The Farmer's Wife: An Oral History Project

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This dissertation titled
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Abstract

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The Farmer's Wife: An Oral History Project

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This oral history project explores the everyday experiences of farmers’ wives who live and work on family farms in western Illinois. Through oral history interviews, I examined how farmers’ wives narrated their life stories and what these stories tell us about women’s gendered lives in rural farming spaces. My inductive analysis is informed by ethnographic and oral history interviewing practices, fieldwork experiences, and resultant field notes. Analysis of the women’s stories reveals how the family farm is a site where the private and public spaces of life are entangled, and the experiences of social isolation, family hardships, housework, fieldwork, and child-rearing are gendered and excluded from consideration in the grand narrative of family farming in Midwest America.
Dedication

For Keith with love—
Acknowledgments

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Chapter I: Introduction

Figure 1: Night Sky.

The rural countryside can be a curious, obscene, terrifying, and unfathomably mysterious place, especially to an outsider. “She’s from the city,” they say. When you enter the region known as the Mississippi River Valley in western Illinois, you cannot help but mourn at the sight of the collapsing barns, silos, and homesteads that are scattered across the countryside. The buildings signify the former lives of families. The barns sit “squarely” on the farmland and are tucked in by acres of cornfields. As they say, “squarely” denotes that the barns were built to withstand time, and by all accounts, they do. Although time has altered farming practices and many barns are no longer used or cared for, they nevertheless prominently remain a fixture of the rural western Illinois
countryside. Sometimes it is a physical structure that tells the tale of a family that once was; other times it is a side dish or dessert shared at a local gathering. And yet other times, it is a fond memory about a couple described as resembling the American Gothic painting.¹ “I wish you could have met them,” they say. In the rural western Illinois agricultural communities, every citizen is remembered through the storied remnants s/he leaves behind.

There are moments in the rural countryside when you hear the wind whip around your home with such force that your bones creak and your teeth chatter. You realize the inadequacy of human beings when you see the power and force with which storms roll across the afternoon sky, painting the landscape with blackness and sending every living soul seeking shelter. Some years ago, I began listening with both curiosity and fear to the stories about the timber or about the howling from coyotes at night. Perhaps it was because of my outsider status, or maybe it was because these stories were so vastly different from my own lived experiences. But, what I do know is that I started listening to the stories because they wove together the most intricate history about a small place that seemed so insignificant to the outside world. Each story painted a picture of the lives, homes, and histories of not just people or citizens, but of family, friends, and community.

The beauty of the still and quiet rural countryside was by no means immediately felt by me, but they are part of the landscape and the rural way of life. As I learned from my participants, stillness and quietness are two distinctly different capacities. Stillness is a lack of movement while quietness is the scarcity of sound. Summer nights are often so still that you can hear deer walking through the cornfields, as their hooves crunch over
fallen cornstalks. Without wind, human conversation, or vehicle sound pollution, each step the deer takes can be heard. Based on the number of steps, you can even tell how many deer are strolling through the cornfield. The quietness and stillness are at times eerie, especially when a vehicle drives down the lane after dark. It breaks up the quietness and is a mismatch to the surround. In the rural countryside, stillness and quietness are welcomed as part of the farming way of life.

Discovering the Project

Unbeknownst to me, this project germinated years ago. This dissertation is the threading together of my scholarly interests and experiences from punctuated moments throughout my life. I would be remiss not to acknowledge the important influence my years of genealogical work at the DeKalb County, Illinois Historical Society had on my identity as a scholar. Under Phyllis Kelley’s guidance, I learned the careful art of reading and cataloging cemetery records, plat maps, newspapers, family photos, and various other donated artifacts. Some of my fondest memories are from my days working alongside Phyllis at the county records office to uncover the stories about DeKalb County agriculture, forgotten family members, the Underground Railroad, and many more historical moments stowed away in gray archival boxes.

Sadly, until recently I had forgotten how critical these experiences were to me. Phyllis was one of my strongest academic supporters and I can only imagine how proud she would be of a project that examined women’s lives and rural spaces. I shared my last grilled cheese sandwich with Phyllis sometime during the winter of 2010, and as usual our conversations covered politics, American history, and fiction novel
recommendations. I never had the chance to tell Phyllis that I would be pursuing a master’s degree and eventually a Ph.D. because she died in July of 2011. However, it seems only fitting that my dissertation engaged Midwest genealogical and archival research, two topics Phyllis dedicated her life to researching and preserving.

Laced throughout this project is the theme of community and citizen identity. I was first introduced to these concepts through my work with the American Democracy Project in my M. A. program. These experiences inspired me to take courses such as “Rhetorical Democracy,” “Critical Political Theory,” and “Early American Political Thought” during my doctoral studies. I was also deeply influenced by feminist readings in the seminar courses such as “Critical Ethnography” and “Oral History Readings.” As a result, I realized that I was interested in learning more about women’s lives in small town communities, and I began to more seriously pursue these ideas through my course work.

During this time, I started researching the history of Thomas Jefferson’s thoughts on agrarian democracy and found my interests piqued when I came across the history of the Seneca Falls Convention. When I realized the important role farmers’ wives performed in making the convention possible and supporting Women’s Suffrage, I knew I wanted to continue researching the stories of the Midwest and farmers’ wives.

There was something about the vastness of the space, the history of American farming, and the lives of women that drew me. Women’s lived experiences were, and continue to be, equally important as men’s, even though they are less examined. In reviewing Midwest literature, I realized that there was a scarcity in stories about women’s lives. When depicted, their lives were almost always monolithic representations of a
woman who cooked and tended to children for the family. Eventually I became more interested in how the women of a farming community worked and lived in a space that mostly failed to remember/recognize their experiences. My curiosity about how the women in a farming community understood, re-remembered, and narrated their own everyday experiences inspired this project. As I read more about the history of the Midwest and farming communities, I realized that one particular story was missing: The story of the farmer’s wife.

The Project: The Farmer’s Wife

Over the years, it was not just the descriptions of the landscape or the rural countryside that I shared in the opening of this chapter that interested me. I also became interested in the stories of women who were simply referred to as: “Just a farmer’s wife.” To me, the phrase denoted that the women were secondary to their husbands, did not contribute to the farm or larger society, and lacked their own identity. However, the stories I heard detailed the lives of women who worked full-time jobs in addition to working on a farm. They inoculated cattle or hogs, helped breed livestock, or ran farm machinery during planting and harvesting seasons. Through the stories I encountered, the women’s lives seemed complex, underappreciated, and even unacknowledged. More often than not, I also noticed that a woman was referred to as “so-and-so’s” farm wife, but rarely was her identity further articulated. In observing this, I wondered about women’s everyday experiences. Who was the farmer’s wife? And, what stories would she tell about her life?
In the course of this project, I interviewed twenty-five farm wives from western Illinois ranging in age from twenty-five to eighty-eight years old. Each woman lived and worked on a family farming operation or family farm. Although I was also interested in interviewing farmwomen, I was unable to locate even one woman who primarily farmed her own family farm in western Illinois. While I met numerous women who farmed with their husbands, I did not meet any women who farmed alone. Instead my participants who did operate farm machinery did so with their husband’s supervision. For my participants, the interchangeable terms family farming operation or family farm were important identifiers. As I learned, they demarcated their farms as family owned and operated instead of corporate financed and managed. Through my fieldwork, I more fully recognized the importance of understanding the family farm as a complex site that linked family members, history, business, and home. Many of the women were born, raised, and lived in the rural western Illinois countryside their entire lives. Specifically, they were from Warren, Mercer, Knox, or Henderson Counties. Finally, some of my participants were related across marriage lines and many were friends.

In order to understand the women’s everyday lives, I asked questions across the domains of childhood, marriage, family, challenges and successes in life, the farm, life in the rural countryside, and finally religious beliefs. While these domains guided our conversations, many women also relied heavily on familial artifacts and farm tours to share stories about their lives. Overall, my dissertation was guided by the following broad research questions:
1. In what ways do women narrate their experiences in a rural Midwest farming community?

2. What do their stories this tell us about their gendered selves?

3. In what ways does a rural farming community and/or a family farm shape these women’s identity/s?

Informed by these research questions and guided by inductive analysis, my dissertation project explored the concepts of identity, women’s labor, and farming/rural community culture. In the chapters that follow, I analyze these concepts and ideas, among others.

Following the introduction, Chapter II provides an in-depth examination of relevant literature. In it, I contextualize farm wives’ experiences as they are related to the historical background of the American Midwest and farming. I also engaged the topics of Midwest topography, women’s gendered lives, and rural communities. I speak specifically to the situated culture of the American Midwest and family farming as they are related to women’s experiences. I also examine the complexity of industrialization in women’s lives, farming, and the rural countryside.

Chapter III presents the theoretical frameworks of Symbolic Interactionism and Narrative Identity. In this chapter, I discuss how these two theoretical frameworks inductively informed my understanding of a farm wife’s identity. Specifically, I speak to how I accessed these theories in order to consider how the women’s identities developed across time and in relationship to her family, farm, and community. In this chapter, I argue that identities are socially constructed, and through narratives, we make sense of our identity experiences. Finally, I reflect on the importance of considering women’s
identities as deeply influenced by the patriarchal structures of a rural farming community and family farm.

In Chapter IV, I outline my methodological approach to understanding farmwomen’s lives. To begin, in this chapter I explain my rationale for employing multiple methodologies in this project. I discuss how I accept the entwined nature of oral history and ethnography. I performed oral history interviews, which allowed me to solicit stories from the farm wives’ individual perspectives. I also completed participant observations, fieldwork experiences, and archival research. In this chapter, I explain how I embraced feminist sensibilities and sought to appreciate the on-going situatedness of the women’s lives. I show how together, these experiences informed my understanding and interpretations of my participants’ lives.

My analysis of farm wives’ stories begins in Chapter V, “Co-Farmers” which expands our understanding of women’s labor roles on the farm. In this chapter, stories from Ellie, Belle, and Annie reveal the complexities of women’s roles on family farms. We are exposed to stories about working for decades in hog sheds and serving noon-meals to family members. Through their stories, we come to understand that women’s work is central to the success of the family farm. Their stories reveal how they each labored daily on the family farm. My intention in this chapter is to explore how Ellie, Belle, and Annie each performed independent roles on the family farm, and further, to illustrate that the women were not merely supplemental help or helpers to their husband—they were co-farmers.
Chapter VI, “The Farmer’s Wife,” is an analysis of farmwomen’s invisible labor on family farms. I present how Margaret, Joy, and Sophia all performed invisible or domestic labor in order to contribute to the family farm. Their labor stories challenge the widely held myth that physical labor exclusively contributes to the success of a farm. For the farm wives in this chapter, “housework” included cooking, cleaning, childrearing, in addition to working off-farm jobs. However, their labor is unrecognized as contributing to the farm. In short, I discuss how their stories reveal a type of labor largely overlooked in the farming literature. The stories included in this chapter illustrate how housework, childcare, emotional, and family labor contributed to the success of the family farm.

Chapter VII, “Outsiders,” is the third thematic chapter. Through the process of gathering stories, I realized that there were women who lived in the rural countryside who were not from western Illinois. Neely, Karen, and Daphne shared stories about their experiences as women who married into farming families. Their stories reveal some of the challenges they experienced marrying into a farming family and living on a farm. This chapter also interrogates the importance of my own outsider identity. As my fieldwork unfolded, I realized that my outsider status was a means through which my participants felt simultaneously comfortable, however also conflicted about sharing their experiences with me.

The final thematic chapter, Chapter VIII, “Changes,” explores the changes to family farms and rural communities in western Illinois. This chapter examines the stories from Delilah, Jane, and Betty, who all experienced sadness as a result of economic
downturn in the rural countryside. Their stories show how rural areas were once populated and vibrant spaces, as well as places that provided important relational connections and support. However, after factories throughout western Illinois shutdown and farming became increasingly more industrialized, the area changed. The stories in this chapter reflect how there is an interdependent relationship between family farms and rural communities in the countryside.

Finally, Chapter IX presents concluding commentary about the project. In this chapter, I reflect on punctuated moments from my fieldwork that I have continued to contemplate. Further, I discuss moments from my fieldwork that are not included elsewhere in the thematic chapters. The stories in this chapter are methodologically important because they further illustrate the complexity of farm wives’ lived experiences in the rural western Illinois countryside. Stories about stories, field moments, and reflections are incorporated into this reflexive closing chapter.

Conclusion

This project reflects the stories shared with me by farmers’ wives from western Illinois. Through oral history interviews and fieldwork experiences, I have carefully considered their stories and what they reveal about women’s identities in farming communities. For this oral history project, I was committed to gathering and representing the everyday experiences of women who lived and worked on family farms. Some of the stories detail the hardships of living and working with family members on a farm, and yet others are harrowing and deeply tragic as they illustrate widowhood and death. The
women shared with me their personal lives and intimate experiences, and they revealed their role in their family and on the farm—these are their stories.

1 Over the years, I heard stories about a couple who were born and raised in Warren County. The wife and husband lived on a small 160-acre family farm and farmed the “old fashioned way” despite modern agricultural inventions. Eventually, I learned that the couple was Gwynn’s parents.

2 I learned that the patriarchal structure of farming families often eliminated women (wives and daughters) from primarily farming in western Illinois.
Chapter II: Contextualizing Midwest Farm Wives Experiences

The stories of farmers’ wives from the rural western Illinois countryside are a part of a larger narrative. Before White pioneers arrived in the Midwest, the Great Lakes region was home to Native American Indians. Indigenous tribes of Native Americans stretched across Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Wisconsin, Ohio, Missouri, Minnesota and Michigan. The Native American Indians of the Midwest were the first to farm the nutrient rich soil. They were also the first to utilize the waterways of the Mississippi River for the transportation of people and agricultural products. The story of the Midwest is often romanticized and only associated with a history of White pioneer settlements. It fails to acknowledge the Native American Indians, who lived and worked in the region.

As increasingly more “White pioneers” arrived in the Midwest, cities and industries developed in the region. Agriculture transformed western Illinois and the vestiges of agricultural history are ever present as thousands of acres of grain crops are grown and harvested each year. Midwest history is also romanticized with notions of hard work, family, and tightknit communities. These romantic notions permeate popular understandings of farming in the Midwest. They are also entwined into the stories about early family farms, which were small and included multiple generations of family members laboring together. The Midwest, specifically Illinois, owes a signification portion of its history to grain and livestock farming. Although farming has changed today, it is still a way of life for many families in the rural western Illinois countryside.

Understanding the farm wives’ stories requires an appreciation for the various, complex contexts embedded in their lives. To begin, we must consider the history of the
American Midwest as part of the women’s situated stories. By doing so, we contemplate the social-political history of the space as it shaped their lives. The lives of farmers’ wives are also connected with the rural countryside, which is a space laden with cultural meanings and practices. It is a space that is more than merely the opposite of urbanized communities. Further, the women’s identities are, of course, contingent to the context of the family farm, which has both ephemeral and lasting gendered practices. A study into farmwomen’s lives must consider the multilayered contexts that are a backdrop to their oral histories.

The American Midwest Landscape

The Midwest is a difficult space to describe in terms of landscape, especially if one is sensitive to not homogenizing the region. The Midwest region often encompasses the following twelve states: North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. Each state within the heartland reflects a particular geography; however, this region is often generalized as one-dimensional—flat. This descriptor does little to describe the grasslands, rolling hills, marshes, woodlands, and prairies that are present throughout the Midwest. Across the region and within each state there is geographic diversity. Historian James Madison argues that the landscape of the Midwest or, “Heartland,” is made-up of a distinctive mix of physical geography, natural resources, agriculture, and industrial patterns. ¹ In the essay, “States of the Midwest,” Madison further suggests that a weaving of geographic patterns and a mix of climate make the Midwest region a mosaic of diverse physical environments. Illustrating that each state in the Midwest has a unique essence and
individual personality that reveals connections to a distinct history, geography, politics, and economy.

The Midwest is often described as flat or farmland. The fact that the landscape of the Midwest is inseparable from agricultural production in the minds of Americans is a part of the story of the region. In many ways, family farms are the beginning of the story of modern agriculture in the Midwest and it would be impossible to discuss contemporary Midwest agricultural production without explaining its connection to the invention of the steel plow. In 1837, the founder of the agricultural manufacturer, John Deere, invented the cast-steel plow in central Illinois. The development of the cast-steel plow allowed for early farmers to break-up prairie sod and thereby, revolutionized farming. Underneath a significant portion of the Midwest is a vein of tough, nutrient-rich clay, which prior to the cast-steel plow was remarkably difficult to cut through. The invention of the cast-steel plow forever changed farming, but it also transformed the region into the Corn Belt that we are familiar with today.

Corn Belt

The midsection of America is known as the Corn Belt region because it marks the acres upon acres of fertile land sowed with corn and other grain crops. According to historian John Hudson, in Making the Corn Belt, references to the Midwest as the “Corn Belt” date back to the 1880s. Hudson explains that the phrase was first used to describe the agriculture produced in the region, and later was adopted as a way to describe the geography of the Midwest. Describing the Midwest as the “Corn Belt” disregards the diversity of the geography and complexity of the industries in the region. Further
explaining this, Chris Mayda, Artimus Keiffer, and Joseph Slade in “Ecology and Environment,” note that the phrase the “Corn Belt” fails to capture the geologic features present in the Midwest that are a result of “glacial action like kames (steep-sided hills), eskers (winding steep-sided ridges of sand and gravel), and drumlins (elongated mounds).” The authors propose that the geography of the Midwest is defined by the “absence of mountains,” but should be understood as a “flat, wet, and seasonal space between the continent’s real mountain ranges.” To situate the geography of the Midwest, one must appreciate how both the physical environment and human activities affected the region.

Perhaps one of the most iconic areas within the Corn Belt is the west-central Illinois region. Corn and sometimes soybeans paint this part of the farm belt, but not all areas of Illinois are marked by agriculture. As Midwest literary scholar Becky Bradway notes “Illinois is three states:”

Three geographies, three separate spheres representing three contemporary states of being: urban, rural, and in-between (a suburban or big town identity, depending on the aspirations of those who live there). Illinois is a long, lean state, making it easy to draw the lines that separate Chicago and its suburbs, the central cities/towns, and rural southern Illinois. This geographic diversity becomes more apparent when one examines the state of Illinois. We realize, for example, how distinctly different the central portion of the state is from its counterparts in the north and south. Chicago in the northeast is a city marked by skyscrapers, whereas Cairo at the southern tip never realized its full growth or potential.
The west-central Illinois region is largely vast, rural, and open except for small cities like Springfield, Bloomington-Normal, Champaign-Urbana, and Peoria, which are spread across the midsection of the state. These cities and others are home to some of the largest agricultural manufacturers in the nation including John Deere, Caterpillar, and International Harvester. These companies reflect the prominent farming industry in the region.

*Till Plain*

The central section of the Midwest that stretches from the Appalachian Plateau in the east across to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa is known as the Till Plain. The Till Plain is often synonymous with the Corn Belt region because of the land that is deposited with silt, creating some of the most productive soils in the United States. According to Hudson, the Till Plain “blossomed into recognizable shape” as early settlers began and intensified agricultural production. The region effectively transformed into the image of farming that we know today. As family farms advanced, the region was demarcated as suitable for grain and corn production. Many are unaware that the central portion of the Midwest was also a space once abundant with over 3 million acres of wetlands including bogs, marshes, and swamps. These types of terrains helped to produce the fertile agricultural soil, but retained rather than drained water, so farmers “tiled” the land to prevent flooding and encourage draining. Tiling is a process of running tubing underneath the soil to aerate and drain low areas that retain water. Sadly, tiling alters ecosystems in irreversible ways, but farmers continue the process in order to produce the most in-demand grains for livestock and human consumption.
For many outsiders, the Midwest is simply flat and the acres of yellow and green are relatively meaningless. The landscape appears as one unending parcel of farmland making it, for most Americans, “flyover country.” According to geographer Cary de Wit, the term *flyover country* is used with physical spaces Americans have traveled over, “but not touched and would rather not touch.” De Wit suggests that the term flyover country is now a regional label for the rural Midwest and has helped to perpetuate myths of nothingness and desolation, portraying the entire area as “fully understood without the benefit of a visit.” The west-central region of Illinois is just one area in the Midwest that is deemed by many as little more than flyover country. Sadly, this assumption ignores the fact that the Midwest is rich with cultural history.

**The American Midwest**

The story of the American Midwest began with the material acquisition and creation of the region as a result of the Old Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The Old Northwest Ordinance eventually transitioned into The Northwest Territory, from which the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin emerged. In the winter of 1822 and 1823, the State Legislature of Illinois organized the military tract land between the Mississippi and Illinois rivers into counties. Among others, the Counties of Warren, Knox, Henderson, and Mercer were created. The military tract land was reserved as payments for veterans of the War of 1812. Historically, the military tract land brought a large number of citizens to inhabit and economically develop the area. War veterans received 160 acres of land and many of those who claimed it moved to the western Illinois region and started family farming operations. The early citizens who entered and
remained in the Midwest helped to transform the social, political, and economic cultures of the region.

It would be almost impossible to re-construct the story of the American Midwest without considering the important influence former President Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian interests had in developing the region. As historian Susan Sessions Rugh explains, Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian ideology centered on the importance of independent land ownership because it allowed the farmer to possess a “virtue unavailable to those who owed their livelihood to others.” According to Jefferson, farmers were able to achieve virtue by being a proprietor rather than working for a European feudal lord. The ideology of owning land was central to the development of Midwest family farms, and also influenced the expansion of the Midwest during the early 19th century. The development of the Midwest was dependent on settlers who were heirs to Jefferson’s ideology and as Rugh notes, within fifty years transformed the Midwest into a “phenomenally productive agricultural sector.” The material transformation of the Midwest centered on the settlers who built family farm systems to meet the economic needs of more than just their families, but also the region, eventually the nation, and beyond.

_Midwest Culture_

“Midwest,” “Heartland,” and “Middle West” are all terms that capture the romanticism and obsession of writers, politicians, and artists to imagine a relationship between people and land. The Midwest has a particular regional consciousness that can be evidenced in the stories about the region and the storytelling performed by its citizens.
In “Storytelling in the Midwest,” Choctaw Nation member and storyteller, Greg Rodgers argues that Midwesterners have a unique kind of storytelling that links the people to the history of the land.\textsuperscript{18} Rodgers explains that this storytelling is due to the Midwest landscape that distinguishes itself from other areas in the United States.\textsuperscript{19} Many stories about the Midwest link the people with the agricultural landscape. Further explaining Midwest storytelling, folklorist Ruth Olson notes that Midwest folklore includes tales about the agricultural industry and the industrious hardworking citizens who plant and harvest the farmland.\textsuperscript{20} One ideology that still operates today is the historical association of citizens who belong to rural farming communities in the Midwest as being hard-workers.

Culture within Midwest rural communities, like those situated within the Mississippi River Valley, symbolizes the heartland myth popularized in American history. The heartland myth harkens us to thoughts of county fairs, 4-H, farming families, and vast open spaces with little resemblance to the so-called modern constructions that are a part of urban and suburban communities. Idyllic descriptions of farming life are also associated with the quintessential American values. Over the years, popularized values such as wholesomeness, thoughtfulness, and economic possibility used to describe the region transformed. Judith Yaross Lee, in her introduction to \textit{The Midwest: The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures}, articulates that paradoxically these values now represent blandness and pigheadedness and have contributed to the invisibility of the region.\textsuperscript{21} And so it seems the values and ideologies that were once
fondly associated with small farming communities now sadly contribute to their obscurity.

The rural Midwest countryside is a place marked by economies almost exclusively dependent on family farms, large-scale corporate style farming, or other diversified mechanical farming industries. The capabilities of people within rural agricultural towns to be so called “good workers” and “hard workers” are actually the primary means to evaluate their worth. This agrarian ideology so often associated with the Midwest reflects a bricolage of ideological remnants of family, hope, and loyalty to all who comprise rural farming towns. Sadly, many Midwest farming communities, once marked with resilience and possibility, today are largely overlooked and forgotten.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, today approximately 2 percent of Americans live and work on farms and 17 percent live in rural areas in the United States. Once burgeoning and populous farm towns are now largely vacant and abandoned, but this decline in population does not make the stories and lived histories of the citizens any less important.

In Midwest farming areas, the centrality of farming labor is difficult to ignore. The labor-intensive work on American farms forms a relationship with the land that permeates the community and influences the lives of those inhabiting the rural towns. Typically, the culture of the Midwest is described in terms of men’s connections to the region through farming. According to feminist scholar Nancy Grey Osterud, women’s connections to the land are “often profoundly embedded in kinship networks” and their agency is also shaped by the farmland. Osterud argues that women identified
themselves as neither “farmers nor caregivers” and did not see themselves as “hapless victims of fate” but rather shaped by the “pushes and pulls” of their own desires and the desires of others.\textsuperscript{25} Women are often positioned within farming communities as well as broader society in through ways in which their agency is controlled, constrained, or at the very least, negotiated with others (family, friends, other community members). Even though the focus on agricultural spaces very often exclusively concerns the production of food, this perspective fails to acknowledge the importance of the who in the economic, social, and emotional labor of American farms. Rural agricultural towns also include the farmers and their families who, together and side-by-side, live and work on the farmland.

Contextualizing the Rural

Defining \textit{rural} is an allusive endeavor. It is challenging to define the term rural because the word is often interchangeably used to describe a small town, community, or a vast open space. The ideologies and emotional connotations associated with rural spaces in the United States also make the term difficult to define. The term is laden with the mystique of American history that is arguably bound to democracy and patriotism. The term \textit{rural} harkens back to deep-seated American ideologies. Agricultural and rural historian R. Douglas Hurt argues that America’s rural agricultural communities have played a critical role in the shaping, preserving, and perpetuating of the “worldview that agriculture is the rock upon which democracy rests.”\textsuperscript{26} In \textit{American Farms: Exploring Their History}, Hurt asserts that to study America’s rural farms is to study the history of not only the subjects who shaped the nation, but also to study the history of the nation.
itself.\textsuperscript{27} Securing a rural family farm was at one point connected with achieving economic success or the so-called “American Dream” in the United States.

\textit{Early Rural Communities}

The story of America’s rural agricultural communities is both broad and complex. In part, the story is complicated by the fact that a divide between rural agricultural communities and urbanized communities emerged almost immediately in 18\textsuperscript{th} century America. By their very nature, rural communities were particularly isolating compared with urban towns during the periods before and after the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. During the time period after the Civil War, as historians Andrew Cayton and Susan Gray explain, a “master narrative of the Midwest gained coherence and explanatory power.”\textsuperscript{28} This narrative posited the economic and cultural successes of the rural Midwest and touted the numerous important political figures who were born and raised in the region.\textsuperscript{29} However, this narrative was met with frustration from rural farming citizens who felt exploited and at the mercy of large-scale capitalist endeavors.\textsuperscript{30} For family farmers, primarily focusing on economic success failed to recognize their value for providing a life for their family and future generations of farmers.

