



The “Main Stay”: Women’s Productive Work on Pioneer Farms

By Barbara Handy-Marchello

Most of the settlers who claimed land in North Dakota intended to follow the example of the early bonanza farms and cultivate wheat. However, it took several years for a farm family to break enough land to plant and harvest an adequate crop and, even then, the climate and markets were uncertain. Wheat yields fluctuated and generally declined. Wheat prices also fluctuated, but remained low until 1905. As economist Scot Stradley has noted, the wheat market “brings prosperity to North Dakota like no other economic or political phenomena. Conversely, when the demand for wheat collapses, the prosperity turns to its opposite and recessions and depressions can last very long.” The uncertainty of wheat income, especially during the settlement period, when farm families were trying to establish permanent homes and communities, required families to develop other sources of income. The most common and reliable source of supplemental income was derived from surplus dairy and poultry products.¹

A study of the economics of **barnyard income** contributes to an expanded understanding of the ways in which **gender roles** developed on settlement farms. The pioneer farm woman was more than a “help-meet” who subordinated her work and needs to those of her husband. She was a careful and

savvy manager who arranged her barnyard work around her household work, the markets, and the seasonal needs of the farm while providing for the family’s food, clothing, and shelter. Her family recognized and respected her contributions in ways that officials who recorded the details of agricul-



Figure 1. A woman milking a cow in the pasture. (Published in *Clothes Lines, Party Lines & Hem Lines*, Extension Homemakers Council, 1989. *Memories of North Dakota Homemakers Collection*, Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 2079.8.13)

tural development in North Dakota did not. Officials lent their own understanding of appropriate gender roles to the collection and analysis of agricultural statistics, which limited women's role in agriculture and has hidden the significance of their work from history.

Between 1875 and 1915, buttermaking and egg production were commonly, though not exclusively, the work of women as they had been for generations of farm women everywhere. These women were foreign born, the children of foreign-born parents, or Yankee American. Census figures do not answer specific questions about the rural population until 1910. By then, and presumably before then, immigrants and their children predominate in rural North Dakota. Accordingly, the historical record leaves the impression that foreign-born women performed field and barnyard labor that Yankee American women refused (or their men did not allow them) to do. In part, this impression derives from the memoirs of immigrant women who worked for Yankee American women. It is probable that women who could hire labor did not milk cows, churn butter, or tend chickens personally. But these women do not represent the experience of all Yankee American women who pioneered in North Dakota. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women of all cultures were likely to have responsibility for barnyard livestock if they could not hire the work done, and if the farm had dairy and poultry stock. The only figures available to suggest how widespread this work was indicate that in 1900 about 77 percent of North Dakota farms produced dairy products.²

In the 1880s, when North Dakota was experiencing frontier conditions, states such as Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin were in the process of commercializing dairy production. Farmers interested in commercial dairy production enlarged their herds, introduced improved bloodlines, and sent their milk and cream to a central creamery for processing. On many farms in these states women were no longer in charge of the dairy. But the division of labor and land on many Dakota

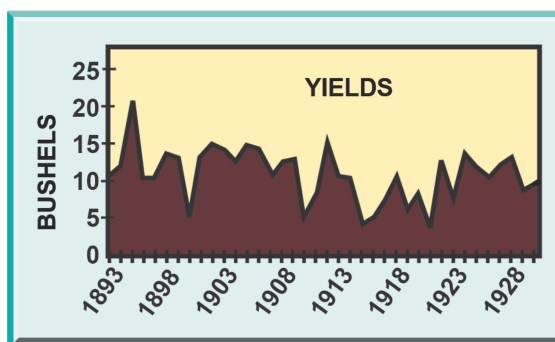


Figure 2. North Dakota wheat yields, 1893–1930.
(Data gathered from biennial reports of the North Dakota Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor, Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

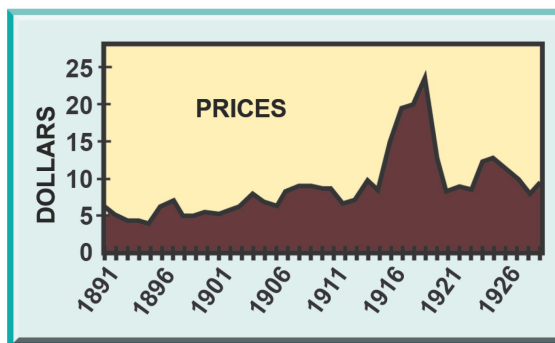


Figure 3. North Dakota wheat prices, 1891–1930.
(Data gathered from the USDA Yearbook of Agriculture, Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

wheat farms during settlement required that dairy and poultry work still belong to women and that management of the dairy herd and poultry flocks not draw too heavily on farm resources. In spite of this arrangement, dairy and poultry were central to maintaining the farm and to surviving the lean years. The products of these animals provided food for the family and a surplus (in butter, eggs, meat, and calves) to sell or trade. Women's barnyard production also contributed to the economic stability of the plains towns, whose future was linked to the farmers', and of the railroads, which needed freight to carry out of the state.

