. The Emergency Recreational Workers' job was to "try to make life brighter for those on the relief list...She will know about your club from the County Agent and may be able to help arrange good times in your community" (Monthly Letter, February 1934, p. 2).

The emphasis on what I would call the mental health of relief clients was also evident in the March 1934 newsletter, which suggested that one way to make life a little cheerier was to have something in "bloom in the yard from early spring to late fall, another may be to paint a picture with flowers in one corner of your yard, choosing your colors carefully. Perhaps another way to make life brighter for some of you is to plant flowers that will bring a sweet fragrance to you as you work in the house or rest on the porch. Carrying out ideas of this sort is great fun and, where shrub, seed and bulb exchanges are made can often be done with little expense" (p. 4). Rock gardens and lily ponds also added interest to the house and farmstead grounds and were recommended here as well as in farm journals such as the *Missouri Ruralist*. In fact, in the April 16, 1938 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist* is a small article entitled, "Let's Plan a Lily Pool. Build a Rock Garden, Too," which insists that beauty can be brought into the dull corners of the farmstead by building a rock garden or lily pool. "This lovely pool, dotted with water lilies, mirrors a wall rock garden built against the side of a garage. Masses of creeping phlox—white, rose and lavender—grow in the crevices of the stones, form a gorgeous contrast to the dark green shrubbery. A small lily pool fits into almost any gardening scheme and is made by sinking into the ground any kind of watertight

container—tub, half barrel, and old watering tank” (79:13). For only 10 cents, one could order a 32-page booklet from the *Missouri Ruralist* that gave instructions for building and planting an inexpensive pool and garden.

The idea of improving the homestead by installing a lily pool or a rock garden was mentioned years earlier in the Agricultural Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture Report for 1931. During that year 170 lily ponds and 109 rock gardens were completed at Missouri farm homes. In fact, the importance of these improvements were expressed by a woman from Holt County who said, “I have never had anything around the home that has been the source of more pleasure to me and my family than our lily pool. I can see it from my kitchen window, and as I work it is before me. If other women knew the pleasure derived from one they would have one of their own to watch and enjoy” (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1931, Circular 285, February 1932, p. 56).

Another way to beautify the farm home that was becoming a trend at this time was to bring wildflowers and shrubs from the woods into the home garden. However, in the April 1934 newsletter, Essie Heyle warned readers “It is a patriotic duty to save our native wildflowers. They were established here before our country was known and should be saved for our grandchildren.” She cites the Garden Club of America’s suggestions with respect to gathering wild flowers, which were to “Use a knife or scissors when gathering wild flowers or shrubs, never break off by hand or pull up by the stem. Gather only a few blossoms from each root and leave the rest to seed as many of our plants are in danger of extinction from overpicking and leaving none for seed. Do not gather your wild flowers, no matter how common a weed, from the roadside; leave them to beautify the

way. Instead ask permission from the owner of the field and gather from the inside of the fence...The following wild flowers should not be picked: Bluebells, columbine, dogwood, Dutchman's breeches, fringed gentian, Indian pipe, Jack-in-the-pulpit, lady slipper, May apples, trillium, and ferns" (Monthly Letter, April 1934, p. 6). Nevertheless, even with a growing emphasis on beautifying the farmstead, the vegetable garden and its produce continue to be emphasized in the newsletters as Essie Heyle writes that, "Few other parts of the farm returned this much for the labor used [referring to demonstration gardens in 1932 and 1933]. More important than the money returned, however, is the delicious quality of the vegetables secured from one's own garden. It pays most farm families to have gardens" (Monthly Letter, March 1934, p. 5).

The June, July, and August 1934 homemaking hints spoke about canning procedures, garden pests, planning hot-weather meals, cooking vegetables, jelly making, canning corn, and school lighting, which pointed to the fact that about 15 percent of school children had defective vision at this time. This health matter was one that could be helped by the proper lighting of schools, which in this case, involved proper placement of the schoolhouse windows, installing glareless blackboards, the proper seating of children so that they do not face windows, and the notion that if the school room seems dark, cut windows at the back of the room (Monthly Letter, August 1934, p. 10). In addition to being concerned with children's vision, the Extension Home Economics Monthly letters responded to the farm woman's need to provide food for the family. The November 1934 letter drew attention to the fact that canned meat was spoiling not because of equipment failure, but "lack of care or knowledge as to some small but important point in handling the canning process" (p. 3). The article goes on to talk about testing the cans to make sure

no water comes out, not packing the jars too tightly, accurately timing the process, and getting the circular on meat or chicken canning from the county agent.

Instructions on how to garden and can more efficiently are pervasive throughout the letters. However, in this November 1934 letter is a section on feeding the family that suggests that if despite all efforts, the garden wasn't productive because of drought in Missouri, one might follow the so-called "Restricted Diet." The article is telling because it identifies a real life problem, that is, the weather is unpredictable and it certainly was in that year in Missouri. "Those of you who planned your food budgets so carefully, planted your gardens and tended them so painstakingly and then looked with dismay at your empty shelves and bins that you had pictured filled with canned and stored fruits and vegetables, feel that Jeremiah may have known what he was talking about. The fall rains and beautiful fall weather have provided some vegetables for the women who had courage to replant. Few of you, however, will have the two fruits and two vegetables a day which the Agricultural Extension Service has been advocating and most of you are short on tomatoes" (Monthly Letter, November 1934, p. 4). However, the article tells women that the "Restricted Diet"<sup>3</sup> prepared by Extension might give some comfort to those who are worried about not meeting their "food habit score card." The diet is high in grain products and low in dairy products, eggs, meat, fruit and vegetables. The diet gives "the minimum amounts of food for a week that a family of five—two very active adults, and three children aged 3, 5, and 13 years, could live on safely for a short period of time. It would not be wise for a family to try to get along with less milk, tomatoes, or other fruits or vegetables than given in this diet. In order to plan three meals a day following this diet the following was recommended: "For every meal—milk for the children; bread

for all; every day—milk for all, potatoes, tomatoes (or oranges) for children, one or more additional fruit or vegetable, a cereal, some sweets and some fats; 2 or 4 times a week—tomatoes or a fresh raw fruit or vegetable, dried beans, peas, or peanuts, eggs, lean meat, fish, poultry, or cheese” (Monthly Letter, November 1934, p. 5). Basically, this was not the ideal diet, but a place to start in planning the family food supply.

This emphasis on restricted diets and well-balanced meals that were economical and appealing were also reflected in the much-shortened section on *Food for the Farm Family* in the 1934 Extension Annual Report. It was noted that farm families have studied food values more carefully in an attempt to cut down on food costs and in this way have added variety to their diets by planting fall gardens. In fact, over 4,000 families apparently planned their food supply and opted to can wild greens and meat and make American cream cheese to help cut costs (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1934, Circular 319, March 1935, p. 49).

In 1934, the Federal government undertook a farm housing survey, which was carried out by the Extension Service in Missouri. Eleven Missouri counties were surveyed, including Buchanan, Grundy, Jackson, Jefferson, Lawrence, Maries, New Madrid, Pettis, Ralls, Randolph, and Webster. These counties were distributed throughout the state, so that no particular socio-economic sector was favored. The research team visited 28,136 farm homes of which over one-half (52%) were owner-occupied. Of particular interest were the amenities in the houses, which on average had five rooms. Ten percent were equipped with bathrooms, 10 percent had running water, 19 percent had kitchen sinks with drains, and 14 percent had electric lights. Two and one-half percent had mechanical refrigerators and 28 percent used ice. Cooking was done in 40 percent of

the households with kerosene or gasoline, 1.5 percent used gas, and the same used electricity. Fourteen and one-half percent of the homes had power washing machines. Doors, windows, screens, and exterior paint were in need of repair (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1934, Circular 319, March 1935, p. 48). This survey indicated that the general quality of the farm home was not particularly modern with only 10 percent having running water and 19 percent having electricity. This lack of amenities in Missouri farm homes seems to be characteristic of the state at this time, and is reflected to some extent in the remarks of my key informants, especially those who did not get electricity until the early 1940s.

Home demonstration work as reported in the 1935 Extension Annual Report continued and club membership increases to a total of 28,711 women enrolled in 1,390 clubs (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture 1935, Circular 344, May 1936, p. 44). Accomplishments for this year included an increase in the number of women giving their families “more tomatoes, raw vegetables, and fresh fruits. There was also a widespread increase in the use of whole grain cereals in family meals...Making sweet cream butter without churning was another accomplishment added by a great many homemakers ” (p. 45). Home beautification continued to be important, with over 7,000 home grounds improved as a result of Extension work. The changes included removing rubbish from the farmstead, grading and seeding lawns, removing chicken coops and unsightly buildings from farmsteads, and the building of walls and driveways. Shrubbery and foundation plantings were also encouraged, and over 100 outdoor living rooms, 253 rock gardens, and 152 lily ponds were constructed (pp. 48-49).

With respect to feeding the farm family, the 1935 Annual Report also indicated that food produced on Missouri farms for home use was the greatest since World War I. In Lawrence County, for example, “518 farm families were reported as having successfully followed the extension plans for making the farm and home garden supply practically all of the food needs of the family. In this county, 77,671 quarts of fruits, vegetables, and meats were canned by homemakers following the budget plan. Fully 75 percent of the farm families in the county increased family income by better methods of home canning and storing” (p. 51). Preserving large quantities of food for home use was made possible on some Missouri farms in part by the fact that home gardening was adopted as a major project by over 1,000 women’s extension clubs. These women followed Extension’s standard practices for raising spring and summer gardens and also successfully raised fall gardens (p. 29).

As noted previously, there is a break in the letters in 1935. By 1936, Essie Heyle was married and replaced by Miss Amy Kelly<sup>4</sup>. The nature of the letters changes somewhat, although the food needs of Missouri farm families continues to be addressed and of high priority. The first few monthly letters prior to Miss Kelly’s arrival were prepared by Julia M. Rocheford, Extension Specialist in House Furnishings, and it was reported that there was a steady increase in the demand from rural homemakers of the state for the services of home demonstration agents. The June 1936 issue contains a small blurb about the Agricultural Extension Service and what it means to farm families and the farm woman. “Recognizing the farm family as the unit with which its activities are concerned, the Extension Service provides a staff of trained teachers who have had practical experience and who are heartily in sympathy with ever member of the farm



family. It is the duty of these teachers—state specialists, and county agricultural and home demonstration agents—to acquaint the farm men and women with the many new developments that are constantly being proven to be practical through experimentation by the Colleges of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.... As a woman cooperator becomes a better thinker, she grows in her own estimation, which inspires confidence on the part of others. She then makes an ideal leader, ready to take part in any worthwhile enterprise, explains to her neighbors what she has mastered, and fills her place in the community. With a half dozen women just as alert, the future of any community is assured” (Monthly Letter, June 1936, p. 4). This quote gives us some perspective on the home demonstration agent and what that agent expects to accomplish, i.e., to transform some farm women into leaders in their communities, thus enhancing the farm woman’s status and self-esteem, and ostensibly endowing her with self-assurance and power.