A particularly important aspect of the migration of early “White pioneers” to the rural Midwest was their cultural and economic background. In places like western Illinois the early settlers may not have come from the strongest economic backgrounds, but they found themselves on some of the most fertile agricultural land in all of the US. These pioneers, as Rugh argues, were able to take cheap land and fertile soil and not only “achieve competency as farmers,” but also a comfortable living for an entire family.\textsuperscript{31}
Their experience contrasts with that of settlers who entered rural regions in southern Illinois where the land was less desirable and often further from easily accessible railways.\textsuperscript{32} When contextualizing rural Midwest communities, we must recognize that although these spaces may occupy the same region, they are far from homogenous. This point is noteworthy when considering the history of rural farming communities in the state of Illinois.

\textit{Rural Communities Today}

Today the term \textit{rural} has also come to be associated with either “cast adrift” towns or “declining areas” that are deemed undesirable places to live.\textsuperscript{33} It is also important to note that rural is not synonymous with agriculture or even a specific type of typography or region in the United States. Anthropologist Jane Adams found that the term rural came to be used in southern Illinois as a means for dividing towns along economic, social, and cultural lines.\textsuperscript{34} Through her examination of rural communities, Adams describes that rural citizens believed their farming way of life was distinctly different and incommensurate with urbanized citizens.\textsuperscript{35} As a consequence of the usage of rural to define towns, a dichotomy emerged that defined spaces as either urban or rural on the basis of \textit{difference}. Today, the US Department of Agriculture denotes rural towns as places that have fewer than 2,500 people and are not a part of larger labor markets.

Rural Midwest communities provide a rich site to explore the lives of women who live and work on family farms. In order to consider the lives of women living and working in rural western Illinois, we must also consider the community as a space of analysis. Through analyzing rural communities in the United States, rural sociologist
Kenneth Wilkinson argues that rural spaces provide the interactions that help foster interpersonal contact and social well-being. Understanding the culture of rural communities, according to Wilkinson, means examining the infrastructure, social, educational, and economic opportunities that are essential to social well-being. A rural community is a space where citizens engage the self in relationship to the generalized other or the community. The community serves the important purpose of developing the self and providing meaning from these interactions for citizens to engage the public and private spheres. Situated within rural farming communities are the family farms of the Midwest.

The Family Farm

In the rural western Illinois countryside, family farming has a long and complex history. When the area was established by “White pioneers” in the early nineteenth century, there were many multi-generational family farms or family farming operations. The farms were owned and operated by a nuclear family, but labored on by many other family members, including children in-laws, and by hired help. The historical adage is that approximately every eighty acres there was a family farm in the rural countryside. The farm was the center of family life, but it was also the primary business and means of an income. Farming was a system of growing grain crops and raising livestock for sale, but it was also a family’s primary food source. Prior to modernization, many family farms were largely self-reliant and independent; however, this does not denote that they were entirely autonomous because family farms were connected with other farms, their community, and community members.
Family and Farming

Family farms reflect a culture of family (kinship ties), generational farming practices, and cultural heritage. Taken together, these characteristics describe the way family farms are intimately connected with the past and reflect this history in the present. Family studies scholar Sonya Salamon explains that family farms in Illinois represent complex histories of family processes, relationships, and decision-making. In this way, family farms reflect the interplay among family members and business decisions for the success of the farm. In “Prairie Patrimony,” Salamon articulates:

The term family farm actually masks a variety of business arrangements that families employ. Partnerships, family corporations, linked family corporations, and single proprietorships are as varied as families vary by developmental phase, size, gender composition, and, of course wealth.

Most importantly, Salamon’s definition illustrates the fact that family farms interconnect family members with the farm as a place of business. Unlike other kinds of corporate farming operations, family farms are a complex system of decisions and negotiations, balancing the needs of the family with the farming business. As a result of the merger of the family with the farming business, decisions about how to spend finances constantly exists, making trade-offs about how money is spent while balancing the needs of the family and the farm. For example, decisions about whether to refinish a barn or upgrade kitchen appliances are routinely made by farming families. Farm families also make decisions about whether to invest more capital into the farm based on whether younger
generations intend on taking over the farm. These types of decisions or tensions reveal the complexity of family farming.

Although the two domains of family and the farm are interconnected, they are also distinct entities. This is important because it reveals the competing interests, challenges, and conflicts on family farms. In this way, the traditional family farm is both a home and business and must support the interests of the farm and the family. The myth of American family farming paints an idyllic image of a way of life with little strife or struggle; however, the reality is quite different. According to historian Mary Neth in *Preserving the Family Farm*, a tension between the farm and the family always exists because of the family labor system. Through Neth’s research on family farms in the Midwest, we learn that the family labor system was “crucial to the survival of small, family-owned farms.” Unlike other types of farms, family farms rely on a family labor system that does not compensate with cash wages. Rather than paying cash wages for the labor-intensive work, labor is compensated by profits from grain or livestock sales and family members are promised a future of farming the family farmland. For family members working on family farms, earning an income from the farm is important, but so too, is the future of the farm for the next generation.

The performance of labor on a family farm is viewed as contributing to the family (or group) rather than serving an individual goal. Family members often view their labor as fundamental to the success of the family farm. On family farms, Neth explains, family members work together through the family life cycle as family members age in or out of farming. On the whole, the family negotiates the changes of children growing into
farming responsibilities and older members retiring from farming. In this way, family farms are guided by an ideology about family labor for the future of the farm and the family. This ideology details that the goal of family labor is to secure the family farm for future generations in order to maintain the farming way of life.\textsuperscript{45} This often means that children do not view the farm as a chore or obligation, but rather as a part of their duty to maintain the family lineage. The farm wife performs an under-appreciated role on the family farm, both as a laborer and supporter of the farming way of life for future generations.

The Farmer’s Wife

When we think of the role of a farmer’s wife, we often have an image in our minds of a woman who lives on a farm with a brood of children and a husband. We imagine her toiling away in the home and on the farm with small children tugging at her apron. We envision her as the primary caregiver for the children, while her husband labors in the farm fields. Her responsibilities include raising a large garden and spending hours preserving food. We picture that she has a root cellar stocked with jars of vegetables, fruits, and meats. And beyond raising her children and tending to the garden, she also labors in the chicken coop and sells eggs. These types of images about farmwomen’s experiences are often linked with a description of their lives as simple, impoverished, and rife with despair. The women’s lives are depicted as difficult, because of harsh conditions and by primitive standards. So the image of a farm wife’s life reflects a set of experiences with little nuance.
While for many farmers’ wives these images are partially true, their experiences on family farms are far more complex. Supporting this understanding, communication scholar Amy Lauters examined the published memoirs of farm wives in mainstream magazines and found that farmwomen were fundamental to the success of the family farm. Through her analysis, Lauters argues that the women’s stories revealed a life of various labor roles on the farm and in the home. In *More than Farmer’s Wife*, Lauters states that throughout American history farm wives were “the backbone of the family business and the managers of the farm home.” Farmwomen have always worked in the home and on the farm and many also worked in the rural communities, as it was necessary. Although this may be true, Lauters and Neth posit that the stories about farm wives’ lives are still overlooked and are rarely a part of American labor history. When we fail to understand the complexity of farm wives lives, we render their experiences invisible and risk that they are forgotten as part of the story of family farming.

The farm wife has always performed integral roles and contributed to the success of the family farm. For many farm wives, their identity is as tied to the farm as their husbands’ identities. Throughout history, women have participated in the physical labor processes of farming by performing tasks in the farm fields like planting and harvesting grains and raising livestock. They have also labored in the home by handling farm finances, preparing meals, and taking care of children. However, the stories from farmers’ wives from rural Midwestern farming communities remain largely overlooked, and historian John Mack Faragher argues that stories about farm wives are frequently ignored in the literature because historians “listened to the powerful, not the powerless.”
The majority of literature about farming life, Faragher claims, focuses on the experiences of men who are depicted as farmers who physically labor on the farm. These stories also form an ideology about how men carved out and settled the wild spaces of the Midwest and women merely supported the men in refining them. This ideology serves to undermine and obscure the experiences of women on farms as they are rarely, if ever, included in the stories about establishing the Midwest.

Historically, the rural countryside is framed as belonging to men, and women are viewed as complementing the men. In the literature, Faragher argues that farmwomen are often considered a “help-mate” or supporter on the farm. These views generalize women’s experiences and position them as reliant on their husbands. Further, it oversimplifies the role of a farm wife and fails to recognize their labor on the farm and in the home. Although family members often work together to maintain and pass on the family farm to the next generation, the labor system is separated by gender and age. Frequently, women and female children are interconnected with the farm but are exclusively responsible for household labor tasks. Neth argues that family labor encourages supportive and cooperative labor, but it also produces patriarchal structures that make “familial relations hierarchical, not mutual.” As consequence of this, women’s experiences are gendered and their contributions to the family farm are obscured by the ever-present and pervasive structure of patriarchy.

Farmwomen’s Gendered Experiences

In part, a woman’s gendered experiences on a farm are related to the ideology of domesticity and its spatial separation. The ideology of domesticity emerged during the
19th century and was widely accepted in the United States. In short, this ideology forwarded the notion that a “woman’s place is in the home.” It was predicated on the belief that women were “naturally” suited to run the household, rear children, and take care of a husband and extended family. A woman was supposed to inhabit and maintain the private sphere, the home, and men were responsible for the public sphere. Feminist geographer Linda McDowell argues that the division of the private sphere for women and the public sphere for men significantly impacted women’s lives. In *Gender, Identity, and Place*, McDowell explains that because of the ideology of domesticity, women were often forced to identify and restrict themselves to the home, and “the home is alternatively a site of disenfranchisement, abuse and fulfillment.” The consequence of the ideology was the reality that women’s labor in the home was undervalued, unrewarded, and also was not recognized as a form of work.

A powerful explanation for the everyday experiences of women’s lives lies at the intersections of space and gender. In *Negotiating Domesticity*, Hilde Heynen argues that domesticity and the gendering of modernity have a direct connection with the emergence of the domestic ideal and industrial capitalism. As public and private spaces became blurred, so did the divisions between residential and industrial spaces. The creation of the public and private dichotomy gave rise to the conception of the home as a feminine gendered space belonging to women. Heynen states:

This ideology is articulated in terms of gender, space, work, and power. It prescribes rather precise (albeit changing) norms regarding the essential requirements of family life, the needs of children, the proper ways of arranging
food, clothes and furniture, the care of body and health, the best ways to balance work, leisure, and family activities, the need for cleanliness and hygiene.

Domesticity can therefore be discussed in terms of legal arrangements, spatial settings, behavioral patterns, social effects, and power constellations—giving rise to a variety of discourses that comment upon it or criticize it.\textsuperscript{58}

Henen’s explanation of the ideology of domesticity reveals its pervasive, gendered, and highly prescriptive structure. Reinforcing such ideas, sociologist Carolyn Sachs explains that women have historically participated in the labor required for agricultural production; however, their involvement has/is almost always rendered invisible because of the sexual division of labor, which is a part of the ideology of domesticity.\textsuperscript{59} The sexual division of labor positions women as domestic beings who complete work in the home and men as completing “man’s work” outside of the home.\textsuperscript{60} Most importantly, only “man’s work” is understood as economically fruitful for the farm and family. The emergence of the ideology of domesticity legitimized the subordination of a farm wife’s work on the farm.

\textit{Gender and Farming}

The ideology of domesticity has maintained the myth that farm wives primarily work in the home and only men tend the farmland (or complete the so-called \textit{real work}). The reality, however, is more complex. Through her analysis of family farms, Sachs argues that “women do the majority of work in agriculture” because they are forced to operate within “patriarchal social systems” within American farming communities.\textsuperscript{61} Consequently, Sachs posits that women’s stories are romanticized, “veiling the women’s
situations in [farming] communities and families.” Often agrarian ideologies perpetuate romantic myths about farming and rural community life. The myths celebrate rural farming life as idyllic and representing the quintessential American experience. Further, Sachs argues that often farm wives are rarely (if ever) asked to provide their own stories. By exploring the lives of farm wives we are also able to consider how gender ideals have pushed their stories to the background of history.

The stories about American farming almost always privilege men’s experiences. A farm wife’s experiences are frequently held in relationship to her domestic responsibilities, which includes the raising, feeding, and caretaking of children and other family members. When women’s experiences are centered by the caretaking of others their contributions to the agricultural production or the economy of the farm are often ignored. The characterization of household work as task-oriented and rational reveals the all too common oversimplification of women’s work. It is because of the oversimplification of what women do on a day-to-day basis that their contributions are so easily forgotten and left untold. Heynen notes that women’s experiences often become relegated to the stories about being the caretakers of domesticity and become fixed within the home. The fixing of women’s experiences into the home fails to recognize the work and labor contributions women make to the farm. For example, a farm wife is rarely recognized for her work as a bookkeeper or a physical laborer, or for running errands for the farm.

In particular, women often go unnoticed for their interactions with agricultural and the nonagricultural activities that sustain both the family and the farm. Farm wives
have/continue to find themselves overlooked for their contributions on the farm and in
the home. Throughout history farmwomen were as interested as their male counterparts
in learning more about agricultural production, land sustainability, and livestock
breeding. In fact, historian Marilyn Irivn Holt in *Linoleum, Better Babies, and the
Modern Farm Woman*, states:

> If men saw benefits in following farm experts’ advice, so too, did their wives and
daughters. Many women were as interested as men in learning about the correct
feeding of livestock, the possibilities of incubators for baby chicks, and how to
fight insects that attacked their gardens.⁶⁶

Furthermore, farmwomen were more than passively interested in these aspects of farm
work, as many were regularly completing these tasks on their farms. Holt further argues
that farm wives were always involved in the economy on family farms both as a laborer
and advocate of farm educational programs. In this way, women actively participated in
the labor and science of farming; however, women’s participation in these experiences
were subordinated by the ideology of domesticity, and so their stories were relegated to
the private sphere or home.

Finally, for women on family farms, patriarchy constrains them economically,
socially, and politically. Males hold the primary power in the family, and also often have
decision-making authority over their wife and children. In farming families, patriarchy is
also evidenced by the almost exclusive male inheritance practices, which afford them
privilege and power to control the farmland. According to political scientist Judith Grant,
“…the oppressive political system of male domination is patriarchy.”⁶⁷ Further, Grant
articulates that a particularly problematic issue with patriarchy is the fact that “male domination was present across time and across cultures.” In this way, it is impossible to imagine a time when men did not control women. Throughout history anthropologist Deborah Fink states that farmwomen were often economically dependent and in asymmetric marriages that only benefited their husbands. Through her analysis of women’s experiences, Fink claims:

Women’s economic dependency constituted a material base for male dominance. By controlling land, wealth, and social services, men were in a position to have their wishes heeded.

In effect, men controlled all aspects of a woman’s life on a farm and left her with little, if any, control over social or material resources. Further, male dominance also positioned women as a "breeder-feeder-producer" of children. Even though women’s responsibilities are often not different from their male counterparts, they are rarely, if at all, recognized as economic “producers” for the farm. As a result, this leaves women to undergo a type of silencing and under-recognition for their work both related to the farm and with the family that is not dissimilar from the effects of patriarchal-gender structure prevalent in wider society.

**Gender and Industrialization**

A family farm provides an interesting site for understanding the gendered experiences of women in a historically patriarchal setting that is also dominated by stories from and about men. Heynen suggests that the increase in industrialization and modernization created a position of ambiguity for women such that the ideals of home
became “charged with contradictory expectations.” Modernity charged with rationalism and efficiency permeated the ideals of domesticity and positioned women ambiguously both in and outside the home. Much like other spaces in larger society, a farm and the gendered ideals including domesticity are not simply constrained and constricted to the home, but are transposed as an ideology onto all aspects of farming life. While modernity suggested a change from domestic ideals and introduced an ideology of social and work equality in society, contemporary farmwomen still find themselves strongly influenced by the ideology of domesticity. The traditional gendered pattern of roles both in the home and outside of the home continue to follow the ideology of domesticity, which fails to recognize women’s work in and outside the home as equally important as work by their male counterparts.

One of the more challenging aspects of understanding the subjugated nature of farmwomen’s experiences is the fact that the home became a commercialized and politicized site with the industrialization of farming. In the rural countryside, industrialization introduced mechanized machinery and effectively transformed farming. Farming technology effected production and labor practices on the farm. During the Progressive Era, rural farming communities became a primary concern for politicians because the areas were deemed economically important to the future of the United States. According to historian Katherine Jellison, by 1909 President Theodore Roosevelt organized a seven-member Commission on Country Life “to investigate the means by which Progressive goals might be met in America’s countryside.” Jellison explains:
They [reformers] believed that a more efficient agriculture, employing fair and sound business principles, would benefit the nation’s growing urban population. These reformers equated more efficient agriculture with cheaper food prices for the urban masses.\textsuperscript{76}

The increased focus of efficiency on family farms in the rural countryside altered farming. Farms became increasingly more market focused and less focused on sustaining the family. Jellison further explains that a primary goal of the commission was to investigate and determine how to make rural citizens more reliant on modern technology. In spirit of goal centered on improving the lives of citizens in the rural countryside; however, a consequence was that it nearly eliminated family farms and further separated women’s work from the farm.

Progressive Era policies focused on bringing steam and gasoline-powered field equipment to rural farmers, thereby eliminating the need for draft animals.\textsuperscript{77} As modern technology made its way onto farms in the form of machinery, farmwomen also desired means to ease the hardships and the challenges of their work. Farmwomen completed laborious home productions and processed goods with few modern tools like gas or electric stoves and indoor refrigerators to ease their work. The Progressive Era modernized the farmhouse and, as author Holt articulates, brought farmwomen utensils, mechanized appliances, and most importantly an “improved work environment.”\textsuperscript{78} An unforeseeable consequence for farmwomen, as a result of the Progressive Era, was the creation of “housekeeping” as a business philosophy and their removal from farming tasks that they had previously completed.\textsuperscript{79} Gender relations on farms did not “merely
follow the industrialization of agricultural production; they were crucial in creating” the
gendered labor system.\textsuperscript{80} In effect, the Progressive Era policies and industrialization
farmed farmers as “business men” and women “homemakers,” which removed them from
their previous roles as managers on the farm.\textsuperscript{81} A combination of increased
mechanization, farming specialization, and Progressive Era politics effectively expanded
the greater disparity between the perceived legitimacy of farmers’ and farmwomen’s
work.

Industrialization also altered the labels of farm wife and farmer. The term farmer
renders images of rugged, muscular, masculine men who utilize heavy machinery. The
term farm wife elicits images of a housekeeper and caregiver. Farmer’ wives stories are
the counter narrative(s) that expose the gender division of labor and life in Midwestern
farming communities.\textsuperscript{82} Industrialization removed women from many of their labor roles
on the farm and as Neth states “reshaped male control of decision-making in the farm
enterprise.”\textsuperscript{83} As industrialization changed the gender relations on the family farm, rural
community expectations were also re-defined. Historically, agricultural community
expectations defined rural life as “working the land,” which was part of the definition of
“manhood.”\textsuperscript{84} Defining the rural communities through work and men effectively
subjugates farmwomen and their contributions. Furthering this point, the story of
farmwomen’s experiences are often only concerned with “moral development,” which
invokes Christian religious expectations for women.\textsuperscript{85} Neth also notes “the term farmer
prioritized male labor on the farm and assumed a male definition of labor.”\textsuperscript{86} This point is
particularly important as it reveals that women’s work was defined as secondary to men’s
work. Within agricultural communities, the farmer is also assumed to be the head of household and the primary contributor to the community economy. This custom highlights how males were and often continue to be tied to family, community, and the economy in meaningful ways that construct their identities, however, often at the expense of women.

Conclusion: Farm Wives’ Stories

Finally, the farm wives’ stories that are represented in the following chapters reflect their gendered experiences on family farms in western Illinois. The women who shared their stories with me detailed how they labored both on the farm and in the home for the success of their family farm. They revealed how gender relations continue to make the private sphere of the home their responsibility—often against their desires. They are tasked with raising children, preparing noon-meals, often at the expense of their own professional career aspirations. The women’s stories revealed how these tasks and others are crucial for the family farming business. More often than that, their stories also detailed how they felt overlooked, underappreciated, and even controlled by their husbands and fathers.

As women in a farming family, their stories also exposed the rigid gender ideology surrounding the role of a farm wife. An ideology only intensified by the industrialization of their family farm, which removed women from their labor roles. As industrialization changed their rural communities and expanded family farms, the women also felt increasingly more isolated and yearned for social connections. Their stories revealed the complexities of women’s everyday gendered lives on family farms. In some
instances, the complexities are struggles among family members, in others, tensions between in-laws, and still for others there was an overwhelming sense of unhappiness about the farming way of way life. The stories in the forthcoming chapters are not a comprehensive representation of women’s lives in western Illinois, but instead are partial accounts from twelve farm wives.

3 Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt*, 1.
9 Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt*, 12.


32 Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 47.


34 Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 47.

35 Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Life*, 47.


42 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 18.
43 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 18.
45 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 18.
49 See both: Lauters, *More than a Farmer’s Wife*; Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*. Both authors argue that farmwomen’s experiences are underexplored as part of the history of family farming.
53 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 18.
54 Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1999), 73.
55 McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place*, 73.
68 Grant, *Fundamental Feminism*, 39.
77 Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 3.
80 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 216.
81 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 214.
83 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 216.
86 Fink, *Open Country, Iowa*, 220.
Chapter III: Theoretical Frameworks

We perform multiple identities across time and space. Human beings gain insight into who they are and will become in their interactions with others in society. In this way, we are inherently social beings who regularly construct and reconstruct our identities.

Our everyday, social lives are filled with interactions that shape and ascribe meaning to our identities. In their interactions and perceptions, human beings derive meanings about the social world. Each time we engage in a social interaction we modify and develop meanings for future interactions. So, through interactions we also engage in a process of interpretation, which either maintains or alters our future behaviors. Finally, we tell stories about these interactions and experiences in order to make sense of them and implicitly reveal aspects about our identity. Over time, our stories alter and adapt in order to reflect the accumulation of our experiences. Through the use of language, we narrate stories about our social interactions and, in the process, construct and reconstruct our identities.

For a farm wife who lives and works on a family farm in western Illinois, identity is contingent on interactions with her family and community members. Her identity is tied to the everyday experiences in the rural countryside. Her everyday relationships with her husband and other family members, the family farm, and the rural community shape her identity. Just as any self, a farm wife’s selves too are created from past interactions that shape her future interactions. Her selves are a part of the social phenomenon of reality. Theorizing about reality and the formation of identities, sociologists Peter Berger
and Thomas Luckmann state that in any society, identities are embedded in the interpretations of reality.¹ They explain:

Identity is, of course, a key element of subjective reality and, like all subjective reality, stands in a dialectical relationship with society. Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations. The social processes involved in both the formation and the maintenance of identity are determined by the social structure. Conversely, the identities produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness and social structure react upon the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or even reshaping it.²

Through Berger and Luckmann’s definition, we understand that identity is formed and altered through social relations. We also more fully appreciate that reality is engendered with social structures that emerge in everyday life. Further, Berger and Luckmann’s contribution to our understanding of the formation of identity also posits that everyday interaction are typified by “specific social structures” like place.³ This denotes that our identities are also influenced by the structures and processes built into our reality like the community we call home, as well as our places of education and work.⁴

For a farmer’s wife, this means that the history and social processes of the family farm, alongside her social interactions with her family and community members, influence her identity. Explaining identity formation further, sociologist Norman Denzin states, “The personal is connected to the structural through biographical and interactional experiences.”⁵ And it is through stories that people reveal their everyday experiences and
also tell about their life and identity or selves. My intention in this project was to understand the everyday experiences of farm wives who live and work on family farms in rural western Illinois. I was curious about the stories the women would reveal about their interactions with family members, the family farm, and the rural community and how their stories constructed their identities as farm wives. In order to further understand their experiences, I drew on the theoretical frameworks of Symbolic Interactionism and Narrative Identity.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic Interactionism is a distinct theoretical approach to studying human interactions that emerged out of the philosophical approach called Pragmatism. It is a philosophy that posits that we understand and become who we are through processes of social interactions. A primary focus of Symbolic Interactionism is the study of the self. The interactions of the self in everyday experiences, according to Denzin are like a “window into the inner life of the person.” Through language, the self reveals personal experiences and relationships with cultural objects. American pragmatists George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and Charles Horton Cooley, among others, proposed that we learn and develop who we are in social interactions. They emphasized that we are active interpreters, changers, and developers of selves and identities. Therefore, central to Symbolic Interactionism is the understanding that the self is fundamentally social. Simply stated, Symbolic Interactionism considers how we conceive of ourselves and how our self-concept changes over time.
George Herbert Mead, in *Mind Self and Society*, explored the self as a development that arises out of social experiences and articulated that it is impossible for a self to arise outside of social experiences. For Mead, the self is not simply a mental product, rather a social object that comes to understand and constitute itself because of social experiences. He argued that the self is a member of the community and develops as well as adjusts to interactions in the social world. As the self develops, “strings of memories” also develop and are organized onto the self. These memories influence and help explain future behaviors. An individual cannot develop a self without a generalized other, which reflects a complex cooperative process of activities and organized behavior in society. Therefore, the generalized other represents the attitude of the whole community toward the self and other social processes. Essentially, individuals come to know who they are and become “selves” in interaction with others. This process also means that human beings have multiple identities that they enact over the course of their lives.

In *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Herbert Blumer argued that human beings make meaning in relationship to others, or in other words, meaning arises “in the processes of interactions.” A student of Mead, Blumer was arguably one of the most important contributors and disseminators of Symbolic Interactionism. Blumer argued that human beings were active interpreters who enacted various roles and identities in particular social situations. Blumer focused on the connection between human interactions and interpretative processes via three premises—(1) “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning they have for them,” (2) “the meaning of
such things is derived from, or arises out of, the interaction that one has with one’s fellows,” and (3) “meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things [s/he] encounters.”

Symbolic Interactionism affords me the means to focus attention to the interpretative communicative processes that are a part of meaning-making and understanding in social interactions.

By gathering stories from farmers’ wives who live and work on family farms, I sought to explore women’s stories as identity experiences rooted in familial and community interactions. I was interested in understanding how relational interactions with family members enhanced or constrained their sense of selfhood. Everyday interactions, Denzin explains, provide the “bare outlines of lived experiences” that are central to the “personal identity or the self-meanings of the person.”

I was committed to understanding how the women described their identity experiences. Denzin further states that these interactions include:

. . . relationships of love, hate, and competition, and ensembles of individual and collective action. These collective structures (ensembles) range from the series (unconnected persons) to gatherings and encounters to fused, pledged and organized groups to complex institutional structures (made of series, groups, and sovereign leaders) and social classes which synthesize institutional groups and series into emerging structures of collective social, moral, political, and economic awareness . . . A person’s location in the world of experience is organized into a body of localized, interactional practices which reify these relational-structural
forms. Such practices include doing work and gender, making love and being entertained.\textsuperscript{14}

Denzin explains that these taken-for-granted interactions and others are embedded into everyday life. These features structure patterns of thought, action, and interpretation.\textsuperscript{15} As such, I explored how a woman’s everyday experiences on a family farm, both as a home and place of business, contributed to their identity as a farm wife. I asked the women about their responsibilities, whether they changed over the years, and who, if anyone, taught them how to perform their labor. Finally, I embraced Denzin’s argument about the importance of understanding all structures embedded in reality, both micro and macro, as interactional production. Aligning myself with this argument allowed me to consider the complexity of women’s gendered experiences as they related to their relationships with family members, their farms, and communities.