Professional agriculturists of the North Dakota Agricultural College and the office of the state commissioner of agriculture and labor, as well as federal agricultural census officials, tended to

overlook, or obscure through the process of collecting data, the significance of farm women's productive work. In doing so, they not only exaggerated the potential of the wheat farms, but also denied women appropriate credit for their work. It was not until 1900 that the federal agricultural census asked for production and sales figures for dairy and poultry. Egg production (not sales) was listed in 1890, but census officials discounted the value of poultry to the entire farm enterprise. Before 1900 federal census "estimates of the total value of livestock on farms" included the "value of neat cattle, horses, sheep, mules, asses, swine." Following the same pattern, the state agricultural commissioner's reports ignored poultry products altogether in the first biennial report of 1890. Beginning in 1892, the commissioner reported on the total dollar value of poultry and eggs sold, but the figures were incomplete and inaccurate.³

The contrast between official interest in poultry and dairy resources and that of the settlers themselves is unmistakable. Thirty or forty years after settling on the prairies, many pioneers remembered the price they paid or received for eggs and butter. They offered stories about their efforts to engage in the butter and egg trade to interviewers who were more interested in blizzards and grasshopper plagues. They remembered quite clearly

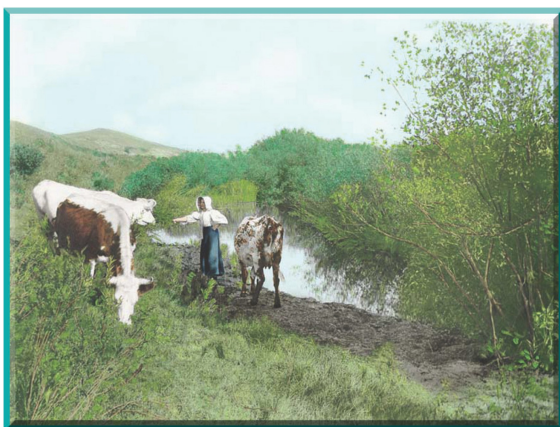


Figure 4. Mrs. Emil Erhardt of Milton, North Dakota, taking the cows to the river, one of many dairy responsibilities of farm women. (Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 2028.196)

the things the butter and egg trade bought. They stated, perhaps without sufficient emphasis to impress interviewers, that "our cream and eggs supplied us with groceries and other necessities." Both women and men tended to credit **women's productive work** with providing the foundation for the survival and success of the farm family, though survival alone was clearly not their goal.⁴

One woman's protest of the lowering of this veil of obscurity over the work of farm women resulted in one of the few occasions of public recognition of the importance of barnyard income to the wheat farm. Writing to the editor of *The Dakota Farmer*, a "lady reader from a sequestered locality in North Dakota" stated that

there is no place where women work so hard and receive so little recognition as on the farm. . . . If the women entirely support the family with eggs and butter and cheese, it is all credited to the man.⁵

The editor tried to restore farm women to what he considered their proper place by giving them "due credit for their faithfulness," but did admit that the

steady, persistent influence of the mother who has marketed the eggs and made the butter has proven **the main stay** of the thousands of Dakota farm homes that would otherwise have been wrecked.

The Dakota Farmer, like other northern plains agricultural institutions, promoted diversified agriculture, but **diversification** did not mean that women would have responsibility for commodity crop production. The power to manage a farm successfully, diversified or not, ideally rested in male hands. The editor's comments grudgingly acknowledge that women contributed to the support of northern plains farms, though to do so was to admit that northern plains farms operated within a fragile economy that depended on women's productive work for survival.⁶

The investment in barnyard livestock was minimal. Cattle were pastured on marginal farm land. Early barns were small and usually constructed of sod. The expense of keeping a milk cow and a flock of laying hens amounted to little more than the price paid for the animals and that cost would be diminished by the sale or productivity of the animals' offspring.

This arrangement reflects the dominance of grain crops in northern plains farming. Women's productive work, though extremely important, could not draw on land, labor, or money that could be invested in wheat. Several factors governed this hierarchy of productive work. North Dakota was settled during an era of intense industrialization in the United States which affected farms as well as cities. Though North Dakota was still experiencing frontier conditions, the state was inevitably linked to the increasingly industrial economy of the nation. Farmers required cash for purchases of machinery, livestock, and seed. **Cash crops**, such as wheat, represented power in an industrializing society, and the power accrued to the person who managed the crop. In addition, the scarcity of labor meant that many women could not be relieved of field work. Women frequently had to leave other chores to work in the fields, so women's own productive work could not demand too much of their time during periods of intense field work.⁷

Though the income derived from butter and eggs was small, it was stable, and increased steadily over the decades. It was income that women controlled. The control and distribution of money was one of the most private decisions couples made, but it appears from available evidence that farm income was usually assigned for use to the person whose labor earned most of it. Men's field and off-farm work bought equipment and land and paid the mortgage interest. Women's income from chickens and dairy cows was, for the most part, used to feed and clothe the farm family. The division of income in Rosina Riedlinger's household closely matched the arrangement she and her husband had reached about authority over farm work:

The best way to farm is to let the men seed the grains, and the women have about two hundred chickens, one hundred turkeys, and a few cattle. We had chickens and during the summer, they supplied us with groceries, and during the winter the turkeys paid for fuel and clothes for the family. Cows and cream paid for the repairs and spending money we needed and the grain crop was money the [sic] could be laid aside, or invested in more land.⁸

Women's primary income was generally derived from the production of butter and eggs. Since this income was usually in the form of credit at a general store, women had limited discretionary use of it. They could not, for instance, apply this credit to a purchase from a mail-order catalog or open a bank account. **Store credit**, however, was good for a range of household and personal supplies including groceries, kerosene, clothing, shoes, tobacco, candy, fruit, yard goods, and sewing notions. In lean years, these items became luxuries as the egg and butter income was diverted to essentials. Farm women could "make do" without trade items, but it increased the hardship and the labor of farm life. Mrs. Hans Emmanuel Anderson, like many other settlers, made coffee from roasted grain when she could not get it by trading eggs. Many families burned a rag in a shallow dish of tallow to make light when they could not afford kerosene. Sugar simply disappeared from the menu.⁹

So significant was this small trade that distance from market was only an obstacle to be overcome, not a determining factor. For instance, Thersia Sherman Bosch walked fourteen miles to Tower City to trade eggs for groceries. Pernella Bjeske Herred, who lived nine miles from Washburn, had only a small pony to pull the stoneboat carrying her butter to town. One day the pony gave up on the heavy load one mile from Washburn, so Herred picked up the two-gallon crock of butter and walked the rest of the way, traded for her groceries, and walked back to the worn-out pony. Charlotte Anderson Swanson sold her butter and eggs in the nearby town of Hancock until it withered at the

end of the Great Dakota Boom. Then she walked ten miles to Coleharbor to sell her eggs and butter to storekeeper George Robinson.¹⁰

A flock of laying hens was so important to the success of a farm family that it was a fairly common wedding gift for a young couple. Marie Jacobson's daughter Josephine received chickens as a wedding gift when she married Axel Axelsen. Tirsten Swenson's brother gave her six hens and one rooster for a wedding present in 1891. Swenson raised seventy-five chicks the following year and within two years of her marriage was buying the family's groceries with her egg and poultry money.¹¹

The first woman to produce butter or eggs in surplus quantities in a newly settled area had a brief opportunity to make an enormous profit. Betsy Halstenson Broton sold eggs for fifty cents a dozen when there were few competitors in the local Nelson County market. Marian Koehn Kramer was able to sell butter at forty-five cents per pound while she had the only milk cow in her Barnes County neighborhood. When other homesteaders acquired milk cows, butter dropped to a far

more ordinary price of five or six cents per pound. It is likely that many of Kramer's first customers were bachelors or married men whose families had not yet arrived. These early arrivals, many of them working for others as well as on their own homesteads, purchased much of their basic food supply from neighboring farm women at frontier prices.¹²

Women who lived near a large town could count on a steady market, particularly if settlement in the area was increasing. Gustapha Granstrom sold cheese directly to the Satteriund Hotel in Washburn and traded butter and eggs in the stores. Washburn was the largest town in booming McLean County in the mid-1880s, so travelers and newcomers formed a small but steady market for farm products. Another McLean County resident, Mathilda Jones, sold chickens, butter, and garden produce to Missouri River steamboat captains.¹³

These urban markets, however, were special, localized, and profitable only to individuals who were prepared to take advantage of them. The situation was very different for Caroline Radke Fregein.



Figure 5. Farm women managed their chicken flocks for growth. The numbers of chickens and eggs increased continuously, and in time, access to railroads to ship eggs to distant markets made larger flocks more profitable. (*Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 2079.8.2*)

Fregein lived in McIntosh County in an area as yet unserved by railroads. McIntosh County was settled primarily by Black Sea Germans who tended to migrate as families, so there were few bachelors to form a local market for surplus barnyard products. Fregein could usually trade her eggs, but she frequently found no market for the more perishable butter. In August 1889 Fregein made the thirty-five-mile trip to Ellendale, but could not sell or trade the five pounds of butter she had brought. She returned home with the melted and spoiled butter and decided against trying again to sell butter in such an unstable market.¹⁴

The dollar value of egg and dairy production can be calculated from several, different sources. Using federal agriculture census statistics, butter income in 1899 averaged \$12.77 per farm. Reliable figures for egg sales in that year are not available. In 1909, however, combined sales of butter and poultry products averaged \$40.88 per farm. In 1919 and 1929 when farm sales of butter were declining, the combined figures for sales of butter and poultry products per farm continued to rise to \$64.40 and \$76.80, respectively. The income from the sale of the wheat crop in those years reflected the instability of wheat crops and markets. Average income per farm from wheat was \$673.77 in 1899, \$1,444.77 in 1909, \$1,909.03 in 1919, and \$1188.93 in 1929. Dairy and poultry income generally ranged between 2.5 and 3.5 percent of the wheat income, but in 1929 with both yields and prices of wheat low, dairy and poultry income amounted to 6.5 percent of the wheat income.¹⁵

