

Lifestyles

WORK

Farm Wives

Truly, a life of devotion. The farm wife went from one chore to another with never an end in sight. Of course, there were advantages — she lived out in the fresh air close to nature, and set her table with lots of fresh food smothered in cream. But for the most part, hers was a long, hard, unheralded life.

The “citywoman” from Ithaca was the exception; most of the women who lived in Tompkins County were farm wives. Today, many still carry on the tradition.

These are the words of local women from around the turn of the nineteenth century, telling their own stories:

I am a farmer's wife, sixty years old today. Thirty-one years I have spent on an isolated hilltop, with work, work, and starved for something to read.

I wonder how other farmers' wives get time to write. I think if I had no children, or if I did not work out of doors as much, I could get along, but I cannot see the weeds grow and try not to pull them, or stay in when the cows need milking, or calves or chickens need feedings, consequently it keeps my work behind and me hustling all of the time.

Even if I were capable of arranging [our home] like a palace, so to speak, my hands are tied. Men, men, mud, mud and my cellar. I wonder we are alive.

As a class, farmers' wives are expected to do more work than any other housekeeper. We do our own washing, ironing, taking care of the milk, meat, chickens, which women of other callings do not. We do our own sewing, making over an infinite number of old clothes to save the expense of new ones . . . I stopped to read your letter, with a table full of dishes to wash, and a boy down with the measles.

There are compensations to living on a farm anywhere, and particularly here, that I am sure no other hard way of earning one's living brings; but it is hard, and oh! the needlessness of it is the hardest part to bear! It is not what money



brings that I or any other sensible person wants, but just to do a reasonable amount of useful work and then a chance to lift one's eyes and thoughts above the daily grind.

I happen to be married to a man who considers it an unpardonable crime for a woman to sit down to read or study, or to take a minute to rest.

Probably the most serious problem in the farming status today is the great amount of hard labor that must be done by the women of the farm households. Few important appliances and machines have been invented to lessen her work; or if they are invented, she usually does not have them.

I weigh 120 pounds. I milk seven or eight cows night and morning; run a separator [device which separates cream from milk]; get breakfast, dinner, and supper; do all of the washing and cleaning; do most of the garden work and rake in some haying. I feel very good most of the time, only when I get too tired I have a headache and pain in back of my neck. I mend, read, and such, but I don't have much time to rest.

I am one of the farmers' wives who certainly needs some help. One's soul certainly does starve away out in the country.

Many farmers' wives are despondent. I think some are so despondent as not to care to put forth enough energy to even lift the head. What causes the state of affairs? Is it the treadmill? Is it lack of society? Is it poor food? Is it poor



clothes? — good clothes are a moral support it is said. Is it unappreciated toil? Is the farmer so much among animals that he comes to regard his wife as a beast of burden? I have been five years trying to answer these questions. I hesitated years before consenting to marry a farmer because I saw that these things were so and I could not tell why.



To me the farmer's wife has so many advantages over her city cousins. She is so near nature and nature's God that she is constantly reminded of the "Great River." The first few years of my married life I rather thought I did not like farming. I had never done much of it, but I learned in order to make my home happy and to be happy myself, I must "accept the situation as lovely, gracefully, and pleasantly as possible," and it has been a grand motto.

I will try and tell you some of my experiences and what a woman can endure. I was married when twenty years old, went to keeping house the first of July. [We soon] found plenty of bugs. Of course there wasn't much rest for many nights. I would take everything outdoors and sweep it down from top to bottom and then scald the logs and then whitewash them and so on. We lived that way for nearly twenty years.

I was married at nineteen and then my farm life began in earnest . . . I would always rise in the morning at four or half past, winter and summer, and have built my own fires, milked from four to eight cows, prepared the breakfast and had it at six. I always did my own churning, and many are the books of poems, histories, stories and newspapers I have read while churning . . . I have always done my own washing and weaving of carpets as I have a large house and it is furnished with rag carpets. . . . One summer I piled up one hundred cords of wood and did my own housework. . . . Not many modern wives would think they could pull flax, cut corn, dig potatoes and do all things on a farm as we used to.

