

Women's Role in Montana Agriculture: "You Had to Make Every Minute Count"

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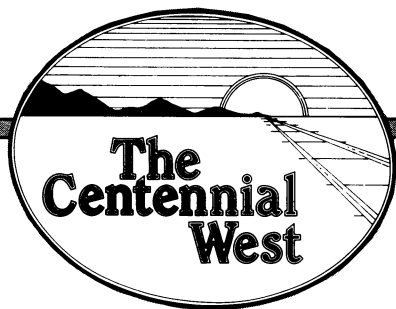
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# Women's Role



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*“You had to make every minute count”*

by Laurie K. Mercier

At the time of statehood, Montana's population was urban, with few of the state's residents tilling the soil. In 1880, a mere 12 per cent of the populace was engaged in agriculture; by 1890, the state's population had more than doubled, but only 20 per cent were farming or ranching.<sup>1</sup> By 1910, however, the Enlarged

Homestead Act of 1909, new dry farming techniques, and the promotions of the state, railroads, and developers had lured tens of thousands of people to Montana's central and eastern plains. The expansion prompted Governor Edwin Norris to comment: “‘Agricultural Montana’ is a term of comparatively recent ap-

# in Montana Agriculture

plication, but the magnificent strides the state has made in the past few years in all lines of farming have made it a term eminently fitting."<sup>2</sup> Two decades after statehood, the number of farms in Montana jumped from 5,600 to 26,000, pushing the state into a new agricultural frontier.

Women were an essential part of that new frontier, yet their role is invisible in census statistics and agricultural records, often because they were not considered full-time agricultural workers.<sup>3</sup> Montana's census report of 1920, for example, recorded only 2,248 women employed in agriculture in a total farm population of 228,000, surely a gross underestimate. And in the field of agricultural history, women are missing from discussions of technology, income, crops, and production methods. Scholars have neglected to examine the day-to-day lives of farm and ranch families and their individual decisions, innovations, struggles, and routines that marked the human side of agriculture.

In Montana lore and literature, however, farm and ranch women have earned a distinctive place. County histories, remini-

scences, and biographical accounts pay special tribute to the wives, mothers, and neighbors who labored selflessly under harsh conditions to care for family and homestead. Many have underscored women's economic role in agricultural enterprises, praising their "butter and egg money," which often carried families through hard times. Despite this general appreciation of women's work on the farm, these accounts often glorify rather than document the women's experiences.

Oral history interviews with rural women give us a broader understanding of their role in Montana agriculture.<sup>4</sup> These women do not ordinarily write memoirs, nor are they remembered in newspaper or local historical accounts. But in their oral reminiscences, they describe their lives and reveal details of their work in the day-to-day operations of Montana farms and ranches. These interviews provide insights into the lives of women of all classes and backgrounds. Through their personal accounts, we can discover how crucial women were in holding together Montana farms and ranches during the first half of this century.

## Economic Linchpins

The success of family agricultural enterprises often rested on the industriousness of the female partner. As historian Richard B. Roeder has concluded, women were the "economic linchpins" of Montana's farms and ranches.<sup>5</sup> Primarily, women contributed to the care of family and farm workers: producing, preserving, and preparing food; making and mending, washing, and ironing clothes; caring for and training children; scrubbing, cleaning, doctoring, haircutting; and any other task required to keep together body, soul, and household. On the surface, it might appear that this work had no monetary value, but women knew that their labor considerably affected farm and ranch finances. Women economized, saved, created, innovated, and undertook various projects to maintain family self-sufficiency, so that earnings from crops and livestock could be reinvested in the farm operation. Their work was critical to the survival of the enterprise.

Survival meant more than washing and cooking. Women had to find some way to supply, purchase, or barter for the family's basic needs, so that meager farm profits could pay for land, stock, seed, or equipment. Isabella Mogstad of Geraldine attributed her family's "good life" on the farm to their chickens, pigs, and milk cows and their products she could sell. Many of her neighbors, she noted, did not have the "good money" because they diverted precious cash resources to procure food and other necessities.<sup>6</sup> As a Judith Basin farm woman remarked, many operators failed because "the woman didn't work outside the family . . . they wouldn't go milk the cow, they wouldn't raise no chickens, they wouldn't do anything like that." She implied that a farm's success depended on a woman's hard work and initiative.<sup>7</sup>

As the linchpins of agriculture, women were expected to assume a variety of roles and complete diverse tasks that often required more skill, efficiency, flexibility, and resourcefulness than men's work. Women were partners, mothers, operators, entrepreneurs, laborers, and domestic workers. They earned income and fed and clothed their families. They managed farm finances, time, and

household and barnyard chores, while they represented their families in political and community affairs. And they tackled any kind of work that needed doing on the farm or ranch. Their descriptions elucidate these many roles and responsibilities.