\textit{Women’s Identity Experiences}

As a theoretical approach, Symbolic Interactionism allowed me to consider the women’s stories as deeply rooted in the social interactions that have/continue to shape their identity. In rural farming communities, a farm wife who is married must engage her self in relationship to her husband, his family, and the patriarchal farming community. Women who are from farming families also often grow up in deeply gendered households. From a young age, they are instructed on how to perform household labor and take care of children and males in the family. For all human beings, gender is an aspect of their culture. Highlighting the importance of gender, Denzin states: “Gender defines the social and cultural meanings brought to each anatomical sex class, children
learn that is, how to “pass as” and “act as: members of their assigned sexual category.” Homes and the family farm are spaces bound with masculine and feminine gender role expectations and distinctions. These distinctions are often linked with the contestation as well as exclusion of women: That is, women are always enmeshed in patriarchal spaces and with/against patriarchal forces that urge subordination and conformity. Gendered contexts force women to understand their identities within a complex, multi-layered patriarchal setting that is ever present in the US.

Farm wives come to understand their identities through a process that is deeply influenced by the patriarchal structures of a rural farming community and family farm. Political scientist and philosopher Seyla Benhabib contends that women must construct their identities by “weaving together conflicting narratives and allegiances into a unique life history.” In The Claims of Culture, Benhabib explains that a woman’s identity is influenced by narratives that often “veil women’s situations” by celebrating the romanticized myths of family, community, and farming that lay praise to the lives of men. Women’s identities (and to an extent, all minority identities) are a recursive product of culturally and historically specific patriarchal narratives. For these reasons, women’s stories are largely untold or forgotten—whether selectively or intentionally.

In order to understand the farm wives’ experiences, I paid careful attention to the stories they told about their identities. For the purposes of this project, I maintained Benhabib’s notion that narratives about the self are “not ahistorical but cultural and historically specific, inflected by the master narratives of family structure and gender roles into which each individual is thrown.” The women’s stories revealed how their
identities were related to relationships, spaces, and socio/political history. Symbolic Interactionism provides a framework for understanding the processes of identity construction. As a complimentary theoretical approach, Narrative Identity explains that through stories we reveal our individually situated experiences in the social world.

Narrative Identity

Narrative is an act of storytelling. Through stories we are able to share our self or identity. In *Making Stories: Law, Literature and Life*, psychologist Jerome Bruner explains that in everyday vernacular, the self appears self-evident, but it is in reality far more complex. In fact, Bruner posits that far too often the self is mistakenly treated as an essential self or “one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words.”21 Through stories we continue the inquiry into the development of the self. Bruner states:

. . . we constantly construct and reconstruct ourselves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future. Telling oneself about oneself is like making up a story about who and what we are, what’s happened and why we’re doing what we’re doing. It is not that we have to make up these stories from scratch each time. Our self-making stories accumulate over time, even pattern themselves on conventional genres.22

Through narratives we share stories about our selves and construct and reconstruct our identities. Bruner explains that we use stories to tell the happenings in our lives because human beings are inherently storytellers. Stories provide a level of “flexibility” and “malleability” in order to share comedic, tragic, romantic, ironic or any other human
experience.\textsuperscript{23} As an interactional experience, storytelling is generative and encourages many different stories to be told and re-told.

Narrative theory posits that we tell stories about our identities. We use narratives as a powerful means for accessing, sense-making, and representing our experiences. Sociologist Laurel Richardson explains that narrative provides human beings the means to access and represent—(1) the everyday; (2) the autobiographical; (3) the biographical; (4) the cultural; and (5) the collective story.\textsuperscript{24} In her essay “Narrative and Sociology,” Richardson further explains the following five narrative experiences:

1. “In everyday life, narrative articulates how actors go about their rounds and accomplish tasks.”

2. \textit{Second}, “autobiographical narrative is how people articulate how the past is related to the present. Narrative organizes the experiences of time into a personal historicity.”

3. \textit{Third}, “because people can narrativize their own lives, the possibility of understanding other people’s lives as also biographically organized arises. Social and generational cohesion, as well as social change depend upon this ability to empathize with the life stories of others.”

4. \textit{Fourth}, “participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture, a general understanding of the stock of meanings and their relationships to each other. The process of storytelling creates and supports a social world.”
5. *Fifth,* “the collective story displays an individual’s story by narrativising the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs, rather than by telling the particular individual’s story or by simply retelling the cultural story.”\(^{25}\)

In reality, these five different types of human experience are not distinct but overlap and intersect. Through narrative, human beings are simultaneously able to access and represent these different types of experiences. Richardson encourages scholars to consider narratives not as something that can be found, but as meanings that are constituted by language and values that emerge in a process of inquiry.\(^{26}\) Her line of reasoning is critical to my understanding of the capacity of narrative to serve as a means through which human beings communicate and organize their lived experiences with others.

Narratives also carry with them and re-create temporal worlds that allow both the teller and the interpreter to experience the story’s relationship with time. The act of telling a story creates a temporal dimension with the interpreter, but also unlocks and allows the teller to re-live, re-experience, and re-remember memories. Explaining the importance of narrative storytelling, Richardson states: “Narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes; it humanizes time; and it allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions, and to alter the directions of our lives.”\(^{27}\) In order to appreciate the lived experiences of farm wives, I was committed to understanding their identity narratives in relationship to time. After all, time is the very basis from which human beings make sense of their experiences.\(^{28}\) Human beings understand their experiences in relationship to
the past, present, and future. Explaining the importance of time, Richardson states that a narrative about one’s life “gives meaning to the past from the point of view from the present.”29 Through telling narratives, human beings are able to make sense of their lived experiences in order to comprehend, order, and make connections with other events and other human beings.

Part of the fabric of narratives is the temporal dimension. Human beings tell stories about their lives in relationship to experiences, memories, fears, or hopes. Recalling and retelling life experiences that have occurred or discussing concerns about the future links time with identity construction. In “Autobiographical Time,” psychologist Jens Brockmeier explains that when narratives are told, there is a back-and-forth between past and present memories and events that engages identity construction.30 In this way, narratives may or may not follow a linear time line. Instead, Brockmeier states that narratives may rely on circular, cyclical, spiral, static, or fragments of time.31 Further clarifying the importance of identity and time for narratives, Brockmeier states:

Looking closer at autobiographical narratives we find, moreover, that these constructions are not so much about time but about times. They encompass and evoke a number of different forms and orders of time, creating a multi-layered weave of human temporality.32

Through narratives, multiple temporal dimensions may be engaged which illustrates the complexity of human life. The stories from women who live and work on family farms in rural western Illinois simultaneously might include their past, present, and future experiences. Their identity narratives reflect the different modalities of time that are
interwoven among one another. After all, a narrative that is told about the past “is always also a story told in, and about, the present as well as story about the future.”

Narratives allow individuals to understand the narrative fabric of identity construction and this reflexivity depends on time modalities. The temporal interaction that occurs during the telling of narratives suggests that identity is therefore not simply a construction, but a reflexive experience that is based on an intertwinement of the here and now and the past as it is remembered.

*Women’s Identity Narratives*

Through eliciting stories from farmers’ wives, I sought to understand how they described their experiences living and working on family farms. My desire was to become conscious of the stories a farm wife told about her marriage, family, farm, and community. I considered the following questions as part of my inquiry: What stories did she tell about family challenges or triumphs? How did she come to know her responsibilities on the farm? Autobiographical narratives or self-narratives are well suited for narrative inquiry because they focus on the self and have an interrelationship with memory and time.

Narrative theorist Mark Freeman states that autobiographical narratives unquestionably reference the “inner landscape” of an individual’s existence.

Freeman explains:

> Put in the simplest of terms, in autobiographical understanding there is no object, no “text,” outside the self; even though the autobiographer may draw on certain personal documents and the like during the course of fashioning his or her story, the phenomenon that is ultimately of concern—namely one’s personal past—must
itself be fashioned through poiesis, that is, through the interpretive and imaginative labor of meaning making.\textsuperscript{38} Thus, the storyteller (a farm wife, for my project) relies on memories to construct identity narratives. An important part of the identity narratives, Freeman argues, is the “expression of the innermost dimensions of the self.”\textsuperscript{39} Through the process of recalling memories and recovering time, an individual attempts to construct complex experiences and wrestle with self-judgments and self-appraisals in the narrative process.\textsuperscript{40} Finally, Freeman cautions us to remember that women’s stories are often disembodied, so their self-narratives require an appreciation and sensitivity to the ideologies and institutions that gender women’s lives. In this way, self-narratives can reveal as much about the innermost self as the narrator can acknowledge and recognize—ideologies are powerfully constraining features of reality.

Narrative theory is an appropriate framework for examining and understanding women’s stories. Further detailing the possibility of self-narratives, communication scholar Arthur Bochner explains that they can reveal the struggles between personal and cultural meanings as they are constructed, defined, and uniquely situated.\textsuperscript{41} In “Narrative Virtues,” Bochner explains that self-narratives can allow an individual to reveal how she or he must negotiate the spaces of dominant cultural scripts that are constructed and defined for them.\textsuperscript{42} Narratives can teach about “the personal, cultural, and political” struggles that are a part of a person’s life.\textsuperscript{43} For farm wives, this conceptualization about the possibility of narrative is powerful because women are always negotiating spaces with patriarchal gender scripts. Stories, Bochner states, reflect the “profound significant
virtues of narrative in the project of self-understanding.\textsuperscript{44} By gathering identity narratives from women who live and work on a family farm, we can learn how family, community, and farming culture influence farmwomen’s identities. The stories from these women can teach us about their uniquely situated experiences and the lives they seek to represent.

Narrative is well suited for understanding life’s everyday contingencies, emotions, political/social influences, and the mundane of the everyday. In his essay “Criteria Against Ourselves,” Bochner notes that human beings narrate stories to “make sense of experiences over the course of time.”\textsuperscript{45} In my project, I was committed to understanding a farm wife’s experiences across her lifetime. I sought to gain a nuanced perspective of how the performance of her role as a farm wife was affected, if at all, over time. While gathering oral histories, I embraced Bochner’s tenet that the purpose of self-narratives is to extract meaning from “experiences rather than to depict an experience exactly as it was lived.”\textsuperscript{46} With this tenet in mind, I maintain that a self-narrative is not tasked with deciding between so-called good or bad narratives, instead, as author Freeman suggests, it has “aims of practicing fidelity to the human experience.”\textsuperscript{47} This point is important especially when interviewing women who are often underrepresented or muted in history. Women’s experiences often are not a part of widely accepted grand narratives. The purpose of gathering narratives is not to mirror or directly reflect history, but to provide participants a space to share their lived experiences. There, the process of telling a self-narrative is also an experience because the participants use language to best fit their re-remembered experiences.
Conclusion

Taken together the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism and Narrative theory allow for an inductive understanding of the identity experiences of farm wives by considering their identity/s as socially constructed in interactions. Symbolic Interactionism fundamentally provides an understanding of the self as created and re-created through social experiences. Narrative theory considers the importance of temporality, social/political influences, and social interactions in the process of identity construction. Further, Symbolic Interactionism and Narrative are connected through understanding the self as a performative ongoing experience of composing, creating, re-creating, and re-remembering through stories. Put simply, these two theories allow me to understand the identity narratives from farmers’ wives as socially constructed experiences that are connected to yet other experiences, and interactions.

6 Denzin, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies, 2.
7 Denzin, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies, 3.
9 Mead, Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, 135.
10 Mead, Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist, 134.
12 Blumer, Symbolic Interactionism, 2.
14 Denzin, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies, 28.
15 Denzin, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies, 27.
16 Denzin, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies, 29.
20 Benhabib, The Claims of Culture, 15.
22 Bruner, Making Stories, 65.
23 Bruner, Making Stories, 31.
27 Richardson, “Narrative and Sociology,” 117.
29 Richardson, “Narrative and Sociology,” 126.
33 Brockmeier, “Autobiographical Time,” 56.
37 Freeman, “Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry,” 130.
38 Freeman, “Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry,” 129.
39 Freeman, “Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry,” 130.
40 Freeman, “Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry,” 130.
42 Bochner, “Narrative’s Virtues,” 147.
43 Bochner, “Narrative’s Virtues,” 147.
44 Bochner, “Narrative’s Virtues,” 154.
46 Bochner, “Criteria Against Ourselves,” 270.
47 Freeman, “Autobiographical Understanding and Narrative Inquiry,” 134.
Chapter IV: Research Practices

Prior to my fieldwork, I never gave the weather much thought. A warm or hot sun was merely the backdrop to my day. As a graduate student, I am freed of any interdependent relationship with the weather. Unlike the farmers’ wives, I do not find the weather precluding me from completing my reading, writing, or teaching. I came to realize that my life was remarkably different from my participants in this way and in many other ways, too. I listened to stories about flat-line winds that knocked down miles of corn but left perfectly square plots of farmland untouched. The fickle nature of the weather systems in the region was part of my participants’ stories about farming.

Whereas machinery and seeds have modified and eased some of the hardships of farming, the weather is not so easily harnessed or tamed—it demands respect. Lillian, a farmer’s wife from Warren County, told me a story about tornado winds that scattered a half-dozen round bales of hay and left nearly every tree on the farm speared with pieces of hay. Wringing her hands, she said “It looked like straw darts.” An event like this was a reminder of the power and unpredictability nature of the weather in the rural countryside.

Every farm wife told stories about respecting and understanding the weather.

Weather and the terrain are integral to the farm wives’ stories. The terrain is outwardly simple and unassuming. There are no rolling hills or deep valleys or rock cut formations. Many of the old timber woods were logged out decades ago, and just a few old growth trees are scattered across the landscape. For miles and miles lie flat farm fields with a few shallow creeks. The nutrient-rich black dirt seemed hardly worth describing, but close to tears Joy asked me, “Have you ever smelled fresh overturned
“dirt?” This would be the first of many times that a farm wife would ask me this question. The smell of the dirt was part of the story. Over the course of my fieldwork, I realized that all features of the landscape, from the black dirt to the wire fences and barns, were part of the family farming story. The weather and the landscape were not merely the backdrop—they were the everyday fabric of their lives as farmers’ wives.

Finding the Field

I become familiar with the western Illinois countryside through my fiancé, Keith. More than eight years ago during winter break, I took my first trip out to the region to visit him and his mother, Laurie; his father, Kurt; and his grandfather, Jay. Since I was not from the area I immediately became curious about the cultural differences that I noticed from my own lived experiences. There are vastness and openness to the region that are dissimilar to my hometown in northern Illinois. I immediately noticed variances in terms of population, infrastructure, and the isolation of communities. I began to get interested in the culture of the rural countryside. Homes were remarkably far apart and the nearest grocery store was over twenty minutes away. The signs for towns on Highway 67 pointed down gravel roads with no indication of human life. The physical terrain of the region was also different from my hometown because of the farming industry. Across Warren, Mercer, Henderson, and Knox Counties in western Illinois the primary industry is grain, cattle or hog farming. Over the years, through the stories from Keith and his family, I learned more about the rural countryside, the people who lived there, and the farming industry. Even after so many years and my months in the field, I still find the countryside unfamiliar.
When I decided to pursue this project and interview farmers’ wives, I spoke with Laurie, who has lived in the area her entire life. For more than sixty-years, she has lived and worked within a thirty-mile radius of her childhood home in Monmouth, Illinois. Although she is not from a farming family and did not marry a farmer, many of her friends, neighbors, and co-workers were connected to the local farming industry. Her role as a gatekeeper and insider in the community was critical to my access to participants. Frequently during my fieldwork, I felt my participants identify my outsider status through their comments about my clothes, pronunciation, or misunderstandings about farming life. These experiences were confirmation of my outsider status and Laurie’s importance to my fieldwork. Laurie vouched for my identity, which eased many participants’ apprehension of interviewing with me.

*Travels with Laurie*

Each morning our travels began with Laurie and me sitting on the front porch or at the kitchen table planning the day. Each of us had a cup of coffee in hand and lists of confirmed or potential participants. First, Laurie would explain to me where the farm was located and then share her relational history with that particular farm wife. Most often, Laurie would call one or two women and after exchanging greetings, pass me the phone to ask the farm wife if she would be interested in participating in an interview. If the woman agreed, I would write down her name, address, and check with Laurie about dates. The distance between participants’ homes was far greater than I realized. From Laurie’s house, we would travel between twenty to forty-five minutes to see a participant. After scheduling two interviews too close together, I relied more on Laurie’s knowledge
about the area. As an insider, Laurie knew the geography of the area and helped me schedule interviews appropriately.

Figure 2: Summer Drive with Laurie in the Rural Countryside.

Laurie was my guide, gatekeeper, and companion. She spent hours driving me around unidentified gravel or dirt roads in the countryside. When she was not driving, she was waiting for hours in the car knitting, reading, or playing scrabble while I interviewed each participant. Traveling together to and from nearly all of the participants’ homes provided me with an additional layer of understanding about living in the rural area.

Sometime near the beginning of my fieldwork, I spoke with a participant who provided me with a rural route address. Naively, I wrote down the address believing that it was simply the name for addresses in the countryside. Fortunately for me, Laurie knew where the farm wife lived because as I eventually learned, a rural route address did not locate
the house in the landscape. Laurie explained that even though today 911 emergency services required all homes to be numbered with house numbers, many people did not use this number. Instead they used their rural route address that was assigned by the postal service or they used their township number. The rural route address was assigned by the postal service for the purposes of mail delivery. Prior to 911 emergency services, farms were assigned a rural route address and a township number. A placard like the one depicted in Figure 3 from Karen’s farm was placed on a stake near the roadside.

![Figure 3: Rural Route Address Sign From Karen’s Farm.](image)

I learned that a rural route address or township number is a virtually meaningless identifier, unless you are from the rural countryside. Laurie clarified that a Global Positioning System (GPS) could not identify a rural route address because it was not
based on map coordinates. However, many farm wives adopted the rural route address as the identifier of their home rather than their 911 address. I encountered a number of participants who provided me with a rural route address, but because of Laurie’s insider knowledge I knew to clarify and ask for a 911 emergency services address. Finally, although Laurie was my primary insider and guide in the rural western Illinois countryside, Grandpa Jay and Kurt also participated in driving me to interviews. Many times, they collaborated to identify the location of a participant’s farm with little more than the description of a barn, hazardous intersection, berm (slight hill), or a creek as landmarks.

Qualitative Bricolage

I utilized multiple methodologies in order to understand the experiences of farmers’ wives living and working on family farms in western Illinois. The French term bricoleur, according to Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, denotes the “multiple methodical practices of qualitative research.” Further, I embraced the insights from Denzin and Lincoln that a bricoleur combines multiple methodologies in an effort to represent a rich, rigorous, and complex montage of meanings in my project. I find their explanation valuable in clarifying my use of multiple methodologies in order to respect and represent the complexity of the lives of my participants. Denzin and Lincoln explain that a “qualitative-researcher as bricoleur” produces “a bricolage, that is, a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation.” Recognizing the complexity of the lives of my participants, I conducted oral history interviews and participant-observation, which included farm tours, fairs, community
events, and archival research. I subsequently documented these experiences in various types of field notes and photography. This is demonstrated in my thematic chapters, where I weave together interview stories, fieldwork experiences, and participant observations to represent a theoretically rich understanding of my participants’ lives.

Whereas the *bricolage* explains my rationale for employing multiple methodologies in this project, it is also important to clarify that I accept the entwined nature of oral history and ethnography. This is worth mentioning because I have presented separate discussions of each method in this chapter. Even though the individual descriptions may seem distinct, I understand oral history and ethnography as complex, crossing boundaries, and borrowing from one another. In an era characterized by blurred genres, I experience methods such as oral history and ethnography as no longer isolated, but rather interdisciplinary, overlapping, and messy. In his foundational essay “Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought,” Clifford Geertz explains that scholarly fields are no longer:

. . . natural kinds, fixed types divided by sharp qualitative differences, we more and more see ourselves surrounded by a vast almost continuous field of variously intended and diversely constructed works we can order only partially, relationally, and as our purposes prompt us. It is not that we no longer have conventions of interpretation; we have more than ever, built—often enough jerry-built—to accommodate a situation at once fluid, plural, uncentered, and ineradicably untidy.
The blurring of genres discussed by Geertz is useful in appreciating the complementary relationship between oral history and ethnography. The two methods are comprised of distinct tenets that reflect their respective origins in history and anthropology; however, both share a commitment for gathering stories from human beings rendered invisible or ignored by society. Finally, oral history and ethnography share a value for stories and observations and in this way, overlap in methodological and theoretical approaches.

Oral History

Oral history is a specific social research method that allows for stories to be uncovered and revealed from an individual perspective. The method is predicated on gathering stories of everyday life that are undocumented and subsequently archiving them for future generations. Historically, cultures have utilized oral history storytelling to record events and pass traditions down from one generation to another. In this way, the method pre-dates its use in the fields of anthropology, history, sociology, and social geography, among others. Prior to acceptance of oral history, many western historians and researchers failed to recognize the importance of collecting stories from individuals’ memories. Oral history is now a well-respected methodology and is utilized in many academic fields for gathering stories across a wide array of topics. My goal was to collect oral histories from farm wives to add to our collective understanding about their gendered experiences on American family farms in western Illinois. I also subsequently provided the interview transcripts to each participant for her family history records.

In the summer of 2015, I conducted twenty-five oral history interviews with farmers’ wives. Interviews primarily took place at the women’s homes or another
location of their choice. Women ranged in age from twenty-five to eighty-eight years old. Additional demographic information as well as a concise biography for each participant is located in Appendix A. It is noteworthy that some of my participants were related through marriage and farmed together, a factor that is in line with the culture of family farming. All women lived on family farms in Warren, Mercer, Henderson, or Knox Counties. I began my fieldwork with ten participant names from Laurie, and subsequently utilized snowball-sampling procedures to solicit additional participants. At the end of each interview, I asked each participant if she knew anyone else who might like to participate. This yielded more than twenty-five more participant names. Upon receiving written consent, all interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed (see Appendix B for the interview protocol). My interviews were an average of two hours in length and resulted in 429 single-spaced pages of transcription about the women’s lives.

Conducting oral history interviews is a performative process that engages both the interviewer and interviewee. As the researcher, I framed and engaged my participants with clarifying and probing questions to engage their memories about family farming. When my participants re-remembered stories to share with me, we experienced what oral historian and performance scholar Della Pollock explains as “making history in dialogue” or “the heart of oral history.” My participants would frequently respond to my questions and through the process of their storytelling they would remember other stories. For many, the act of telling stories from decades old memories was emotional and at times unsettling, as stories connected the past with the present. Through Pollock’s theorizing of oral history performance, I also recognize the process as “co-creative, co-embodied,
specially framed, contextually, and intersubjectively contingent.” In this way, my presence as a researcher was part of the “doing through saying” of oral history interviewing which reflects the commitment of this method to collect subjective historical identity experiences. Each interview created and re-created a sensuous space between my participant and myself. The interpersonal space, although initiated artificially, was viscerally charged with telling and listening—the performance of oral history.

Almost immediately after I began meeting with farmers’ wives, I realized that the process of oral history interviewing was dissimilar from in-depth interviews. In part, one explanation forwarded by oral historian Linda Shopes is that oral history interviews are “open-ended, subjective, historically inflected” and “let the narrator define the plot of his or her own story for the historical record.” I found that many women were nervous about speaking with me because they felt they could not accurately explain the history or the present day operations of their farm. Many wives would go so far as to have short handwritten notes about their farm so they could “get it right.” With oral history interviews, unlike in-depth interviews that are often topically focused, my participants provided a lifespan of subjective life experiences related to family farming.

Although Laurie helped me secure participants who were willing to participate, nearly every woman would convey her hesitancy by stating (1) I don’t know anything about farming, (2) I don’t work on the farm, and (3) explain that I should speak with her husband. Even though nearly every woman said this to me, my shortest interview was two hours long. In an effort to clarify the method of oral history, Shopes in the essay “Oral History” proposes the following six tenets to describe the interviewing method:
1. It is, *first*, an interview, an exchange between someone who asks questions, that is, the interviewer, and someone who answers them, referred to as the interviewee, narrator, or informant.

2. *Second*, oral history is recorded, retained for the record, and made accessible to others for a variety of uses.

3. *Third*, oral history interviewing is historical in intent; that is, it seeks new knowledge about and insights into the past through an individual biography.

4. *Fourth*, oral history is understood as both an act of memory and an inherently subjective account of the past.

5. *Fifth*, an oral history interview is an inquiry in depth.

6. *Finally*, oral history is fundamentally oral, reflecting both the conventions and dynamics of the spoken word.¹²

Maintaining these tenets, I additionally crafted an interview protocol that posed questions across the domains of childhood, marriage, family, challenges and successes in life, the farm, life in the rural countryside, and finally religious beliefs. As the interview unfolded, I also encouraged my participants to share other stories that they felt would help me understand the life of a farmer’s wife. Often these stories were about present day goings-on at the farm or relational challenges in the family. At the end of each interview, I would also ask each participant if there was anything that I had failed to ask about. Although a simple question, it was often meaningful and resulted in many participants sharing additional stories through the use of photo albums and family artifacts.
From the inception of this project to its end, I was committed to gathering stories about farm wives’ lives that revealed their gendered experiences. Throughout this process, I embraced the feminist principles forwarded by women’s studies scholar Susan Geiger, who contends that as a feminist endeavor, oral history “will encompass radical, respectful, newly accessible truths, and realities about women’s lives.” Oral history becomes a feminist methodology, according to Geiger, when the interview is gender focused, concerned with studying women as they embody and create specific realities, and when the interviewer accepts women’s own interpretations of their identities.

Through implementing Geiger’s ideas, I emphasized a feminist oral history interviewing approach in which I employed understanding rather than control, opening/s rather than closing/s, and resisted inclinations to generalize my participants experiences. Further enhancing my use of oral history as a feminist methodology, oral historians Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack assert that the method provides women an opportunity to articulate their own story in their own language. Further, Anderson and Jack explain:

A woman’s discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men’s dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman’s personal experiences.

During the interview process, I listened to women’s experiences “in stereo,” which Anderson and Jack explain as fundamentally important for hearing both the “dominant and muted channels” of women’s perspectives. Frequently, my participants would tell conflicting stories about their experiences as farm wives. Many women would
narrate stories that illustrated the importance of their role for the success of the farm, but also articulated the demeaning reality of being treated as “just the farmer’s wife.” By listening to their stories “in stereo,” I heard stories that illustrated feelings of social isolation and separation, attitudes of anger and frustration about failing to receive recognition for labor, and disappointment about the lack of opportunities on the farm. I was intent on paying careful attention to women’s subjective experiences, and in doing so, I heard stories that were at once complementary and contradictory.