Amy Kelly writes in the August 1936 letter about the drought that has beset the state. “Some of you are wondering what you are going to do until the rains come, many are hauling water for household purposes as well as for the stock; it is difficult and trying. However discouraged you may be you will carry on. Farm women have always been able to face reality and you will do so now. The rains will come and your land will again produce food for yourselves and others” (p. 1). The rains did eventually come and by March 1937, the problem was flooding in Missouri, particularly in the southeastern counties, such as New Madrid and Dunklin. The bountiful rains continue into July; but by February 1938 central and western Missouri are dry, while eastern and southern Missouri

continue to be wet. In August 1939, the letter notes that the state had 5 to 6 days of 100-degree temperatures.

As noted above a result of the demand by farm women, there was a dramatic increase in the number of home demonstration agents in the counties from 17 in 1935 to 44 in 1936. These agents were able to serve 71 counties according to the 1936 Extension Annual Report (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1936, Circular 357, February 1937, p. 65). Programs that continue to be promoted by demonstration agents were providing food for the farm family, making garden plans, preparing food budgets, canning, and storage and food preparation and meal planning. Home beautification, home management, and the remodeling and care of clothing also continue to be popular programs.

In the March 1936 letter, R.A. Schroeder from the College of Agriculture wrote an article in which he made 15 points about planning, planting, and cultivating the garden. The first was that the garden should be established on the best possible soil and be well drained. He furthermore recommended that the garden “should include a large number of vegetables making, of course, the largest plantings of the vegetables liked best by the family” (Monthly Letter, March 1936, p. 4). Among the vegetables that he suggested planting in mid-March were radishes, leaf lettuce, peas, carrots, spinach, onion sets, and asparagus roots. Five to seven days later plant cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, kohlrabi, turnips, leek, mustard, kale, and early potatoes (Monthly Letter, March 1936, p.5).

The household vegetable garden in the 1937 Extension Annual Report still received some attention, with a notation that despite the dry fall period that shortened the

growing season, records produced by 9,500 families cooperating with Extension were on average able to save \$104.53 worth of food from their gardens that averaged less than half an acre in size. These returns, the report says, were made with the use of 97 person-hours of labor and an average case expense of \$7.57 per garden (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1937, Circular 378, March 1938, pp. 23- 24). The 1937 Annual Report also stated that the number of agents serving Missouri counties has increased to 65. Likewise the number of extension clubs has also increased to 1,913 with a total membership of 36,526. These clubs, which trained over 12,000 leaders, were responsible for bringing Extension's homemaking suggestions to over 163,887 additional women (p. 40). During 1937 the home grounds in over 7,000 farmsteads were improved. Although there is a continuing emphasis on the farmstead grounds, it appears that greater emphasis is being placed on improving the home by organizing the interior to better meet the social needs of the farm family and to allow the homemaker to make the best use of her time and energy in doing household tasks thus allowing her more leisure time (p. 42).

Regarding feeding the farm family, the Extension Annual Report notes that there was quite an interest in buying food recently, but this was probably due to the dry 1936 growing season which severely curtailed canning vegetables for the winter months. In response Extension taught women about U.S. Standards set up for different canned goods and about reading the labels on cans. This was in addition to providing information on serving simpler meals, which could be prepared by careful planning (p. 45).

By 1938, the format for the Extension Annual Report changed considerably with the subheads—Home Economics or Home Demonstration Work—being completely

erased. “Home Improvement” and “Using Home Grown Foods,” and “Gardening and Fruit Growing” have replaced the earlier years’ section “Feeding the Farm Family.” The annual report states that if “all of the 278,454 farms in Missouri had done as well as those families who kept records of the garden produce and whose average return was \$130.00 per garden, then the total value of the food produced in the State would have been more than \$36,000,000.” Because of such high returns on such a small space on the farmstead, the Extension Service is “placing emphasis on this phase of the farm plan” (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1938, Circular 400, February 1939, p. 17).

While clothing courses were featured in the 1939 Extension Annual Report, food and nutritional problems as they affected “health, comfort, and living standard of every rural family,” were also of concern to extension workers and homemaker’s clubs. Although the nutritional aspects of child health and development still were prominent among club members’ concerns, information on meal planning, food preservation, better ways to prepare foods, planning the family food supply, and child feeding were eagerly sought. It was pointed out that even though the “necessary foods are available, some members of the family do not eat them because they do not understand the nutritional values or because the foods are of poor quality, improperly cooked, or unattractively served. Both knowledge and artistry, therefore, are needed by the homemaker, and of this need the rural women of Missouri are now almost universally conscious” (Annual Report of the Extension Service, Missouri College of Agriculture for 1939, Circular 420, June 1940, p. 59). In some sense bearing the responsibility for the members of your family not being interested in eating “preferred” foods, blames the farm woman, who is not

preparing the meal to meet certain nutritional standards and the family member because they are ignorant of the benefits of vitamins and minerals. In any case, during this year 104,000 farm families cooperated with the Extension Service in 81 counties to work on upgrading their skills with respect to food and nutrition. One special aspect of club work that proliferated during the Depression was the provision of hot dishes at lunchtime for school children. The Annual Report goes on to say that notable “in this connection was the work of the women’s extension club in the Roscoe Community of St. Clair county, where hot lunches were served to some 200 children in the consolidated high school and four outlying grade schools” (p. 60).

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, home demonstration agents promoted the Live-At-Home Program during the 1930s. In her letter of April 1940, Amy Kelly discusses this in response to requests made by farm women in the state who wanted to comply with this program. She begins the letter with a an item called “The Garden Cure,” which is supposed to be one woman’s approach [Grimy Jane, Minnesota] to her garden and one that can be emulated by all. It says:

To some women gardening may just be work but to me it’s a hobby. It’s good for what ails me. There’s satisfaction of creation, the element of chance (and how!), and it is inexpensive. With the first stirring of spring, when wrens are back fussing and scolding, I am out cleaning and digging, crumbling and smoothing the mellow ground. There is no smell equal to that of good, damp dirt, warm with the sun. I poke around the perennials cautiously. I dig in fertilizer around the shrubs. I kill grubs and cut-worms. My trouble is to leave the ground alone long enough to grow things, but I have produced good vegetables and nice blooms at times. More than that, I have buried worries, hurts and loneliness, and dug up fresh courage, self-control and gumption out there. My hands get rough, and a few freckles will out, even at my age—but what are lotions for? Once you get ‘gardenitis’ you really have something (Monthly Letter, April 1940, p. 1).

This little story hints at the fact that women rely on their gardens for more than vegetables; they also find solace there.

The bulk of the April 1940 newsletter, however, speaks to the Live-At-Home Program and the notion that gardening is a family affair. Kelly suggests that 75 percent of the family's food should be produced on the farm, e.g., and there must be gardens if that is to be true. Miss Kelly suggests that greens, including spinach can be grown most of the winter in cold frames in some parts of the state, but that some greens will have to be canned. "Canned greens are a very important part of our diet, if we cannot have them fresh," she writes. Another feature of the program is that vegetables are to be canned at the right season of the year. "Probably young spring vegetables are more tender and easier to can than those produced in the fall. For the last few years we have had such dry falls that it has been almost impossible to have fall gardens. I think that Miss Carl<sup>5</sup> is advocating that we can vegetables in the spring and that they be nice, young tender vegetables. They are easier to can, if young and tender, they process better, and the spoilage is not so great" (Monthly Letter, April 1940, p. 2). While much of the information in the newsletters is repetitive, there is enough variety to maintain most peoples' interests and by analyzing the content of these letters, one can understand some of the problems that farm women and home demonstration agents faced during the Depression.

### **Assessment**

What can be learned from reading these Home Economic Monthly Letters and from a review of Annual Reports from the Missouri College of Agriculture, Agricultural Extension Service during the 1930s? First, we can see how the Depression impacted the productive work of farm women and how farm women responded by doubling their efforts. They were being encouraged to plant both a spring and a fall garden, instructed

about proper canning techniques to decrease spoilage, and when possible, increase production so that any surplus could be sold or bartered for goods and services for the home. They were also told how to identify garden pests and what to do about them, thus aiding them in making their gardens more productive. Second, we can see from the letters and annual reports that the farm family's health and welfare were important to home demonstration agents as they helped women to make the best with their limited financial and material resources. They were advised, for example, about the vegetables that would grow best in Missouri, and were alerted continuously to the fact that greens, such as kale and Chinese cabbage, were nutritious and grown enthusiastically by many Missouri farm women. Since money was an obstacle for many women, instructions were given on how to save seeds, plan the family food budget, can meat, cull chickens, substitute butter with lard, plant 22 varieties of vegetables, include green leafy vegetables to improve the health of the family, and use a pressure cooker to reduce food spoilage. In addition, farm women were given opportunities at meetings to exchange seeds and plants with friends and neighbors. Women were also encouraged to beautify the home grounds and farmstead with flower and water gardens, wildflowers and shrubs from the woods, and create outdoor living rooms in an effort to brighten up the lives of family members, thus improving their overall mental health.

Third, we can come to some understanding about how farm women related to one another at this time. Throughout the letters, club women were reminded to be cognizant of the fact that there may be a woman in the neighborhood or community who needs "to be pepped up on her gardening or canning program or helped so that she is more successful" (Monthly Letter, June 1934, p. 7). As the Depression wore on in Missouri,

there appears to be a greater demand for agents by farm women and we can see a dramatic increase in the number of agents and in the number of counties that were served by the end of the 1930s. This might be due to an increasing awareness by farm women of the usefulness of the information being presented and by the fact that the clubs provided some means of social support during trying times.

Fourth, we can follow the weather patterns in the state, as home demonstration agents responded to ever-changing conditions and suggested appropriate measures to ensure a viable vegetable garden. Finally, the workings of the New Deal relief programs in Missouri are revealed in the letters to some extent. This was especially evident in 1934 when Essie Heyle began working on government relief programs, and in the 1934 letter where she described emergency relief work in Missouri counties. It was stated that relief workers, who were generally college graduates in Home Economics, might be calling on Extension Homemaker's Clubs to help in a variety of relief measures, including securing old clothes, obtaining information on families needing help, cooperating in teaching or encouraging women to make "hominy, rugs, gardens, soap, or to can, or she may ask you to help supply food or lunches for school children in your neighborhood, or when you are in town to take back some Federal foods to relief families in your neighborhood who need them....As you perhaps know, flour, butter, eggs, and salt pork have been bought for families on the relief list by the Federal Government as one method of reducing surpluses so prices can rise" (Monthly Letter, February 1934, pp. 1-2).