## A Partnership

Interviews with both men and women in agriculture reveal that husbands and wives viewed their economic relationship as a partnership.<sup>8</sup> Men and women might have had gender-specific duties, but they respected each other's responsibilities and recognized their need for mutual success. One woman bluntly described her homesteading parents' marriage of 1916 as one of convenience and necessity:

There were darn few marriages of love out here among these early beginners. . . . A man just couldn't work out in the field all day and then come in and start the beans boiling—it didn't work. . . . You realize that washing clothes was almost a two-day operation in the wintertime. . . . Just running the household was a full-time job, so you went out looking for a woman and you went out fast. . . . I don't think I've ever heard a homestead wife tell how much she loved her husband. That wasn't part of it, it was survival.<sup>9</sup>

Women joined with their mates in making decisions that affected farm operations. They helped establish priorities and advised on land acquisitions, marketing of animals, and equipment purchases. Pearl Reeves of Chinook, for example, was determined not to lose her father's ranch and decided with her husband to go into the dairy business to pay the taxes on the ranch.<sup>10</sup> Even when husbands did not heed their advice, women continued to voice their concerns. Anna Lehfeldt, for example, openly opposed switching from the sheep to the cattle business:

I could see there was more money in the sheep than there was in the cattle. And I kept wanting to get rid of those darn cattle, [but my

ing his similar conclusions about the economic role of Montana agricultural women based on his examination of women's written reminiscences.

6. Isabella Mogstad, interview by Laurie K. Mercier, Geraldine, Montana, March 17, 1982. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews were conducted by Mercier.

7. Saima Myllymaki, interview, Stanford, Montana, March 19, 1982.

8. A number of western and women's historians have challenged an earlier assumption that the lives of rural women in the West were characterized by isolation, drudgery, and clearly delineated gender roles. They discovered that most agricultural women had periodic contact with other women; they did not feel deprived; and they viewed their work as essential to the farm enterprise. See Robert V. Hine, *The American West* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1984), 191; Katherine Harris,

1. U.S. Census, 1880 and 1890.

2. *Minneapolis Journal*, March 31, 1910.

3. Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980): 209.

4. Most of the interviews used in this article were produced for the Montana Historical Society oral history project, "Montanans At Work, 1910-1945." Completed during 1981-1983, the project focused on Montanans' working experiences between 1910 and 1945. It was funded with a grant from the Montana state legislature through the Cultural and Aesthetic Projects program.

5. I am indebted to Richard B. Roeder for his insights and for shar-



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**During haying season, women worked in the fields alongside men and in the kitchen feeding threshing crews. Evelyn J. Cameron took this photograph of the first threshing at N. M. McNaughten's farm on Fallon Flat in 1908.**

husband kept saying] those cattle are going to pay out.<sup>11</sup>

Some women persevered in spite of their husbands' objections. Lydia Keating got into the sheep business even though her husband "hated sheep" and would not assist with feeding or lambing. And Edna McCann of Trout Creek used her own money from milking cows to file mining claims nearby in the Cabinet Mountains without her husband's support. She occasionally hired a neighbor to baby-sit while she went off prospecting for the day.<sup>12</sup>

Many women "kept the books" for the operation and had a firmer understanding of expenses and income than their husbands. As Anna Fletcher of Glendive remembered, her mother was more of a "financier" than her father, and after taking over the operation of the ranch she retired the family's debts. But there was another side to family finances. Many women did not have direct control or participation. Verna Carlson of Circle described her difficulties

gaining access to the checkbook and bank account and recalled her own mother's frustrations with men's control of finances: "That irked my mother terribly; she wanted something of her own." Facing divorce, Bernice Kingsbury of Dupuyer realized what other women surely did, that she "hadn't stashed away five cents in spite of twenty-five years of marriage."<sup>13</sup>

Women knew that "luxuries," such as improvements in the home, often had to wait while earnings were invested in new agricultural equipment. Only an outstanding crop year justified the purchase of goods for the household, and women often managed without conveniences in their daily work. The Fergus County Farm Home Committee, composed mostly of women, recognized the distribution of farm income and urged the Fergus County Agriculture Economic Conference in 1927 to understand that "home improvements should go hand in hand with improvement in farming practices." They

"Homesteading in Northeastern Colorado, 1873-1920: Sex Roles and Women's Experience," in *The Women's West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 173; T. A. Larson, "Women in the American West," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 24 (Summer 1974): 7; Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 149-165, 239-259; Susan Armitage, "Western Women Beginning to Come Into Focus," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 32 (Summer 1982): 7; Susan Armitage, "Farm Women and Technological Change, 1920-1960," *Plainswoman* 5 (October 1981): 11.