Finally, I enacted a feminist oral history interviewing frame as detailed by feminist scholar Kristina Minster, who argues that interviewing women requires sensitivity to women’s experiences. In her essay “A Feminist Frame for Interviews,” Minster asserts that a feminist oral historian must reject any expectations or assumptions about the oral history interview. Keeping Minster’s argument in mind, during each interview I avoided inserting my own stories or analyses or guiding my participants’ responses to fit my expectations. I also sought to avoid generalizing the women’s identity narratives and rather treated their stories as interpretations of their social world. To the best of my ability, I provided my participants with time to think and narrate their stories without feeling pressure from me to answer in a particular manner. In this way, I rejected the desire to solely control the interview and instead sought a cooperative co-constructed process with my participants.

Ethnographic Practices

Ethnography is an interdisciplinary set of research practices that are well suited for my oral history project because of its focus on examining and understanding everyday
human experiences. It is a tradition that historian James Clifford articulates as “inherently partial—committed and incomplete.” As an ethnographer, I enmeshed myself into the culture of family farming and continually interrogated my understandings and experiences with my participants. James Clifford broadly defines ethnography as:

…actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genres. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of the processes.

While I had a broad sense of my field before my project, I gained a different sense of intimacy and familiarity with the space during my two months of fieldwork. For those months, I was no longer a visitor but a researcher. During the interviews, I never pried or forced my participants to tell stories against their will. When a farm wife said, “I need a break” or “I can’t talk about this anymore,” I did not further question her. Instead, I relinquished power to my participants, and in my doing so, they guided their stories at their own pace. However, I also accept that it was impossible for me to completely relinquish my power as a researcher during the interview process. My positionality and the subjectivity of my participants were part of a power relationship that I took seriously and critically considered as I listened and subsequently wrote stories about the women’s lives.

I was committed to gathering stories about women’s lives from women in order to understand their experiences. I embraced the foundational principles laid forth by
ethnographers: James Clifford, George Marcus, Vincent Crapanzano, and Paul Rabinow among others, but I also incorporated the critical thoughts and insights of feminist anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran. Carefully critiquing Clifford and others, Visweswaran, in “Fictions of Feminist Ethnography,” argues that ethnography has failed to recognize that when a woman writes about women, the stories are always subjective.\textsuperscript{23} As an outsider and someone from the “city,” I spent time by necessity participating in experiences with the farmers’ wives. I helped bottle-feed baby calves, road in tractors, and drove All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) on the farm with the women. In this way, my fieldwork experiences were critical to my analyses and the shaping of my participants’ first-person narratives.\textsuperscript{24} A feminist ethnography, Visweswaran maintains, should “focus on women’s relationships to other women, and the power differentials between them.”\textsuperscript{25} Aligned with this feminist commitment, I sought to understand and investigate the daily lives of farmers’ wives and the systems of power that obscure their experiences. Through their stories, I remained keenly attuned to the ways family members created and reproduced systems of power that subjugated the women.

Throughout the stories in this project, I thought deeply about the ways in which I represented the women’s lives. I paid careful attention to the situatedness of their stories, as they are embedded in pre-existing and on-going political, social, personal, and local histories. I took note of how my participants described family relationships, challenges on the farm, and changes in the rural countryside. I sought to write in a way that utilized rich and thick descriptions of the women’s experiences and to present them not as an entire fixed-story or culture, but as ethnographic moments. The ethnographic moments are
carefully attended to by Dwight Conquergood’s idea of the importance of presenting the bodily experiences of fieldwork rather than privileging theory and literature. I drew from Conquergood’s essay “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical and Cultural Politics” and presented my fieldwork experiences as an embodied practice that is an “intensely sensuous way of knowing.” The stories in the following thematic chapters – Chapter V, “Co-Farmers”, Chapter VI, “The Farmer’s Wife”, Chapter VII, “Outsiders,” and Chapter VIII, “Changes,” – present intimate connections between my participants and myself and are not smoothed out into expository prose, but instead reflect the “interpersonal contingencies and experiential give-and-take” of my field experiences with my participants. In this way, the women’s stories are laced with their emotions and feelings along with my reflections and observations.

As part of my oral history project, I completed a series of fieldwork experiences in addition to conducting twenty-five oral history interviews. Much of my fieldwork was inspired by details from my participants’ stories. While in the field for two-months, I involved myself in local activities in order to gain an understanding of the daily lives of farm wives and community members. In the Art of Fieldwork, anthropologist Harry Wolcott argues that fieldwork is revealed by intention rather than location and adds: fieldwork is a form of inquiry in which one is immersed personally in the ongoing social activities of some individual or group for the purposes of research.

Fieldwork is characterized by personal involvement to achieve a level of understanding that will be shared with others.
During my fieldwork, I attended formal events such as a rhubarb festival and a pottery and ceramic bazaar. Along with Laurie, I was also invited to attend multiple retirement parties for well-known teachers in the area. During my fieldwork, I also toured the “Chicken Scratch” art studio and the Viola Museum. In addition, I visited Alexis Fire Equipment, which is one of the only non-agricultural employers in the area. Many of my participants explained how the company kept the town of Alexis from entirely disappearing, so with the help of Keith’s dad, Kurt, I toured the facility. In June, the company hosted an anniversary party and because Kurt works there, I attended the cookout and informally spoke with employees who were also part-time farmers.

These events allowed me to be visible, approachable, and to informally chat with community members about my project. As an outsider, I was cognizant of the importance of building a rapport with my participants, but also with the community, too. I informally chatted with people when I went “into town” to have lunch or when I purchased snacks from the Cardinal Convenience store. During all of these experiences, I engaged in participant observations and to the best of my ability displayed an artful role as a researcher in which I used empathy, patience, and everyday courtesy. In order to become further acquainted with the area, I also often heard about local happenings like ice cream socials and boxed lunch or dinner fundraisers. These community experiences helped me to think more carefully about life in the rural western Illinois countryside.

Frequently, during an interview a farm wife would tell me about places in the community that I should visit. My participants frequently noted the one-room schoolhouse they attended as an important site for me to visit. Nearly all of my fifty and
older participants attended one-room schoolhouses and through their stories fondly remembered walking to school on foot or by donkey. The rural countryside of Warren, Mercer, and Henderson Counties was originally organized with a church and one-room schoolhouse every one-square mile. The area was laid out when farmers farmed between eighty to one hundred and sixty acres, and so schools and churches were built in walking distance. As farms grew in size and after years of neglect and abandonment, nearly all of the original one-room schoolhouses and churches were torn down. Today, only a few one-room schoolhouses and churches remain operational in the rural western Illinois countryside.

Figure 4: One-Room School Class Photograph. Bottom Row, Far Left is Sophia’s Husband Tom. Same Row, Far Right is Sophia.
Although I heard many stories about one-room schoolhouses, I was mesmerized by Sophia’s story about attending the Pleasant Green Schoolhouse as a first grader with her future husband who was a second grader. As the only first grader in the school, she told stories about being picked on by him and having her lunch stolen by his best friend. These stories brought the one-room schoolhouse back to life. After her interview, Sophia shared photographs with me and explained how the entire school would take a school photo. Sharing these informal moments with my participants helped them re-remember and tell additional stories after the interview.

I was intentional about some of the experiences I wanted to have during my fieldwork. Often, Laurie suggested places to visit and we would set off for the day to, in her words, “just explore.” As a self-proclaimed explorer, she told me how she loved driving around on remote roads in the countryside. Together, we explored a lot of one-lane country roads looking at barns, silos, and old farmhouses. After a week of being in the field, Laurie’s mother, Anne, asked me to visit a farmer’s wife who lived in her retirement home. Jeanne was Anne’s neighbor, puzzle partner, and a famed baker in the retirement home. She was also a farmer’s wife from Warren County. After spending a morning eating cookies and drinking coffee with Jeanne, I learned that she used to sharecrop with her husband and their landlord. Through my research and stories from my participants, I became aware of this obsolete farming practice. Sharecropping was a widespread farming practice in western Illinois in which a landlord rented farmland to a tenant in exchange for a percentage of the crop profits.
Although Jeanne was a farmer’s wife, the stories she wanted to share were about her late husband and his toy farm implement collection. Each tractor had a story about how or why it was acquired. The Farmall tractor pictured in Figure 5 was a gift from their neighbors after her husband’s open-heart surgery. In her small one-bedroom apartment, photos of her late husband’s tractors had a prominent place on top of her curio cabinet. I learned from Jeanne that there are times when being in the field is less about the interview and has more to do with being, listening, and observing. Jeanne was a farmer’s wife, but she resisted talking about her experience or the farm. The death of her husband, her son’s farming accident, and the death of her grand-daughter seemed to preclude Jeanne from accessing memories about farming or being a farmer’s wife. Jeanne had stories she needed to tell, and on three subsequent occasions I came back to her apartment, ate cookies, drank coffee, and listened.

*Figure 5:* One of the Many Farmall Tractors in Jeanne’s Home.
Throughout my fieldwork, I traveled everywhere with small field notebooks and my camera. I took notes about my interactions with my participants and photographed my everyday experiences in the field. In his “Notes on (Field) Notes” James Clifford argues that fieldnotes and photographs illustrate the “orders and disorders of fieldwork.” While Clifford hesitates to define a systematic process for taking fieldnotes, he nevertheless asserts the importance for the “writing down, writing over or writing up” of ethnographic work.” We further glean from his essay that ethnographers should consider the entire fieldnote process as “intertexual, collaborative, and rhetorical.” The process of writing while in the field allowed me to think through the complexities of relationships, my own understandings or misunderstandings, and taken for granted assumptions.

In order to distinguish my different types of fieldnotes, I framed them according to the suggestions of Clifford as moments of “inscription, transcription, and description.” Before, during, and after each interview, I scribbled down inscription or scratch notes about my field experiences. Often my scratch notes were nothing more than a few phrases or fleeting ideas that I was considering. Next, during each interview, I engaged in transcription or representations about my interactions with my participants. These notes were often based on my senses and reflected smells from the farm, sounds I heard in the home, or visual observations in the home or on the farm. Finally, I wrote down description or short analytical notes that engaged in sense-making about what I believed the story described about broader rural, farming, and women’s culture.

In addition to note-taking, I also used photography to visually represent my experiences in the field. As I navigated the countryside, I took 194 photographs. Some
photographs were of scenery or farm structures that I found reflected important moments from my participants’ stories. Other photographs were of goings-on about the farm that I observed or artifacts on the property that reflected the history of the family farm. I also asked each woman about objects that described her identity as a farm wife. Frequently there were many objects, so I photographed them. I photographed everything from antique tractor toys and wood wagon wheels, to Depression glassware, furniture, and paintings. Frequently, this resulted in many of my participants sharing additional stories as result of the object(s). Finally, at the end of each day, I would collate all of my notes with my interview protocol, so that I could holistically examine them. At night, I would write more thorough analytical notes about the meanings of my experiences and contemplations about my own insights. Frequently, in these notes, I questioned, challenged, and explored the stories I heard that day or from the days prior.

*Archival Research*

In order to provide an additional layer of texture and depth to my inductive analysis, I also completed formal archival research at the Warren and Mercer County historical societies. I spent many afternoons at the historical societies researching the history of the region, centennial and sesquicentennial farms, and local farming communities. With assistance from genealogists, I was also able to locate fragments of my participants’ ancestral histories. For example, I located the newspaper articles announcing the declaration of Neely and Sally’s centennial farms by the Illinois Department of Agriculture. After I found these announcements, I more fully realized the significance of centennial and sesquicentennial farms.
When the farms were declared, the nearby communities and neighbors came to the farm to honor the families. My archival research helped me contextualize the women’s stories with the history of western Illinois countryside. In Chapter VII, “Changes,” I relied heavily on my archival research to understand how corporate and farm-finishing operations changed the rural countryside. By examining farm plat books, I traced how the overall number of family farms decreased through the years. I also recognized the family farms that withstood the advancements to machinery and changes to farming practices. Visually inspecting the farm plat books was useful because they illustrated the material changes that were a part of many of the women’s stories.

The local historical societies also had an archive of family genealogy projects and it was among these works that I found the history of Wyatt Earp. His infamous life as an outlaw and gunman was notorious and only further contributed to contentions surrounding his highly disputed birthplace in Monmouth. For many of my participants, Wyatt Earp’s connection to western Illinois was a point of pride even though his life was filled with gunfights and murders. I rifled through hundreds of pages of newspaper clippings, interview transcripts, and photos documenting the history of the area. I spent hours reading through original 1860’s *Prairie Farmer’s Reliable Directory of Farmers and Breeders* in Warren and Henderson Counties. I learned that the genealogists coveted this publication for its genealogical and regionally specific information.

The publication was about farming practices, farming families, and farm organizations in the area. Reading through the publication helped me to understand the historical contingencies of farming that were visible in my participants’ stories. In the
publications, I noted the changes in farming advertisements. With modernity came increasingly more plow, tractor, and seed advertising. The publications depicted the changes to family farming in the region. At the historical societies, I also had opportunities to speak with genealogists who were familiar with the history of the region and farming. On numerous occasions, I spent hours asking questions about changes to farming and the surrounding communities.

During one of my first visits to the Warren County Genealogical Society, I met Lynne Devlin, a retired civil servant employee from Monmouth College. Her husband was once a farmhand, and after I explained my project, we developed a friendship that led to many conversations. Lynne answered my questions with plat maps, census records, and 1880s biographical accounts of the region. With her assistance, I was also able to go through the historical society’s Crab Tree newsletter archives, which included researched stories about people, the area, and farming. Eventually, Lynne came to trust me enough to allow me to work alone in the genealogical room and pay for my ten-cent copies on the honor system. As a life-long member of the region, Lynne shared stories that gave history texture and added an additional layer of introspection to the lives of citizens living in the rural countryside.

Unbeknownst to me, I would also engage with another form of archival work at my participant’s homes. After an interview was complete, frequently the farm wife would bring out a collection of photo albums. Photographs were a way for the women to present the history of their family and the family farm to me. For example, Figures 6 and 7 helped Gwynn to re-remember and share stories about her parents’ family farm. The
photographs also provided an additional opportunity for the women to tell stories about the farming way of life. Frequently, included among the photographs were images of relatives farming in the fields, erecting barns, feeding livestock, and some of the whole family taken after a harvest. Together, we explored the photographs and engaged in conversations about the people, places, and experiences represented. The moments we shared while examining the photographs were also an opportunity for me to ask clarifying and follow-up questions.

Figure 6: Farmhouse on Gwynn’s Parents’ Farm in Warren County.
Overall, I found that the women enjoyed sharing old photographs with me, and some even requested that I return to their home after they found additional photo albums. After I returned from my fieldwork and I sorted through the hundreds of photographs I had taken documenting my participants’ photo albums, I realized that there were very few pictures of women. The overall lack of photographs of women paralleled the absence of recorded stories from farmers’ wives about their experiences on farms. Whereas the camera seemed to capture the lived experiences of men, the women’s experiences were infrequently captured and contributed to their histories being more easily forgotten by the family.
Analysis

Before, during, and after my fieldwork, I followed the diction, “Analysis is always happening” continually resonated—even now as I write this chapter, analysis is still happening. From the moment I entered the field, I began thinking, interpreting, and contemplating my experiences and my participants’ stories. I relied on Catherine Kohler Riessman’s approach to narrative analysis while listening to my participants during the interview process. I listened carefully to how the women constructed their stories, what language they used, and why they storied particular experiences. During the interview, I thought carefully about the interviewing process as a co-constructed act, and in this way, I resisted overtly influencing a participant’s story by only asking probing or clarifying questions. This was important to me because the process of narrative analysis is also co-constructed act that stretches across time and is influenced by the performance of both telling and listening. In many ways, this marked the beginning of the inductive analysis process.

Upon my return from the field, I began transcribing my interviews. Transcription is an analytical and systematic process. Each time I listened to my audio recordings, I examined the accuracy of my transcription. The act of transcription transforms oral into written communication and in the process aspects of orality are lost (e.g., interpersonal expressions). Understanding this, I carefully listened and transcribed my participants’ stories verbatim. To make the speech from participants more coherent and readable I removed disfluencies (e.g., um, uh, or extraneous words). In order to represent long
pauses or moments of thinking I used ellipses ([ . . . ]). Otherwise I did not modify my participants’ stories.

While transcribing, I took additional notes about the language, the sequence of stories, and inconsistencies I noticed in the audio recordings. Analysis is an iterative process, so I listened to each interview a total of three times and took new notes each time. Throughout the process of listening and analyzing my participants’ stories, I maintained that narratives function in a complicated manner with time and place because they are not fixed (per se). By maintaining this perspective, I paid attention to the public and private events on-going in the region as well as nationally in American culture. For example, towards the end of my fieldwork the stock prices of corn began to fall, a change that invoked many conversations about a potential farming crisis. I also spent time listening to my interviews on my iPod when I walked on the bike path or exercised at the gym. Doing this gave me another opportunity to spend time listening to my interviews and helped me re-remember my interview and fieldwork experiences.

Overall, my inductive inquiry most closely aligned with a thematic analytical approach. The process of thematic analysis, according to Riessman, embraces “the search for novel theoretical insights,” “keeps the story in tact,” and “attends to time and place of narration.” As Riessman explains, narrative analysis is not a “concrete process” because it is an ongoing inquiry into a participant’s stories. I engaged in a cyclical analytical process in which I examined and re-examined all twenty-five of my interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and written documents from my archival research. A significant portion of my analysis was dedicated to a close textual reading of my transcripts, during which I paid
careful attention to the words, the structure, and what was included or excluded in the narratives. First, I began low-level thematizing in which I grouped together concrete terms or experiences from the transcripts such as housework, childcare, isolation, tragedies, and errand-running. These low-level themes informed my high-level thematizing in which I grouped together abstract or theoretical issues like farm labor, gendered labor, family farms, and industrialization in the rural countryside.

Based upon this thematizing, I employed a systematic technique from critical ethnographer Soyini Madison in which I began the process of grouping clusters of analysis. As clusters formed, I followed Madison’s guidelines and began the following analysis process—(1) I examined each specific cluster, (2) I compared and contrasted clusters, (3) I examined and created notes about each cluster, (4) I discerned overlapping, marked distinctions and topics that required removal, (5) Finally, I made adjustments to each cluster, and thereby allowed themes to evolve and become more apparent. Broadly, all of the women’s stories detailed their experiences working and living on a family farm. Although I interviewed twenty-five women, primarily twelve stories are represented through four themes. The women’s stories emerged into the four thematic categories of the “Co-Farmers,” “Farmer’s Wife,” “Outsiders,” and “Changes.” The twelve women’s stories were selected because they best contributed to each of the respective themes. Each thematic category is primarily illustrated through three separate farm wives’ oral history stories and my own field experiences.

The first thematic, “Co-Farmers,” details the experiences of women who labored daily on a family farm. This thematic emerged through critically considering how my
participants labored on the family farm, but nevertheless their labor was not considered as contributing to the success of the family farm. The stories included in this thematic reveal the gendered positionality of women on a farm. The experiences depicted in this chapter reveal how Ellie, Belle, and Annie labored on a farm for years, but eventually their labor role was altered or entirely eliminated because of changing farming economics, family strife or other life challenges.

Distinguishing itself as the next thematic, “The Farmer’s Wife” presents stories from Margaret, Joy, and Sophia who completed invisible labor for the success of the family farm. In this chapter, stories from women about housework, childcare, and off-farm work illustrate the unpaid labor performed by farm wives. In comparison to the “Co-Farmers,” the “The Farmer’s Wife” thematic distinguishes itself by revealing the complex system of interdependency of the house and farm for the success of the farming business. Further, this chapter focuses on considering the gendered labor performed in the private sphere of the home.

The next thematic, “Outsiders,” in some ways most obviously emerged. In part, this was a result of Neely, Karen, and Daphne sharing a common experience of marrying into a farming family. However, there is also an analytical richness to their descriptions of family farming culture, which helps to illustrate the entwined nature of the family and farming business. Moreover, the stories in this chapter depict the complexity of farming culture through stories about unique rules, rituals, and customs. The stories of farmwomen who are outsiders, also illustrate the challenges and struggles of negotiating life as a farm wife.
The final thematic, “Changes”, illustrates how industrialization altered farming and the rural countryside. This thematic elucidates the experiences from Delilah, Jane, and Betty who witnessed an economic downturn in their communities. This chapter diverges from the other three thematics in that it specifically focuses on the rural community as a space that constructs the women’s identities. Through careful analysis of the women’s stories, this thematic exemplifies the interdependent relationship between family farming and rural communities. Collectively, by engaging with a systematic analytical approach, I did not deductively understand the narratives from my participants or homogenize their stories through my thematic analyses.

Concluding with a Field Experience

Maybe it was the women’s stories, or the reality of being outside nearly every day, that brought the weather to the forefront of my mind on this hot June day. After shutting the front door and exiting the air-conditioned farmhouse, I immediately felt sweat beads under the straps of my Birkenstock sandals. Some days ago, I noticed that the leather straps had started rubbing against the arches of my feet. During my fieldwork, I did a significant amount of walking around farms and through fairs and community events. As I walked through the sun-scorched lawn, I felt the leather gouge and nick my skin. I felt a tender spot forming on my right foot. “I wish she would have parked closer,” I thought to myself, making my way to the car. Since my knee surgery, my right foot is ever so slightly larger. I realized I had forgotten to loosen the strap on my right sandal and with every step I could feel a raw blister forming. The car was parked at the end of the gravel driveway, which was one hundred meters or so away from the farmhouse. The
driveway was narrow and a grain cart and two tractors made the lane impassible. Laurie looked up from her Kindle and waved at me from the driver’s side. “All good,” she said as I opened the car door. “Oh yes,” I replied gratefully slipping my sandals off.

With a long sigh, I felt a sense of relief being back in the car with Laurie. The car had become a familiar and comfortable space to me. It was the space I used to mentally prepare and decompress from each interview. I enjoyed my fieldwork, but as I learned, some stories were particularly tragic and challenging for me to comprehend. I was emotionally exhausted from Annie’s stories about the death of her infant son and the foreignness she felt living homebound in an osteoporotic body. “You were gone nearly three hours. Have something,” Laurie said, passing me a bag of Twizzlers. “She made me iced tea,” I said, as I reached for the last Twizzler. We ate a lot of Twizzlers and Combos during my fieldwork. Our snacks and conversations in the car were all part of our travels through the countryside. Like many more interviews over the summer, Laurie would wait in the driveway, and after many hours I would re-appear.

Day after day, we explored some of the most remote gravel country roads so that I could interview farm wives from the rural western Illinois countryside. We got lost more times than I can remember, but this was part of doing fieldwork and being in the field. During the moments when we were lost, I felt the isolation of the rural countryside. I also felt the closeness of the community when I stopped at a farmhouse and asked for directions. Greeted by a friendly face, I momentarily felt the neighborly feeling so many of my participants described. Traveling, experiencing, and sometimes being were all part
of understanding the women’s lives. All in all, oral history, and fieldwork experiences allowed me access, understand, and analyze the lived experiences of farmers’ wives.

27 Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography,” 180.
28 Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography,” 181.
30 I toured the Alexis Fire Equipment a few weeks after forty employees were laid off. This was the first lay off for the company in nearly a decade. Needless to say the mood during my visit was somber.
33 Clifford, “Notes on (Field) Notes,” 68.
34 Clifford, “Notes on (Field) Notes,” 68.
35 Clifford, “Notes on (Field) Notes,” 51.
41 Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 44.
Chapter V: Co-Farmers

Images of Midwest farming families that shape the popular imagination include the all-American family with a father who physically labors on the land, the mother who tends to the children and home, and children who grow up on picturesque rural farms. When we think of the region known as the Heartland, we often fail to recognize the complexities of family farming. All families are complicated, and farming families are no exception. Family members are tied together across generations not only through familial bonds, but also by economic decisions in an effort to keep the farming way of life possible. These economic decisions often bond in-laws into agreements about the future of the family farm and farmhouse when their husbands die. Many farming families are committed to maintaining the farming way of life regardless of the technological changes, the increase in farmland needed for a profit, or the desire of their children to break ties with farming.

As I listened to Ellie, Belle, and Annie’s stories I learned that they did not work on the periphery of the family farm, but rather they worked both independently and alongside their husbands. “I wasn’t just the farmer’s wife, I helped be that farm,” Belle told me. Their daily tasks have included killing a chicken, bottle-feeding baby calves, or inoculating hogs. They prepared the noon-meal and helped a heifer birth a calf all in the same day. Their stories illuminated perspectives from within the family farm. They raised their children at home and took them out to the farm fields when they helped plant or harvest corn. They operated machinery weighing multiple tons and costing a half-million
dollars or more with confidence. The grain truck was just another vehicle to them, and the hay would be baled and racked just as it always was, by them.

Ellie, Belle, and Annie each told me their story from their perspectives as co-farmers. I am using the term co-farmers to reflect the partnership these farmers’ wives have with their husbands on the farm. Their relationships were always a partnership between husband and wife, but one also fraught with complexity because outside family members both lived and worked on the family farm. As co-farmers, the women were not merely supplemental help on the family farm or helpers to their husband. The farm wives performed independent roles on and outside of the family farm. My intention in this chapter is to be sensitive to the farm wives’ experiences and their positionalties on their farms. Each of the stories herein begins with an entry, if you will, not a beginning, just a starting place, and there is no ending or conclusion. We begin with Ellie’s story, move to Belle’s, and finish with Annie’s experiences on her family farm. All are situated in the rural western Illinois countryside.

Ellie, 88, Rural Warren County

To begin this story, one must know that farm families value their privacy. Salamon notes, “farm families value privacy perhaps even more than urbanites or suburbanites” because “they are accustomed to vast open spaces between them and others.”¹ I would argue that farm families are especially private with those who do not belong to their neighborhood.² After listening to many stories, I realized that the women identified themselves as belonging to a neighborhood or an area surrounding the farm. The women explained who belonged to their neighbored and how they “neighbored” or
socialized with the families in the area. A neighborhood used to include many family
farms before farms tripled and quadrupled in size and the farm homes were torn down.
Their neighborhood was where they lived and worked with their families, on their family
farm. On the whole, outsiders simply do not belong in the neighborhoods in the rural
western Illinois countryside.

On a hot and humid summer day in June, all of this became quite important. We
met on the back porch of Ellie’s farmhouse. There were dogs at my feet, kittens all
around, chickens in the yard, and then a rough, cracked, and dirty hand was extended.
“Hi, my name is Ron.” We exchanged pleasantries, but he picked up on my outsider
status. By this point, I had become used to being told, “You don’t sound like you’re from
here.” He wanted to know more about what I was doing and why I was doing it. Clearly
protective of his aging mother, he was inquisitive about the kinds of questions I would be
asking her and how her responses were of interest to me. Luckily, Ron, a short, rather
gruff-looking man, remembered me. Years ago, Laurie and I came to their home to visit
his mother, Ellie, to purchase two hand-raised parakeets. Ron’s mom and his brother are
known in the area for raising domesticated birds and for taking in orphaned animals, too.
“Oh, yeah, you’re the gal from the city,” he said. “I remember you.” And just like that the
ice was broken. Ron, let out a full-bellied laugh about the fact that I was from the “city”
and his untamed beard jiggled as he laughed about my standing on his back porch.