It is only in theory that any but a very small percentage of any working people can live the life comfortable, much less beautiful . . . *Just to live* keeps one toiling to the health-breaking, back-aching point. It jars one's nerves to read the beautiful theories laid down.

I used to say that I could select the farmers' wives from a crowd of women of all classes. They seemed to have a sort-of hopeless spiritless look.

I have cleared \$2.44 from thirty hens this last year . . . This year I have three industries, the profit from two sheep, 35 hens, and a patch of strawberries. I am tending these myself besides





my garden and housework and sewing, etc. I have been married seven years and in that time I have never had any sewing done for myself or any ready-made garments, no help of any kind in the house, hired or otherwise.

So many of the country women, as well as their sisters in the city, are engaged in crocheting and knitting for the city firms. Few can make over three cents an hour.

I do much more work than many have to do, and keep my house and family of from eight to ten comfortable, but I don't "soar upward" very much. I know the beauties of nature quite well, but when one is constantly tired it hinders some.

When my husband was alive we worked together. I fed the calves and pigs and when he was very busy I helped pick potatoes and carrots. He would help me in the house drying dishes, sweeping, and cleaning vegetables and it was pleasanter than working alone.

It seems to me the one thing that all workers need—perhaps farmers more than townspeople—is to keep above the thought of drudgery, to look beyond the toiling to the result, and so transform drudgery, which no one enjoys, into work; and when work becomes

spontaneous, it is no longer under the law of necessity, but it is joyful and free from strain and pain.

Before leaving your bedroom, open [the] window and put your bed to air. Be sure to ask divine help to carry you through the day. Have your breakfast well on the way the night before. Clear the table and wash [the] dishes right off; don't let them stand to dry or call flies. Sweep and dust; clean lamps. Then do chamber work. Prepare dinner. . . . Can you tell me how to do this and at the same time crowd in the care of milk from five cows, churning twice a week, baking for seven in [the] family, attending to poultry, washing, ironing, mending, sewing, etc., etc.? I must confess I don't know how to do it and keep sweet-tempered as a wife and mother should. God alone knows I would like to be able to do it.

I find by forethought I can accomplish a good deal before breakfast. I try to get the beds made, rooms swept and dusted, lamp cleaned and chickens fed before the men come in to breakfast. We have a great deal of company and of course everyone adds to the work; yet I do not want to live without the society of my friends. Sometimes I let some of the cleaning go and when very tired sit right down and read a few pages in some good book or paper, and

it rests me more than I can tell. . . . I enjoy the life a farm offers, if only we could get a little more time and not quite so much hard work.'

Taking the Reins

Her husband is dead. She is left with from five to twelve children, and a store, farm, or business. She has to keep those five to twelve children fed, and so she rolls up her sleeves and marches out to do what has to be done. She works like the dickens, and if she is lucky, her children are able to grow up healthy and strong.

The list of these stories is long and impressive. Truth is, husbands and fathers would sometimes die young, leaving behind the makings of some means of livelihood. Often their widows and daughters, thought unsuited to "man's work," would quietly pick up the necessary skills, assume responsibility, and carry on with their lives.

Farming is a good example. Though the farmer's wife is well-recognized, the existence of the female *farmer* is but little known. These are some of their stories:

I was once the happy wife of a good farmer, and now a farmer myself. My husband and daughter died three years ago and me alone with the farm to manage. I hired a man to help. I find it no easy task to manage the farm successfully [but] I love the work.

My husband died sixteen years ago. . . . I came back to the home after an absence of ten years

spent in educating my daughters, found such a run-down, neglected looking place that every passer-by might know that a "woman or drunkard" owned it. Of course it is uphill work hiring everything done, but I [now] assume all responsibility, and am farming to the best of my ability on 93 acres - 18 acres orchard.