These monthly letters give us a glimpse into the on-the-ground efforts made by relief workers in the early 1930s that was extremely important in many Missouri counties, particularly in those southern counties where vast pockets of poverty existed.



Other women throughout the state also worked with farm families on relief. These women were Home Management Specialists who worked with Farm Security Administration clients. Their role in working with Missouri farm women and their connection with home demonstration agents was discussed in the previous chapter.

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the scholarly literature on the work of Extension home demonstration agents in various states throughout the country during the 1930s. It also examined the work that these women did with Home Economics Extension Clubs in Missouri, with particular emphasis on the content of the monthly newsletters to Club presidents and members that were written by State home demonstration agents during the Depression years. The chapter began with a look at what farm women wanted based on the results of a survey done in 1919. What farm women wanted were programs that helped them safeguard the family health and develop money-yielding home industries, both of which could be captured in the household vegetable garden. For many farm families, women's productive enterprises during the Depression were responsible for paying the bills, keeping food on the table and clothes on the children, and of course, paying taxes.

While there were both white and African American home demonstration agents, the fiscal resources devoted to their projects was divided unequally along racial lines, with the black agents receiving least support overall. Nevertheless, scarce resources did not deter these women as they were able to overcome financial and material barriers to serve their rural clients. Despite the proliferation of home demonstration work throughout the country, farm women adopted the practices that they felt served their needs, and

rejected others. For the most part they accepted advice that enabled them to maintain and improve their productive capabilities especially with respect to their vegetable gardens and home canning practices. The agents themselves were generally educated young women, who were not married and who were serving in counties that were not where they grew up. As the specialty of home economics became more professionalized, especially as graduates of University programs entered the work force as specialists in a number of the New Deal programs, agents expanded their work to include things such as writing newspaper columns, articles, bulletins, and doing radio broadcasts. We can see this trend in the life work of Essie Heyle, whose thoughts and ideas touched the lives of many farm women during the Depression.

Home demonstration work in Missouri was similar to the work done in other states with emphasis on planning and planting fall and winter gardens, beautifying the farmstead and home grounds, providing nutritious meals from the garden, learning about health care, and using materials at hand to construct fireless cookers and recondition clothing. The work of these women was examined through a review of the monthly newsletters for the 1930s, which are housed in the University of Missouri Archives.

The next chapter summarizes the findings in this dissertation about farm women's efforts to provide food for their families during the Depression, particularly as they interacted with some of the larger institutions and programs of the times. The chapter looks at the material culture of the vegetable garden and how it can be made relevant to today's gardeners. And, it speaks to the idea that food is intimately connected with community and community building and that by examining the relationships that the

vegetable garden mediates—between friends, family, and the wider society—we can also rediscover our communities and reconnect with the natural world.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Madge Reese, when she was Assistant in Home Demonstration Work in the Office of Extension Work, South, prepared Farmers' Bulletin 927, *Farm Home Conveniences*, which was issued in 1918 and reprinted in 1922. In this Bulletin Reese described how to construct the fireless cooker and praised its usefulness to the farm woman, who could now “put her dinner in the fireless cooker before she drives to town to market her products, and upon returning find it ready for serving” (USDA Farmers' Bulletin 927, p. 4). One of the interesting insights that can be gained from reading the instructions on how to construct the fireless cooker is the care with which Reese offered alternative and readily available construction materials. For example, for the packing or insulation material she suggests using some that is a poor conductor of heat such as lint cotton, cotton-seed hulls, wool, shredded newspaper, Spanish moss, ground cork, hay, straw, or excelsior (p. 6).

<sup>2</sup> As seen earlier in this chapter, women who were home demonstration agents were generally single and well educated.

<sup>3</sup> The “Restricted Diet” consists of: milk (14 quarts or 1/2 gallon a day); eggs (9); meat (2 1/2 pounds); butter and other fats (4 pounds); dried beans and peas (2 1/4 pounds); tomatoes (3 quarts, or three No. 3 cans); cabbage and other dark green or yellow vegetables (3 pounds); dried fruit (1 pound or 5 pounds fresh or 3 quarts canned); sugar and other sweets (4 1/2 pounds); flour and cereals (24 pounds, one half of which should be whole grain products).

<sup>4</sup> Amy Kelly, according to the February 1936 letter written by Julia Rocheford, has been the State Home Demonstration Leader in Kansas since 1923. Before that time she held that same position in Idaho for ten years. “We feel that Miss Kelly will come to us, not as a stranger—many of you have met her at the ‘Royal’—but as a neighbor and a friend, that she will bring to us knowledge, sympathy and a deep insight into those conditions that affect the welfare of rural women of the state, and inspiration to make those conditions better and better” (p. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Flora Carl prepared a number of University of Missouri, College of Agriculture, Agricultural Extension Service circulars, including one written in January 1933, *Missouri Farm Family Food Budget* (Circular 301) and *Canning Fruits and Vegetables* (Circular 406), June 1939.

## CHAPTER 10

### CREATING A FUTURE FROM THE PAST WITH THE HOME VEGETABLE GARDEN

This final chapter ends where my dissertation began, and that is with the farm woman's household vegetable garden. I began with the vegetable garden as a space on the farmstead that not only produced food for the farm family during the Great Depression, but also frequently provided surplus produce, which could be sold or bartered for goods and services that the farm family needed. In addition, the garden was important to women in that it was often a source of creative endeavor and was a link between them, their families, and the wider community. These connections, while critical during the Depression, are also important today as industrial agriculture begins to separate us from the land and from the sources of our food.

On one level, the narrative of my dissertation is an analysis of how Missouri farm women conducted their everyday lives, how they grew and preserved food from their gardens, and how their gardening practices changed their local landscapes. The economic and social value of the household garden, which ostensibly gave women a sense of accomplishment and status within the home and community, was also explored (see Chapter 7). The study looked at the broader social context of the Great Depression to examine the extent to which farm women were aided by their clubs and Depression-Era institutions and organizations to enable them to feed their families nutritional and adequate meals, to maintain the health of their children, and for some, to attain leadership positions in the community (see Chapters 8 and 9).

On another level, the narrative of the study is significant in its contribution to the scholarly research on rural women, specifically farm women living in Missouri during the 1930s. This study used women's voices through transcribed interviews to describe their gardens and their lives on the farm during the Depression to understand the multidimensional aspects of gardening and of processing fruits and vegetables. The study also makes an important contribution to the history of gardening and to historic landscape preservation, as it documents the material culture of the Depression-era vegetable garden. The dissertation identified and documented horticultural practices and historical material artifacts that relate to vegetable gardening and the farmstead. By focusing on the material culture of the vegetable garden, I was able to uncover some gardening practices that might be useful to today's gardeners and also uncovered some of the varieties of fruits and vegetables that were grown in the state in the past (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7).

### **Feeding the Farm Family**

Throughout this dissertation, I have emphasized that one of the main productive activities and household responsibilities in farm women's lives during the Depression was to feed their families, which was often done under climatic and financial conditions that severely limited their ability to do so. To organize my findings of the actual lived experiences of Missouri farm women as they produced family meals from their vegetable gardens and from other farmstead activities, such as raising chickens, I will use the schema from Marjorie DeVault's book *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. She has two principal components to her schema: doing family meals, which involves planning the meal as well as cooking, and provisioning. In addition to keeping the household supplied with needed food items, provisioning might

also involve gardening, or trading goods for services from relatives or others. At one point in her book she writes that advances in technology have brought to the fore new products and appliances that have made “cooking tasks much easier than in our grandmothers’ time, and more and more of the arduous work of processing foods has been transferred from home to market” (DeVault 1991:36). The focus of my work is on the arduous tasks, which involved growing and processing food, done by our grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

One of DeVault’s purposes in her analysis of the work of feeding the family is to uncover the often invisible activities that it involves, and to point out that this work entails physical and mental skills that often seem routine even to the women who produce the meals. Because much of this work is mental work, it is literally invisible (DeVault 1991:56). While this is generally true for the farm women who produced meals in my study, there are three main differences. First, on the farm much of the work involved in producing a meal tended to be visible and tangible, as women planted, cultivated, harvested, and canned vegetables and fruit that were the raw ingredients of the farm family’s dinner. However, the mental effort involved at each stage of this process could be considered invisible. Second, these activities were undertaken in conjunction with the seasons and climatic changes, and visibly transformed the physical landscape of the farmstead in real and dramatic ways. Different vegetables were planted and harvested at different times of the year, thus making farm women’s work sometimes very hectic, at other times less so, but always impacting the landscape. For example, a fall garden, which depended on weather conditions, might need to be planted if a summer drought severely limited the spring/summer garden produce. Third, while the garden was

traditionally women's space, frequently family members, especially children, participated in tending the garden and harvesting its products, thus becoming active players in the production of the family's meals. In this way, children were able to learn gardening by imitating their parents, primarily their mothers, and remain connected to and respectful of the land and the food that was produced on it. This aspect of gardening is particularly evident in the words of my key informants, who learned their gardening practices from their mothers and sometimes their fathers (see Chapters 5 and 6).

By examining how the farm family was fed during the Depression through the lens of DeVault's *Feeding the Family*, I will summarize some of the major themes and findings of my research and arrive at some understanding of how these farm women were able to develop the skills and knowledge that they needed to address the serious issues that faced them and their families at this time around food security. My story of feeding the farm family begins when DeVault writes that, "In the past, farm families grew much of their own food, and some, though many fewer, still do today. Most households now, especially in urban areas, depend on food that is produced elsewhere and purchased for home use" (DeVault 1991:58). While most farm households in the early twentieth century did in fact purchase some items, such as coffee, tea, salt, sugar, and some grains, which brought women into the marketplace, most farm families as we have seen grew and processed their own vegetables and butchered their livestock for meat. Much of this work was acutely visible and acknowledged by family members, but there were still aspects of women's subsistence production that were woman's work that remained invisible. Like the women in DeVault's study, farm women were responsible for providing the key ingredients in "doing a meal," which involve planning the menu, taking

individual family member preferences into account, and realizing which ingredients fulfilled the nutritional needs of the family, while keeping in mind ethnic and cultural food ideologies. On a more practical level, they were expected to “do a meal” three times a day, seven days a week, without fail.