In fact, we both laughed. In a way, I felt like I had to laugh. By laughing at my
own positionality, as someone from the “city,” I made myself vulnerable to Ron and
allowed him to see that I was a human being, too. Honestly, I knew I needed him to trust
me; otherwise he would not invite me in the home to see his mother. After all, I do not belong to the area, let alone his neighborhood. Neighborhoods are peculiar in this rural Midwest countryside, especially for an outsider, because they violate all of the traditional conceptions of how one from the city would imagine a neighborhood.

Figure 8: View from Ellie’s Back Porch.

The houses are few, the spaces are wide-open, and the only sounds are from livestock or tractors in the fields. From time to time, one might hear the sound of a car coming down the gravel lane, but otherwise the neighborhoods in the countryside are quiet. Ron reminded me that I had to be patient to gain access. This meant talking to him about the different animals on his farm, keeping my word to come out and do a farm tour after my interview, and most importantly, to respect his way of life. He vetted me and
after a while, he yelled, “Ma, she’s here.” And just like that, I realized I had crossed the threshold as an outsider into a protected space for insiders.

We saw each other through the glass porch door. Ellie greeted me with a huge smile, her round face silhouetted by wisps of gray of hair. At barely five feet tall she said, “Hi.” We shook hands, and I felt the roughness of her calloused fingers against my fingers. Her hands were worker hands that I knew had labored on this farm. When we shook hands I could tell her pointer finger was crooked. This is common among farmers and mechanics, a crooked pointer finger, otherwise known as “trigger finger,” usually signifies years of a repetitive motion with the pointer finger and thumb. Sometimes a “trigger finger” is the result of years of operating tools or driving heavy machinery that requires force or a cranking motion. The crookedness in Ellie’s finger was a visible reminder of how she lived her life, and I knew at this moment that Ellie co-farmed with her husband and family. As I learned from Ellie, she was not “strictly house” or a housewife who worked in the home like her mother. She operated farm machinery and helped with livestock for nearly seventy years.

_Banny Hens_

As we walked across the threshold into her farmhouse, I was immediately aware of the sounds of baby chicks coming from every direction, a sound familiar to me, but startling to hear inside a home, let alone a kitchen. As we walked through her kitchen, Ellie directed me to her kitchen table. “Are you right or left-handed?” she asked me. “Right,” I replied, not fully aware of why I was answering this question. “Sit there,” she said. Ellie had cleared of half of the kitchen table and arranged two of the kitchen chairs
for our conversation. The kitchen was chaotic. There were boxes of food, papers, bowls, baskets, and knick-knacks of all kinds—all over. Every surface had something on it. A giant calf bottle sat on the counter near the kitchen sink. At the bottom there was some milk residue from the last feeding. The flowered wallpaper was peeling off the walls and the wood floors had long ago lost their shine. The 1970s refrigerator was covered with school papers, pictures of kids, and reminder cards for appointments. While not particularly clean or organized, the kitchen was welcoming. This kitchen was the heart of Ellie’s home and I could tell through the disorganization that her family spent a lot of time here.

As I was sitting down, I noticed a Blue Bonnet margarine tub on the far edge of the kitchen counter. It seemed out of place even in the chaos of Ellie’s kitchen. Of all the items in Ellie’s kitchen this one stuck out to me because of the bag of hog grain feed nearby. There were also a number of eyedroppers and cotton swabs in a small dish. As I peeked into the margarine tub, I noticed a pinkish piece of cloth rolled up into a ball. The following exchanged ensued:

Ellie: “Jordan (grandson) brought me up that little Banny and we’ve tried and tried to raise these little Bannys and they’re so cute and he put it down in the basement and we’ve got Guineas and everything and I said this one is gonna die so I brought him up here . . .”

S: What is it?

(Ellie begins to carefully unwrap the pink cloth to reveal a baby chick.)
Ellie: A Banny and when it gets tall . . . he’ll be a foot tall . . . ooo you feets cold . . .

S: Do you think he’ll make it?

Ellie: Oh yeah. I’m gonna wrap him up better. I’ve got a little feed down here, but he’s too young to eat . . . feed him a little hog feed and chicken feed. I used to have it, but Ron has it now. He’s got my little incubator so he can hatch his chickens and ducks. I think I might have to put him in there.

I truly had no idea what a Banny or a Guinea hen was or why Ellie had this baby chick in a Blue Bonnet margarine tub. Another farmer’s wife explained that Banny or Bantam hens are backyard egg laying hens that are smaller than average chickens. I learned that Bantam hens are preferred over other breeds of chickens because they require less space. Even though it was unclear to me why Ellie had a baby chick in her kitchen, she seemed to know what she was doing. I watched her wrap up the baby chick in an old pair of women’s cotton underwear, drop a little bit more feed into the tub, and carefully place the wrapped up chick back in the margarine tub. In many ways, she had created a homemade incubator for the baby chick out of a margarine tub. The baby chick was nestled into a cloth nest for warmth and had hog grain feed for food.

Shifting closer to Ellie, I asked, “Ellie, why do you have this Banny hen?” At first she was reluctant to speak about this and simply said, “Why, I don’t know.” This became a phrase she frequently used. I later realized this phrase stood for her uncertainty and desire to not speak much about herself. As our conversation grew longer, her memories
become free and she more easily spoke about her experiences. I had a feeling she did
know why, so I repeated my question. She replied:

Well, the Guineas and Bannys are always makin’ a cheapin’ they’re bug
catchers…and they run every place and when people are over run with those lady
bugs. . . well I don’t have them because Guineas and Bannys eat ‘em up.

Raising Banny and Guinea hens is a part of Ellie’s role on the family farm, one that she
has performed long before the prevalence and use of crop pesticides or Roundup Ready
seeds. In a way, this supports the words from Rachel Ann Rosenfeld in Farm Women:

Work, Farm, and Family in the United States where she notes:

It is difficult to trace changes in the work roles of farmwomen. Because scholars
have not considered women “farmers,” we do not have much information about
what they did in the past.⁴

According to Rosenfeld, historically, the stories about farmwomen’s labor have either
been anecdotal or focused on the production of quantifiable products.⁵ By failing to
consider Ellie’s raising of Banny and Guinea hens as farm work, we discount her
contributions to her family farm. Ellie spent her entire life raising Banny and Guinea hens
to help her husband “make ends meet.” Raising Banny and Guinea hens is more than a
helpmate task or a hobby job for Ellie since these hens serve the functional purpose of
eating crop pests and the economic purpose of reducing pesticide costs today. The duties
that Ellie performs by raising Banny and Guinea hens are therefore, intimately connected
to the crop yields on the farm. On family farms, each family member has a role and tasks
to complete that contributes to the farming business. Rosenfeld emphasizes that
farmwomen perform a variety of different tasks and roles on their farm from independent producer to agricultural partner to farm helper to farm homemaker. Ellie’s hens exemplify the diversity of tasks and roles she performed on the farm.

Raising Banny and Guinea hens was also a means of providing food for her family. From Ellie, I learned it was not just the animals she could raise or the vegetables she could grow that were important to the economics on her farm, but also the fact that she could “fix” this food for her family. Laughing, Ellie shared with me how she and her husband lived in a ten foot by twenty-eight foot trailer with their three young children for almost eight years. True to her disposition, she was able to recall living in such a “cramped” space quite fondly. I realized how difficult a life Ellie and her family had on their farm. The early years were “thin” (financially) she said and so I asked her if she felt like there was a lot of uncertainty with farming. She replied:

No, no I always knew that I could kill a chicken and eat it (laughing). And we always had eggs and we had a big garden and I grew a lot of potatoes, peas, and sweet corn. You had food you just had to fix it.

Often not written about as labor, but also critical to the identities of farmers’ wives is the task of raising and socializing one’s children to the family farm. As Salamon notes “the merger of home and workplace” meant that a farm wife like Ellie had to take her children with her when she gardened or ran errands on the farm. For Ellie this came in the form of responsibilities or chores. One of her regular home tasks included butchering hogs and rendering fat in the larder for food and soaps. All five of her children had chores that she was responsible for supervising including raising hogs, ducks, geese, and cows. This
came in addition to bringing all of her children with her while she checked on “ferreted pigs across the road” and “hailed water and feed to the hogs.”

_Purchasing the Farm_

Perhaps one of the most unusual facets to Ellie’s story was the acquisition of her farm. Although both Ellie and her husband were from farming families, neither had any inherited farmland when they married in 1950. Their farm, including the farmland and farmhouse, was acquired through her own finances. Ellie explained:

Well I hadn’t sold my club calves that year and when they sold them and divided up the money I had $2,200 dollars. I don’t know what my husband had . . . not much (laughing), but we sold that load of cattle and we got a farm.

From the sale of Ellie’s club calves, her family was able to move onto the farm where she lives today. After some years, Ellie’s husband’s paternal grandparents retired from farming and sold their farmland to Ellie and her husband. Even though Ellie purchased their family farm with her finances, she neither owned the farm nor earned a salary.

Speaking to such issues, Rugh notes:

For the farm wife, who did not own property or earn wages, the success of the farm meant maintenance for her lifetime and a legacy for her children. Individual interests were subordinated to the welfare of the farm, even if it meant placing the children in harm’s way or making a widow dependent on her children for support.₈

Although Ellie did contribute directly to the financing of her farm, the ownership belonged to her husband. When her husband died, the farm was passed to her sons and
grandsons who expanded and continue to manage the family farm. In many ways, Ellie was classically slotted as farm help, or as she poetically said, “my in-laws always said they had a farmhand.” In fact, Ellie and her husband were married on February 14, 1950, and the very next day she was hauling manure on her in-laws’ farm.

Whereas Ellie frequently participated in the driving of grain trucks and planting of seed corn, her husband did not participate in her gendered tasks of cooking, cleaning, and raising children. In *Farming Women: Gender Work and Family Enterprise*, Sarah Whatmore explains that the gender division of labor includes: childrearing and care, food provision, housework, laundry and shopping. Ellie has spent her life on the farm, and up until three years ago she said, “Why I hauled grain in with a truck and wagon.” Although she has now reluctantly “retired” from farming, this is how she explained her average day:

> You got up got breakfast around 5:30-6:00 a.m. . . . then for a long time we milked cows and we ran that milk through the separator and we separated the milk from the cream and sold the cream for money. Then we fed the milk to the chickens and hogs and then you had to wash the separator every day and that was a pain . . . we always had a lot of work.

Historically on farms, women have carried out all types of tasks both agricultural and non-agricultural. Ellie was the kind of farmer’s wife who went out in the field with her husband every day, but not before got her three boys ready for school and completed the daily housework. She said:
Well, I’d get my housework done and why I’d pack me a little lunch and then I’d get their (husband/family farmhands) lunches all fixed. I’d go out to the fields around 10:00 a.m. When the school bus came in the afternoon, then I’d come back in and get the kids off the bus and eat my lunch. After we had all eaten, I would go back out to the fields and drive a tractor.

From Rugh we learn that women’s labor is vital to the farming economy. We often have a fixed image of the types of jobs completed on farms and they involve operating large machinery, taking care of livestock, and the planting of grains. Women’s work on family farms is often obscured because their labor is unpaid or subordinated to the work of the men. In our mind, there is a separation between men’s jobs and women’s jobs on a family farm. However, in listening to Ellie’s stories, I became increasingly more aware of how women’s work on the family farm is often considered supplemental to the work their husbands complete; when their work is, in fact, as necessary as the labor of their husband’s.

Belle, 50, Rural Henderson County

By chance, I entered into this story almost seven years ago through a face-to-face encounter facilitated by Grandpa Jay. This was long before the rural western Illinois countryside was my field site and Belle was a participant. After coming to know about this project, Grandpa Jay insisted that I interview Belle. We had met each other a half-dozen times or so, enough to recognize one another, but not enough to exchange names. Sometime during my fieldwork I began using the term conversation instead of interview to assure the farmers’ wives that their/our experiences together would be neither too
formal nor too journalistic. Many times a farmer’s wife would say, “we’re simple people,” and the mere mentioning of an interview made the conversation go silent. It was as if because they saw themselves as a “simple people” that they were not important enough to be interviewed. Comforted by the idea that we were only having a conversation, Belle agreed to meet with me and suggested a bar and grill on Route 83. The bar, a twenty-five mile drive for me, is a landmark of sorts because it is the only restaurant between Rio and Galesburg, Illinois. I obliged her and Grandpa Jay drove me to the bar and grill. He insisted on driving me to this interview, which Laurie also thought was a good idea since she, too, was concerned that I would get lost on the rural country roads.

There was a quiet hum of conversation in “O’Leary’s,” a dive bar on Route 83 on the day we meet. Grandpa Jay and I arrived a half-hour early, so that we could order lunch before my conversation with Belle. Inside there are a few customers who, from their dress, are most likely farmers or farm help. It is not just the coveralls and cut off t-shirts, but the smell of dirt and manure they carry with them—literally. Chunks and clumps of dirt speckle the gray linoleum floor. The smell of farming lingers in the air as I pulled up a stool to the bar. “A Pepsi and the lunch special,” I said to Vickie behind the bar. The bar and grill is for people who belong to the neighborhood, and as I waited for Belle to arrive, I am reminded by looks from other customers that I am not from here. Grandpa Jay was adopted as a member of the community some years ago, but I can feel the questioning looks as I sit with him at the bar. A woman came in and orders ten lunch specials to go for “the boys.” “A great deal,” she said to me and I agreed with a nod.
Today, on one of the many rainy summer days in June, Belle is late for our conversation. I remember the weather on this day because it marked almost two weeks of continuous rainfall. During many conversations the weather was brought up as farm fields began flooding and the corn began growing too quickly, leaving the stalks weak and vulnerable. “You pray for it and curse it out,” a farmers’ wife said referencing the rain. Belle is a small framed and muscular woman whose skin is sun kissed and weathered with age. Her family, and her husband are all from the Henderson County area and are known for being pork farmers. Belle has lived in the area her entire life and moved only six miles from her childhood home onto her husband’s farm nearly twenty-six years ago. As I study Belle’s skin, I can sense a story about her life and I know she is a worker. Her hands and face are wrinkled, but not from vacations in the sun. I notice the deep set wrinkles around her eyes and mouth as she laughs when I ask her to tell me about her childhood.

_A Daughter on the Farm_

Growing up on a small family farm, Belle’s childhood was filled with hard work. She was raised on a farm by hardworking parents. Her father was a full-time farmer and full-time plowman for the Burlington-Northern Iowa Railroad. Her mother worked second shift as a nurse after “chore-ing all morning” on the farm. In many ways, Belle’s childhood fits neatly into the historical script for girls who grow up on farms in the Midwest. As the oldest sibling, she explained:

Being the oldest and being a girl I kinda got thrown into all of it. So, it was like I got to do housework and I got to do farm work. You also didn’t realize everybody
was just as poor as everybody else. We had a wringer washer until I was a junior in high school.

Belle’s childhood is different in the respect that she most likely worked more than the average daughter in a farming family. One explanation for this is the fact that her father did not inherit any farmland. The ownership of farmland by a farming family helps to generate income for the farm and the household. It was only after Belle’s father married her mother and he purchased 180 acres of farmland that the family ceased cash renting farmland. Her father purchased the farmland because he grew-up in tenet homes on cash rented farmland in Warren and Mercer Counties. In Belle’s paternal family, the earliest farming relatives to the area rented rather than purchased farmland. When the depression came, it made it even more difficult for families like Belle’s to purchase farmland, so they continued to operate as cash renters. Belle, a self-identifying amateur genealogist, explained:

My dad’s family was a farm family and his mom and dad cash rented so they would move from farmstead to farmstead. If you lost a farm you got a different one. My grandmother, my dad’s mom, and my grandpa and for all them growing up it was very different. Times were tough it was the Depression and my grandmother, my dad’s mom, had eight kids and my great-grandmother would stay home and my grandfather would go to different states by rail and not buy a ticket to find more work (in addition to farming). Then he would send money home, so things were tough, especially if you had any kids in the Depression.
Belle’s family history reveals that she came from a less prosperous farming family. Her family always farmed, but because they cash rented, family members also had off-farm jobs. When farmers are less prosperous, Neth claims, the family tends to depend more on children for labor on the farm and for off-farm income.\textsuperscript{11} Owning farmland helps a farm family generate income for the farm and household because renting the ground is a tremendous and often burdensome debt. This is not to suggest that farmers who solely operate on cash rented farmland are poor, just that they have a reduced opportunity for generating income, and coupled with the requirement of mechanized equipment, they experience potentially significant financial hardships that landowners do not.

All of these factors affect the positionality of the daughters and wives in farming families, too. In fact, labor is situated and constructed in relationship to the farming operation for the entire family. A daughter, like Belle, was permitted to participate in the physical labor of milking cows, pulling weeds, watering livestock, and gathering wood because the family did not have the financial means to hire farmhands. Belle was solely responsible for completing these chores beginning in grade school when her mother and father were both at work. As Neth notes:

\begin{quote}
Children’s labor could increase home production, which lessened expenses, or increased the amount of goods produced for cash sale, which enlarged income. Economic necessity countered the ideological gender definitions of labor.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Supporting this argument, Belle’s childhood experiences included doing chores in the home and on the farming operation before and after school. In fact, during the summer months she and her brother were left alone during the day while their parents worked off-
farm in full-time jobs. Belle explained that her father would instruct her and brother to mow, rake, and bale the hay while he was working during the day so that when he got home they could move it into the barn. She said:

   It was just the things you did. I hate to say this, but kids were farmhands. And, if you had that oldest girl I guess she was also like a surrogate mama too.

The story of Belle’s childhood was about completing chores, which included cooking, cleaning, and keeping track of her younger brother, as well as laboring on the farming operation. Although her brother was expected to complete the farm jobs with her, he was not expected to participate in completing any of the housework. This gendered form of labor continued when Belle was married, as she was primarily responsible for “the laundry, cookin’ meals, cleanin’ the house, takin’ care of kids,” along with her daughter. However, Belle’s son and husband worked on the hog farm and were not responsible for any of jobs in the home.

*Inheritance*

   The history of the farmland farmed by family farmers is critical to the history of family farming in the Midwest. It situates and positions the women in farming families because the land carries economic, social, and family cultural values. The inheritance of farmland also frequently privileges males, as sons form partnerships with their fathers and purchase land or machinery jointly to expand the farming operation.13 Both Belle and her brother inherited from their parent’s farming estate, but only Belle’s brother inherited the rights to physically farm the land. Sally Shortall, a sociologist, in *Women and Farming: Property and Power*, states:
Women rarely inherit land. Their typical entry to farming, and the farm family, is through marriage.¹⁴ For Belle this only holds partially true, as she grew up in a long lineage of family farmers on her paternal side; however, she was not permitted to bring inherited farmland into her marriage. Belle helped her father to farm, but because of the gender lines organized around farming, only her brother was permitted to farm the land. Across my conversations with farm wives, it was quite typical that an inheritance would dictate that a son physically inherits the farmland to farm. Often the inheritance would prescribe that the inheriting son would pay rent to his female siblings for use of the land. This means that even in the rare instance that a female was to inherit a portion of farmland, she would not inherit the right to own or farm the land.

We learn through Shortall’s analysis of family farms that the transfer of land is “governed by a system of beliefs” and these beliefs also ascribe cultural meanings to the relationships between family, land, and community.¹⁵ Family farmers are protective of their farming operation because it is also connected to their neighborhoods. As more family farmers are removed from the neighborhood, the area is transformed into a few large-scale farming operations. Today, many farming families choose to not evenly divide the farmland among their children because the land is less likely to be “lost” (or sold) if it is passed to only one heir (male). Further, if the family farm is economically sound, then the heir (male) will need all of the inherited farmland in order to be successful.
The topic of inheritance was also frequently discussed with stories about family farms that were lost to bankruptcy or sold at a local auction. Sometimes family farms were sold over disagreements about finances or farming practices. Other times, as I realized through Belle’s stories, changes to farming forced family members to sell their farm. As we continued to talk, I noticed Belle look over her shoulder in the direction of a gentleman who was about thirty years old. Until now I had not noticed him sitting at the end of the bar eating a lunch special. Leaning towards me, Belle stated:

If you’re driving around in the country pay attention . . . You’ll see gate holes and you’ll see a tree in the middle of the field that’s fairly close to the road. You’re gonna go . . . hmmm . . . I wonder if there was a farmstead there and there
probably was. You used to be able to drive down all the roads in all these counties and see a farmhouse on forty acres. And guess what? They were self-sustaining.

That’s not the case anymore.

I knew Belle was right. Driving through the rural western countryside, I saw barns and old growth trees mysteriously speckled in farm fields.

The industrialization and the mechanization of farming and the most recent electronic multi-media advancements (GPS planting/drones) have affected farming practices. Most notably, they have impacted the amount of land that farming families need in order to make a profit. They have also effectively forced many farming families out of the farming business. Farmers have always dealt with the reality of the “cost-price squeeze” of earning a profit from farming crops or raising livestock.¹⁶ In attempt to answer this problem many farmers have chosen to increase the amount of land they farm or increase the productivity of the farming operation. I noticed that Belle seemed distracted and kept glancing over her shoulder at the man at the end of the bar, as she said:

To give you an example, his family (points to the man at the end of the bar with her elbow) had a little farm. Someone bought it and they dozed it and it had to have been killin’ their family when they dozed their house. The changes do make a big difference for some people, maybe not to the person that’s dozin’ it, but to the people that owned it before.

The loss of a farming operation was a story that frequently came up for my participants. Farmwomen like Belle and Ellie would reminisce about the neighbors they used to have.
Ellie told a story about how her husband slipped on a corn cob in the field and broke his foot, but he just “holler’d” and multiple neighbors came running to his aid.

Neighborhoods have now changed. Some farming families were forced to sell farmland to pay off debts, others may have had to file for bankruptcy during the 1980’s, and the lucky farmers who were able to keep their farmland have had to find off-farm jobs to supplement their farming income when grain yields are not enough. Regardless, farmland holds obvious economic value today, but perhaps more importantly, it contains a history of family memories. The farmland and its history is a salient identity marker for farming families. I found this to be true regardless of whether the farming family rented or owned the land because the memories are tied to the material of the space including the barns and farmhouse.

When Belle married into her husband’s family, within three years she began working on their hog confinement operation. She was the only farmer’s wife who I met who did not say, “I didn’t do anything on the farm.” Belle acknowledged with confidence the work that she did on the farm. She described her work:

When I worked on the hog farm, first off you were up at 7:00 a.m. at the latest. Then you fed, processed, moved pigs, and then you washed. Then you did the breeding and then you did anything else that needed fixed during the day. During all of that, it was like, well, I have to make feed, which is a long process. Then at the end of the day you’re feeding again and making more feed so you have it in the morning. I mean it’s just a process. Sometimes you were slamming it . . .
Sometimes it would be longer than 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. and sometimes it would be a little earlier.

Belle’s husband did not marry a woman with land, but he did marry a worker. She was a farm wife who worked on the hog operation for seventeen years. Belle explained:

The original operation where I worked was 550 sows farrow to finish. The operation my husband, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law own is about 25,000 sows farrow to finish. It’s much larger.

The fact that she did not bring material property into the farming operation and was also from a smaller or more modest farm background, positioned her, just like Ellie, as a farmhand. When farmers’ wives bring material property like land, a home, or equipment into the marriage, they bring with them the tradition of family farming.

The family farming tradition is symbolized by a relationship of working with the land and the physical labor is a point of personal pride. I wondered why Belle, after seventeen years of working on the hog farm just quit work that she said, “I was damn good at.” So, I asked:

S: Belle, why did you quit working on the hog farm?

Belle: We closed that farm because it was built in the early 1970s and we needed to re-do it or close it. So, we just closed it about six years ago.

S: Was it hard for you to shut that farm down?

Belle: Yes, I don’t see myself just as a farmer’s wife and I never have, but I am, you know? But it’s like I wasn’t just the farmer’s wife, I worked on that farm. I helped be that farm.
Tears began welling in Belle’s blue eyes. She asked me, “Okay, if I have a smoke?” “Oh yeah,” I said feeling guilty that I had carelessly underestimated the importance of working on the hog farm for her. After the hog farm closed there was no place for Belle on the larger modern and technologically advanced operation because it only needed three employees. Having brought no capital into the relationship, Belle entered into an “agrifamily system” that was already situated with heirs namely her husband, his brother, and their cousin.17 Helping to explain the positionality of a woman in a farming family, Salamon states:

If a heartland woman brings land or the promise of inherited land to a marriage, the dominance hierarchy of the team is less pronounced. A woman who brought no land into marriage with a man inheriting a substantial amount, for example, had a relatively low status.18

The interdependency of the family and the farming business has changed as a result of mechanization and technology. In Belle’s case, she found herself stuck between her husband’s family and her lack of inherited land. Prior to the increase in mechanization and technology on farms, women performed jobs that were traditionally conceived of as male or head of household jobs. Women like Ellie and Belle had long performed tasks like milking cows, working with hogs, running grain trucks, or planting/harvesting grain fields. In describing women’s experiences on farms, Neth explains: “Helping out in the field was also a crucial part of . . . a women’s view of womanhood.”19 However, a fundamental changed occurred on family farms after World War II that according to Neth induced “institutional, ideological, and economic changes” to farming.20 All this coupled
with government agricultural policy changes and the innovation of farming technology led to a transformation on family farming operations that resulted in dramatic changes in the jobs farmers’ wives performed. The unforeseen consequences were stricter gender lines that ensued for many of my participants, including Belle. These gender lines would eventually force farmers’ wives to give up their farm jobs and work exclusively in the home.

Advancements were not isolated to only grain farming, but also permeated hog, cattle, and poultry farms, too. For example, the hog farm that Belle worked on used to ferret hogs in A-frame huts, but today is a confinement operation. It is also worth mentioning that technological advancements were welcomed by farming families because they often reduced the physical labor on the farm. However, Neth argues that technological advancements “altered gender-defined work cultures on family farms.” In other words, with technological advancements, the gender relations on family farming operations did not become equitable between a husband and wife. Instead, the interdependency of the family and the farming business changed in a way that removed women like Belle from working on the farm. The advancements often eliminated the farmer’s wife’s farm job and made it so her labor was no longer necessary. The unseen consequence of farmwomen being removed from their farm job was that they became solely responsible for housework and childrearing. A reality that was far too raw and real for Belle, who after seventeen years of being a leader at the hog confinement, is now responsible for cooking meals and taking care of housework.
Annie, 87, Henderson County

I met Annie through Ellie, as Annie and Ellie’s sister were best friends. After Ellie’s younger sister passed away in 1992, Annie and Ellie became quite close and talk on the phone every day. “She’s bent at the waist, so she doesn’t get many visitors, but she would like to chat with you,” Ellie informed me during our conversation. Grateful for the name and phone number of another potential participant, I quickly wrote down Annie’s information. A few days later and after an hour and a half drive, we arrived at Annie’s home. Laurie insisted on waiting in the car with her Kindle because Annie’s home was so far removed from the nearest town and difficult to navigate to. Annie’s gravel lane was neither marked nor identifiable via GPS.