9. Jewell Peterson Wolk, interview by Jackie Day, Cut Bank, Montana, November 29, 1984.

10. Pearl Reser Reeves, interview, Chinook, Montana, June 10, 1982.

11. Anna Lehfeldt, interview, Lavina, Montana, April 18, 1983.

12. Lydia Keating, interview, Utica, Montana, March 31, 1983; Edna McCann, interview by Diane Sands, Trout Creek, Montana, June 11, 1983.

13. Anna Fletcher, interview, Glendive, Montana, October 26, 1981; Verna Carlson, interview, Circle, Montana, October 27, 1981; Bernice Kingsbury, interview, Helena, Montana, September 17, 1982.

recommended that every home should install water, heating, lighting, and drainage systems, and invest in kitchen conveniences, such as a high stool, pressure cooker, and dish drainer.<sup>14</sup>

Women often acknowledged that their self-sacrifice helped support the farm enterprise. When Mary Zanto received a \$1,300 check from the coal rights on her parents' homestead near Stockett, she gave it to her husband to purchase their first tractor. Verna Carlson also recalled her husband's down payment on a first tractor:

I didn't object. I had to do without things right along. It was kind of a funny thing—I don't know if I could ever confess, maybe I told somebody lately—I used to think, I wish I had some money to just go to town and spend, whenever I take the notion. If I could just ever accumulate twenty-five dollars that I could just spend and get some new things for the house or just go and buy something because I want it instead of just what I had to have. I thought about it a good many times, but I didn't complain about it.<sup>15</sup>

Women often managed the home place while husbands worked for wages on bigger ranches, with the railroad, or in Montana's mines and smelters. Theresa Billing stayed home in northern Custer County and looked after children, bum lambs, and chickens while her husband sheared sheep. Emma Rogers managed her Windham ranch during the winters, while her husband worked in the Lehigh coal mines for extra income.<sup>16</sup>

Many husbands, seeing their wives' schedules as more flexible, expected them to participate in community and political affairs. Men encouraged them to engage in political work on agricultural economic issues. Verna Carlson, for example, became active in the Farmers Union during the late 1920s, when she and friends became interested in "the cooperative way of doing business." Impressed with the Union's emphasis on equality, where men and women were encouraged to serve as teachers, local leaders, and organizers, she served as Union secretary for seven years. Anna Dahl spent months going door-to-door in northeastern Montana for the Union because she believed that it could obtain better prices and farming conditions. During the 1940s, she helped organize a local Rural Electrification Association in northeastern Montana, explaining:

14. *A Program for the Development of Agriculture in Fergus County, Montana, Based on Farmers' Experience* (Lewistown: Agricultural Interests of Fergus County, in cooperation with the Montana State Extension Service, July 1927), 43.

15. Mary Zanto, interview, Fort Benton, April 28, 1982; Carlson interview.

16. Teresa Haughian Billing, interview, Miles City, Montana, April 19, 1983; Emma Rogers, interview by Kathleen Tureck, Stanford, Montana, September 15, 1982.

"Once we got started, and once we got people interested and could see that we could do this, that it could be done, that the government was behind us, then it was much easier." Although she neglected canning and other duties to make time for REA work, her husband supported her.<sup>17</sup>

## The Division of Labor

Keeping the family clothed and fed was the chief responsibility of farm and ranch women. Preparing food for family, hired help, and guests took an enormous amount of labor, but it was the one household duty in which women took the most pride. Meals were large, and they had immediate economic importance in fueling and satisfying workers. As Anna Dahl commented: "I prided myself on the fact that I could cook. And I never had any trouble keeping help or a man or whatever because they liked my cooking." Vina Stirling described her ranch table as one with eighteen leaves that "never came down." Women had to be highly organized to cook for so many people. Katie Adams recalled her system for feeding ten or twelve:

I'd get breakfast, and I never washed the breakfast dishes till I was ready to set the table. I'd get all my potatoes and vegetables ready, then I'd wash the breakfast dishes. As I washed them I'd set the table and get ready for dinner. That was done all at once. Between times, I'd be preparing the vegetables. . . . and I'd go out and kill the chickens during that time, too. I was kept busy.<sup>18</sup>

The Farm Home Committee at the Fergus County Agricultural Economic Conference in 1927 reported that the average Fergus County farm housewife spent nine working hours a day in the kitchen.