Another aspect of “doing a meal” is provisioning, which DeVault defines as “keeping the household supplied with products used in the day-to-day routine. Much of this work is included in the activity usually called shopping, although some people also garden, or trade food items with relatives and friends” (DeVault 1991:58). Included in provisioning are a number of key ideas, such as considering the economic resources of the household when deciding how much to spend; keeping the household stocked with ingredients for the meals that are to be prepared; learning about options that are available and making decisions about when to shop, where, and how often; and learning to deal with a marketplace that is designed to disrupt the routine shopping experience by trying to entice shoppers to buy new products. DeVault also includes monitoring and improvisation as two other key aspects of provisioning. Monitoring suggests watching out for the needs and preferences of household members, keeping track of supplies, and paying attention to new products and evolving familial needs (DeVault 1991:71). Monitoring also includes learning what items may be available and where to get them. When an opportunity arises at the market to purchase something that is not on the list, DeVault suggests that this involves an element of improvisation, so that shoppers can stop and take advantage of a sale or an especially interesting item. This type of decision, she writes, “requires an on-the-spot rearrangement of plans, an ability to shift from the regular routine to a variation of it and to make adjustment for the unusual purchase. This



kind of constantly shifting routine is at the heart of the work of provisioning, which must be based on multiple criteria for choices, a mental inventory of supplies at home, and a long range but flexible plan for using them” (DeVault 1991:74). While some of the details do not necessarily apply to farm women during the 1930s, the basic notion of provisioning was extremely important to them.

Farm women during the Depression had to develop the skills necessary for the work of provisioning, albeit with less emphasis on interacting with a global marketplace. However, provisioning for farm women included all of the visible physical work involved in planting, cultivating, harvesting, canning, and preserving vegetables from the garden. It also involved all of the mental work needed in planning the garden to select the most healthful foods, as well as the mental work associated with the physical work mentioned above. For example, planning, which might include seasonal rotation of vegetables; monitoring, which includes the seasonal availability of vegetables and what crops ripen at different times; and remembering are all unseen work. While the marketplace was the context for the activity of provisioning in DeVault’s study, the farmstead is the context for the activity of feeding the farm family in my study. As we saw in earlier chapters, farm women spent considerable time making the system of household production, including gardening and canning, on the farmstead work. Producing one’s own food requires considerable tacit knowledge garnered from traditional sources, such as parents, grandparents, friends, farmer’s almanacs, and seed catalogs. In addition, new ideas are important for women’s work; these new ideas might be acquired from more formal sources, such as women’s club meetings, magazines, or face-to-face demonstrations by professional home economists. As we saw in Chapters 8

and 9, many farm women were able to take advantage of belonging to a home economics extension club, or have the benefit of working with a Rural Rehabilitation Home Management Supervisor during the Depression. In fact, as we saw in earlier chapters, the number of clubs and club membership in Missouri and elsewhere increased markedly during the 1930s.

Many of my key informants repeatedly remarked that they were monetarily poor, but that they always had enough to eat, and while rationing food was sometimes necessary, they were, in general, better off than those people who lived in cities with no access to land on which to grow their own food.<sup>1</sup> As an adjunct to this notion of poverty, several informants acknowledged that their mothers did not order seeds through catalogs because the cost was too high. Most said that saving seeds from one year to the next was traditional. However, this was also probably prompted by limited financial means. Exchanging seeds and plants with neighbors and kin were also a means whereby farm women could experiment and grow some new vegetables every year, or grow specific grapes, gooseberries, or other berry, recommended by the nursery and seed catalogs for producing, for example, jams and jellies.

Like DeVault's informants, the individuals in my study and the women in the records of the Farm Security Administration files that I studied, had to consider the family's economic resources when deciding how much to spend in the market place and how to allocate scarce resources. For example, a number of Farm Security Administration clients used their small loans to, among other things, purchase a pressure cooker, which enabled them to can with a greater sense of security knowing that the food would not be tainted with harmful bacteria. The decision to buy a pressure canner and garden seed had

to be weighed against buying farm equipment, livestock, and field crop seeds. The decision to buy a pressure canner for many of these farm families indicated that this was an important item and one that would contribute to an adequate household food supply. It also indicated that the farm woman's role in household food production was paramount and acknowledged by all family members. The purchase of a pressure canner, for those who did not own one, was also encouraged by the Rural Rehabilitation Home Management Supervisors who were always on hand to instruct farm women on how to use it.

It was generally agreed among my informants that the farm women made the decisions about what went into the vegetable garden, anticipating meals to come. Not an easy task when one considers that they also needed to take into account individual family member's likes and dislikes, and were no doubt influenced to some extent by the "media" blitz from the Extension Service that promoted tomatoes, and yellow and green leafy vegetables to ensure good health. Decisions about whether or not to plant a fall garden were also made by farm women; fall gardens were heavily advertised by Extension as a means of extending the growing season and as a fallback when the Spring garden was less productive than expected. In addition to making decisions about how and when to plant and about rotating and fertilizing vegetables, farm women also had to continuously monitor vegetable growth to select the best day to harvest. For example, my informant, Lonnie, reported that his mother was constantly checking on the garden and that she would harvest vegetables on a routine basis as the basic ingredients for lunch. Likewise, Hettie said that she and her brother always helped in the garden and when dinner time came, "they would just go out and pick something and fix it for dinner."

The garden, as we saw, had to be cultivated and also protected from predatory insects and other pests. Enlisting the help of children was especially important in this regard. Not only were the children involved in weeding, but they also participated on a routine basis in keeping insects off of the plants. Additionally, they foraged in neighboring woods for strawberries, blackberries, and gooseberries. My key informants generally reported that they had learned to garden from their parents and that this gardening knowledge was for the most part derived from imitation because they were so actively engaged in gardening with their mothers from an early age.

One practice that seemed to be pervasive among my informants' families was sharing food and garden produce with neighbors and kin. When asked whether they knew of a family whose food needs might not have been met during the Depression, most responded that they did, and, in fact, they frequently brought food to these individuals, as well as gave unconditionally to hobos and others in need. Extension home demonstration agents likewise alerted club women to the prospects of aiding non-members and neighbors with their canning problems and by assisting in neighborhood canning centers that helped the poor.

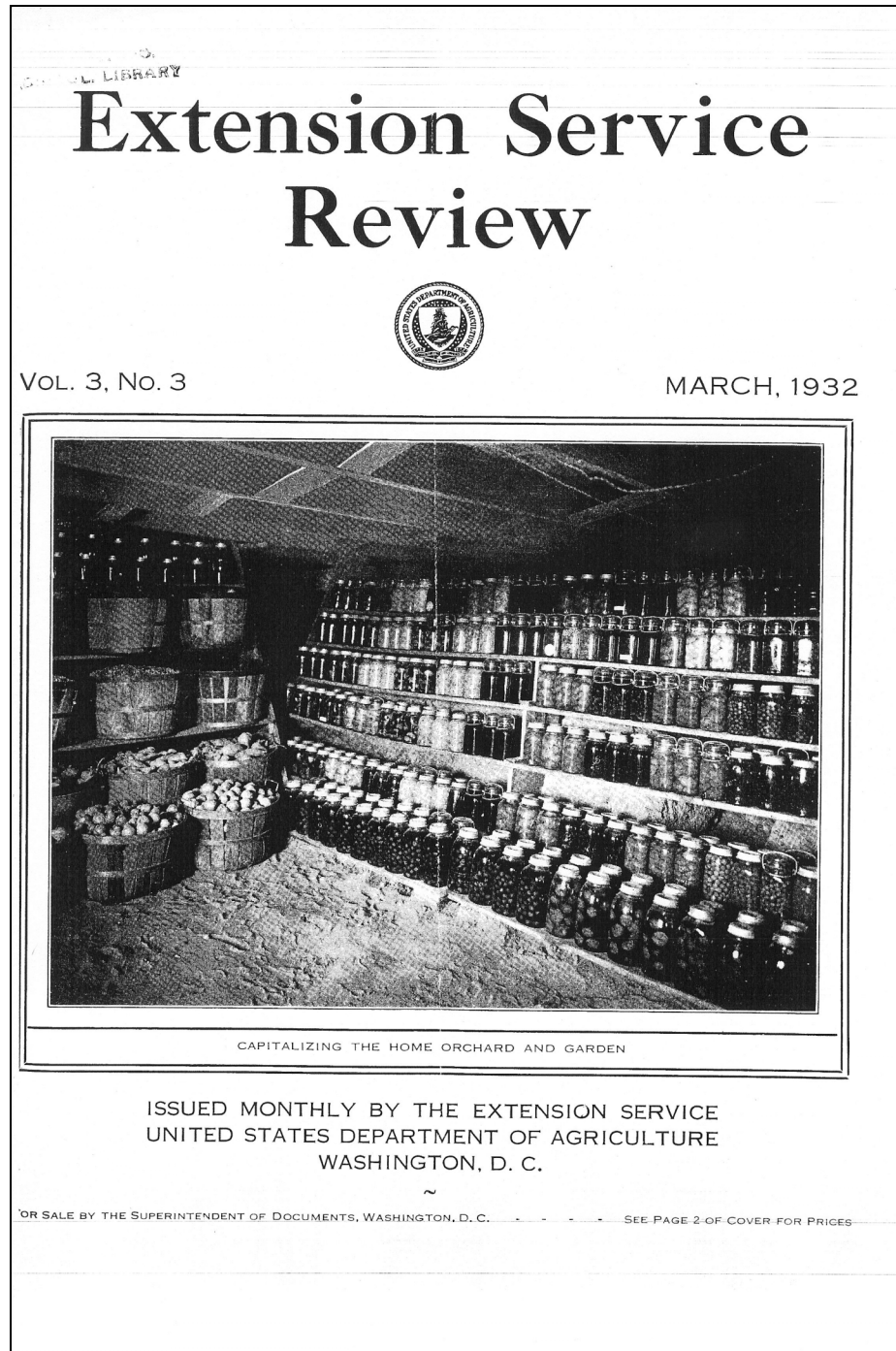
Another component of DeVault's schema of monitoring was the notion that women paid attention to the market to identify new products and that sometimes they learned what was available through formal sources of knowledge. An example of this from the 1930s can be seen when the pressure cooker became available and was replacing hot water baths and cold pack canning. The pressure cooker reduced the time that women spent canning, not to mention improving the quality of the product and the safety of the food. Some women learned to can from their mothers; others learned from Extension

home demonstration agents and Rural Rehabilitation Home Management Specialists as we saw in Chapters 8 and 9. In Chapter 6, Elizabeth's story of her early and heartbreaking canning experiences with blackberries suggests the importance of the women who were to become home demonstration agents to the lives of farm women.