In 1865 my father died. His farm which consisted of 225 acres, all he possessed, was bought by my two sisters and myself. . . . I am not, and never have been married. Neither [has] my sister ever married. We paid all of our debts, and have today a moderate surplus. Every day's work done on our farm has been paid for out of the income of the farm.

My dear father was called to his home in 1902, and my mother and myself were left with the farm of one hundred acres, eleven cows, and a good team [of horses], and a great many debts (\$500). I, the only child, had been brought up very tenderly. I just thought I would see what we could do. . . . Last summer I milked thirteen cows most of the time, twice a day fed calves and pigs, took cows to and from pasture. Have work for one [hired] man, whom we have only by the day. I take care of our garden, and have red and white raspberries, red and white currants, gooseberries, garden long blackberries, cherries and apples. My mother will be 79 the fifth of March, and she does much of the housework but I do all the hard work. An old lady stays with us who is eighty-seven, and she is a great care. This winter I have taken care of twenty heads of cattle, fifty hens, one hog, and two horses most of the time, and they all look fine. I clean the stables, and do it all. . . . We built a new tenant house, and have paid a great many debts, and I can say I'm well and strong (age 56), and I find time for quite a bit of fancy work. I think the secret of success in farming as in anything else is just being cheerful and happy with whatever your lot in life may be. . . . This summer I expect to have seventeen cows, and shall have to milk them most of the



. . . on the farm.

time alone. I expect to repair the barn some, so you can see what a woman can do.¹

Working-Class Women

A woman's station in life has always been a decisive factor in determining her relationship to work. Married women often spent their lives scrubbing, washing, cooking, making and repairing clothes, cleaning, ministering to childrens' needs, and forever picking-up-after. Unmarried and poor women, however, had to go in search of "real" work — that is, *paid* work.

For Bread

Mrs. Ellen K. Hooken of Ithaca was economically independent in the days "when women went about their business quietly and everyone let them do what they pleased if they could show they could do it."² These were the years of the mid-1800s.

When my husband died I was all the son and father in my house and so I naturally kept right

on teaching and supporting my invalid mother and my three children. It was the only thing to do.²

Lack of choice is strong motivation. Women who needed to work found themselves in all sorts of sundry jobs. A visitor to this area in 1869 reported incredulously:

One of these women contracts for loads and draws wood, and she says she has drawn wood every day this winter, Sundays excepted. The other drives a peddling wagon, and no inclemency of weather prevents her from pursuing her vocation.³

America's Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s was a major force in opening a new world of possibilities in the work place for women. This formerly agrarian society with its social order based on handicraft was transformed to one dominated by industry and machine production. New "feminine" industries such as textile and garment factories needed laborers. Employees were especially inclined to hire young women because there were many eager to work and they had fewer responsibilities. But best of all, employers could get away with paying women, young and old, only *half* the salary they paid the men.⁴

Sad Tales

In 1908, Judge Whitman from New York City decried the hardships of young women trying to support themselves on wages of five dollars a week or less. A local commented, "Yet many young women, not only in New York City, but in Ithaca as well, are earning that sum or less."⁵

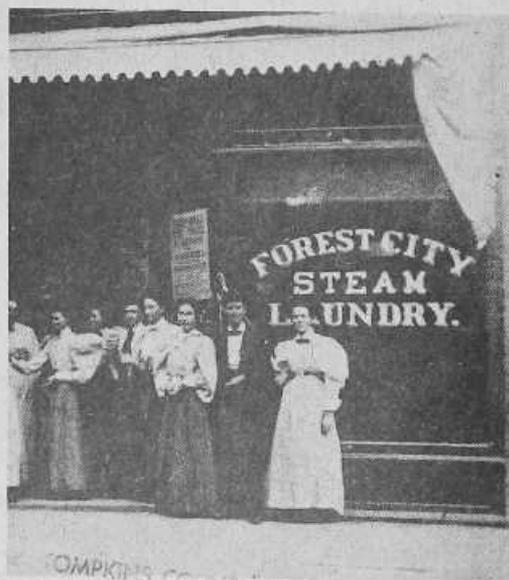
Women in Ithaca's hosiery factory in 1888 earned only one dollar a day (which would buy about three pair of hosiery). But they were much better off than their sisters in the button factory on North Albany Street. There, female employees were paid two cents for every 144 buttons they sewed on cards. Finally, outraged, twenty-one of these