On one of the many hot and humid days in June, I walked up to a ranch style home and knocked on Annie’s door. Her son, a slim, soft-spoken, and middle-aged man, said, “Come-on in. Come into the kitchen.” I walked through a small living room that had floors of an avocado green and walls decorated with family photos. “Hi, I’m Paul,” he said to me. “Stevie, nice to meet you,” I said. Annie looked up to me and said, “I totally forgot you were coming and I didn’t recognize your voice at the door.” Before I could say anything Paul said with a laugh, “Well, Ma, that’s why I’m here.” After a few moments of Paul and Annie discussing upcoming bills that “needed paid,” Paul said, “It was nice to meet you Stevie,” and with that he left to work outside on the generator powering Annie’s home.
Family

Annie was sitting at her kitchen table with a spread of newspapers and documents in front of her. This kitchen table was clearly a place Annie rarely left. It was treated more like a workspace than a place to eat. It held file organizers, cups with pens and pencils, a phone, a flashlight, and stacks upon stacks of bills. At Annie’s feet sat a 1970s radio equipped with an antenna playing Merle Haggard’s “Mama Tried” softly in the background. Behind her the small galley style kitchen was decorated with wood paneling and yellowish Formica countertops. The countertops were stacked with Tupperware containers, bowls, pots, and spices. Directly behind Annie there was a sign with a picture of a priest.

Figure 10: Sign in Annie’s Kitchen.
The picture was carefully placed on top of a Tupperware container of spices. I would later learn that the young man in the picture was Annie’s grandson. He was studying to be a priest in the Chicagoland area.

This picture became a touchstone for Annie and me during our conversations. It was a symbol for the importance of family and keeping family together by following the same religious practices. Steeped in the traditions of Catholicism, Annie drew on her faith to inform how she understood her farming life. She stated:

It’s just something you’re closely connected to and I’ve always enjoyed it and the kids have, too. I will just say it’s an important part of bringing up a family so they’re a close-knit family and have good values.

More so than any of my other participants, Annie’s family was at the center of her life. Being closely connected to her faith meant taking care of the farmland, appreciating the timely rains, and providing for her family. Her role as a farmer’s wife and the tasks she completed were for her family and her farming operation. And so, there was no separation for Annie between her faith, family, and farming. All three are embedded into her identity as a farmer’s wife.

Annie is “bent at the waist” from osteoporosis and had to keep her forearm on her kitchen table to keep herself upright. As we spoke she hardly moved her body except for the few instances where she used her right hand to spin her thin gold wedding band.

Much like Ellie and Belle, Annie has lived in the rural country her entire life. She moved just seven miles from her parents’ home after she was married in 1951. When I asked Annie, “What kind of farming do you do?,” she replied:
Well, my son, Paul, that was here, he lives about a mile a half from here. He farms. My husband died in 2011. He’s been gone four years. We lived here all of our married life. We moved here when he got out of the service in 1954. So I’ve been here all my married life. We had five boys: one of them died of Leukemia when he was three and my other four boys . . . I have four living boys. They all live right here. They all live on the farm.

Annie’s response to my question revealed how she viewed the relationship between her family and farming operation as inseparable. Her love for her family was part of her love for farming and being a farmer’s wife. During our interview she never referred to herself as a widow, but rather as a farmer’s wife. I later learned that her family farming operation is now primarily a 300-acre grain farm. She told me:

I think I was probably happier that my life didn’t change, you know. I think if I had moved to the city or something and everything had been different I wouldn’t have been happy . . . but this was more or less like I was at home. So it was not much of change for me.

Some of my participants felt a sense of loneliness and entrapment by living and being on their farm, but this was not the case for Annie. Although she is largely homebound today, she told me she rarely left her farm even when her children were growing up. She said, “You just didn’t go much.” In part, this was due to the isolation and distance of her farm and home to the nearest populated community, which was over thirty miles one-way. It was also by choice that Annie stayed on her family farm because this is where she
performed her role for her family and her farming operation. In many ways, the farming operation was and continues to be dependent on her.

*Women’s Work*

The work Annie performed contributed to the success of the farming operation and allowed for her husband to solely farm. Without the support from Annie, it would have been extremely difficult for her husband to earn a living just from farming. The work that Annie completed was, according to communication scholar Debbie Dougherty in *The Reluctant Farmer*, central but part of the “hidden economy.” That is, the work Annie completed did not earn her living wages, but rather, as Dougherty notes; she “reproduced labor and cared for [family members] in such a way that men could act as paid labor in the capitalist market.” Annie performed many unpaid tasks on the farm that required labor such as bottle-feeding up to twenty baby calves each morning and night. “An hour each morning and each night,” Annie noted. That is how long it took to bottle-feed baby calves with four young boys helping her. She explained the process of bottle-feeding baby calves to me:

First, you had to milk the cows. Then you had to get that milk and prepare it. You had to fix the milk and bottles and bottle-feed each calf individually. I was busy fixing the bottles and telling the boys which calves to feed . . . that was my job and so anyway . . . they just grew up working with me . . .

This was also a farm chore Annie had performed as a five or six-year-old child on her parents’ farm. She continued with it when she married her husband. For Annie, there were not many changes from her childhood to womanhood since her farm chores and
responsibilities stayed consistent. Annie explained her view of the work she completed on her farm, as “It was our life. We grew up in it and continued; it was not any change, you know?” It was curious to me that Annie frequently seemed to simplify her experiences by stating it was just “our life.” One of the challenges of understanding the work of a farmer’s wife is that they frequently did not view their chores as work because they completed them with their children.

When we think of work, we often assume that it must be completed outside of the home, but this is not the case for many women, including my participants. A family farm is a site where work and family life take place in the same space. Work and home life, according to sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, are in the American imagination in opposition to one another. However, this positioning fails to recognize the work that women like Annie performed on their family farm. Work and home life are considered separate; however, as Annie revealed through her stories, home and work life were intertwined. In The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work, Hochschild claims that women are more likely than men in families to be “starved for time,” which results in women working, taking care of childcare, and home needs. For example, each spring for over seventy years, Annie purchased 300 chicks. She raised the chicks, gathered fresh eggs every day, and sold the eggs as a sideline income. Annie completed this job to contribute additional revenue to the family farm. While feeding and caring for the hens, she also brought her youngest sons with her into the henhouse. For Annie, much like Ellie, there was no division between work and home life.
The family farm is a space with specific gender roles for wife and husband. On family farms, Rosenfeld claims that a farm wife is frequently positioned as a “helper” or “helpmate” which under values their work. Through Rosenfeld’s analysis of farm and homework, we learn that there is considerable variation in the work women perform on family farms. A farm wife may run errands, cook meals, milk heifers, run farm machinery, or raise chicks as a sideline income for the family farm. Through her analysis of place and gender relations, geographer Doreen Massey articulates that being a wife and/or mother to a male who performs a masculine job (e.g., mining, farming, or carpentry) often relegates the woman to complete the domestic labor tasks. As a result, Massey explains in *Space, Place, and Gender* that the association of masculinity for particular professions creates gender roles and relations. In other words, when a profession such as farming is denoted as masculine a specific set of gender relations are constructed in other spheres. For Annie and other farm wives, this translated into childcare and homemaking responsibilities being feminine or women’s work. By constructing the farmer as a masculine role, it meant that the farm wife’s role was feminine. This gender construction is important because it specifies our understanding of role relations on a family farm.

Farm wives have always contributed to the family farming economy; however, the construction of masculine and feminine roles also contributed to the subjugation of a farm wife’s work on the family farm. Whereas men’s work, Rosenfeld posits, is associated with physical or productive work on the farm, women’s work is associated more with home and thus less with the agricultural economy.
dissociated from the agricultural economy then it becomes easy to suggest that a farm wife like Annie, who spent the majority of her life child-rearing and homemaking, did not contribute to the farm economy. Historically, this type of logic made it easy to accept that women’s work did not fully contribute to the farming economy because many of the jobs were in the home. Further the tasks a farm wife, like Annie, completed often did not require a tremendous amount of physical labor (e.g., raising chickens, bottling feeding calves, or milking heifers). Further, because women’s tasks are also frequently completed with children, they are also positioned as a “farm wife’s job,” but not as work that contributes to the farming operation. The tasks that Annie completed were separated from her husband’s tasks only by the physical labor she performed. However, they both worked every day on the 300-acre farm in order to make it financially successful.

The economics of farming are such that it would be largely impossible for a farming operation to be successful without the help of the wife. In fact, Rugh explains that farmwomen’s labor was vital to the “transformation of agrarian capitalism.” The labor that many farmwomen performed included raising chickens and selling baby chicks and eggs, but also making butter from cream. For Annie, cooking and preparing meals for her family is not a chore or a task. Cooking is a responsibility she gladly fulfills as she cooks “farm dinners” (meat and potatoes) and bakes cherry or peach crisps for the noon-meal. It is a responsibility that she has always had on her farming operation. It is also one of the few chores that she is still able to complete; it is, therefore, her way of contributing to the farming operation to this day. Even now her family, expects her to have a “maid-
“maid-rite” meal available anytime. A “maid-rite” meal is something that is pre-cooked and ready to eat on a short notice. Annie explained:

I make maid-rite. I always keep something on hand because when they come in they are hungry. It might be 9:00 p.m. or even 10:00 p.m. and they haven’t had supper. I fix them a sandwich, heat up a roast, and warm up a pie. I usually cook every day.

I listened to a lot of stories about the importance of the noon-meal from farmers’ wives. The noon-meal is commonly referred to as dinner for farm families because it is the biggest meal of the day, and the evening meal is known as supper. Cooking and meal preparation is a means by which farmwomen are “erased from farming” because this task is not treated as legitimate work. On family farms, farmer’s wives like Annie view their job of cooking as their role in their family, as well as a means of contributing to their farm. Each family member in a farming family has a role and a responsibility, and for Annie, the role of preparing meals continues to be important to her identity as a farmer’s wife.

For Annie, the performance of cooking as well as canning food for her family meant a lot. It was and continues to be her way of contributing to the family farm. Because Annie and the other wives were able to provide cooked meals for their families, they served a functional need of satisfying hunger. One has to remember that there are no restaurants in close proximity and with take-out failing to be an option, a wife’s ability to prepare meals becomes quite important. By being invited into her story and her life, I learned, that cooking was not just about feeding the family. Cooking was about
contributing to the success of the farm. By considering family farming through the lens of
the lifecourse approach, we better recognize how the family and farm are intertwined.
The lifecourse approach, Salaman explains, is “connected to the lifecourse of family
members” and farming decisions. In other words, family farming is a business, but
there is interdependency between the farm and the family members who farm the land.
Annie is a mother and a wife, but also a farmhand and an independent worker on her
family farm. The tasks she performed were not just for the household or her children;
they were for the success of the farm. Literature often fails to position the lives and
gendered experiences of farmers’ wives as contributing to the family farm in meaningful
ways.

Conclusion

At first, I found the women’s references to “having to feed their men” as
whimsical. The feminist in me cringed; why would women like Annie or Belle take pride
in cooking? For me, as an outsider, it was hard to imagine why cooking a huge breakfast
with sausage, bacon, eggs, pancakes, and biscuits and gravy was vital to the success of
the farm. Annie explained how she spent days pressure-cooking mason jars in large steel
pots with the smell of vinegar leaking from her skin. “Vinegar?” I asked, perplexed.
Annie just laughed and said, “You’ve never canned before.” She was right. Annie
continues to jar pickles, potatoes, tomato juice, creamed corn, and string beans for meals
during the harsh winter months in western Illinois. I wondered why Ellie, Belle, and
Annie continued to have massive gardens with vegetables and fruit. I realized that I was
focusing my attention on the gendered labor of cooking and preparing food and I failed to recognize the importance of this contribution to the family farm.

Tending to gardens and preparing meals were ways for the women to contribute to the family farm. There is variety in the types of labor Ellie, Belle, and Annie performed on their farm. Annie’s story illustrates how her primary role involved childrearing and meal preparation for her family. Her contributions to the family farm were different from Ellie’s, but no less important. Whereas Annie remained largely with her children in the home, Ellie and Belle thrived by physically working on the farm. There was pride in their eyes when they talked about the hours they spent on the farm. Their stories reveal the differences in the types of labor farm wives performed for the success of their family farm. If we only consider physical labor or the labor that is performed in the farm fields as contributing to the family farm, we fail to recognize the gendered labor and experiences of farm wives. Ellie, Belle, and Annie are co-farmers; they often worked alongside their husbands, but they also performed tasks independently of them for the success of the farm.

1 Salamon, Prairie Patrimony, 44.
2 Through my fieldwork, I was repeatedly questioned about where I was from and how I found a farm wife’s neighborhood. Often the women would explain which farms were part of their neighborhood.
3 Banny was a colloquialism for Bantam hens. Ellie and other farmers’ wives used Banny to describe Bantam hens.
5 Rosenfeld, Farm Women, 19.
6 Rosenfeld, Farm Women, 52.
7 Salamon, Prairie Patrimony, 50.
12 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 20.
18 Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony*, 125.
19 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 240.
20 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 273.
26 Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 53.
27 Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 53.
28 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 189.
29 Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 188.
30 Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 53.
34 Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony*, 45.
Chapter VI: The Farmer’s Wife

Every spring, over the course of a few months, every farm field in western Illinois is planted. Perfectly parallel rows of grain crops enter the soil and the distinctive row pattern indicates the beginning of another farming season. First, tiny sprouts peek out of the soil and eventually knee-high plants appear. By the end of June, the home I am living in on 30th Avenue is nestled in by thousands of acres of corn standing multiple feet high. The rhythm and pattern to farming are predictable and comforting for many of my participants. As she looks out her farmhouse window, Margaret says: “When I hear the tractors, it means this way of life is moving forward.” In spite of farming advancements, tractors continue to enter the farm fields and plant grain crops. Right after the corn tassels, but before the corn is fully matured—a sweet, milky smell permeates the air. This summer, the smell is particularly significant because it indicates a successful grain crop that has survived heavy rainfalls. A successful crop also financially rewards the hard work of the farmers and gives hope for another farming season.

Stories about American farming have almost always focused on the physical labor required of farmers to maintain their family farming operations. The literature highlights the long work hours and grueling tasks livestock and grain farmers perform. Moreover, the literature focuses on the physical labor that is connected to visible and material products like the tons of grain, bales of hay, or head of cattle sold. The physical labor performed by farmers today is arguably less than the past. For example, rather than shucking corn by hand, farmers operate a combine tractor. Farming is a process, and
family farming connects the farming process with family members. Interlacing the two into a complex system of interdependency.

The modernization of farm equipment has shifted much of the manual labor to machinery. As I listened to story after story from farmers' wives, I realized that they were revealing a type of labor largely overlooked in the farming literature. They were telling stories about tasks they completed in the home such as housework and childcare. This was labor that required grueling hours and dedication, but remains largely unrecognized as contributing to the family farming operation. In addition to their housework and childcare responsibilities, they provided the emotional support for their husbands and other family members, too. Further, some told stories about how, in addition to their responsibilities in the home, they also worked off-farm jobs. Working an off-farm job provided a steady income for their families to live on as well as much needed medical insurance, but also allowed their husbands to remain a full-time farmer. And still, I learned that in addition to all of their other tasks and responsibilities they performed, many farmers' wives were also caretakers for elderly or sick family members.

Through their stories, Margaret, Joy, and Sophia explained a type of invisible labor, or family labor, they performed in their home for their family and farming operation. The term family labor captures the private sphere labor activities of the farm wives. These labor activities included completing housework, being a caretaker, or providing emotional support to family members. The stories presented in this chapter reveal the performance of women's labor activities that are often not included in the stories about U.S. American family farming. The thematic, “The Farmer’s Wife,”
illustrates stories about housework, childcare, emotional, and family labor performed by Margaret, Joy, and Sophia. Further, these stories show how these farm wives performed a labor role that contributes to the success of the family farming operation. These are the stories from three farmers’ wives about their labor performance on family farms in rural western Illinois.

Margaret, 85, Rural Mercer County

“You’ll really like her,” Laurie said, handing me a cup of coffee. I looked out the window, down the gravel road and I could faintly see Margaret’s house. Every morning, Laurie and I shared a cup of coffee together. Coffee was a habit we have long shared, but this summer we also began a habit of planning and organizing my day while we drank it. My very first interview in June was with Margaret, so I set out down the gravel road to her house. Arriving at Margaret’s farmhouse, I noticed how all of the barns on the property were meticulously maintained. They were old, but well cared for, like the one pictured below.

Figure 11: Decorated Barn on Margaret’s Farm.
After I knocked on her back porch door, Margaret invited me into her kitchen. Our conversation began with the following exchange:

Margaret: Cubs fan?
S: Uh, no not really . . .
Margaret: Oh . . . well, they’re doing better than they usually do. Baseball is my favorite thing . . . has been my entire life.

Although she is frail from age now, I learned that Margaret loved to play baseball as a young woman and was, in her own words, “a die hard Cubs fan.” Her passion for the sport was evident from her refrigerator magnets, “The #1 Cubs fan” sign in her kitchen, and Cubs blankets on her porch swing. Her kitchen was carefully decorated with Cubs mementos as well as family photographs and country-style knick-knacks.

Prior to my arrival, Margaret had set two places at the kitchen table with triangle-folded napkins and a plate of Snickerdoodle cookies. She had prepared a tray with two coffee cups, a sugar bowl, a milk decanter, and a coffee carafe. Margaret was a proper hostess, a performance she credited learning from her mother. As we began our conversation, I could tell Margaret was nervous. She tied and re-tied the teal scarf around her neck. Each time she carefully positioned the bow to cover-up an age spot near the center of her throat. Hoping to calm her nerves I asked, “Would you tell me about your farming operation?” This started the following exchange:

Margaret: Well, when Jim and I were married in 1957, we came here to this farm. We didn’t own it, but eventually we did.
S: Why did you come here?
Margaret: Well, because Jim lived across the field (points behind her). His dad was a farmer. Jim was the oldest of six children. And his mom farmed because his dad died young.

S: Oh, okay. So, his mom started buying this place?

Margaret: Yes, his mother started buying the house and the farmland where Kyle, my son, lives (points behind her again). He’s the farmer.

S: Okay, about how much farmland do you farm?

Margaret: Not a whole lot compared to most people. We farm 550 acres. At first we fed cattle, but after Jim died and Kyle came home from college he started feeding cow-calf herds. We’ve been with that ever since.

Margaret explained that she married Jim at the age of twenty-seven. Her father persuaded her to marry Jim because he was “a good man.” The family structure Margaret was from in rural Kewanee, Illinois, was quite different than the one she married into. Margaret was not from a farming family. She grew up in town and with a family that valued higher education. Her father was a principal, and two of her three siblings received bachelor’s degrees in education. Margaret also earned a bachelor’s degree in education from The Normal School (today Illinois State University) and taught at two different high schools in western Illinois.

Farming Families

According to Margaret, it was “different” marrying into a farming family. Margaret grew up in a home with stories about the significance of higher education, but she married into a family that valued passing on the farming way of life to the next
generation. The stories Margaret grew up with were about teaching, going to college, and the importance of studying, not farming. Through storytelling, Kristen Langellier and Eric Peterson posit that families construct complex narratives to express, construct, and maintain a family culture.³ In this way, the family stories heard and re-told also function to maintain order across internal and external boundaries in family.⁴ Further articulating how families maintain order, Langellier and Peterson in “Somebody’s Got to Pick Eggs: Family Storytelling About Work” explain, “Families perform stories not only to represent past experiences but to embody and occasion them for a particular audience in a present situation.”⁵ Even though neither her mother nor her father went to college,⁶ Margaret explained, “They knew the importance of education.” She fondly told stories about walking to school with her dad and eventually going to college at The Normal School. “I just loved school,” she said smiling.

The enthusiasm Margaret had for sharing stories from her childhood and going to school quickly dissipated when I asked her to tell me about her late husband and their marriage. “Let’s just say he worked all the time. Let’s put it that way,” Margaret said, pushing the plate of Snickerdoodle cookies towards me. Taking one of the cookies, I asked Margaret: “Do you think farming shaped your husband?” Margaret explained:

Oh, definitely him. Well, his mother had him signed up to go to college when he graduated from high school up at St. Ambrose, but he wouldn’t go. He said, “I don’t want to go to college (she shook her head in disapproval).” He wanted to stay here and take care of things on the farm.
From Margaret’s body language, I could tell it was difficult for her to understand why her husband would choose to forgo attending college. However, his decision to remain on the family farm and continue farming is consistent with what Whatmore argues as the “internal structure” of farming families.\(^7\) The internal structure of a farming family, Whatmore notes, reproduces the “family labor, on a daily and generational basis.”\(^8\) Whatmore explains that despite external changes to the production of agriculture, family farming continues to combine “property ownership and family labor,” thereby making such operations internally resilient to external pressures like attending college.\(^9\) Langellier and Peterson further assert:

Families draw upon and are constrained by internal and external resources as they struggle to survive and pass along culture to the next generation. Task ordering is the interactional work across boundaries that families do to create and maintain productive internal relationships and external relations with a changing, often threatening, environment.\(^10\)

In order to continue the farming way of life, farm families tell stories about the history and future expectations of the farm. Both Margaret and Sophia explained how their children grew up hearing stories about how it was their responsibility to keep the farm in the family. Langellier and Peterson further explain that task ordering is both generational and gendered and includes the “expectation that children will contribute to the family economy.”\(^11\) I would argue that only as a result of technological advancements within the past few decades have farming families openly encouraged their children to attend college. I found this to be especially true for male children, who were encouraged to
pursue agricultural business or management degrees in order to bring this knowledge back to the family farm. University degrees like these allow family farming operations to internally manage and control the amount of outside influence on the production, marketing, and sale of grain or livestock. For Margaret's husband, Jim, the internal expectations of his farming family included that, as the eldest son, he would take over the family farming operation when his father died. This internal structure and task ordering made the possibility of attending college incompatible with the expectations of the family.

*Patrilineal Inheritance*

When Jim suddenly died, the family expectation of the eldest son taking over the family farm repeated itself. Constrained by internal resources and coupled with the internal expectations of the family, Margaret and Jim's eldest son Kyle dropped out of college upon Jim’s death. “He died right there,” she said and pointed to my chair. Shifting under the weight of Margaret’s words, I asked “In my chair?” “Yes, I knew he was dead the moment I walked in the door,” she said. When Margaret’s husband Jim died, a series of events ensued. Explaining Kyle dropping out of college, Margaret said:

I just . . . begged Kyle . . . he was a junior. I said give it another year and go finish school. Maybe I could’ve gotten someone else to farm the land, but he wouldn’t have it. He said, “No Mom, I’m coming home and giving it a try.”

Family farms are dependent on the children (or the next generation) to eventually take over the operation. As the oldest son, Kyle would be the first to inherit the farmland. Most importantly, Kyle would accept the “transferred system of beliefs and practices
integral to the family farm.” In other words, Kyle would accept the responsibility of the farm even if it meant dropping out of college against Margaret’s wishes. Just as Margaret’s husband had stayed home to take care of his mother and the farm, Kyle would repeat the same pattern. One noteworthy aspect of the “transferred system of beliefs” explained by Shortall is the “patrilineal line of inheritance” in farming families. When Margaret’s husband died, Kyle accepted a one-third-split inheritance of the 550 acre farm with his two siblings. As the oldest sibling, Kyle was the only one to inherit the right to farm all of the farmland. Rural sociologists Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote in *Harvest of Hope: Family Farming, Farming Families* further explain: “farming family farmland symbolizes a family history and power.” By inheriting the ability to farm the land, Kyle also effectively gained power and became the head of the family farming operation.

While the death of Margaret’s husband elevated Kyle’s position, it was also her own positionality and labor role that afforded Kyle power. Through the stories I heard, it was common for a farm wife to become a widow. Some farm wives, like Sophia, explained that the physical labor of farming “makes their heart give out.” Explaining widowhood on a farm, Salamon claims: “A widow’s duty, as stand-in for her husband and implementor of his wishes, is preservation of family holdings for the next generation.” For Margaret, becoming a widow posed a series of challenges including, but not limited to, passing the family farm onto her eldest son Kyle. An equally pressing concern was her financial situation. The farm had always been her only financial income. Today, the economics of family farming are precarious because they require operating loans to finance the farming business. Like many farm wives who outlive their
husbands by multiple decades, Margaret’s retirement was dependent on one of her sons taking over the farm. Farm wives like Margaret, Whatmore notes, act as the “channel for securing the transference of production.” As a farm wife, Margaret was not included in production or decision-making for the running of the farm. Her role was to transition the farm to her son Kyle, an arrangement that Whatmore argues is one of the “more complex forms of patriarchal ownership.” Although Margaret wanted Kyle to stay in college, in many ways, because of the economic structure of the farm she needed him to come back home to work. By returning to farm, Kyle would pay Margaret rent for the farmland, the rental payments would become her income and he would also assume responsibility for the operating loan debts.

An important aspect of a Midwest family farm is the patriarchal power structure controlled by husbands and sons. Farmers’ wives, according to Sachs, perform their labor under the “direct or indirect control of men.” For Margaret, the death of her husband did little to alter her positionality on the farm. In fact, the death of her husband placed her in a subservient role to her son. Further, Margaret’s late husband ascribed a role to her that removed her labor from the farm. Margaret explained:

I never worked outside on the farm. I would have liked to, but my husband always said no. He always said I had enough to do with the four children. I used to keep the finances for the farm, but I thought it would be fun to go out and help in the barn and on the farm.

When women are removed from the labor process, they are also often removed from the decision-making for the farm. Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote explain that one
patriarchal belief, which eliminates a farm wife from laboring on the farm, is the contention by the husband that her “plate is already full, juggling family, home and off-farm work. The farm is his work, his arena of expertise, and she has her own.”

The overall patriarchal gender relations on the farm further legitimized the removal of women from labor processes. Removing women from farm labor roles further removed them from positions of earning a wage income. According Sachs, farm wives were often not paid for their work with wages, the absence of which subjects them to a work structure reminiscent of a feudal arrangement. In other words, while farm wives performed unpaid labor, their husbands earned an income or salary. Earning a wage or salary in a capitalistic production system like a farm also results in power within the familial structure.

Although Margaret was eliminated from the physical labor process on her family farming operation, when her husband was alive she was in charge of the book-keeping for the farm. According Rosenfeld, the task of book-keeping on family farming operations, “a task stereotyped as farmwomen’s work,” was consistently completed by women regardless of other responsibilities. For farm wives, book-keeping can be a way for them to remain connected to the decision-making for the family farming operation (e.g., purchasing of land, equipment, grain, and fertilizers). When Kyle took over the farm, he hired a financial accountant. This decision effectively removed Margaret from all decision-making for the farm.
Invisible Labor

Even though keeping finances and handling cash for the farm is critical for financial success, the importance of this task is often overlooked. One explanation for this is that it is considered a gendered task and occurs in the home. As Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote explain:

farm accounting is an activity done in the home and often wherever time is available. It can be done around the wife’s other work, such as childcare and other household tasks.25

This task is not viewed as “real work” because it is not performed on the farming operation.26 In other words, only visible or physical work that occurs on the farm is considered farm labor. In discussing her responsibilities with the book-keeping and maintenance of financial records, Margaret explained:

I used to keep the finances. I was never really good at that . . . I don’t know. My husband, Jim showed me how to do it, but well . . . anything with math I had to write down. I had to do all of the numbers by hand . . . not like him . . . he did it all in his head.