Another source of information on income suggests that income from butter and eggs on individual farms might have been substantially higher. In April 1895 Ragnhild Raaen twice traded butter against her bill at Heen's Store in Hatton. For one delivery (weight unknown) she received \$5.25. For the second delivery four days later, she received ninety cents. If Raaen received \$6.15 over four days, her butter credit very likely would have exceeded the \$12.77 annual average calculated for 1899.¹⁶

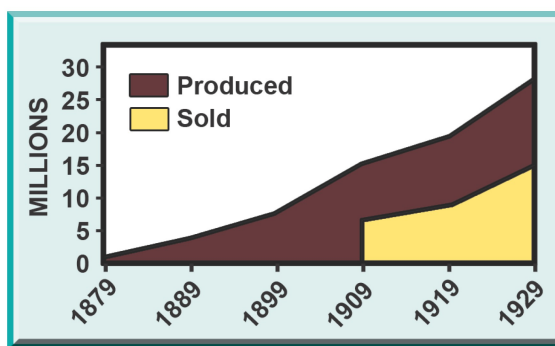


Figure 6. North Dakota egg production, in millions of dozens, and sales from farms, in dollars. (Data gathered from the U.S. Census Reports of Agriculture, Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

Another woman, Mrs. Frances F. Fitzmaurice of Crystal, wrote an article for the 1901 North Dakota Farmers' Institute *Annual* about the dairy work she had been pursuing for the past several years. Using conservative figures, she calculated that a cow should produce seventy-two dollars worth of butter and a calf worth ten dollars, yielding a total annual income of eighty-two dollars per cow. The federal agriculture census indicates that in 1899 farm women sold 39 percent of the butter they churned. If this figure is applied to Fitzmaurice's butter production, she should have received in cash or credit \$28.08 per cow. There was an average of nearly three cows per farm in 1899. Theoretically, then, a good dairy manager should have been able to earn \$78.62 in 1899 from the sale of butter. If similar records were available for egg and poultry sales, it is likely that those figures would rise as well. Settlement narratives attribute the purchase of most household supplies to credit or income earned from the butter and egg trade. It would seem, then, that the higher figures may be more accurate.¹⁷

Egg and butter production on Dakota farms followed very different courses between 1879 and 1929. Egg production, poultry flocks, and egg and poultry income rose continually, if not dramatically, during this period (Figure 6). After 1920 egg production increased at a faster pace. According to the federal agricultural census, home butter production rose until 1909, then began to drop as commercial creameries took over the produc-

tion of butter for market (Figure 7). The drop in butter production slowed after 1920. This shift coincides with a 1920 crash in market prices for all farm commodities and indicates that farm women managed their flocks and herds while keeping an eye on the commodity markets, family needs, and the most profitable use of their time and energy.¹⁸

Farm women managed their hen flocks for growth beyond household needs. While the average number of birds per farm increased continuously from 1879 to 1929, the sharpest increase came during the Great Dakota Boom (1878–1890). Flock size per farm nearly doubled in the 1880s. Average farm egg production more than tripled during the boom. In part, growth was due to recently arrived homesteaders allowing eggs to hatch to increase the size of their flocks, but the increase was also in response to the growing market. The local market swelled with land seekers and new settlers who were willing to pay frontier prices for eggs to start their own flocks or as food. During the 1890s flock growth tapered off, increasing by only 7 percent, but the quantity of eggs produced grew by more than 27 percent. Growth in egg production that exceeds growth in flock size indicates that flock managers were able to provide better feed and housing for laying hens, were allowing fewer eggs to hatch, and were able to take advantage of more distant markets as rail line construction began to extend into small towns far from the main lines.

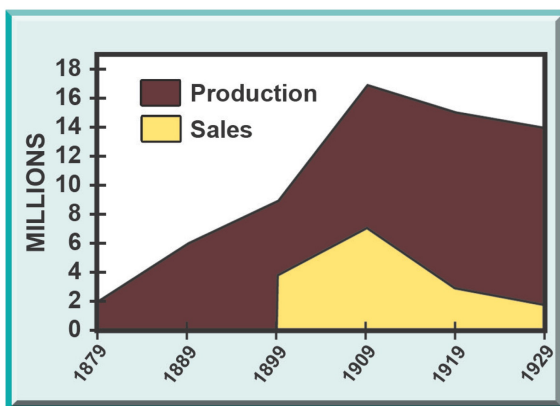


Figure 7. Total production and sales of butter, in pounds, from North Dakota farms. (Data gathered from the U.S. Census Reports of Agriculture, Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

Country storekeepers, anxious for the trade, took in crates of eggs packed in oats or straw. The eggs were often fertile, rarely candled, and likely to be covered with manure. Occasionally an overheated fertile egg would explode, making a mess in the storekeeper’s storage room. Storekeepers usually traded the eggs for the same price they received when selling them, losing money on the labor and storage. The advantage for storekeepers under these circumstances was to keep farm women’s business in their store. If they did not accept the trade on the women’s terms, farm women would take their eggs and the rest of their trade to a different store. If competition was tough, storekeepers might even offer the egg seller as much as five cents a dozen over what the market warranted. Under these economic circumstances, farm women enjoyed no advantage in investing time and money to produce large, uniform, clean eggs to trade to storekeepers. The price was the same either way as long as they controlled the local market with their trade.¹⁹