Putting meals on the table involved more than just cooking. Ranch and farm women had to milk cows, feed chickens and pigs, separate cream, churn butter, plant and tend the garden, hunt, butcher, and preserve meats, vegetables, and fruits. To carry families and hands through the long winters, women stocked root cellars, often bragging about the hundreds of quarts of food they canned every summer.

17. Carlson interview; Anna Boe Dahl, interview, Plentywood, Montana, October 20, October 22, 1982.

18. Dahl interview; Vina Stirling, interview, Havre, Montana, September 3, 1981; Katie Adams, interview, Havre, Montana, April 5, 1983.

19. Anna Juvan, interview, Livingston, Montana, September 28, 1982.

20. Minnie Sampson Christensen, interview, Plentywood, Montana, October 23, 1982; Ruby Greenwell, interview, Geraldine, Montana, April 26, 1982.



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**Many farm women were active in agricultural and political movements. Photographer Walter Dean took this photo of Anna Turley, a Home Demonstration Agent, speaking at a Farm Bureau picnic in Forsyth on June 29, 1921.**

Many women also became skilled with a rifle. Anna Juvan recalled that her mother often hunted prairie chickens: "She was good at it. Lots of times she'd shoot seven shots and get eight chickens."<sup>19</sup>

Very few women enjoyed washing clothes, but it was an essential task—a weekly, all-day affair, using a washboard and tub. "Because it was so hard to get water," Minnie Christensen remembered, "you didn't wash a little dab now and then, you probably had to haul it a long ways." In eastern Montana, women often did not have access to good water and might have to travel several miles to fill barrels with drinking and cooking water. A closer well could supply water for bathing, washing, and livestock, but nonetheless, "you learned to be conservative with water."<sup>20</sup>

Although many farm duties were gender-defined, some were not. Husbands often assisted their wives, for example, by taking children with them to town, which allowed women time alone to complete sewing and canning. Many wives praised their husbands for helping with domestic duties, indicating that they saw their assistance as special. Men and women often mutually agreed to share or do a designated task. Edna McCann, for example, milked cows in exchange for her husband washing the dishes.<sup>21</sup> Many couples began their day by milking

cows together before splitting off to field, range, garden, or home.

Although men helped care for children, childrearing was primarily the rural woman's function. How many children women had and their ages greatly affected their work schedules and the kinds of work they pursued. Although farm families considered children an economic asset for their assistance with the labor-intensive farm work and most narrators referred to them in loving terms, rural women observed that child care was demanding, time-consuming, and interfered with other economic activities. Children represented additional mouths to feed, and mothers carried the responsibility to provide the food. Some remarked that other women had large families because "they didn't know of any way of protecting themselves," and others recalled that abortions were not uncommon. Mary Zanto remembered that women commonly nursed a child for two years to avoid additional pregnancies.<sup>22</sup>

Young children had to be under the watchful eye of mothers who were busy gardening, washing, and cooking. One woman recalled tying her son to a clothesline while she worked in the garden, and

21. McCann interview.

22. Helen Seright, interview, Fort Benton, Montana, April 27, 1982; Kingsbury interview; Wolk interview; Zanto interview. In "Women As Workers, Women As Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," *The Women's West*, 150, Betsy Jameson noted that "a woman's work multiplied as her family did."



MHS Photograph Archives

Agricultural women spent an incredible number of hours doing domestic chores. To ease his wife's burden a bit, Homer T. Goodell of Philbrook used a small gasoline motor to mechanize Ruby Goodell's paddle washer.

others admitted that they just could not raise as many chickens or turkeys when children were small and needed a lot of care. Routine tasks, such as sewing and mending, became more time-consuming as the household size increased. Helen Seright recalled: "I didn't have very much time to do any fancy work when they were growing up."<sup>23</sup>

Daughters began working as soon as they could walk. They learned to carry potatoes and gather eggs, to pick rocks off fields, to wash dishes and clothes, to milk and herd livestock, and to weed the garden. Children worked in the fields "just like men. We'd all go out and work. [My mother would] take the baby out there and put it on a blanket and she'd work, and we'd work alongside of her." And when there were few brothers to help with farm work, daughters assisted their fathers in the fields, driving teams, pickups, and combines. They also shocked grain, stacked oats, plowed, and raked hay. As Dorothy Johnston remembered, she spent most of her youth on horseback chasing after livestock. Opal Maxey's daughter worked for other ranches and earned college tuition money by driving a stacker team.<sup>24</sup>

23. Seright interview

24. Juvan interview; Dorothy Cartwright Johnston, interview, White Sulphur Springs, Montana, September 16, 1982; Opal Maxey, interview, Livingston, Montana, September 21, 1981.