Doing provisioning, as DeVault suggests, also involves women in social relationships both within the household and with outsiders. The activities of provisioning “knit together the ragged edges of household life and the larger society” (DeVault 1991:75). This is also true to some extent for the farm woman as she processed food from her garden and tended the farm poultry flock. These productive activities have the potential of producing a surplus that can be used to barter for other goods, sell at a curb market, or exchange with neighbors, thus solidifying social relations outside of the farmstead.

Most of the farm families in my study also raised chickens and some had rather large flocks and sold large quantities of eggs to various local institutions. The eggs and canned vegetables were usually stored in a dug out area near the house—a cave or a cellar—which required the farm woman to keep tabs on the inventory of produce and to make it available when guests came for dinner or for unexpected visitations. Fannie reported, for example, that the standby vegetables for her family were potatoes, green beans, lima beans, cabbage, carrots, and tomatoes. “We never lacked for vegetables. To keep those things in the winter, of course, we canned jars of them, but dad would dig a hole in the garden and line it with straw or hay of some kind and things that you could bury and keep for a while, like cabbage heads and apples, we would bury apples when we got our cellar full.” As seen in Chapter 5, Henry Field reported that he and Bertha stored

food in their cave all summer long. Storing canned goods in various places made it incumbent upon the farm woman to have a mental tally of what was available for meals and what had been used (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** A farm woman's winter supply of canned produce during the 1930s.  
Source: *Extension Service Review*. U.S. Department of Agriculture. March 1932.

Public discourse around cooking, which has become utterly pervasive today, was less so in the first part of the twentieth century. Women were, however, not immune from the influences of advertising and the media in instructing them on how to prepare a proper meal, how to plan and plant their gardens, and how to beautify their homes and grounds, whether it was on radio homemakers programs, in *Capper's Weekly*, or in farm journals. Texts, DeVault writes, “related to food work include cookbooks and books of instruction for domestic work, newspaper and television advertising and features about food and cooking, and the nutritional advice given by physicians, dietitians, home economists, and the mass media” (DeVault 1991:215). Furthermore, following Dorothy Smith’s notion of discourse, DeVault says that cooking discourse not only refers to the texts, but also to the “activities involved in their production and use as well. The images and codes of discourse, expressed in particular texts, are public, and transcend local settings, but local expressions of the code are specific to particular individuals and material settings, and are products of individual effort” (Devault 1991:215).

The cooking discourse that farm women were exposed to in many instances was via the radio. Farm women joined clubs and met with home economics specialists, who provided information that was important to their producing and processing food for the family. As we saw in Chapters 6 and 9, Extension home demonstration agents throughout the State of Missouri and the country wrote articles and brochures, did radio broadcasts, held face-to-face demonstrations of the latest “scientific” products, and reported on new and nutritious vegetables that could be grown in the garden. Often women became empowered by the information, but others accepted what they considered beneficial and discarded the rest. Some of the main themes in the cooking discourse for the 1930s

revolved around eating healthy, leafy green vegetables, such as spinach and Chinese cabbage, eating fruits to prevent pellagra and other diseases, and participating in canning demonstrations that represented the modern and scientific practices of preserving food quality and preventing spoilage. The Missouri College of Agriculture was also instrumental in providing scientific information to farm women through circulars and research bulletins on a wide variety of food-related topics, including how to can fruits and vegetables, developing the farm family food budget, and the home vegetable garden.

One of my informants in particular acknowledged the importance of the information that home demonstration agents brought into her community. Fannie reported that: “the home demonstration agents were lifesavers as far as I’m concerned. They came to the country. The men did too. They came to the meetings and gave us new information. About the first thing in addition to our sewing and cooking that helped us so much was when the pressure cooker became available. The home demonstration agent would come to every club meeting and demonstrate how to use it. We just thought that canning was no problem after we got a pressure cooker because it was so much quicker than what we had been using and so much safer.” As part of the canning process, even before the widespread use of the pressure cooker, Extension and others were suggesting that farm women can by following a canning budget, which laid out how many quarts of particular vegetables would be needed to supply each individual in the farm family with food throughout the winter months. Fulfilling a canning budget was particularly evident in the FSA client files where home management supervisors worked with farm women to prepare and realize their canning budgets (see Chapter 8).



As DeVault points out in her book, there is a tension for women about family work and that is that family work is “burdensome and oppressive, but also meaningful because it serves as a means for connecting with others...Women in all societies share long traditions of feeding others, and in many settings the work of producing, processing, distributing, and serving food provides a valued identity or a kind of power for women” (DeVault 1991:232). I’m suggesting in this dissertation that while this tension also existed and it may have been even more burdensome, at least involving more physical exertion during the 1930s, that farm women tended to think of themselves as partners in their farming endeavor and used their influence over the farmstead, which was their traditional role, to contribute to their households and make a significant contribution as historical actors in their own right (Whites, Neth, and Kremer 2004). By being the primary caretakers of the vegetable garden, farm women during the Depression increased their efforts to produce food to meet their own needs and the needs of the household and wider community, especially when the United States entered World War II.

Like women in other economies during difficult economic and social times, farm women during the Depression put all of their energies into household production so that they might also be able to enter into the market economy to secure some extra income for the family (Jellison 1993:114-115). In her recent research on the impact of drought on gender relations in Australia, Margaret Alston notes that one of the most significant findings was the fact that drought (or in my case the Depression) is a gendered experience. She writes that “Women are more likely to increase their on- and off-farm work roles, to be seeking assistance and information, to have a critical understanding of the budgetary bottom line, to be continuing their responsibility for childcare and

housework, to be monitoring the deteriorating health of family members and to be emotionally stretched from the ongoing battle to keep case income flowing and bills paid” (2006:172). The long drought in Australia, therefore, has the potential for destabilizing traditional gender and power relations. However, as her research showed these relationships are reshaped in times of crisis, but “remain structured along patriarchal lines to accommodate this circumstance. Men are still viewed as the farmers and all family members work to ensure that the family can remain in farming. For women, this has meant increasing (or continuing) their heavy workload on-and off-farm to provide the income to allow the family to remain in agriculture... What is not revealed in the dominant discourse [however] is that women appear to have become the breadwinners during the drought and men the dependants” (p 177). Similarly, as I have emphasized throughout this dissertation, farm women worked hard to maintain their farming way of life by increasing household production, and many sought assistance and information from home demonstration agents and others to help them improve their gardening and canning practices in order to survive. Nevertheless, although their household production allowed the family to keep farming and in many instances was the sole source of support for the family, these women, like those in Australia, continued to operate within a patriarchal system.

### **Individualism and Collective Identity**

Another underlying tension that was evident during the years of the 1930s was that of collectivism versus individualism. In his book, *The Age of the Great Depression, 1929-1941*, Dixon Wecter wrote: “the period 1929-1941 began with a domestic débâcle which stemmed from many causes, but perhaps the most basic was selfish blindness to

the bond between group welfare and the satisfactions of the individual” (Wecter 1948:24). The tension between the American ideology of independence and self-sufficiency versus cooperative efforts and mutual aid was evident during the Depression, especially in rural areas, where families were encouraged to “live-at-home” and grow groceries in the garden, but at the same time to become part of cooperative marketing systems and join clubs for sharing and social support and to obtain the latest scientific information regarding gardening and other household management skills. When Franklin Roosevelt became President in 1932, his New Deal programs brought together large groups of men and women to work cooperatively in rehabilitating or building the nation’s infrastructure (Cutler 1985), or sewing and canning for relief families (Noun 1999).

Eleanor Roosevelt in her book *It’s Up To The Women* firmly believed that people must work together and help each other, and “that each man or woman’s problems affect the whole community” (1933:254). She continues

We all remember reading of the husking and quilting parties when all the neighbors joined together and worked for each other and had fun doing it. We remember the tales of our grandfathers working together building stone fences and clearing fields and raising houses and barns, all of them cooperative undertakings. As we have grown in size and in wealth we have drifted away from the community help-each-other spirit and the belief has grown up that each entity is independent of any other and sufficient unto itself. The past years of depression have shown us that we cannot live for ourselves alone—and it is the women fundamentally who can reestablish the old idea which worked so well in laying the firm foundation of our country... This is a time which should teach us all one lesson—namely, that the prosperity of the few is very precarious indeed if the many are in really poor circumstances (1933:254-255).

As the 1930s progressed, more and more farmers acquired tractors and other modern farming implements that enabled them to farm independently with fewer manual laborers, including their wives and children (Jellison 1993). As Susan Ware reminds us, “By substituting their own labor for goods and services previously bought in the

marketplace, women [during the Depression] often provided the difference between making do and doing without for their families. This substitution represented a break from the general trend toward more labor saving devices in the home and the removal of family functions to other economic and social institutions” (1982:198-199). The Depression then interrupted the trend toward modernity and a more consumer-oriented individualistic society and thus highlighted the importance of the farm woman’s labor. However, as the Depression lessened, more consumer goods became available to farm families, especially with the push toward rural electrification, which offered a host of labor-saving devices, such as irons, refrigerators, and washing machines. But, as Ronald R. Kline argues in his book *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (2000), while by the 1960s the farm family had generally succumbed to the lure of “new communication, transportation, and household technologies to make rural life more like urban life...farm people were not passive consumers who accepted new technology on the terms of the reformers. Instead, they resisted, modified, and selectively used these technologies to create new ways of rural life. They followed their own paths to modernity” (2000:272 & 276).

While they may have adopted new technologies on their own terms, the independent, self-sufficient, commercially oriented farmer eventually became the norm, possibly with the exception of the Amish community. Mary Neth writes of this trend that

The fundamental changes in agricultural production that followed World War II originated in the institutional, ideological, and economic changes that took place during the first forty years of the twentieth century. As agricultural production was reorganized by government policy, the power of increasingly centralized agricultural corporations, and technological innovations, farm people migrated from rural America, and the survival strategies of community exchange and home production went with them...Nevertheless, although rural communities and patterns of assistance in hard times persist, they are no longer integrated with

daily patterns of work and exchange. Families share resources, family members contribute extensive labor to the family enterprise, and farm women still negotiate within patriarchal family structures, but the methods of contributing to the farm and the resources available for negotiation have changed dramatically (1995:273).

Cooperative efforts, such as those supported in Missouri by the Farm Security Administration, were undermined and abolished as some people thought that they were Communistic. On the other hand, the production and selling of vegetables to other members of the community or in towns during the Depression was vital to the survival of many farm families, as it is today becoming an intricate part of the mortar that is building communities around food.