Farm women continued to market their eggs to country stores through the 1930s. The trade proved advantageous for both farm women and storekeepers. The trade in eggs and butter kept the family on the farm during lean years, but country stores also needed the trade to stay in business when the economy was weak. At least one storekeeper credited the farm produce trade with keeping his small string of country stores in operation during the 1930s.²⁰

When farm commodity prices fell in the 1920s, farm women noticed a drop in the prices they received for their products, but also recognized that money invested in poultry and eggs showed a better return than did money invested in other farm commodities; they increased their flocks and egg production accordingly. Nationally, flocks increased by 13.6 percent, but North Dakota farm women responded more vigorously to the crisis than did women in the rest of the nation increasing their flocks by 20 percent. In his report on farm poultry and egg production, North Dakota Agricultural College marketing expert Alva Benton wrote that the increase in chickens was an increase for the market, because most farms had already

met their own poultry and egg needs. As a result, between 1921 and 1926 railroad freight tonnage of poultry (live chickens) increased four times, and the tonnage of eggs more than doubled. Because of distance, poor quality, and high production, North Dakota egg and poultry prices had been lower than the national average since 1915. Enlarging the flocks tended to force prices down even more, but individual farm women made their decisions according to their own interests. They increased production, but still refused to invest more money or labor than necessary to maintain their flocks and to meet their own production plans.²¹

The continuous increase in poultry production through both good and bad wheat years indicates that farm families depended on the small income derived from egg and poultry sales and expected continuing fluctuations in wheat income. The increase of poultry production also, in part, replaced the labor women had previously expended in the farm dairy. By 1910 butter production had become increasingly commercialized, and farm women began to expend less labor in the farm dairy.

During the early years of settlement, butter had much the same financial importance to the homesteading family that chickens did, but many women did not know how to take advantage of the seasonal butter market. When Hannah Lovass Kjelland first took her butter to the Parkhouse store in Valley City in 1883, Mr. Parkhouse told her that in order to take advantage of the market, she must take her butter back home, “pack it [in crocks], with salt, put it down in the cellar and keep [it] until the price went up again.” In order to meet the demand of the local market, Kjelland would also have to make her butter more attractive to the buyer. Town women who purchased farm-produced butter for their homes demanded fine taste and an attractive appearance. The storekeeper would set aside the finest quality butter for local sales, allowing potential buyers to use a toothpick to taste a bit of butter. The best butter brought a premium price, an advantage to both the producer and the storekeeper. Parkhouse taught Kjelland

how to use a butter mold to make her butter more appealing. Hannah Kjelland’s success in producing a good quality, fine-tasting, attractive package of butter gave her a steady private market and cash income. She sold her butter to Parkhouse for his own table, and sold directly to prominent Valley City families for years.²²

Butter income was so important to some families that they did not think of it in terms of subsistence and surplus. On these farms, butter was a commodity to be sold or traded, but not consumed by the family that produced it. Joseph Falerius remembered that when he was a child his family rarely ate butter. It was produced for trade or for sale. The family saved sour skimmed milk for table use.²³

While farm women were producing and marketing butter to support their families, the state agricultural commissioner was encouraging the establishment of **commercial creameries**. It was necessary, according to the various men who held the position, to diversify North Dakota agriculture because a wheat economy was not reliable. But the agriculture commissioners did not set out to aid farm women in marketing a surplus homemade product. The intent of the commissioners, as they addressed the “dairymen” of the state, was to increase and improve dairy herds in order to support commercial creameries where cream would be made into butter for both local and distant markets. From 1890 to approximately 1910, the agriculture commissioner and the dairy commissioner alternately pleaded with and scolded farmers over the dairy issue. Cooperatives and privately owned creameries opened up for business, but often closed within a year or two. Several factors inhibited the growth of creameries, some of them gender related.²⁴

Most often, creameries closed for lack of trade. There were not enough cows within (horse-drawn) driving distance to operate a creamery at a profit. Farmers declined to increase their dairy herds because of the expense of investing in more cattle and providing feed and shelter for them. Commercial dairying also meant morning and evening

work every day. Improving the dairy herds would divert labor and money from wheat farming, and most North Dakota farmers were not yet ready to give up on the idea that wheat farming would make them rich.

Creameries also failed for want of labor to tend larger herds. It was difficult for farmers to hire men who would willingly milk cows. This meant that herds could not be expanded to a commercial level because the work would exceed the amount of time farm women and their children had available. A man (or, less likely, a woman) hired to do this job specifically could handle a commercial herd, but as long as milking was one chore among dozens a woman had to complete daily, the dairy herd had to remain small. Some farmers indicated that they preferred small herds that could be managed by women and children so there would be no other demands on adult male labor during planting and harvest.²⁵

In 1894 the agriculture commissioner tried to assess the failure of dairying in economic terms and enlisted the advice and support of local and distant experts. W. D. Hoard, a noted Wisconsin dairy expert and publisher of *Hoard's Dairyman*, wrote that because North Dakota was a sparsely settled state with farms scattered at some distance from each other and from towns, and herds were small and of poor quality, he had little confidence that it would become a dairy state. Other correspondents offered similar analyses, though most thought that dairying could succeed if the farmers put some money and effort into it. Why they were reluctant to do so was usually attributed to the ease and potential of wheat farming.