I was saddened to realize that Margaret’s comments revealed the lack of confidence she had in a job that she successfully performed for over twenty years. Perhaps her lack of confidence was a result of a strained relationship with her husband, whom she described as “strict.” I would also argue that Margaret’s commentary can be explained by the tension that exists on farming operations between what is considered “production labor”
or necessary labor (e.g., farm tasks) and “surplus labor” or domestic labor (e.g., childcare/housework). 27

On farms, there is domestic labor and production labor. These two forms of labor also constitute a gendered division of labor between on-farm work and housework. Farm work is perceived as visible labor performed by men and housework is invisible labor performed by women. This is important in understanding Margaret’s story because it elucidates her invisible labor role and relationship to the farm. On farming operations, visible labor is regarded as work that directly contributes to the economics of the farm. Margaret spent her entire life engaged in invisible labor or family labor for the survival of the farm. 28 Her example is typical as historian Elizabeth Ramey, explains in her book *Class, Gender, and the American Family Farm in the 20th Century*:

A farm wife’s work was unpaid, and the use values she produced took the form of services like childcare and cleaning, products like cooked meals, sewn shirts, and cash from the sale of products like butter and eggs . . . Their responsibilities in the farm household and farm enterprise were delineated largely according to their gender, and largely completed without expecting or receiving assistance from their husbands. 29

The invisible labor Margaret performed included the family labor of raising four children, preparing meals, cleaning dishes, and housekeeping. She also helped raise her nieces and nephews and was the primary caretaker for her father and mother at the end of their lives. Both her parents moved into the farmhouse so that they would not have to go to a nursing home, and Margaret cared for them. When we consider the invisible labor performed by
Margaret, we gain a fuller picture of all the labor required for a successful family farming operation.

Joy, 67, Rural Warren County

Figure 12: Restored Livestock Water Pump.

On the edge of Joy’s property sits this restored red water pump. Joy’s front yard and flowerbeds are also meticulously maintained. Daffodils, lilies, and daisies in a variety of colors are all in full bloom and neatly bedded in fresh mulch. A point of pride for many of my farmers’ wives was having a “well kept” front yard. Joy’s front yard was, as they say, “well kept,” and the envy for Laurie as she drove into the driveway. Like many farmhouses in the area, this one is over one hundred years old and was built around the
1900’s. The farmhouses, barns, and property are also important to the story of Midwest farm wives. These material entities are part of the stories and histories of women’s lives. They also reflect the stability and consistency of the farming family. For Joy and other farm wives, being a part of family farming for over 100 years was a point of significant pride.

On this day, Joy requested that I enter through her back-porch door, a practice that is customary in the rural countryside. During my fieldwork, I learned that the front door was reserved for special occasions and using the backdoor was a way to keep the farmhouse clean. I learned this was particularly important during the fall planting and spring harvesting months. Full of energy, Joy swung the back-porch door open and greeted me with a “welcome.” She was dressed in jean capris, Keds sneakers, and a pink “#1 Grandma” t-shirt. Walking through the mudroom I could see evidence of young children from the squirt guns, sandbox toys, and sidewalk chalk. “Ignore the mess,” she said laughing. Joy pulled out a chair for me, cleared the crumbs off the kitchen table with her bare hand, and then sat down. “You know I’m divorced, right?” Joy said. Unprepared for Joy’s question, I instinctively answered “No, but that’s okay.” By this point I had done numerous interviews, and I felt prepared for almost anything, but Joy’s question caught me off guard. It was near the end of the summer that I realized why being divorced was important to Joy and her story as a farmer’s wife.

Marriage and Divorce

Farming families and rural farming communities are laced with cultural ideologies about family relationships, motherhood, and fatherhood. The ideology of
agrarianism is embedded in farming families and connects the family unit to the family farm. Included in this ideology is the very important belief system that a farming family works together, both for the success of their farming operation, and also for the stability of their nuclear family unit. According to Fink, the ideology of agrarianism “is a belief in the moral and economic primacy of farming over other industry, and the celebration of farming and farmers as the heart of American society.”31 This high level of morality and purity reinforces the notion of American farming families as being virtuous, hardworking, and God fearing. Taken together, agrarianism also reinforces gender ideals for the roles of men and women in farming families, positioning women as secondary to their husbands and husbands as leaders and owners of the family farm. Fink notes, “divorce was another negation of the rural wife role.”32 It seems even today, women in farming families are discouraged from divorcing because divorce denotes dishonor, disgrace, and shame on the family. Marriage is considered an honorable and “absolute relationship,” and divorce is rare because little justifies the dissolution of a marriage.33 Joy was the only participant I interviewed who was from a farming family and divorced.

For Joy, being divorced is a stigmatized identity in the rural western Illinois farming countryside. “Farming families don’t divorce,” Joy said. Nodding, not quite in agreement, but also unsure of how to respond, I asked, “Would you tell me about the kind of farming you did?” Joy responded:

My dad owns two farms in Warren County. One of them I lived on since I was twelve. When I was growing up he fed a lot of cattle. He still feeds a lot of cattle, but they are in commercial feedlots. He buys and sells all of the time. He takes
care of his own business, but I pay all of the bills. The two farms together are probably a little over 600 hundred acres. He has grass calves in the summer time and then they go to a feedlot in the fall to finish off and get fat.

Joy’s story is different because she brought her ex-husband into the family farming enterprise. While there are many stories about a woman marrying into a farming family, there are few stories about men marrying into a farming family. In 1967, Joy married her first husband Kevin and a few years later they began farming with Joy’s father. Joy explained:

My dad came to my ex-husband and said, “I need help on the farm. Would you want to come and farm with me?” We moved to the country and over the years we bought Dad’s machinery. We also bought a tractor and a combine . . . not one of those fancy auto-steer ones though (laughs). At the end of the year when they would settle up (when they did the taxes), then we gave dad so much money for using his machinery. So, yeah Dad brought my ex-husband into farming.

Traditionally, a farming daughter or a “heartland daughter” is encouraged to marry into a farming family. Joy’s story departs from this tradition and is unusual because her father invited her first husband to join the family farm. Farming families, in many ways, depend on the institution of marriage to organize and construct gender relations as well as roles on the family farming operation. While sons inherit the family farmland, daughters are encouraged to marry into a farming family in order to bring another kinship relationship into the family. In farming families, a kinship relationship, Salamon argues, occurs when farm and residence are merged and workmates are also kinmates. As result, the
institution of marriage can be a point of control over daughters, who are often encouraged by male members to marry into another farming family of the same social class and traditions.

**Relationships**

By encouraging particular marriages and relationships, farming families also reproduce the patriarchal structure and gendered roles in the family. According to Whatmore, there are two components in farming families: kinship and household relationships and she notes: “Kinship relations are the main structural system in control of the processes of bearing and raising children and a key site in the construction of gender identities.” Kinship relationships are used within a farming family to control and dictate roles and responsibilities. These relationships often result in a “distribution of power” and authority in decision-making related to the family farm. Frequently, these relationships are also apparent in the rights of inheritance among siblings and other family members.

Kinship relations would seem to be the structural system within families, while household relations include family members involved with the so-called economic resources of the farm. Whatmore defines household relations as “the socioeconomic unit organizing the subsistence process and centered on co-residence and commensal resource provision and consumption.” The kinship structural system within farming families also defines how economic resources and power are distributed. Although money and power are often thought of as two separate types of relationships in farming families, the reality is far more complex. According to Salamon, one explanation for the complexity is that
farming families combine home and work relationships; kinship relationships are characterized by “family relationships cross a multitude of interpersonal domains.” One “interpersonal domain” that is important to the family farm is the concept of family members being farm help and labor on the family farm. This illustrates how the boundaries between kinship and household relationships are artificial and permeable. Understanding this complexity is critical to the stories of farm wives because gender structures the roles and relationships in these families, and often eliminates women from the economics of the farm.

For an outsider to farming culture, marrying someone from a non-farming background would likely seem insignificant. However, I learned from Joy and other wives that a farming lineage is important to rural farming culture because it is both a point of pride and economic stability. Joy’s marriage to her ex-husband, someone from a non-farming lineage, was further complicated by the fact that he did not own his own farmland. “He was factory worker and he was from town,” she said. Sociologist Marty Strange explains in *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision* that the family farming system is constructed on the importance of farmland ownership. Without his own farmland, Joy’s ex-husband was also limited in power and influence on the farm. I learned from Joy that after nearly twenty-five years of farming with her father, she and her ex-husband were forced to quit farming. She explained:

Well, we had about 600 acres, but it just wasn’t enough. We were grain farmers and fed a lot of cattle. We just couldn’t make a living. No, Dad couldn’t make a living, and he didn’t want to split the profits anymore. In 1984, we put the crop in,
but we didn’t take it out. We were forty and went to work for an hourly wage and Dad still farmed and bought cattle. It was all on him, and we weren’t involved anymore.

Joy’s father was the only landowner, but he did not own enough land for everyone to continue making a profit. From Strange we learn that the ownership of farmland has both economic and ideological value. Economically, farmland can be used as collateral to purchase farm machinery and its ideological value is equally important as it reflects power and status in the family through kinship relationships. As the commercialization of farming increased in the 1980s, and Joy’s father was the only family member who owned farmland, the economics of everyone farming together no longer worked. Harold Brookfield, a geographer, and Helen Parsons, an agricultural scientist, in *Family Farms: Survival and Prospect* explain:

> World prices declined rapidly right through the early 1980s. National prices followed suit, interest rates rose sharply and many farmers again could not service their debts, creating conditions for a new farm liquidity crisis of dimensions potentially as severe as the 1930s.

Nearly every farm wife I spoke with brought up the economic downturn during the 1980s. This was remembered as a time when many of their friends and family members went bankrupt and were forced out of farming. “So many had to give it up,” Joy said in reference to the time period. She said:

> We farmed for probably twenty-five years before it was . . . before the economy said no. My dad said, “I can’t make a living with all of us.” We were forty . . .
forty . . . so my husband went to work for Illinois Pork (today Smithfield foods).

He went to work as a hog buyer in the back. He had sold cattle for Dad, so buying and selling hogs was about the only thing he could do . . .

The tenuous farming economics of the 1980s coupled with the lack of land ownership by Joy’s first husband led to the end of farming for them. The familial structure could not handle having both Joy’s father and her husband as leaders of the farm. They discontinued farming on Joy’s father’s request.

*Gender Roles*

The patriarchal structure on family farming operations dictates gendered roles and relationships. A farm wife like Joy is often considered economically dependent upon her husband and sons but is also solely responsible for providing social and emotional support to her husband. Joy’s situation was complicated by the fact that her father was still alive. Since her husband did not own land, she continued to be positioned in the role of the farmer’s daughter, a role that is laden with gender expectations. Fink states:

> Women were not farmers . . . White women were the daughters, wives, and mothers of men, and their fulfillment came from comforting and supporting men within the family . . . The house and the farm were two different spheres, and the man was to be master of the farm. 46

I learned from Joy that her role as an emotional support provider was not her choice, but rather dictated to her by the structure of farm ownership. As a woman, she was responsible for comforting and supporting both her father and ex-husband. When they farmed with her father tensions and disagreements were common. “They just didn’t get
along a lot because they had different ideas,” she said. “They didn’t get along?” I asked.

Joy replied:

Well sometimes they did and sometimes they didn’t. My ex-husband would say, “I don’t know why your Dad asks my opinion . . . he does it his way anyway.” We probably always did it Dad’s way . . . Dad would ask our opinion, but it didn’t really matter what we thought ‘cuz it had always been done . . . you know his way.

I sensed that, like many farming families, there was a lot of friction between her father and ex-husband about what farm equipment, seed, and fertilizer to purchase. Joy explained her role as a mediator:

I was the go between my dad and my ex-husband. I kept the peace between them.

You know like, you tell him (something) . . . and then you tell him (something else) . . . sometimes I just didn’t say anything because I didn’t want the fight.

Although, she was recently happily re-married, I could sense that re-remembering and telling stories of farming with her ex-husband and father were difficult for her. “Those were tough times,” I said to Joy who had tears welling in her eyes. “Yeah, it was,” she said. Joy’s role as a mediator was a cause of a lot of stress for her. In their essay, “Stress and Adaptation Theories: Families Across the Life Span,” family communication scholars Tamara Afifi and Jon Nussbaum explore family stressors across the lifespan (i.e., death, career loss, divorce, etc.) and explain how stress is managed. Afifi and Nussbaum assert that families develop “governing norms” or ways to manage familial stress among family members.47 We learn through Afifi and Nussbaum that families often
address stress through role-relationships. As the farmer’s daughter and wife, Joy had the responsibility to keep the relationship between her father and ex-husband from becoming strained. In her family, she was tasked with the role of, as she said, “peace keeper” between her father and ex-husband in order to mitigate familial stress.

Farming Economics

Due to the specific economics of their farm, Joy went back to work part-time in 1981. This was nearly five years before her father informed her and her ex-husband that they would no longer be able to farm. She secured a part-time position working for a cattle company in their commodity office. Rosenfeld describes “push forces” and “pull forces” that have increased the necessity for members of farming families to seek off-farm employment. The “push forces” leading Joy to seek off-farm work included the need for another source of cash flow for the farming operation. She asserted:

I already had a job outside of the home before my ex-husband did. We needed the health insurance, so I got a job that gave us health insurance in 1981.

For Joy and her ex-husband, the “pull forces” of being able to access better medical insurance through off-farm employment also influenced the decision to have Joy go back to work first. Through my conversations with farm wives, I learned that having to seek off-farm employment was understood as a loss of farming pride. Working an off-farm job signified that the farm was not financially profitable and that they were “hobby” or “part-time farmers.” Through Rosenfeld we learn that family farms that include off-farm employment have “remarkable stability” in comparison to full-time farming families. Even though this may be economically more viable, it is not compatible with the
ideology of family farming. For Joy and her ex-husband, off-farm employment would not only be a means to supplement their farming way of life, it would eventually be their primary occupation.

As the economics related to farming changed, the role of the farmer’s wife on family farming operations also changed. After Joy took a part-time job and eventually a full-time job in 1985, she continued to have responsibilities on the farm. I asked Joy, “Would you tell me about the kinds of responsibilities you had in and outside of the home?” Joy responded:

Other than working outside the home . . . I was the gofer. If you broke down, I had to go get the part and I might get the wrong part, so then I would have to go get another part. Send me a picture, send me a part so I know what I’m getting (laughing). I also mowed the yard, took care of the garden, laundry, cleaning . . . stuff like that.

In addition to supplementing the income of the family with her off-farm employment, Joy continued to perform her role as the “go-between” or errand girl and gofer on the farming operation. She explained how in addition to being the gofer she would also make a “big farm breakfast” each morning, take care of her three sons, sew, hang laundry on the clothesline, and tend to a large garden.

Noting this kind of multitasking, Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote argue: “A farm wife is an integral part of the farm labor force, often because the farm business simply cannot afford the cost of hiring labor.” On the farm, Joy performed many of the tasks that any hired help would complete for wages. Even after Joy began working an off-
farm job, she continued to assist with the on farm chores and responsibilities. According to Ramey, farmwomen are frequently required to perform many of the same tasks as their male counterparts, but males rarely participate in housework or childcare duties. While the tasks a farm wife performs in the home are likely not viewed as contributing to the farm, a wife who also works an off-farm job receives even less recognition of her work in the home. I would argue that when women work off-farm jobs they are almost never recognized for the labor they perform on the farm or in the home. Men are still seen as farmers, but a farm wife will only be recognized for her off-farm employment and not for the tasks she completes on the farm. Joy’s story illustrates the complications of family members working together on a family farm as well as the impact of the economic changes during the 1980s.

Sophia, 79, Rural Warren County

“They’re good people,” Laurie said describing Sophia and her husband, Tom. This phrase carries a significant meaning for the people of the rural western Illinois countryside. The meaning of the phrase is best understood as describing trustworthy and honest people. Over the years, I have heard many stories about their dairy farm and how Sophia worked at Warren Achievement (a school for adults with disabilities). Also true to the stories I had heard, their home was located deep in the countryside, where a GPS does not work. Even though Laurie proudly boasted that she would have no problem finding her way to the house, it was her husband, Kurt, who drove me there. By July, even he had begun chauffeuring me around the countryside. Sophia’s home is in the northwest corner of Warren County, an area best described as vacant, forgotten, and deeply isolated.
A few weeks prior to meeting Sophia, I met a genealogist at the Monmouth County Historical Society who went to a one-room schoolhouse with Sophia’s husband, Tom. The rural countryside is a small and tightknit community this way. The genealogist explained that the Pleasant Green Schoolhouse was one of the earliest schools built in Warren County. I had all but forgotten this conversation until I looked out of the car window and saw a brick building. Built in 1858, the Pleasant Green Schoolhouse is little more than a shell of a building today. Much like other old buildings in the rural countryside this one is severely neglected. I heard stories about Civil War veterans who were buried on the overgrown property and how the county sold the building and land for profits. For many of my participants, their stories were tied to memories of buildings and spaces that were once a point of pride for the community, but today are an eyesore. I
learned that for Sophia, this old building was significant because it was where she first met Tom. “He teased me a lot because I was younger,” she said laughing. Sophia has now known Tom for more than seventy years. They lived a half-mile from each other as children, and shortly after graduating from high school at the ages of nineteen and twenty, they got married.

After marriage, they moved onto the farmland where they currently live today. The outside of Sophia's home was a careful mix of antique tractors, other relics from the past, and Americana yard decorations. Sometime in late July, Sophia invited me into her home. As I entered the home, Sophia said, “Sorry, I’m so slow with this thing.” Sophia was leaning heavily on a red walker to move through her kitchen. “Oh, gosh you’re fine,” I said as we made our way to her four-season porch. After sitting down we had the following exchange:

Sophia: This (pointing to her walker) all just started.

S: Oh?

Sophia: Yes, the doctors call it Post-Polio Syndrome. I did real well until the last few years. Once you’ve had polio . . . when you get older your muscles start getting weaker . . . and . . . that’s kinda my problem now. I used to . . . I had even got rid of my braces and my crutches. People wouldn’t even notice I had that much of a limp and that all ended.

S: You still get around really well, Sophia.

Sophia: We had two boys and they’re good and healthy. That’s what’s important.
I would learn that contracting polio as a young teenager was a defining moment in Sophia’s life. Polio was the reason she stayed close to home and chose to not attend college. It was also what bonded her to Tom, who visited her every week in the hospital for almost a year. She was hospitalized for the majority of her sophomore year in high school and was forced to repeat the grade the next year. “They really didn’t think I was gonna make it,” she said. “But you did,” I responded. “I’m still here,” Sophia said, laughing. I learned how her mother and grandmother helped care for her when she was hospitalized. "They were caretakers,” she said, describing her mother and grandmother. I would subsequently learn that through the course of Sophia’s life, she also spent a significant amount of time performing the role of a caretaker for family members.

*Off-Farm Work*

In the literature, family farming operations are often exclusively associated with the physical labor of working the farmland and operating farming machinery. Often this results in women’s domestic labor (e.g., caretaking) being largely overlooked as labor on the farm. Both Joy and Sophia’s labor tasks were delineated by what Carolyn Sachs calls a “sexual division of labor” on the farm. Sachs explains that on family farms the division of labor between men and women is further legitimized by the ideology of domesticity. This ideology placed farm wives in subordinate and often invisible roles to their husband and sons. I would posit that on family farming operations, the ideology of domesticity was further legitimized by the patriarchal structure of the farming family. Sophia explained:
I always worked outside the home. A lot of the farmers’ wives in our generation ran tractors and trucks and hauled grain and stuff, and I never did that more or less because of my bad legs. I couldn’t operate a tractor like a lot of them did and there are a lot of them out there that did. They’d go ride along in the machinery and stuff . . . I couldn’t do that and I never really could . . . I’m not the typical farm wife.

Sophia’s role on her farm neither engaged the farmland nor any machinery in part because of her weak legs. However, even if Sophia had not contracted polio, she still most likely would not have participated on the farm. My rationale for this argument is informed by the fact that Sophia did not grow up with any farming chores or responsibilities. Her mother wanted her to be in the home to learn how to cook, clean, and sew, and her father had a hired man who helped him. Neth notes that children who grow up on farms are also subjected to a sexual division of labor. As girls grow up they are encouraged into “female types of work” like house cleaning, cooking, caretaking, and canning. Whereas gender roles on a farm may be more delineated, most heterosexual families are also influenced by the ideology of domesticity. In this way, gender organizes tasks and responsibilities for the entire family.

Like Joy, Sophia’s farm also faced challenging economics, which forced her to work an off-farm job in order to earn a consistent income for the family. The choice for Sophia to work an off-farm job required what sociologists Arlie Russell Hochschild and Annie Machung refer to in their book The Second Shift: Working Parents and Revolution at Home as a reconciliation of gender ideologies: “A gender strategy is a place of action
through which a person tries to solve problems at hand, given the cultural notions of gender at play.” Sophia and Tom were both from families where farming was the primary source of income. The fathers, sons, and occasional male help worked the land while the wives, daughters, and aunts worked in the home. Most importantly, women from previous generations did not work off-farm jobs. Even though this was the gender ideology they had both grown up with, they had to reconcile this ideology for their own family. Their negotiated gender strategy effectively meant that Sophia would work off the farm to help support their family, but also take care of the home and children.

A contributing factor that necessitated Sophia’s working off the farm was that Sophia and Tom did not immediately inherit farmland. They did not inherit farmland until Sophia’s father died. According to Whatmore, farm wives often participate in off-farm work “in order to contribute to the family household budget” because the farming operation “produces an insufficient income” for the family. For many farming families, encouraging the wife to work an off-farm job was a clear advantage because it meant a diversification of income. Before they inherited their respective parents’ farms, the family needed Sophia to work an off-farm job in order to bring a consistent income into the family, which allowed Tom to focus primarily on farming. Sophia worked for Warren Achievement Center for over twenty-five years. Tom also worked some part-time jobs over the years, but he was never responsible for in home tasks or childcare. For him, working in the home was not compatible with the male gender ideology into which he was socialized.
As I spoke with Sophia, I realized that she was eager to speak with me about the work she did at the Warren Achievement Center. She freely told stories about her responsibilities and former clients who still live in the community. The center was a point of pride for many of my participants because of the life and job skills it provided to adults with disabilities. However, when I asked Sophia if being a farmer’s wife was important to her, she responded:

Since it’s what my husband is I guess it is important . . . I could be something else. Being a farmer is just what my husband was . . . but this is also what I’ve always known . . . I think I could adjust though . . .

Providing clarity to Sophia’s ambivalence, Neth states that as farm technology changed and farming became increasingly more market-driven, women were more freely permitted to negotiate their own decision-making. As a result of farming innovations, women on many family farms could access professional off-farm work. This meant farm wives were freed from the monotony and drudgery of the family farm. In many ways, this was case for Sophia, who worked as a residential aid at the Warren Achievement Center for twenty-five years.

Another explanation for Sophia’s ambivalence in relationship to her identity as a farmer’s wife is the fact that unlike her mother and grandmother before her, she never had any farming responsibilities. For generations of farmwomen before Sophia, labor in the home also meant producing deliverable products like butter, canned foods and preserves, as well as working in the fields. Although these tasks were also unpaid labor tasks, they were still connected to the farm and exclusive to the private sphere of the
home. Farmwomen for generations partook in making and marketing these home goods, which also allowed them to be connected to the economics of the farming operation.

Caretaking

Although Sophia did not work with her husband on the farm like her mother and grandmother before her, she was a caretaker like both of them. First, she took care of her mother, then her father, and eventually both of her daughters-in-law. Historian, Tamara Miller her essay, “Those with Whom I Feel Most Nearly Connected,” explains that women in farming families provide essential emotional support to family members.61 Miller states that women in farming families learn to provide emotional support as daughters in order to help their mothers and aunts with the small children.62 Typical examples of emotional support provided by farm daughters include listening to the troubles of their mother, caring for siblings or helping with elderly relatives. A form of emotional support Sophia provided her father was acting as his primary caretaker after her mother died. She provided emotional and physical support in the form of cooking, cleaning, and hygienic care. When I asked Sophia, “Was there ever stress in your marriage due to farming?” she quickly replied “No, not in my marriage.” We were long past this question, when she abruptly told me the following story:

You asked about stress in our marriage. After my mother passed away my dad was by himself. That was probably the most stress we had in our marriage because I had to spend a lot of time with him because he couldn’t see well. I would stay with him after work and Tom would either come by Dad’s house and we would have supper together or he wouldn’t come by. Then on the weekends
we tried to spend some time together. I finally had to get a gal to come and stay with him at night through the week and then I was back to taking care of him on the weekends. Tom was very understanding and we naturally got through it, but it was rather stressful. It got stressful for me because I felt like I belonged with my husband and I also belonged there taking care of my dad.

As an only child and a daughter, Sophia was her father’s primary caretaker for more than three years. I could sense that taking care of her father and remembering this time was quite difficult for her. As she told this story she fidgeted with the handles on her red walker and nervously pushed it back and forth in front of her. There is very little in the farming literature about the lives of women in relationship to the emotional support they provide their family as caretakers. This absence in the literature is a consequence of the labor being unpaid, feminized, and relegated to the private sphere. The multi-layered patriarchal and gendered structure with farming families renders this form of women’s labor largely invisible in the farming literature.

Researchers have written sparingly about the role of farm wives in relationship to childcare responsibilities, but have almost entirely ignored this form of caretaking as either labor or work. Communication scholar Caryn Medved in “Investigating Family Labor in Communication Studies: Threading Across Historical and Contemporary Discourses” explains “problematizing the definition of work is necessary to get our hands around issues of unpaid family labor.” On farms, when the labor farm wives act as a caretaker, emotional support provider, or perform housework, this labor is associated almost exclusively with the home and the private sphere. Tasks such as working in the
fields or operating farm machinery are also recognized as gendered labor, but take place in the public sphere and contribute to the economics of the farm. Medved further argues that a problem with understanding the private sphere and public sphere as simply dualistic is that this conception fails to recognize the complexity of family labor and house labor that women perform.\textsuperscript{66} For farm wives specifically, and for all women in general, by only considering tasks performed in the public sphere that are rewarded economically as labor; we risk overlooking and failing to recognize the many other forms of unpaid labor women perform.