### **Food in Search of Community**

Much has been written recently about reconnection people to their food source and subsequently to their communities (Allen 2004; Barber 2007; Hendrickson 1997; Lyson 2004; Pollen 2006, 2007; Vitek and Jackson 1996). Farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs), Food Circles, the Slow Food movement, and even elementary school vegetable gardens are all "creative new forms of community development, built around the regeneration of local food systems [which] may eventually generate sufficient economic and political power to mute the more socially and environmentally destructive manifestations of the global marketplace," according to Thomas Lyson (2004:98). In his book, *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food, and Community*, Lyson goes on to write that, "Civic agriculture represents a promising economic alternative that can nurture community businesses, save farms, and preserve farmland by providing consumers with fresh, locally produced agricultural and food products" (2004:98). Farming in this scenario is oriented toward local markets that are integrated into the community where producers rely on "local, site-specific knowledge

and less on a uniform set of “best management practices,” and where farming is more land- and labor-intensive. Small-scale production of value-added, high quality products is emphasized. In Lyson’s model of civic agriculture, community building by directly linking the producers of food and its consumers is emphasized. At the heart of what Lyson calls civic agriculture is the farm family vegetable garden and house-based production activities. One can speculate that the basis for this movement is the production of food for family and community during the Depression and World War II with Victory Gardens, and other gardening efforts, such as the widespread establishment of community gardens throughout the twentieth century. Like the Depression-era vegetable garden that helped to sustain the farm family and preserve a traditional way of life, civic agriculture also seeks to preserve farming as a way of life and also provide food to local consumers, thus building a community of gardeners and preserving rural culture.

The vegetable garden in this system is not only providing food for the farm family as it did during the Depression, but it is also mediating social relationships in the household and in the community. It is in essence one of the means of anchoring people to their place (Kloppenborg, Hedrickson, and Stevenson 1996). In the household garden is also the means to support the idea that the production and consumption of food can be used to sustain or reinvigorate familial, community, and civic culture (Kloppenborg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1996:115), and that by starting with food and the centrality of food in our lives, we can become connected materially and spiritually to one another and to the earth (p. 122). As I have shown in this dissertation, women who gardened during the Depression increased their efforts to produce food for their families in the face of extreme hardships. They relied on each other through their clubs, and on the practical

advice given to them by the professional cadre of women who worked as home demonstration agents and as home management supervisors to enable them to produce a viable garden that would result in healthier meals for their families. These farm women also established gardens that today might be considered organic gardens because many industrial herbicides and pesticides were not in widespread use and because limited financial means meant more hands-on insect control as we saw in Chapter 5. Their vegetable gardens, as I have emphasized, not only provided material sustenance, but also gave farm women a sense of worth and the means to connect with other women and the outside world, in fact, it empowered them.

Nevertheless, farm women still operated within a patriarchal system, although during the Depression there was a shift, albeit temporary, in power and gender relations as we saw earlier in this chapter. Recently, the sustainable agriculture and organic farming movements have offered the expectation that “more spaces for female involvement in day to day farm production and marketing...[and thus] greater female involvement in decision-making” (Hall and Mogyorody 2007:290) would be forthcoming. However, these expectations have yet to be realized (Allen and Sachs 1993:149; Hall and Mogyorody 2007:312; Meares 1997:45).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

While this dissertation has uncovered and recovered material related to rural women’s history and has made a contribution to the scholarly literature on women and gender studies, and to the material culture of household vegetable gardens, particularly in the State of Missouri, there are a number of additional intriguing lines of inquiry that I was not able to pursue. Some of them are described below.

Because Missouri is such a melting pot of ethnic groups in the past and today, it would be interesting to look historically and identify gardening practices by ethnic group. For example, where was the German Four-Square gardening method practiced? Was it extensively practiced in German communities in the state? Were their gardening methods homogenized by Extension and other programs designed to educate women or did these groups hold onto their own gardening practices?

Lu Ann Jones and others have written about the work of Extension home demonstration agents and other professional women who worked in communities and with various organizations during the 1930s. While there has been some scholarly research on specific individuals, unearthing the lives of other women who worked with women to make their lives better is worthwhile. One such woman was Madge Reese, who worked for Extension throughout her lifetime. Because she was originally from Missouri, her papers are housed in Columbia, Missouri, in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection and are a great source of information about Extension and about home demonstration agents and their work with farm women over time. Delving into these files and acknowledging the work that these professional women did during the 1930s and beyond, would make an excellent contribution to the scholarly literature.

As we have seen, nursery and seed catalogs are an incredibly useful resource when looking at horticultural practices and at the material culture of gardening. Seed catalogs are an underutilized resource when it comes to identifying tools, gardening practices, heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables, and historical trends in popular varieties of fruits and vegetables. In addition, aesthetically, the catalogs, especially those



produced in color are beautifully rendered and remind us of how our contact with nature is a necessary ingredient in our lives.

It was my intention in this dissertation to write more about the two major cooperative, some say Communistic, ventures of the Farm Security Administration in Missouri—the La Forge and Osage Farms Projects. However, because of time constraints I was unable to give them the attention that I feel they warranted. Delving into the records of these two FSA projects would be an important contribution in increasing our understanding of cooperative farming and why it did not catch on in the United States. It would be especially important to learn about the women in these cooperative farming initiatives and how they dealt with the Rural Rehabilitation home management supervisors who worked with them. What really happened in the lives of these women as they were moved from “tenant” status to “ownership” status on these cooperative farms? It would also be useful to know what happened to the individual farm families when the farms were disbanded. We see in the pictures that were produced for the Farm Security Administration, bright and apparently well-adjusted women and children doing their daily tasks, but how they were actually coping with this experiment in “socialism” is a theme well worth exploring.

Another aspect of civic agriculture can be seen in efforts by food banks and government agencies concerned with poverty to enable clients to become at least partially self-sufficient by growing their own vegetables. An example of this type of assistance in Missouri can be seen in the project of the Ozarks Food Harvest pantry, which today feeds an average of 35,000 Ozarks citizens per month; about 164,000 people in the Ozarks live in poverty (Medlin 2006:23). One of their programs, the Full Circle Garden program,

“teaches low-income families how to grow fresh organic produce” (Medlin 2006:22). The program provides land, supplies, and the support needed to grow fresh vegetables. Thus far the program has taught more than 700 low-income gardeners how to “grow, harvest and preserve healthy produce for their families” (Medlin 2006:24). How this program could be replicated (and evaluated) in other counties throughout Missouri, thus establishing new communities of gardeners, would be an important contribution to make as a rural sociologist or as a Master Gardener.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> During the Depression, as we saw in Chapter 4, there were many opportunities for workers in cities and elsewhere to participate in corporation-driven vegetable gardening programs. In cities, community gardening efforts abounded (Conkin 1959; Warner 1987).

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE: MISSOURI FARM WOMEN IN THE 1930s**

Lyn Mortimer  
May 2005

#### **Preliminary Questions**

1. Where did you live in the 1930s?
2. Date of birth. Family background—length of time in Missouri, in county, livelihood, where did you settle—originally and during the 1930s, where did your family come from?
3. How many were in your family when you were growing up? Who lived in your household? What are their ages? What is their marital status? How many children did they have and where are they now?
4. How far did you go in school?
5. Is the Great Depression a point in time that is pivotal for you?

#### **The Farm**

1. Describe the farm: size, type of crops raised, number of workers, tenancy, owner?
2. What was considered women's work outdoors: poultry, garden dairy, animal chores, field work? What work did you do? What work did women do? Was that usual for women to do?
3. What work did you do in the house? Was it considered women's work? Did you have help? Was the help hired to do farmwork or housework?

#### **The Vegetable Garden and Food Security**

##### **A. The Garden**

1. Did you have a vegetable garden in the 1930s? Most people had them, so if you didn't, why not? How did you lose your vegetable garden?
2. Who taught you to garden? Can vegetables?
3. Did you enjoy gardening?
4. What did you grow in the garden? Tell me about what you remember of your garden.
5. What did it take to make the garden, beginning with soil preparation? Would you describe the actual work involved, step-by-step?
6. On a typical day during (spring, summer, fall) how much time did you spend in the garden? Canning? Garden-related activities? Was there a season that you didn't have to garden?
7. Do you remember any especially bad or good years where the garden was less than successful? What did you do? Do you remember any especially good years with respect to the garden? Did you get a bountiful harvest?
8. How would your life have been different without your garden?

## **B. Relationships**

9. Who helped you with the garden? Did you share your gardening work with others (friends, neighbors)?
10. Did you share your vegetables with neighbors and friends?
11. Did you use the vegetables produced in your garden to barter for other products?
12. Did anyone not have enough food during the Depression?
13. What are some of the stories about gardening your mother told you? Did your grandmother or aunts tell you stories about food production/gardening? Did you use these practices in your own garden?

## **C. Gardening Practices**

14. Did the Depression change what you did in your garden?
15. If you had a pest that was causing a problem, who would you turn to for advice?
16. Where did you get seeds for your garden? From a catalogue? If so, which ones? From friends? Saved seeds? If so, how did you collect and preserve the seeds? Did you trade seeds?
17. What tools did you use in the garden?
18. Were there practices that your mother, grandmother used that they told you about that made their gardens more productive? Did you have any special practices; for example, do you plant root vegetables at a certain point in the moon cycle? or plant certain plants together?
19. Did you ever exhibit something in the state or county fair?
20. Did you rely on any specific sources of information for gardening, such as the "Farmer's Almanac"?

## **D. Household**

21. Did you like to cook? How did you feel about preparing meals from your garden?
22. What were some of the ways you prepared meals using produce from the garden?
23. What cookbooks did you use? Special recipes?
24. Did most of your meals include produce from your garden?
25. What products did you buy at the grocery store during the 1930s?
26. What did your family like to eat?

## **E. Community/Family**

27. Were you in any clubs during the 1930s? For example, garden clubs or homemakers extension clubs?
28. What projects did your clubs work on? Did you like the clubs? Can you tell me about the make up of the clubs? Who else was a member? Neighbors, etc.?
29. Did you get together with just women in the 1930s? Could you sometimes spend the whole day with a friend? Working or just for fun?
30. What relatives did you see the most? Did women family members and kin ever get together without men?
31. Could you go to your family if you needed help; for example, outdoor farm related tasks, or childcare, routine crop harvesting, financial problems? Did family members come to your for help?

32. When did you first get electricity in your community? Farm? What was the first electrically operated machine that your family got? When did you get a radio? What stations did you frequently listen to? Women's programs?