### "A Way of Income"

Between 1910 and 1940—a period marked by cyclical drought and depression, few or no crops, a lack of feed for livestock, and low prices—women's economic role was particularly critical and valued. Women supplied the family's income by raising fowl, pigs, milk cows, and vegetables for gain. Mary Stephenson decided that instead of hauling a skimpy wheat crop to Glendive, she would feed it to her chickens. She soon doubled her flock of birds and sold eggs in nearby Richey. She recalled: "Lots of times, that was all the money we had was the chicken money. . . . If it hadn't been for the chickens, we'd have starved." During the 1930s, when Anna Fletcher and her mother were struggling to keep their ranch going, they purchased 500 chickens to raise and sell. They butchered and dressed the chickens forty at a time and "peddled them out" to townspeople. When wheat prices were low, the Fletchers also sold melons, potatoes, beets, and onions in Glendive from their "market garden," which even at low prices paid their taxes. Pearl Reeves also earned tax money by selling tomatoes

25. Mary Stephenson, interview, Circle, Montana, October 29, 1981; Fletcher interview; Reeves interview; Zanto interview.



to Italian families on Havre's east end, and Mary Zanto raised navy beans, once selling 400 pounds of them in Highwood.<sup>25</sup>

This part of women's labor—the cream, butter, produce, chickens, and eggs—brought cash to the family for groceries and for “spending money.” One Drummond-area farm woman remembered the importance of her “cream check”:

The cream check covered everything. That was the bank account right there. . . . like your cows you'd sell, that would be just a once a year thing, so that's why this cream check was so wonderful, it just gave you a little cash all through the year. . . . It sure was a lifesaver in the “good ol' days.”

The cream check, another woman recalled, “bought our gasoline and our kerosene and the necessities, what the eggs didn't buy.”<sup>26</sup>

Women's success at selling farm products encouraged others to try similar enterprises. Anna Lehfeltdt of Lavina recalled that she acquired 300 chickens because, “My mother had a few chickens and I knew there was money in chickens. It was a way of income, we could trade the eggs for food and provisions and different things.” Impressed that her sister-in-law made enough money selling turkeys to make a down payment on a first car, Agnes Jelinek of Coffee Creek acquired 175 turkeys herself. In spite of failing to adequately fatten up the turkeys, Agnes sold her birds and bought her children's clothes “and something extra little bit for the home.” She noted that “you always wanted to make a little extra because [on] your farm, there's always a place for it.”<sup>27</sup>

Women's economic ventures were also extremely important because they gave women some control over finances and something they could call their own. They marketed their products directly to local customers or sent them to town creameries and stores. As with grain and livestock, these goods were subject to variables in the market. Agnes Jelinek remembered when the price of cream dropped from eight to two dollars for a five-gallon can, while her income still had to purchase the same amount of groceries for the family and shoes for her children. Fluctuations in prices, Faye Hoven remarked, “kept you guessing” about what the cream check could purchase.<sup>28</sup>

Some ventures, such as turkey raising, were substantial undertakings. Turkeys were relatively easy to care for, but more importantly they could all be butchered at one time in the fall and sold through

a cooperative. Many women formed turkey pools in their counties to cut shipping and marketing costs and to obtain more favorable prices from large buyers. Others had smaller-scale operations, raising turkeys only at holiday times, with often fewer than fifty turkeys to dress and sell. Although it was a profitable business, many disliked “peddling” and haggling over prices with town folks, so some women specialized in breeding stock and setting eggs.

Turkey raising, however, was not without its pitfalls. Price fluctuations, disease, predators, and fire made the investment in animals and equipment a gamble. Lydia Keating of Utica, for example, had to trap coyotes to protect her turkeys who fed on grasshoppers on the range. But disaster could always strike. One night after receiving a new shipment of 400 turkey chicks from Oregon and settling them in a new brooder house, Faye Hoven stayed up to check on them. In a matter of minutes after she had laid down on her davenport to rest, the brooder house caught fire and she lost everything. Nonetheless, she persisted and built another brooder house and purchased more turkeys for that year.<sup>29</sup>

### “Just Like a Hired Man”

Women on Montana's ranches and farms were not confined to working in the household, garden, and chicken house. Many women toiled alongside their husbands in the fields, and others periodically changed their routines to help outdoors with such critical jobs as threshing, haying, and branding. As one woman remarked:

I was just like a hired man. I was right there. I helped harness the horses and unharness them and hitch them up, and I followed the plow more than once, and the harrow and the rake, raked the fields. I done a lot of it.<sup>30</sup>

Dorothy Johnston of White Sulphur Springs noted that she “could run all of the farm machines; I could run the mowers and the combines and the rakes and I knew how to irrigate, you know, all that stuff that goes with it, farm, ranch, like that.”<sup>31</sup> Women also ran errands, hauled provisions to sheep camps, and searched town bars for sheepherders, hired hands, and threshing crews.