Economic analysis alone, with no consideration of gender issues, could not explain the reluctance of North Dakota farmers to commercialize their dairy herds. But dairy experts rarely recognized the realities of the gendered division of labor that farmers found to be a significant factor in the failure of commercial creameries. Nor did officials recognize the refusal of many men to take up the work. If they had, they would have had to acknowledge that

women had been successfully producing butter for sale and trade.

The dairy commissioner had no reply to farmers who pointed out the difficulties in getting men to take up dairying. J.H. Bosard, a farmer who had tried, but failed, to start a creamery, wrote to the commissioner that “very many of our farmers think that it is cheaper and more economical to have their wives [make butter] for nothing than to pay the creamery for doing it.” He also mentioned that it was hard to get hired men to milk. Another correspondent, C.P. Smith, believed that hired men did not like to milk because cows had to be milked twice daily, optimally twelve hours apart, which extended the length of the working day. Smith did not comment on the length of the farm woman’s day.²⁶

There was also the question of the propriety of a man milking a cow. Some men, especially bachelors, milked without questioning the social consequences. Einar Brosten, an unmarried Norwegian immigrant, wrote home that he shared the milking chores with his male companions and sold whole milk to the Cooperstown creamery. In some communities, however, the distinction between men’s work and women’s work was drawn quite firmly, and milking was women’s work. Rosina Riedlinger remembered that in her South Russia village men could herd cattle, but never milked cows. “It was the duty of girls to do the milking. A man never milked a cow as he felt it was a disgrace if he did.” Scottish immigrant Christina Hills Caldwell recalled clearly her first winter on the homestead because they had not completed the barn before winter and she had to milk the cows outdoors. She laconically explained, “this work was done by the women.”²⁷

For first-generation immigrants, this training in gender roles would not disappear easily. Writing about his grandfather, Erling Sannes described Erick Sannes as a man who was “quick to disassociate himself from other Norwegian customs and traditions, [but] never forgot that in old Norway men did not milk cows. Never in his entire life did he ever milk a cow.”²⁸

Many men refused to milk cows because it was considered women's work, and for the same reason, they accorded dairy income little or no value in relation to the economy of the farm. While the historic record indicates that men as well as women stated that butter and eggs provided financial stability for farm families, they did not necessarily see barnyard work as farm work. The assumption they apparently made was that the dairy was an extension of the household rather than a part of the farm. The distinction was easily made if butter and eggs were traded for credit at the store, rather than sold for cash as the grain crop was. Many farmers apparently also clung to the notion that a farm woman's labor was free while a farm hand had to be paid in cash. The difference between cash and credit income enhanced the gender division of labor in a society where cash was increasingly necessary as a medium of exchange. As Carolyn Sachs has pointed out, for centuries the work of farm women in European and European American cultures was "invisible," and therefore, undervalued. As long as the work and the income of butter making was devalued as women's work, farmers would not readily invest in improving the dairy. Even without addressing the question of who would do the milking, many farmers operated on the assumption that money put into improving the quality of the herd, the size or comfort of the barn, or the quantity or quality of feedstuffs would not provide a reasonable return. In other words, a dairy operation on a grain farm was considered a sideline, and profitable only as long as it did not draw heavily on farm resources.²⁹

Between 1890 and 1910 the agriculture and dairy commissioners pursued the goal of commercial dairying in agricultural publications and at public meetings. They were never able to shift the foundation of agriculture in the state from small grains to dairy, but by 1910 a small, but relatively stable commercial dairy industry had been established. Commercialization resulted in a decline in on-farm butter production after 1909, according to U.S. census reports. Annual reports of the state agriculture commissioner indicate that home production of butter peaked in 1911. The decline in



Figure 8. Randi Sneva milks while her husband helpfully holds the cow. Cows were milked outdoors in all kinds of weather when there was no barn. Even though several men are present, they didn't milk if a woman was available to do the work. (Fred Hultstrand History in Pictures Collection, Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, 2028.164)

farm butter production after 1910 was moderate, but the decline in sales of farm-produced butter was dramatic and indicates a shift in the origin of butter sales from the farm to the creamery (Figure 7). These figures reveal a complex of human activities that signify the end of the settlement period, a gender shift in productive work on the farm, and the commercialization of butter production.³⁰

Creameries very quickly cut into the market that farm women had once had to themselves. While census figures indicate that women continued to churn butter on the farm, it is not clear why. Between 1920 and 1930 the farm population declined slightly, and the number of hired men and women the farm woman had to feed dropped significantly. The quantity of homemade butter consumed on the farm, however, increased between 1920 and 1929 by nearly two and one-half million pounds.³¹