## APPENDIX 2

### PROFILES OF KEY INFORMANTS

The following profiles provide a brief description of the individuals who I interviewed for my research. As agreed with each person in advance, I have assigned them fictitious names. These profiles attempt to give some family background and insight into their world views. All of these people were Caucasian (eight females and one male) and lived in the State of Missouri most of their lives. They all acknowledged that their mothers were “always busy.”

**Josie:** Born in 1921, Josie was nine years old at the beginning of the Great Depression. Her family consisted of an older brother, father, and mother. They moved to a number of different what she called “bank farms” during the 1930s, and in 1935 settled on a farm in Columbia (Boone County), where they raised sheep and did some crop farming. A “bank farm” was one that was repossessed and owned by a bank. She had vivid memories of the kinds of work that her mother did and the work that she did in the garden and around the house. Like most of the other informants, Josie quickly recalled the name of the horse—Old Doll—that pulled their plow and buggy. Josie was interviewed on March 21, 2005.

**Lonnie:** Like many Missourians, his ancestors came to Missouri from Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1800s. In 1933, he lived with his brother, sister, and parents on a 320 acre farm, which they owned, on the Sac River in Dade County. Born in 1919, Lonnie recalled that in addition to her other chores, his mother raised between 400-500 broilers each year. They always had eggs and would take cream to town every Saturday evening. Their farm was more than a subsistence farm because they raised cattle and hogs to sell. Lonnie graduated from the University of Missouri in 1947 with a degree in agriculture. He also had one year of graduate school. Lonnie was interviewed on March 24, 2005.

**Clara:** In 1938, three years after she was married, Clara and her husband bought a 220 acre farm in Mokane, Missouri (Callaway County), where they lived for the next 56 years. Born in 1914, Clara was one of ten children born to German parents who settled near Hermann, Missouri. Her canned cabbage is excellent; the recipe goes like this. Cut the cabbage into chunks; cook it until it wilts, and comes to a boil. Then stuff the cabbage chunks into quart jars as tight as possible; add some salt and put the jars in a pressure cooker—ten pounds of pressure for ten minutes. She still has the original pressure cooker that she bought for \$8.75 in 1941. In 2004, she canned 473 quarts of green beans and takes great pride in her vegetable garden. Clara was interviewed on April 18, 2005.

**Elizabeth:** In the 1930s, Elizabeth lived on a 120-acre farm near Rolla, Missouri in Phelps County that had been in her husband’s family since 1903. Born in 1907 in northern Missouri, she was the second of seven children. When her mother died in 1919, she was 12-years-old and had to assume the “womanly tasks” for her family. Elizabeth and her husband worked on their farm, raising chickens and registered Jersey cattle for 49 years. As progressive farmers, they were always ready to try something new. In the 1940s

they enrolled in the Extension Balanced Farming program, and over the next 25 years were frequently acknowledged for their contributions to farming in Missouri. Their farm is designated a Missouri Century Farm. Elizabeth was interviewed on April 22, 2005; she passed away in January 2006.

**Fern:** Fern was ten in 1930 and living on her family's 300-acre farm in Howard County, where they raised cattle, hogs, mules, geese, chickens, and turkeys. Fern was the youngest of three children, and was frequently privileged to ride the mule, Ada, when the vegetable garden was plowed in the spring. During the drought years, she said, neighbors shared and no one was lacking. Her mother called the farm "Hollyhock Farm" since there were lots of them growing there. Fern's family farm is now designated a Missouri Century Farm. Fern was interviewed on May 20, 2005.

**Hettie:** Before settling in Howard County, Hettie grew up on a farm in neighboring Saline County north of Arrow Rock, where she and her pony, Pet, would carry water to the threshing crew. She was born in 1912 and married in 1930. Hettie and her husband moved to Fayette from their farm in 1937, leaving what Hettie called a "rough life." Nevertheless, they managed to continue to have a large garden on property in the country and grew lots of strawberries, among other things. She said they were poor, but so was everyone else in the Depression, "so we didn't think anything about it...we just knew that we had a lot of things to do." Hettie was interviewed on June 30, 2005; she passed away in February 2006.

**Fannie:** Born in Howard County in 1920, Fannie was the middle of three sisters. The farm she grew up on was relatively small—80 acres—but when farming was done only with horses it was just about right. One thing about the Great Depression was that "farm people had food," she said. On her family farm they raised cattle, hogs, turkeys, chickens, and geese, which were plucked, feathers saved, and pillows made. Married in 1940, Fannie moved onto her husband's family farm and has been there ever since. Fannie joined a 4-H Club at age nine and that is where she learned to cook and sew; she still participates in club work. The farm she lives on is designated as a Missouri Century Farm. Fannie was interviewed on July 14, 2005.

**Emma:** One of nine children—eight girls and one boy—Emma was born in 1918, in Mercer County, although she now lives in Putnam County in northern Missouri, near the Iowa border. During the hard times of the Depression, her family grew corn and oats, raised chickens and turkeys, and milked dairy cattle. Her parents owned a farm, but when the Depression hit, "it went" and they began renting a farm. Their black pony—Lottie—took them back and forth the six miles to school. All of the neighbors shared their vegetables, Emma said, but there were some who were "rationing just like we were because food was limited." Emma was interviewed on August 17, 2005.

**Nettie:** Born in 1912 in Ozark County, like so many other Missourians Nettie's family originated in Kentucky and Tennessee. During the 1930s, Nettie's family never went hungry because they had pigs, chickens, and a garden. Her mother, in fact, grew cotton on the farm and would make clothes from the cotton for the family. They also picked

wild strawberries and blackberries and canned them. Nettie once knew 30 kinds of wild greens and frequently led “wild food walks” where she shared her knowledge of native medicinal and edible plants. Nettie’s mother also was knowledgeable about healing plants and frequently aided the local doctor in his rounds. Nettie was interviewed on September 10, 2005; she passed away in Ava, Missouri, in February 2006.



**APPENDIX 3**  
**RECIPES AND GARDENING TIPS**  
**FROM THE 1930s**

As I was reading through farm journals and other Depression-era publications, I found a number of interesting recipes and gardening ideas, and articles, some of which were about products that today we take for granted, but which were new during the 1930s. In addition, special diets were recommended by home economists and others that reflected the latest nutritional knowledge at the time, but also indicate how farm families had to conserve food resources in order to survive.

In the section of her book *It's Up To The Women* Eleanor Roosevelt (1933) recommends a weeks' menu of three meals a day that can provide the needed nutritional requirements for the family at a very low cost. She says that in fact many of the meals have been used at the White House. The meals from Monday are reproduced here:

**Monday**

Breakfast

Farina-Milk-Sugar, Whole Wheat Toast-Butter, Milk for children, Coffee for adults.

Dinner

Meat Loaf-creamed potatoes, lettuce salad, Whole Wheat Bread-Butter, Stewed Prunes, Milk for Children.

Supper

Scalloped Tomatoes with Cheese, Whole Wheat Bread-Butter, Scotch Wafers, Cocoa for All. Give only weak cocoa to young children.

Meat Loaf: (can be made into meat balls and cooked on top of stove.) 1 lb. ground beef, 1 cup bread crumbs, 1-1/2 teaspoons salt, 1 medium onion, minced. Milk or water, pepper. Mix all the ingredients together, thoroughly, adding enough milk or water to moisten well. Bake in a moderate oven about 1 hour.

Scalloped Tomatoes: Canned or fresh tomatoes, salt and pepper, grated cheese, few drops of onion juice, sugar, buttered bread crumbs. If canned tomatoes are used, drain off some of tomato liquid and save for breakfast. Season tomatoes with salt, pepper, onion juice, and sugar if liked sweet. Cover bottom of buttered baking dish with crumbs, cover with tomatoes, cover with a layer of cheese and sprinkle top thickly with crumbs. Bake in a moderate oven (375 degrees F.) until crumbs are brown.

Scotch Wafers: 2 cups rolled oats, 1 cup sifted flour, 1/2 cup sugar, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 2 teaspoons baking powder, 3 tablespoons fat, 1/3 cup milk. Mix the dry ingredients, add the fat, and mix together thoroughly. Add enough milk to make a dough sufficiently hard to roll (about 1/3 cup). Knead this dough well. Roll very thin, cut with a biscuit cutter. Bake in a moderately hot oven (375 deg. F.) for 15 to 20 minutes. When cool the wafers should be very crisp.  
(Roosevelt 1933:65-67)

### **Depression-Era Recipes**

The following recipes appeared in the farm journals and in *Capper's Weekly* in the 1930s and early 1940s.

From *The Missouri Farmer*

#### MFA Apricot Nut Bread

1-1/2 cups dried apricots (about 1/2 lb.), 1 cup water, 2-1/2 cups MFA flour, 5 teaspoons of baking powder, 1 teaspoon soda, 1/2 cup sugar, 1/2 cup coarsely chopped toasted nuts, 1 egg, 1 cup sour milk or buttermilk, 2 tablespoons melted shortening, 1/2 teaspoon salt.

Method: 1. Wash apricots. Place in saucepan with 1 cup water. Boil until apricots are soft—about 10 minutes. Drain if there is any liquid left. 2. Cool and chop apricots. 3. Sift flour, once before measuring. 4. Sift flour, baking powder, soda, salt and sugar together. 5. Add nuts to flour mixture. 6. Beat eggs well, add milk and stir into flour mixture. 7. Add melted shortening and mix thoroughly. 8. Fold in chopped apricots. 9. Pour into well-greased bread loaf pan and let stand 20 minutes. 10. Bake, time 65 to 70 minutes; temperature 350 degrees F., moderate oven. Size of pan—8x4x3 inches. Note—if apricot sauce is used, drain juice thoroughly from apricots (30:19, March 1, 1938).

#### Cereal Grass as Food

While this is not an actual recipe, it does acknowledge the fact that cold cereals have not been around for that long. “We have all heard how Henry Ford has made everything from milk to steering wheels out of the lowly soybean and know that

science has been trying in various ways to help the farmer by finding new uses for weeds, grass, and crops of various kinds, a notable instance being Edison's search for a source of rubber, golden rod being found a good candidate. The latest thing in this line is among the food dishes. Dried grass, says a report, is used to prepare a dish which ranks among the foremost new food delicacies. Chemist-dietitians claim that young cereal grasses such as oats, rye, and barley are several hundred times more nutritious than spinach, carrots, lettuce, etc. However, they must be cut at exactly the right time, it is claimed, as the variation of a week will reduce the vitamin, mineral and fat content by 50 per cent. What next?"(27:6, August 15, 1935).