Although most women welcomed the challenges, prestige, and fresh air associated with outdoor farm work, many could not leave home because of child-care duties. But sometimes work demands super-

26. Rose Weaver Lorenson, interview, Drummond, Montana, February 8, 1983; Lehfeltdt interview.

27. Lehfeltdt interview; Agnes Jelinek, interview, Coffee Creek, Montana, April 30, 1982.

28. Jelinek interview; Faye Hoven, interview, Hobson, Montana, March 30, 1982.

29. Keating interview; Hoven interview.

30. Adams interview.

31. Johnston interview.



Allison, photographer. MHS Photograph Archives

Some women in Chinook, like others in Montana, raised turkeys and probably contributed to the 50,000 pounds of turkeys shown here at Christmas 1925.

ceded children's needs. During haying, Lucile Bridges worked in the field and "then cooked for the crew." She took her children to the hayfield to play and planned ahead so that "in a half an hour I would have the dinner on the table." Lacking a babysitter, May Applegate took her children along and drove the derrick with her ranch's haying crew.<sup>32</sup>

Many women pursued outdoor work once their children were older. Verna Carlson, for example, wrangled the horses while her husband milked the cows. Her children managed the household chores, and after they left for school, "we'd hitch up and go to work in the field." During the 1930s depression, the Carlsons could not afford to hire a crew, so Verna tended the threshing machine, greasing the separator and belting up the tractor. In agriculture, men and women could work closely as a team, and at least in spirit there was a genuine sense of equality. As one man boasted of his wife's talents:

32. Lucile Webster Bridges, interview, White Sulphur Springs, Montana, July 15, 1982; May Bell Powell Applegate, interview, Deer Lodge, Montana, March 7, 1983.

"She was always real strong and a good horseman; she was a good teamster and a good stockman always."<sup>33</sup>

### "Every Minute Counted"

Most of the women interviewed emphasized the importance of managing their time. "You had to make every minute count," Bernice Kingsbury explained. "Rarely, rarely was there enough time in the day to lie down and take a nap, you know, to rest at all. It was just constant work." Their descriptions of daily schedules contradict the popular image of a relaxed pastoral farm life devoid of time management that is usually associated with industrial work. Rural women may not have punched time clocks,

33. Carlson interview; Fred Blyth, interview, Geraldine, Montana, March 16, 1982.

34. Kingsbury interview; Zanto interview.

but they approached assembly-line precision in getting their required work done. Mary Zanto remembered:

Oh, you ought to see the work we did. We never had any spare time. We worked from the time we got up in the morning until the time we went to bed. Many a time I didn't sit down—only when I had the babies, I had to sit down and nurse the kids, it was the only time I'd sit down, all day long, to eat or anything. I was always on the go when I was eating. I was either feeding the kids or feeding the rest of them or something.<sup>34</sup>

Most women had a daily, weekly, and seasonal routine for accomplishing certain tasks, but they also had to be flexible. As Lucile Bridges said: "When I'd run out of something, then I'd start to make it." Rather than abide by a strict schedule, women relied on their creativity and efficiency to meet demands. When asked to describe their routines, women typically responded:

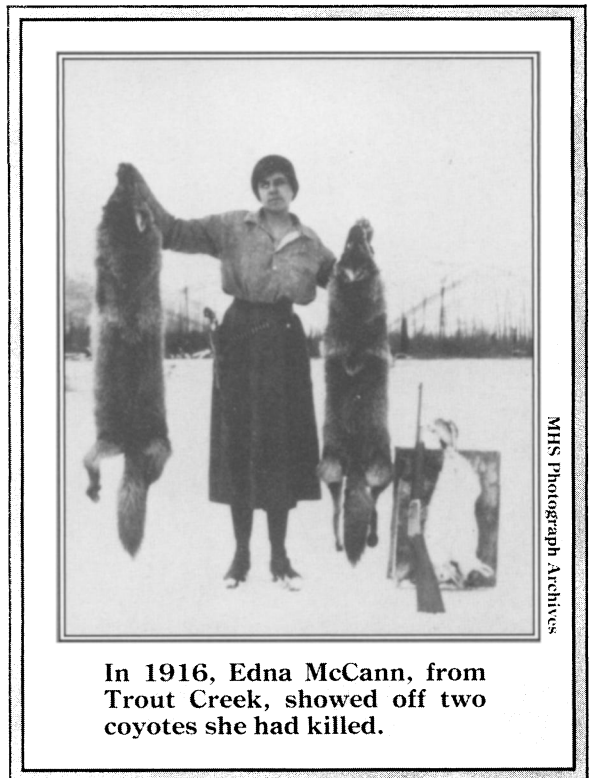
You'd go to bed about eleven-thirty, twelve o'clock, you'd get up at four, and you go out and help harness the horses, you milked the cows, get breakfast, strain your milk and put it away. Wash up your dishes, feed your chickens and slop the pigs. If there was any time left, you could start your washing, maybe carry your water . . . heat your water in a boiler, get your washboard and your tub. . . . Wasn't many times I'd fool around.