The Cayuga Salt Works in Lansing employed local women to sew the tops of the salt bags together.

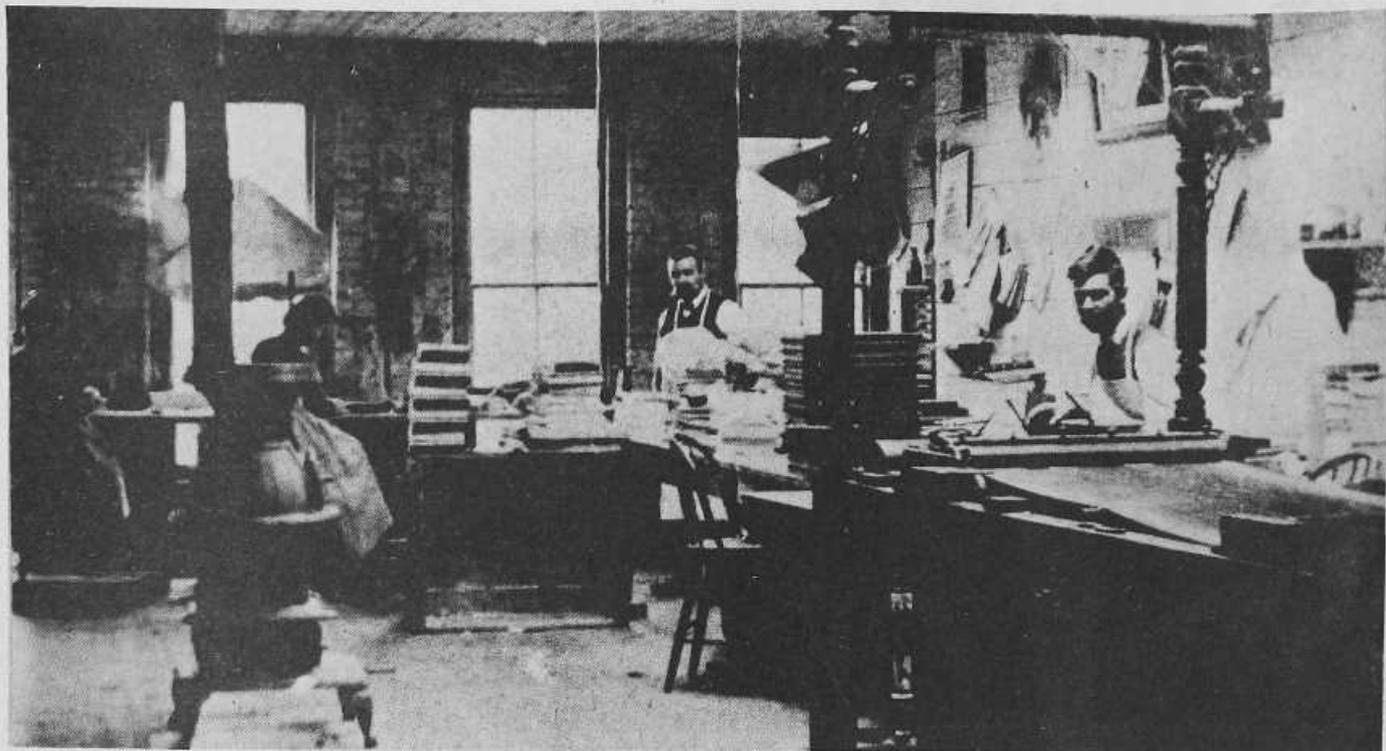


209 N AURORA ST
ITHACA, N.Y.
E. M. MERRILL.



The Forest City Steam Laundry, 1896-1925, hired women for all aspects of the laundering operation.