### Tomato Chutney

3 dozen ripe tomatoes, medium size, chopped; 6 onions, medium size, chopped; 3 red peppers, seeded and chopped; 1 dozen tart apples, peeled and chopped; 1 pound seedless raisins; 1 cup celery, cut fine; 2 quarts vinegar; 3 cups sugar; 1 teaspoon each cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves; salt. Combine the ingredients, and cook in a preserving kettle until it is thick and clear. Stir frequently to prevent burning. Pour into hot sterilized jars and seal (24:11, June 1, 1932).

From the *Missouri Ruralist*

### Scalloped tomatoes

Place a layer of sliced or canned tomatoes in a buttered baking dish, add a layer of canned or cooked corn and a layer of shredded green peppers. Add another layer of tomatoes and cover with buttered bread crumbs. Bake in a moderate oven for 20 minutes (81:9, July 20, 1940).

### Canned Fresh Tomatoes from Mrs. Ned Benson

First, with the dull side of a paring knife, I bruise the fruit downward from the stem. Then the skin slips off easily. Into freshly sterilized jars, equipped with new rubber rings, go these old-fashioned 'love-apples,' with 1 teaspoon of salt for each quart. Then I fill the jars with boiling water and seal the lids tightly. Next I place the jars in rapidly boiling water, deep enough to cover the jars; cover the container airtight; turn off the heat and cover completely with a heavy quilt. I allow them to stand until the water is cold, remove the jars and store in a cool, dark place. They're perfect and oh, so good! (81:9, August 17, 1940).

### Cider Sherbert (sic)

3/4 cup water; 2/3 cup sugar; 2 cups cider; 1 cup orange juice, 4 tablespoons lemon juice; 2 egg whites. Combine water and sugar; heat to boiling; boil 5 minutes. Cool. Add cider and fruit juices. Partially freeze. Fold in stiffly beaten egg whites. Continue freezing (81:22, November 9, 1940).

### Canning Hominy

Use 2 tablespoons of concentrated lye to a gallon of boiling water and a half-gallon of corn. Dissolve the lye in a pint of cold water and stir in the gallon of boiling water. Add the corn and bring to the boiling point for about 20 minutes. After this boiling the corn eyes should come out easily. Wash your corn thoroughly. This means wash it again and again. Boil the hominy three hours (73:11, January 15, 1932).

### Fool-Proof Pickles from Mrs. E.S. Siemon

Into a clean stone jar put 2 gallons of cucumbers, washed and sliced lengthwise. Dissolve 2 cups of salt in 1 gallon of boiling water and pour while hot over pickles. Then cover and weigh down pickles and let stand for 1 week. On the eighth day, drain, then pour 1 gallon boiling water over them and let stand 24 hours. On the ninth day drain and pour 1 gallon of boiling water with 1 tablespoon of powdered alum over the pickles and let stand 24 hours. On the following or the 10<sup>th</sup> day, drain again, pour 1 gallon of boiling water over them, let stand for 24 hours, then drain. For the pickling mixture, combine 5 pints of vinegar boiling hot, 6 cups of sugar, 1/2 ounce of celery seed, 1 ounce stick cinnamon. Pour this over the pickles, drain off for 3 mornings, reheating it and adding 1 cup sugar each morning. The pickles are not ready to can" (76:10, September 7, 1935).

From *Capper's Weekly*

### Four-Egg Sunshine Cake from Mary Coons, Palmyra, Missouri

Four eggs; 3 teaspoons cold water; 1 1/2 cups sifted sugar; 1 teaspoon vanilla; 1 3/4 cups sifted flour; 1/8 teaspoon salt; 1/2 cup boiling water; 1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar. Beat egg yolks until light, add cold water and sugar gradually; beat until it is foamy and the sugar has been dissolved, then add the hot water. Add salt, vanilla and flour. Whip egg whites until foamy, add cream of tartar and continue beating until stiff but not dry. Fold carefully into dough and pour into ungreased tube pan. Bake 1 hour as for angel food. Cool cake before removing from pan (63:4, July 9, 1938).

#### Depression Fruit Cake from Mrs. Fred Cook, Bloomington, Nebraska

This is a real depression cake as it requires neither eggs, milk nor cream—and is excellent. One cup of raisins stewed in 2 cups of cold water until only 1 cup of liquid remains, 1 cup sugar creamed with 2 tablespoons butter or other shortening. Now add raisins and liquid, 2 teaspoons cinnamon, 1 teaspoon nutmeg, 1 level teaspoon soda, pinch of salt, 2 cups flour. Shift spices, soda and flour together. Bake in loaf (57:4, November 5, 1932).

#### Potato Lemon Pie from Mrs. Will Umphres, Sterling, Nebraska

Boil and mash enough potatoes to make 1 cupful, and add while hot 1 tablespoon butter, 1/4 teaspoon of cinnamon and 1 teaspoon of salt. Beat 2 eggs well, add to 1/2 cup of rich milk and 1/2 cup of sugar. Stir until well dissolved. Add the potato mixture with the juice and grates rind of 1/2 lemon. Line a square glass baking dish with pastry and pour in the mixture, bake in a moderate oven. Just before the baking is finished sprinkle finely chopped almonds or pecans over the pie and brown delicately (59:4, March 17, 1934).

#### Pineapple Squares from Mrs. Wayne Thompson, Camden Point, Missouri

You will need 24 large graham crackers, 1/2 cup butter, 1 cup sugar, 1 cup sweet milk, 2 teaspoons baking powder, 1/2 cup black walnuts chopped and 2 eggs. Cream butter and sugar; add beaten egg yolks. Roll graham crackers until very fine and add baking powder to crumbs. Add cracker mixture alternately with milk to the first mixture. Put in nuts and fold in beaten egg whites. Bake in moderate over 350 degrees Fahrenheit, for 45 minutes. Remove from oven and while hot cover with a sauce made by cooking 1 cup sugar and 1 small can of crushed pineapple until thick. Cool. To serve, cut in squares and top with whipped cream (57:4, February 27, 1932).

### **Gardening Tips**

“Use Broom in Garden” This tip from the Ferry-Morse seed company appeared in the May 15, 1937 issue of *The Missouri Farmer*. Use a broom in the garden as well as in the kitchen as a means of lessening garden labor. “Where rows are rather long, soil can be pulled onto seeds by drawing a broom lightly over the tops of the trenches or drills. Soil must be well prepared, of course. In firming the soil, a board may be placed over the rows and walked on. This procedure is recommended for almost all flower seeds and the smaller vegetable seeds. When planting fine flower seeds, such as petunia, soil may be

merely sprinkled over the row; or the seed may be pressed into the soil by walking on a board laid over the row” (29:11).

“Just Anybody Can Do This” This tip appeared in the June 15, 1934 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist*, during a very dry year. “These folks took old lard cans, made holes in the sides and bottom and dug them into the ground almost their full depth. Three times a day the children filled them full of water. They are spaced about 8 or 10 feet apart. The cabbage, tomatoes, cucumbers, and beans are looking wonderful. This serves two purposes: one is to irrigate or water the garden and the other is teaching the children to help whip hard times, as they take the responsibility for seeing that these cans are filled regularly. The cost of this irrigating system is small. But the results are wonderful, as they have had cabbage already, and their other truck certainly is far ahead of gardens on better ground where no irrigation has been used” (75:3).

“Wrap Sweet Spuds in Paper” This article appeared in the September 8, 1934 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist* and was sent in by Mrs. Oren Schiefeidecker, of Marion County, Missouri. “Every fall we have our cellar full of fruits and vegetables canned for winter. This is cheaper than buying at the store. We also keep a large amount of sweet potatoes that are dug before frost or very cold nights arrive, as cold easily chills them. Be careful about bruising sweet potatoes while digging and handling. Wash or brush them clean and spread them out on a floor that is warm and dry, and don’t allow them to touch one another. Leave them spread out 2 weeks, or until the potatoes have dried well. Then wrap each one in paper separately, pack in a box or closet where they are kept warm. Cared for this way they will keep until next summer and are much better than canned ones (75:3).

“It’s Work, Not Luck” In the April 6, 1935 issue of the *Missouri Ruralist* was this small article by Mrs. Ann Farmer. “One day last April I took a load of farm produce—eggs, young chickens, cream, asparagus, spinach, rhubarb, and green onions. Garden truck always brings a good price on the early market. A neighbor standing close by remarked that I was ‘lucky’ to have those things to sell. I knew he had owned his lace several years longer than we had ours, yet he had not done as much planting. I asked him why he considered it luck. The things didn’t grow until we planted them and only by giving them special care could we have them on the early market. Our rhubarb is mulched heavy both in the spring and fall. The first warm days of spring I cultivate around it, pour warm water down to the roots, cover each hill over with a bottomless keg and mulch heavy. The heat soon brings up the young shoots and they grow rapidly toward the sun. The asparagus bed is mulched heavy with chicken droppings which are disked in, and watered well early in the spring then covered deep with straw as the young shoots freeze back before they are tall enough to cut if they are not protected. The spinach is planted in the fall and it, too, is protected with straw. The onion sets are planted about 3 inches deep in the fall and watered so they start growth in the fall. The deeper the onions are set the more of the tender white shoot is good for food. It isn’t luck that gets the early crops ready for market—it’s hard work and an early start” (76:10).

“Practical Garden Tool” Mrs. Cleve Butler of Audrain County wrote into the *Missouri Ruralist* with this suggestion. “A wooden potato masher can easily be converted into a practical tool to break up the caked soil which we always find close to the roots of plants.

The masher itself is driven fairly full of nails, which then are filed to a point. The nails may be fairly large or rather small, may protrude more or less, and may be few or more numerous, as the work at hand seems to indicate. The tool is used by simply pushing the points into the soil, and then giving the handle a light twisting motion to the right and then to the left. The action will loosen the soil properly without injury to the roots of the plants about which it is used (78:11, April 3, 1937).

“Pit for Vegetables” Beatrice Crawford from Webster County, Missouri submitted this idea to the *Missouri Ruralist* for a pit to store vegetables. “If you do not have a cellar to store your winter vegetables or apples try an outdoor pit. We find it very satisfactory. Select a well-drained location as the excess water has to be drained off for the storage pit during heavy rains. Dig a pit 2 feet deep and 6 feet wide, line with hay or straw about 6 inches deep. After the crop has been placed on the hay, cover with another 6 inches of hay or straw and then enough soil to keep the hay or straw from blowing off. An old stove pipe or a bundle of straw 6 inches in diameter should be put in to keep the air circulating. As the weather gets colder more soil is added to it to keep the vegetables from freezing (78:7, December 25, 1937).

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## VITA

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