When there was extra time during the day, women often caught up on mending or some other ever-present task.<sup>35</sup>

When describing their work, women emphasized the long hours and exhaustion that accompanied such physical labor. With a daylight-to-dark schedule cooking for threshing crews, as Minnie Christensen recalled: "You just went on and on and on . . . if there was a few minutes you lay down on that bench [and] you'd be sound asleep." After a day of milking and irrigating, Anna Juvan would "have charley horses so bad it would just hold me . . . we worked that hard." Faye Hoven remembered her schedule as a cook on a ranch:

I had to be up by five and Pete used to always get up first and I would be so tired, I would just be paralyzed. And if he didn't see that I got up and stood on my feet before he left the house, why, I'd probably stayed in bed. So he used to have to make me get up before he'd leave. And I would try to get things, I know I'd always set the table at night so I didn't have to do that in the morning.<sup>36</sup>

35. Bridges interview; Adams interview.



MHS Photograph Archives

In 1916, Edna McCann, from Trout Creek, showed off two coyotes she had killed.

## Working Out

Not all ranch and farm families owned land. Many women and their husbands moved in and out of the farm economy, struggling to buy a place of their own, recovering from earlier losses, or seeking wage work to hang on to farms threatened by drought, taxes, or low prices. Although many rural women downplayed their poverty by saying "we were all in the same boat," others frequently mentioned class distinctions in farming communities. One narrator who moved back and forth between ranch and town work noted: "If you was a working girl you was a working girl, and if somebody had a little money, that was different. [There was a] lot of class distinction many years ago."<sup>37</sup>

Daughters often had to quit school and work as domestics to contribute to the family income: "I sent money home until the day I got married," Anna Juvan said, "every bit of it." As early as age ten or thirteen, girls would work "for some rich people" and shoulder the responsibility for cooking, keeping house, and baby-sitting. "Everyone seemed to have a hired girl," so work was easy to find, even though the pay was low. At age eleven, Saima Myllymaki cooked for a haying crew and drove a stacker team, for fifty cents a day. With her earnings, she pur-

36. Christensen interview; Juvan interview; Hoven interview.

37. Christensen interview.



**Women contributed to the family's income by raising animals for market. This woman is tending stock on Ray Wolverton's farm near Valier in 1910.**

chased her "first boughten clothes." Minnie Christensen, who earned two dollars a week as a maid, was eager to cook for threshing crews during harvest season, because "there I got \$3 a day, which was a big deal." If girls wanted to attend high school, they often had to work for their board and room by baby-sitting and doing housework for a family in town.<sup>38</sup>

Men and women often worked as teams or ranches or in towns for several years to secure a "grubstake" before taking up a homestead or renting or buying a ranch. When Faye Hoven's husband worked for a local ranch, she insisted on applying for a position as cook for the same outfit. Saima Myllymaki followed her husband to Butte, where she got a job preparing miners' lunches while he worked in the mines. Concepcion and Tony Bengochea moved to Montana in the 1930s and worked for the Etchart ranch in the northeastern part of the state for seven years—he as a sheepherder and tender and she as a cook—until they saved enough money to purchase their own ranch.<sup>39</sup>

Women generally recognized that agricultural labor was strenuous and underpaid, but they accepted their wages without complaining because it "was just the way things were." But they did comment on the discrepancies in pay between men and women. One woman cooking on a ranch was paid