Women recounting their lives on a Dakota pioneer farm frequently mention the number of cows they milked and the price they received for their butter, but they do not discuss a transition time when they gave up milking, or when the herd was enlarged, or when the milking process was modernized with cream separators, cooling equipment, or a creamery truck to haul the milk to the plant. We are left with an unexplained statistic, gathered

from the agricultural census, that shows us that women on 76 percent of the state's farms continued to make butter (an average of 225 pounds per farm in 1929), but were selling less and less of it. Less than 12 percent of the farms where butter was churned sold butter. The gap between production and sales suggests that women may not have been eager to give up butter churning and, therefore, did not consider it drudgery but productive and valuable work. They may have thought it a measure of thrift by which they could manufacture, rather than purchase, one household item, thereby conserving cash. As Bethel Herigstad noted, when crops or prices were poor, "only their early training in being frugal and economical saved them from giving up." The quality of butter they produced was also a source of pride and established the reputation of particularly skilled women, like Hannah Kjelland, in their communities. The decline in farm butter production leveled off somewhat during the lean years of the 1920s, confirming that many farm women considered churning to be a means of conserving

resources while maintaining a high quality food supply for their families.³²

We do not know from the census, the commissioner of agriculture reports, or anecdotal evidence if women ceased to milk cows after 1910, or if women lost control of the income from dairying as the labor requirements and the financial investment rose. There are several indications, however, that after 1910, dairying became a stable form of cash income (rather than a subsistence/surplus product), and this encouraged some men to cease resisting dairy chores and assume control of the work and the income. In 1912 Dairy Commissioner R.F. Flint noted that bankers had found that (male) farmers who sold cream to creameries were more likely to pay their debts. Bankers would loan money to farmers for cattle, even if they considered a loan for seed grain a bad risk. This suggests that men controlled dairy income. In the same year Flint received a letter from a "writer" who stated, "I have no difficulty in keeping men to milk because I have comfortable convenient barns for them to

Figure 9. Cows, chickens, and children could not thrive without clean water, but there was no harder work on a pioneer farm than pumping and carrying water. At eight pounds per gallon, a bucket of water weighed forty pounds. (Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 2079.13.8)



work in.” Flint considered this a “highly significant” statement because it supported his campaign to modernize dairying with proper barns and silos. It suggests that while women milked their cows in lean-tos, sod barns, or even outside in the winter as Christina Hills Caldwell did, hired men would balk at the task until they had a decent barn to work in. It also indicates that farmers who had made a commitment to commercial dairying had fostered a shift in the gendered division of labor on the farm.³³

As settlers remembered their early experiences on Dakota farms, they recognized how important the egg and butter trade was to their families but they recalled the work and the products with little excitement. Women’s work in the barnyard was duly noted, but not celebrated. It was wheat, **King Wheat**, that held a special place in pioneers’ memories, for its beauty, if not for its potential for wealth. The contrast is evident in the memoirs of Johanna Rildahl, who settled with her family in Ramsey County in 1883. “From the proceeds of our chickens and cows we set our table and bought most of our clothing,” she wrote in the plainest language. But as she remembered the first wheat crop, harvested from just a few acres, her words expanded and became descriptive: “It was beautiful, golden, Scotch Fife, No. 1 Hard.” Women’s butter and egg production tends to diminish in importance next to the wheat crop on which so many pioneers pinned all their hopes. No one forgot that wheat crops failed, nor that wheat prices remained low for years after settlement; but neither did they forget the crops that were too large to be contained in the granary, nor the year the bushel price broke one dollar. It is hard to maintain a clear perspective on the value of different kinds of work when they are obscured by hope and potential for success.³⁴

The gender shift in dairy work (and similar, later trends in poultry production) was part of continuing changes in the social relations of agriculture that came about in response to the industrialization of the U.S. economy. The processes took place at different rates in different locations as frontier economies gave way to mature farm and urban economies. The result of these changes, initiating far from the fields of northern plains farms, was to sever the farm partnership, officially if not in reality, and to marginalize the contributions of farm women to the development of North Dakota’s farm economy.³⁵

Women, however, understood their work in different terms. To them, it was not marginal, but central to the family farm economy. They had proved this with their years of labor through which they had not only supported the farm family and kept the farm functioning in lean years, but sustained country stores, and by extension, banks, elevators and railroads, contributing significantly to the stability of the state’s agricultural economy.

About the Author

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1. Scot Arthur Stradley, *The Broken Circle: An Economic History of North Dakota* (Grand Forks: Bureau of Business and Economic Research, University of North Dakota, 1993), p. 70. The settlement period lasted in North Dakota from about 1875 to about 1915, depending on location. This article reviews the farm

economy of first-generation pioneers from earliest settlement to the time of their retirement. Since many retired during the 1920s, I use 1930 as a closing date. This time frame allows an examination of the changes that took place as frontier conditions gave way to a mature farm economy.

2. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*, Population, Vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: General Printing Office, 1913); *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*, Agriculture, Vol. 5, Part 1 (Washington, D.C.: 1902), p. 466. On immigrant girls' view of Yankee American women see especially Ragot Raaen, *Grass of the Earth* (Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1950. Reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1994); and Sophie Trupin, *Dakota Diaspora: Memoirs of a Jewish Homesteader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).
3. *Report of the Statistics of Agriculture in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1895), p. 342; *Twelfth Census 1900*, p. xxxi.
4. Many of the personal reminiscences noted in this article are taken from the Writers' Project series of interviews conducted with elderly pioneers between 1938 and 1940. These include the Pioneer Biographies (PB), the Ethnic Group Files (EGF) and the Hard Wheat Study (HW), noted hereafter with the initials in parentheses only. All records are housed in the archives of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck. Oluf Anderson, HW, Cass County
5. "A Just Complaint," *The Dakota Farmer*, September 15, 1897, p. 8.
6. *Ibid.* On the process of commodification of poultry production after 1930 in Iowa and its consequences for gender, see Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 135–159.
7. On the effect of industrialization and urbanization on farming, see David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban American and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900–1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979).
8. Rosina Reidlinger, EGF, McIntosh County.
9. Anderson, EGF.
10. Bosch, Reel 3, North Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, Pioneer Mother Project Records, 1938–1953 (PMP), State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck; Herred and Swanson in Mary Ann Barnes Williams, *Fifty Pioneer Mothers of McLean County*, (Washburn, N. Dak.: Privately printed, 1932): pp. 53, 73.
11. Jacobsen in Axel Axelson, PB, Barnes County; Swenson, PB, Barnes County.
12. Broton, PMP, Kramer, PB, Barnes County.
13. Williams, pp. 49, 61.
14. Fregein, PB, McIntosh County.
15. Production quantity figures, egg and poultry sales figures and butter sales figures are taken from *Twelfth Census*, pp. 110, 178, 615; *Thirteenth Census*, Agriculture, Vol. 7, part 1, pp. 284, 289, 294; *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920*, Agriculture, Vol. 6, part 1, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), pp. 626, 631, 636; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, Agriculture, Vol. 2, part 1, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), pp. 1932, 1082, 1095, 1100, 1118. Wheat price figures are taken from *Yearbook of United States Department of Agriculture 1910* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), p. 518; *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture 1925* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), p. 764; *Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture 1930* (Washington, D.C.: 1930), p. 600.
16. Thomas Raaen credit account, Raaen Papers, Hatton-Eielson Museum, Hatton, North Dakota.
17. Mrs. F. Fitzmaurice, "The Dairy," *Annual* (1901): pp. 32–33.
18. The landmark years relate to federal agricultural census data. The agricultural census is taken at the same time as the population census (the year ending in zero), but figures recorded are for the previous calendar year (the year ending in 9).
19. M.A. Johnson, *Fifty Years of County Storekeeping* (Larimore, ND: Privately printed), p. 12, Alva H. Benton, "Poultry and Egg Marketing in North Dakota," *Agricultural Experiment Station, North Dakota Agricultural College Bulletin 215* (February 1928), pp. 8, 25–27.
20. Johnson, p. 87; Benton, p. 8–9.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Kjelland, PB, Barnes County; Johnson, p. 15.
23. Falerius, PB, Barnes County.
24. For a thorough discussion of the efforts of the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station to establish commercial dairying, see David B. Danbom, "The North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station and the Struggle to Create a Dairy State," *Agricultural History* 63 (Spring 1989): pp. 174–186.
25. John L. Coulter, "Attempts to Re-organize the Agricultural System," in "Industrial History of the Valley of the Red River of the North," *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota* 3 (1910): p. 638.
26. *Third Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor to the Governor of North Dakota*, June 30, 1894, pp. 14, 18. Fink discusses similar concepts of "free" labor in Iowa poultry production in *Open Country Iowa*, p. 138
27. Einar Brosten to brother, June 17, 1888, Cooperstown, D.T., translator unknown. Myrtle Bemis Porterville Papers, Box 1, Folder 18, North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, Fargo. Riedlinger, EGF, McIntosh County; Caldwell, PMP, Reel 3.
28. Erling N. Sannes, "Free Land for All: Ei ung snasakvinne som nybyggjar i Nord-Dakota," *Kumur* 11 (1990): pp. 28–29 (English translation by Erling Sannes).
29. Carolyn Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women In Agricultural Production* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanhead, 1983).
30. *Twelfth Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor*, June 30, 1912, p. 120.
31. *Twelfth Census*, p. 615; *Thirteenth Census*, p. 289; *Fourteenth Census*, p. 631; *Fifteenth Census*, p. 1118.
32. *Fifteenth Census*, p. 1118; Herigstad, EGF, Griggs County
33. Anonymous writer to R. F. Flint, in *Biennial Report of the Dairy Commissioner to the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labor of the Dairy Interests*, June 30, 1912, pp. 180–181.
34. N. Johanna Kildahl, Ph.D. *Reminiscences*, pp. 2, 6. Johanna Kildahl Papers 1895–1936. Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.
35. These changes have been examined in different locations and time periods in the work of several historians including Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women 1750–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Deborah Fink, *Open Country Iowa and Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Ratherme Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913–1963*; Sally McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth Century America: Vernacular Design and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