OMPKE'S CO. PHOTOGRAPHERS
NORTH CAYUGA STREET
ITHACA, NEW YORK



Female employees of the Reed & Montgomery Bookbindery on 188-24 South Tioga Street, c. 1900.



Well-intentioned ladies organized to aid the needy.

women went on strike. The result was disconcerting – instead of answering the strikers' demands, the factory closed down and moved to Scranton, Pennsylvania!⁶

Strikes were rarely successful. In 1908, twenty out of twenty-one women quit their job at the Cayuga Lake House – a summer hotel in neighboring Sheldrake – to show solidarity with the headwaitress, apparently fired unjustly. The women headed for Ithaca “in a solid phalanx” to look for new jobs, and the management, not very much bothered, simply sent out telegrams for twenty male replacements.⁷

Factory conditions were often far from Safe, Clean, & Happy. Long hours without rest was the norm. Finally in 1909, concern over the health of women and children climaxed, and new legislation emerged which for the first time stipulated the eight-hour work day, a required day of rest, and health regulations aplenty. A local soda fountain owner lamented the coming of these laws, saying that he “could not give the people the best service” anymore, the women being unable to work more than fifty-four hours a week, or not before seven o'clock in the morning, nor later than ten o'clock at night.⁸

Benefits and Hardships

Despite the hardships, many women were anxious to work, and for good reason – not only could a working woman enjoy the benefits of personal monies and independence, but knowing she had the option of supporting herself, she need not live with a marriage gone sour. The *Ithaca Daily News* of 1912 objected:

It is because they know no way by which they can support themselves that myriads of women are forced to endure the purgatory of unhappy homes and live with men who abuse and insult them. If she possessed a self-supporting occupation that she could turn to, many a miserable wife would pack her trunk and go back to her typewriter or her sewing machine or her book-keeping.⁹

Most women's rights advocates since 1900 have promoted the idea of women in trades. Then, these trades were generally those of typing, sewing, or bookkeeping. Many of the specific opportunities for women have changed since then, but the goals remain the same – the desire for competence, self-assurance, and independence.

Working-class women have always had a tough time of it. They have often had to support children and husbands by means of a job that paid piddling little and would never pay more. Meanwhile, clothes get dirty, cobwebs appear in corners, and there are always the never-ending chores of cleaning and cooking to be done. After a long day in the work place,

many women came home to their unpaid but essential second job of keeping house, and keeping the family together. There was seldom any time left for themselves.

Social distinctions are as visible today as ever. Women from middle-class and affluent families stand more of a chance of learning a lucrative trade, since their family can put them through school, help them get started, and give a “little something” when needed. Ironically, those women who most need the training are least likely to receive it. You won't often see children from prosperous homes coughing in the dust of a coal mine, or having as the proud product of their existence 840,000 buttons successfully sewed on cards.

Women's Organizations

For all their teas, quilting bees, and church auxiliaries, local women never formalized their groups into organizations until the 1860s.

The Ladies Union Benevolent Society (LUBS)

Established in 1869, LUBS was both one of the original women's organizations in Ithaca, and also the first secular organization designed to care for the city's poor.

These women were wealthy (Mrs. Ezra Cornell was a long-time member);¹ some were even driven to their meetings by chauffeurs. But they were more than generous with their money. They completely financed and operated a Children's Home and an Old Ladies' Home. The former incorporated in 1900 and became self-supporting. The latter group resided for many years in a house at 514 North Aurora Street. In 1871 the house was sold, and the Home moved to a wing in the McGraw House at 221 South Geneva Street, where the Ladies Union Benevolent Society cares for elderly women to this day.