38. Juvan interview; Christensen interview; Myllymaki interview.

39. Myllymaki interview; Hoven interview; Concepcion Bengochea, interview, Nashua, Montana, October 19, 1982.

40. Bengochea interview; Juvan interview.

41. Hazel Klotzbuecher, interview, Chinook, Montana, June 9, 1982; Jelinek interview.

thirty-five dollars a month, half of what some ranch hands received, even though she "was the first one to get up and the last one to go to bed." Regardless of the pay rate, many women "worked out" to earn cash for the family farm. Young women often worked as domestics, and married women cooked for threshing and haying crews. Anna Juvan, who worked at a neighbor's dairy for three years for twenty dollars a month, recalled that the work provided more than immediate income—she received some heifer calves and eventually started her own dairy business.<sup>40</sup>

For women who had completed high school, teaching school was another source of outside work, although most counties prohibited married women from teaching. Hazel Klotzbuecher remembered that in some years her earnings as a teacher paid for taxes, the grazing lease, and fuel, among other necessities. Occasionally, there were other wage opportunities: taking the census or, during the 1930s, conducting WPA farm economics classes. As Agnes Jelinek remarked: "We always had to look for something else . . . once in a while I tried to do some sewing for neighbors . . . some women would want me to do some things, so that was a little extra money."<sup>41</sup>

42. Katherine Harris discovered from examining homestead land entries that women homesteaders in northeastern Colorado were just as successful as men in proving up their claims. See Harris, "Homesteading in Northeast Colorado, 1873-1920: Sex Roles and Women's Experience," in *The Women's West*, 165.

43. Mogstad interview; Kristina Fallan, interview, Livingston, Montana, September 22, 1981; Gina Sophia Houge Lippard, interview, Havre, Montana, April 7, 1983; Amelia M. "Babe" Hilger, interview, Helena, Montana, November 8, 1983.



### On Her Own

There were single women who successfully operated farms and ranches without the help of a male companion. Many proved up their own homesteads.<sup>42</sup> Isabella Mogstad's sister and grandmother each took up homesteads near her and helped Isabella with her children. Two years after arriving from Norway, Kristina Fallan took up a homestead near Reedpoint, held onto it for five years, and sold the land for \$1,500. Gina Lippard also kept her homestead as an investment until the late 1940s, after building her own ten-by-twelve-foot shack and raising a successful flax crop. Babe Hilger, who preferred to work outdoors with the cattle, remained single and ran the family ranch near Wolf Creek with her sister and two brothers.<sup>43</sup>

Women who lost husbands also operated their farms and ranches on their own or sought agricultural employment. Opal Maxey cooked and kept books for a ranch after her husband died, and she saw to it that her children attended college. When Mary Stephenson's husband died in 1941, she entered the sheep business, acquiring bum lambs and working as her own shepherd. During the 1930s and 1940s, Peggy Dobson struggled on a Missouri River ranch south of Malta without much help from her errant husband. After she divorced

44. Stephenson interview; Thelma "Peggy" Dobson Boyce Czyzeski, interview, Glasgow, Montana, May 21, 1982; Kingsbury interview.

45. Dahl interview.

him in 1945, she ran cattle on shares, borrowed a mower and team, built a haysweep out of ash poles, and made enough money to send her children to school and to rent the ranch for the next spring. When she later married a local rancher, Peggy continued to live on and operate her own ranch independently of her husband. Another ranch woman believed that she was better off after divorcing her husband and taking over their Dupuyer ranch: "I didn't work any harder than when I was a wife of him and getting no place. I proved to myself that women can do it." She improved irrigation ditches and hay lands and within two years increased the yield from 6,000 to 20,000 bales.<sup>44</sup>

### "We Were Busy Getting It Done"

Despite a life of hard work, few of the women interviewed expressed bitterness about their past, insisting that agricultural life had advantages. They liked working outdoors and with animals. They had the freedom to set their own schedules and priorities, a healthy environment in which to raise children, and an independence not guaranteed women in town. Rather than focus on the drudgery, women claimed that "we were busy getting it done." They remembered fondly the more pleasant aspects of rural life: picnics, fishing and berry-picking trips, visits with neighbors, dances, and Home Demonstration, community club, farm organization and church meetings. As Anna Dahl insisted, "It wasn't just drab, drab work all the time."<sup>45</sup>

Montana's agricultural women played a critical economic role. Regardless of the family's fortunes they had a sense of pride and accomplishment in their work. Even if the family "dried out," lost a place to a mortgage company, or failed for some other reason to remain in agriculture, women accepted their fate and reflected that they had held up their end. They did not romanticize their past, nor did they dwell on self-pity; they acknowledged the economic crises of the times and their role in the struggle. Even though their contributions have been largely ignored by others, their reminiscences remind us that farm and ranch women had a variety of experiences and that the history of Montana's agricultural frontier cannot be accurately written without them. ♫

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