Across many of my conversations with farm wives from the rural western Illinois countryside, I heard stories about how elderly relatives moved into the main farmhouse and how the wives would perform caretaking duties until the relatives died. In Sophia’s family, I learned that over many generations women were caretakers for family members. Sophia explained how she grew up watching her mother take care of both her grandmothers. Both women moved into Sophia’s childhood home and lived with her family while she was growing up. She used the term caretaker to describe the role that she learned from her mother. Critical feminist scholar Julia Wood explains in her work “Critical Feminist Theories: A Provocative Perspective on Families” that there are “gendered patterns in caregiving” and argues that women do the majority of caregiving regardless of other responsibilities both in and outside of the home.\textsuperscript{67} In comparison to the other stories I heard about caregiving there was something different about why Sophia was responsible for taking care of her father.
When I asked Sophia if she would explain her role as a caretaker for her father, she told the following story:

My dad was blind by the time he was 50 some years old, but he kept farming even though he shouldn’t have been. My mother would sit on the fender of the tractor when they cultivated to direct him . . . so he wouldn’t plow out corn because he couldn’t see that well. When he would hook up something to the back of the tractor he would always feel where the hole was to put the pin in to fasten the hitch. He should’ve quit long before he did. Now Jerry (her son) has the same problem . . . he doesn’t do any driving in the neighborhood. He doesn’t feel secure enough out on the road . . . and he’s 54 . . .

Sophia explained that on her father’s side of the family there was a rare genetic eye disorder called Cone Rod Dystrophy that females pass to males. The eye disorder eventually results in partial or total blindness, and there is no cure. Unfortunately, Sophia’s son Jerry has inherited the genetic eye condition. He continues to own and operate a hog confinement operation, but is unable to drive himself off the farm. Sophia and Tom encouraged their son to open the hog confinement because this type of farming does not require the operation of any machinery. Today Sophia and her daughter-in-law drive Jerry everywhere he needs to go. As Sophia’s health continues to leave her in an increasingly fragile state, it will be her daughter-in-law (Jerry’s wife) who will become the next generation of farm wife caretakers.
Conclusion

Based on the stories from these farmers’ wives, I conclude that domestic tasks like caretaking were always and will continue to be an aspect of women’s work on family farming operations. For instance, Sophia’s mother, who was also a farmer’s wife, took care of numerous family members through the course of her life. In the course of Sophia’s life, she has also performed caretaking duties when one daughter-in-law suffered a brain aneurism and another daughter-in-law was diagnosed with tongue cancer and lived with Sophia and Tom for almost a year. Farm wives have always provided emotional and caretaking support for their families. However, their stories were frequently ignored as contributing to the family farming operation. By recognizing the stories of farm wives who performed unpaid domestic labor tasks, we broaden our understanding of labor beyond only public sphere wage labor.

The stories in this chapter reveal the everyday experiences of farm wives who performed domestic labor tasks within the farmhouse. Their stories illuminate how they performed labor tasks for the success of their family farm. From Margaret, we learned how farming families create and re-produce gendered structures that often eliminate women from the decision-making on family farming operations. Margaret, nevertheless, was responsible for the finances, housework, child-rearing, and caretaking of relatives through the course of her life. By contrast Joy’s story illustrated how she and other farm wives were expected to provide emotional support to their male family members. Her story expands our understanding of the gendered expectations of a farm wife’s experiences. The role of the caretaker is captured in the story from Sophia, who, like
many of my participants, took care of many family relatives over the course of time.

These stories reveal a type of labor performed by women in the home for their families and for the success of their family farming operation. By including these stories into the narratives about family farming, we more fully understand how patriarchy and gender ideologies of work subvert women’s experiences on farms.

1 By using the term family labor, I am addressing communication scholar Caryn Medved’s call to attention in her article “Investigating Family Labor in Communication Studies: Threading Across Historical and Contemporary Discourses.” In the article, Medved notes that there is a lack of cohesive literature on the daily lives of women related to private-sphere activities (e.g., home).
2 Kewanee, Illinois is forty miles west of Margaret’s family farm.
4 Langellier and Peterson, “‘Somebody’s Got to Pick Eggs,’” 469.
5 Langellier and Peterson, “‘Somebody’s Got to Pick Eggs,’” 469.
6 Margaret explained that for a long time school administrators did not need a bachelor’s degree.
7 Whatmore, The Farming Women, 19.
9 Whatmore, The Farming Women, 12.
10 Langellier and Peterson, “‘Somebody’s Got to Pick Eggs,’” 470.
11 Langellier and Peterson, “‘Somebody’s Got to Pick Eggs,’” 470.
12 Shortall, Women and Farming, 29.
13 Shortall, Women and Farming, 30.
14 Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote, Harvest of Hope, 81.
15 Salamon, Prairie Patrimony, 130.
16 In conversations, farm wives referenced operating loans used to finance the farming business as “living on futures.” Meaning that the family farm was being financed with loans with the hope of paying the loan back in the future.
17 Whatmore, The Farming Women, 74.
18 Whatmore, The Farming Women, 76.
19 Sachs, The Invisible Farmers, 1.
20 Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote, Harvest of Hope, 31.
21 Whatmore, The Farming Women, 144.
22 Sachs, The Invisible Farmers, 47.
23 Rosenfeld, Farm Women, 273.
24 Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote, Harvest of Hope, 30.
30. Sonya Salamon explains that entering through the backdoor of a farm home serves the specific purpose of preventing manure from entering the home, 43.
33. Fink, *Agrarian Women*, 82.
34. Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony*, 142.
43. Strange, *Family Farming*, 46.
44. Strange, *Family Farming*, 47.
48. Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 143.
49. Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 142.
50. Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 142.
52. Ramey, *Class, Gender, and the American Family Farm in the 20th Century*, 76.

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59 Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 217.
62 Miller, “Those with Whom I Feel Most Nearly Connected: Kinship and Gender in Early Ohio,” 130.
64 Rosenfeld argues that childcare responsibilities are often a form of additive women’s labor on family farming operations, 31.
Chapter VII: Outsiders

As an outsider, I never imagined that I would interview other outsiders who lived in the rural western Illinois countryside. I had falsely assumed that all farm wives were from farm families in the area. This thematic emerged as I heard stories about women who were not from the area, but had married into farming families. Dorothy, a sixty-six-year-old farmer’s wife from rural Mercer County, told the first story about a young woman who married into a local farming family. During our interview, she conveyed her anger about a “young gal from the Chicago area” who “was just not willing to put effort into the church.” Dorothy went on to reference this woman as an outsider. Her use of the term outsider interested me because it was the first time I heard a farm wife distinguish between women who were from the area and those who were not. In this chapter, I use the term outsider to represent the stories from women who were not from farming families or the rural countryside.

Through the process of gathering stories from the outsiders, I realized that my own outsider identity was important. It was the means through which the women and I built a relationship. My own outsider identity helped us foster a rapport that I had not experienced with my other participants. I approached the notion of using my outsider identity delicately, paying careful attention to the suggestions of narrative researchers Springwood and King in “Unsettling Engagements: On the Ends of Rapport in Critical Ethnography” to interrogate my own fallibilities, investments, and privilege.1 Springwood and King articulate that “rapport,” or the building of interpersonal relationships, can enhance an ethnographer’s understanding, but merits careful
interrogation as powerful knowledge claims about a culture are made. As my fieldwork unfolded, I was accustomed to my participants’ skepticism about my interest in their families’ farming stories. It was common for me to repeat (again and again) why I was interested in farm wives’ stories and what I would do with the stories.

As I interviewed the women who were considered outsiders, I realized that they feared being misunderstood and subsequently misrepresented by someone from the city. The notion of being from the city evokes feelings of distrust because this space, both economically and politically, overshadows the rural Illinois countryside. Although my outsider identity helped us build a rapport, the culture within the rural countryside nevertheless revealed me as potentially misunderstanding the family farming way of life. As outsiders, the women were concerned with how I would represent them, but most importantly, how I would protect their identity. Relationships in the rural western Illinois countryside entwine citizens across Warren, Mercer, Knox, and Henderson Counties, making the space relationally intimate—almost like a family. The same intimacy that provided a source of comfort for many of participants also fueled the reservations of the outsiders in speaking with me. Karen and Daphne explicitly expressed their hesitancy in speaking with me about the rural community and their family farms.

The stories in this chapter reveal the lives of outsiders who married into farming families. Through their stories, Neely, Karen, and Daphne illustrated the challenges they experienced as farm wives. Neely revealed how difficult it was for her to accept the reality of passing her home onto her son. Next, Karen explained the struggles of negotiating the expectations of being a farmer’s wife and a mother to sons on a farm.
Finally, Daphne’s story illustrates the challenges of the rules and rituals in farming families. These are the stories from women who married into farming families and live on family farming operations in the rural western Illinois countryside.

Neely, 62, Rural Warren County

Neely’s interview began and ended with tears. “I’m just a crier,” she said wiping tears away from her cheeks. Her tears began the moment I asked her to tell me about the farm. Family farms are peculiar for outsiders because they merge generations of family members, a home, and a place of business. Over a ten-year period, Neely and her husband Bruce slowly increased the amount of farmland their son John rented from the family operation. In preparation to eventually take over the family farm, John also secured additional rental farmland to supplement his income. In writing about Midwest farming, Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote explain that historically, family farming operations were operated and managed by father and son or multigenerations. They further note that multigenerations of family members jointly owned land and shared the work, and profits.3 When Neely married her husband Bruce, she married into a multigenerational farming system with her in-laws. As more farmland and farming responsibilities were transferred to their son John, Neely and her husband moved closer to retiring by the age range of sixty-five to seventy. Unlike in many other professions where the individual has some choice in retirement, a farmer must consider the “longevity of the enterprise.”4 In order to establish a prosperous future for the farm, the current farming family is expected to retire and pass ownership of family farmland onto next generation.
Neely clearly believed it was important for the family farm to be passed on to her eldest son, John, in a timely manner. During my fieldwork, I discovered that timing was essential for the success of the farm. Whether it was planting or harvesting or retiring and passing farmland on to children, timing was everything to farming families. Neely’s husband had inherited approximately 500 acres of farmland. In the course of their marriage, Bruce and Neely purchased an additional 300 acres of farmland. Even though the family owned more than 800 acres, there were still not enough profits for both Bruce and John. Neely stated:

You have to be able to keep up. It used to be, like for Bruce’s dad . . . he just had 200 acres and he survived. Somebody could farm 200 acres and raise their family on it because they would’ve had just a little tractor. Now it has gotten more industrialized . . . the way big equipment is here.

In order for her son to be financially successful without multiple sideline incomes, he needed to solely farm all of the farmland. This meant that Neely’s husband needed to retire and not draw an income from the farm anymore. I learned that Neely had not planned on moving out of her home or off the farm. Having recently retired after thirty-five years as a middle school teacher, she explained, “I intended on playing cards and drinking with my girls, but here I am moving.”

Many of my participants told stories about how their farms used to have an in-law house on the farmland. Over the years this cultural practice was largely eliminated as the demand for farmland increased. The in-law homes were torn down in order to farm the viable farmland. When Neely married her husband Bruce, they moved into an in-law
house that was on the property. Some years ago, they tore down the in-law house and built a grain dryer so that they no longer needed to pay a separate company to dry the corn. Unfortunately with the in-law house gone, Neely and her husband had no choice but to move off the farm and into town. By moving out of her home, her son and daughter-in-law would be able to completely take over the farm.

Transition

I met Neely during the summer of the transition. The term transition was used by many of my participants to describe the large scale passing of farmland, farm implements, as well as the main house to the next generation. In many ways, the transition marks the end of an era for one farming generation and the beginning for the next. For many farmers today, the transition also marks the onslaught of planters and combines with GPS. “We have an iPad in our planter,” Neely said laugh-crying. For families like Neely’s, many of the recent technological advancements like drone helicopters and GPS equipped implements have forced them to transition out of farming earlier than expected. In part, this is due to the challenge of keeping up with the knowledge required to successfully operate the farm machinery. “Bruce won’t plant with the auto steer planter. It drives my son mad,” Neely stated laughing. Whereas her husband Bruce preferred the older and less advanced implements, her son exclusively bought the latest machinery. Many of the younger farmers were motivated to learn how to use the more advanced farming machinery because it frequently meant great efficiency and accuracy. For farmers, efficiency and accuracy also equates to increased profits.
This was Neely’s first transition experience. She had grown up in a rural town in Henderson County, which was approximately fifteen miles from her home today. Growing up, her mother worked at the former Gales and Form Fit factories and her father managed a grain elevator. Neely’s parents were not from farming families, but growing up they had hogs and chickens. “Right in the backyard,” she said laughing as she fondly recalled visiting her grandparents’ home in Henderson County. I realized early on in our conversation that the process of going through the transition was challenging for Neely, as she said:

I can’t imagine myself being one of those people. I’m gonna be one of them in another month . . . we’re gonna be moving into town.

Neely and her husband were in the process of moving into a pre-fabricated housing community in Monmouth because there was no longer space for them on the farm. We learn from Salamon that the process of succession (or inheritance) is often connected to the retirement of the father from managing the family farm. This process, Salamon explains, requires support from the succeeding generation. On farms, retirement is a process that is negotiated and assisted by the succeeding generation. Prior to interviewing Neely, I had heard many stories about how families negotiated the transition. For other farm wives, the transition was treated as an aspect of the farming way of life. In speaking to Neely, I realized that because she was an outsider, the experience of the transition was remarkably challenging for her in comparison to women who were from farming families. For wives who were from farming families, the passing of the family farmland
and the main house was not viewed with sadness, but instead as a crucial step for the future of the farm.

The cultural practice of succession reflects the financial stability of the farm. Successful farming families are more readily able to go through the process of inheritance. Women who are from farming families also grow up in households where financially successful farming family surnames are known. The surnames are linked-up with the farming history in the rural western Illinois countryside. Barns and plots of farmland carry the names of wealthy families. Neely married into a farming family with over a hundred years of history in family farming. Her husband’s family had two separate centennial farms that were declared in the 1970s. According to Neely, his family ancestors were among some of the first farming settlers on military tract land in the area. In clarifying the positionality of women in prosperous farming families, Fink argues that the economic success of the farm often constrains the wife’s input in the farming business. Fink further clarifies that on economically successful farms, the wife is often not included as a partner in business decisions. Neely did not assume a financial partnership on the farm with her husband and father-in-law. In part, this was due to the fact that she was an outsider, but also as result of the financial success of the farm. When I asked Neely if she ever wanted to work on the farm, she said:

I wanted to help on the farm when the kids were little and . . . I just couldn’t. I had the kids. I think when I wanted to do it most it was when the kids were young. It was pretty traditional . . . I was watching the kids and Bruce was working on the
I didn’t ask Bruce to do anything spring or fall with kids. I was in charge of the kids seven days a week.

Although Neely expressed an interest in laboring on the farm, she stated that she never regularly did. “I’ve run a truck a few times and that’s it,” she said laughing. When women are removed from the labor process on farms, they are also often eliminated from the financial decisions of the farm. This illustrates how Neely had little input on the transition as well the timing of her son and daughter-in-law’s move into the main house that is Neely’s home. Finally, I would also argue that it was possible for her husband and father-in-law to not discuss farm finances with her because she was an outsider. Neely lacked the cultural knowledge about family. This, coupled with the fact that she also did not work on the farm, made it arguably easier for her husband and father-in-law to exclude her from the economic decision-making.

**Finances and Teaching**

Over the course of my fieldwork, I heard many stories about how farming finances and household finances were separate. Neely described how she maintained their household finances, but again was uninvolved in the debts and assets of the farm. For outsiders, the topic of finances was particularly challenging because they were forced to reconcile with the reality of having no earned income from the farm for multiple months during the year. As Neely explained, everything related to the farm was expensive. “He’s real conservative with money,” Nelly stated describing her husband Bruce. As an outsider, Neely had to reconcile what Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote explain as the
“the ups and downs in family income.”¹³ In reference to the uncertainty of the farming finances, Neely told the following story:

I used to ask Bruce, “Is this a good year for extras?” And he would say no . . . he always said no. I never did find out when it would be a good year for extras (laughing). One thing, I learned about farming is that there are farmers who take vacations and drive new cars, but they aren’t making payments on land. I’ve learned they’re not rich because they drive a fifty thousand dollar car . . . they’re just making payments on everything. Bruce says it hasn’t been that hard to make a living at farming . . . like it was for his dad, but things are going back the other way . . . we’ll see a lot of bankruptcies and foreclosures . . .

All families must learn to manage finances, but farming families face the daunting reality of living with the unknowns of farming. The unknowns include the weather, seed, fertilizer, pesticide prices, and the markets. All these contribute to whether or not and how much of a profit a farmer will make. “Farmers are the biggest gamblers,” she said laughing. This phrase was frequently used to describe the gamble of borrowing $500,000 to $750,000 dollars in the spring with the goal of paying the money back by the end of fall.¹⁴ Farmers have to take on debt in order to make a profit from farming, unlike in other professions.

When Neely married Bruce, she began a thirty-five year career as a middle-school teacher. She explained that teaching gave her satisfaction and a purpose in life. Even though she had retired from teaching, she had recently begun teaching entry-level math at the local community college. “I love teaching,” she said. On family farms, Sachs explains
that women only work an off-farm job if the farming economics necessitate it.\textsuperscript{15} For nearly five years, Neely worked as a middle-school teacher before she realized her father-in-law was underpaying her husband for his labor on the farm. She stated:

When my father-in-law first rented Bruce 160 acres, I of course was teaching . . . I was always teaching. His dad . . . and I didn’t like this either, but his dad would say, “I know I should pay you more but Neely’s teaching so it’s okay.” And I thought I was bringing the icing on the cake for the family. Really I was bringing our paycheck in.

As I learned from Neely’s story, her husband and father-in-law seemed to encourage her to work as a schoolteacher, in part because it was in the best interest of the farm. Neely’s income allowed her husband and father-in-law to steadily purchase hundreds of acres of farmland over the years. Frequently, the income from women on farms, argues Adams, is “plowed directly back into the household.”\textsuperscript{16} As the economics related to family farming changed through the years, Neely’s income was rationalized as a means of protecting the farm because it became the primary living means for the family. Even in the 1980s, the family remained financially stable and was able to purchase a foreclosed homestead when other family farmers in the area were going bankrupt. It would seem that Neely’s commitment to teaching was utilized by the male patriarchs for financial benefits even though she never physically labored on the farm as she had wished to do.

Neely’s working an off-farm job was even more unusual when I learned about the history of women in the family. She was the first farm wife in the family who had an off-farm job. Her mother-in-law never worked an off-farm job. Prior to Neely, women in the
family had remained on the farm in order to take care of the children, cook meals, garden, and run errands as needed. As we talked about the changes she experienced during her marriage, Neely told the following story:

I can remember telling Bruce how lucky my Mother-in-Law was that she was satisfied . . . satisfied being the farmer’s wife. I would not have been. I think it was a generational thing too. It was more common during her time. She never wanted to work off the farm. She didn’t need to go anywhere and was happy staying right here on the farm. One time, my in-laws were thinking about putting up something new on the house or putting up a harvest barn . . . and they went with the barn. Something to put corn in? I wouldn’t have let that happen (laughing) . . . but she was fine with it.

Although Neely spoke highly of her mother-in-law, it was clear from her stories that they had different experiences of being farmers’ wives. They also held different views about the role of women on the farm. As an outsider, Neely had grown up with a mother who had always worked outside the home. Reminiscing about her mom she said, “She was pretty progressive.” It was relatively common during her mother-in-law’s time for women to work off-farm jobs because of the changes in farming economics. Explaining this, Adams proposes that women after World War II began working off-farm jobs because of the “modernizing” to farm machinery. Modernization led to an increase in prices. The cost of machinery for many farming families required sideline incomes, but because Neely was working no one else in the family needed an off-farm job.
Cooking

Although Neely’s mother-in-law never openly criticized her off-farm job as a schoolteacher, she did frequently remind Neely of her responsibilities as a farm wife. For the most part, it seemed that the two women had a mutual understanding and respect for one another. However, they disagreed about the importance of cooking homemade meals for the family and farm help. During the school year, Neely frequently would order carry out or prepare a pre-made frozen meal. “Let’s just say she was shocked,” she said in reference to the first time her mother-in-law realized she bought frozen meals. Domestic responsibilities, Rosenfeld argues, are considered the duties of a farm wife whether or not she worked on or off the farm. Even though Neely worked as a schoolteacher, she was responsible for preparing dinner each night for her family. She shared the following story about her mother-in-law:

My mother-in-law told me . . . and I kinda blew her off . . . she said, “You just want to make sure to feed Bruce regularly. Make sure he’s full.” And I am like, what? What is this about? I have learned, well . . . it’s something I worked at . . . cooking . . .

For Neely’s mother-in-law cooking and preparing meals were integral to her identity as a farmer’s wife. Fulfilling these tasks was part of the gender ideology of her role as a farmer’s wife in the family. Through Neth we learn that “women’s work rituals centered on serving meals” on family farms. The ritual of inviting the entire farm labor into the home for the noon-meal (or dinner) or preparing meals to be taken out to the farm fields...
was completed by generations of farm wives. This was a task that Neely’s mother-in-law performed each day until her death.

When Neely married Bruce, she did not accept the same gender ideology that her mother-in-law had about food preparation being exclusively her responsibility. Neth argues that as the “family composition” or familial membership changes so do the gender definitions of work. Arguably, this would be especially true for women who marry into a farming family from various other non-farming backgrounds. She shared the following story about her husband Bruce cooking:

He used to get up at 6:30 a.m. When the kids were growing up, he would get up every morning and ask them, “Bacon, eggs, pancakes or what do you want?” I remember one morning his mom said to me . . . “Neely, I can’t believe you let him fix breakfast.” I’m thinking, are you kidding me? It wasn’t like I was being lazy. I was fixin’ the backpacks and lunches. If Bruce sees I’m not going to be home . . . well, he’s quite capable - - in fact he’s probably a better cook than I am (laughing).

By allowing Bruce to cook, Neely began to alter the gender expectations for a farm wife in the family. Neely grew up in a home where her father would help her mother out in the home, so for her, sharing chores was not unusual. She explained that breakfast was Bruce’s favorite meal, but it was not a meal that she grew up eating. “Breakfast was always important to him, so I let him cook it,” she stated. Although Neely’s husband prepared breakfast, it was her mother-in-law who continued to take care of the noon-meal
(dinner) until she died. This was a tradition that after her death, Neely did not continue because her husband, son, and hired man brought lunches out to the fields.

Notions of womanhood on family farms are frequently entangled with a value for hard work and skill related to cooking. In Neely’s family, women had previously adopted an ideology that meals were homemade and required elaborate preparation. As an outsider, Neely did not adopt this ideology as part of her role as a farm wife. She rarely cooked homemade meals and also worked as a schoolteacher. Neely was proud of the fact that her son was more involved in his children’s lives and helped around the house much more than Bruce or her father-in-law had in the past. As an outsider, Neely accepted but also altered her role as a farmer’s wife and the culture of her farming family. However, many of the gender expectations for women’s work on the farm still remained unchanged.

Karen, 43, Rural Mercer County

It was Jane, a farmer’s wife, who gave me Karen’s name. Jane was Margaret’s daughter-in-law, and after I interviewed her she called me and asked if she could give me the name of best friend, Karen. “I think she’ll be good for you to talk to because she has a different perspective,” Jane stated. From Jane I learned that Karen was not from the area, but rather from the Chicagoland area. After college Karen married a local farmer and moved onto the family farm. Jane discussed how Karen had a difficult time adjusting to the rural countryside and the farming way of life. As Jane spoke, I hurriedly wrote down everything she said about Karen in one of my field notebooks. Grateful for an additional name, I thanked Jane and wrote down Karen’s contact information.
Time slipped away from me during my fieldwork. Nearly a month after I had talked with Jane, I came across Neely’s story in one of my field notebooks. I noticed that I had scribbled, “married into a farming family” in the margin. After reading this, I realized that Neely was the only farmer’s wife I had interviewed who was not from a farming family. It was in this moment that I decided I needed to call Karen. When I called her, there was a long pause after I introduced myself and then she said, “I know who you are, but I’m not sure I should do this.” Startled, I explained to Karen that I was a Ph.D. student interested in collecting stories about Midwest culture. “It’s just . . . I don’t like it . . . I hate it,” she stated. Her words were crisp and clear. “Oh, that’s fine. Totally fine,” I responded trying to reassure her. This was the first time a participant expressed hatred for the area. We spent nearly fifteen minutes on the phone before Karen invited me over to her home the following evening. After I hung up, I knew Karen’s story would be very different from my other interviews.

You’re Not a Farm Wife

When I arrived at Karen’s house, her distant disposition revealed that she was distrustful of me. As she invited me through her home, I noticed no indicators of her home being a farmhouse. Unlike many of my other participants, who had farming artifacts in and around their homes, Karen did not; her house was strikingly absent of these. There were no gingham patterned couches, antique tractor toys, or country decorations in her home. I quickly noted these observations in my field notebook while she was in the kitchen making iced tea. While her home may not have reflected the
typical farmhouse, she had adopted the rural country custom of making and offering iced tea to guests.

![Figure 14: A Favorite Item in Karen’s Home Because “It’s not farming.”](image)

As she returned from the kitchen she said, “My kids think this is hilarious.” Initially, unclear of what she meant and I replied, “Oh, really?” She responded:

Oh yes. They think this is just hysterical because I would need them to explain the farming. When they heard you were coming over to interview me about being a farmer’s wife, they laughed and said, “You’re not a farm wife.”
After listening, I clarified to Karen that her experiences as a farmer’s wife were also important. “I’m not interested in one particular kind of story,” I said. After sipping on her iced tea, she looked at me and said, “That’s a relief because I’m not my mother-in-law.” I knew from Karen’s response that she likely performed different tasks than her mother-in-law. Reflecting on her children’s commentary, I realized that they had a learned cultural understanding for the role of a farm wife and Karen did not fit this role.

Even though Karen was not from a family farming background, her children were immersed in the culture and way of life. On family farming operations, Neth explains that children are socialized and learn about the family, gendered labor, and the farm.22 They had learned from other family members and neighbors how a farm wife should perform her role. According to Strange, there is a cultural assumption that farms and the families that operate them are homogenous.23 When we perceive farms in this manner, we also assume and expect that all family members perform the same roles and duties across all farms. In actuality, family farms, Strange argues, may have the same “common interests” (farming or livestock), but have different personal values and individual interests that guide the operation of the farm.24 As I learned about the expectations for Karen as a farm wife, I recognized that many of the tasks such as childrearing and meal preparation were the same as Neely’s. Karen would go on to explain the one striking difference between their two family expectations for a farm wife. I would learn that whereas Neely’s family accepted her working as a teacher off the farm, Karen’s did not.

As our conversation unfolded, Karen expressed how nervous she was about speaking with me because she never held a job on the farm. Karen noted that she had
operated a combine for the first time this fall, after seventeen years of marriage. When I asked her if she was ever interested in primarily working on the farm, she stated unequivocally, “No.” Karen also clarified that she was never interested in being involved with the day-to-day operations on the farm. Further, there was no room for her on the farm because her father-in-law, husband, cousin, and a hired man all worked together. In comparison to women’s experiences on farms, men’s experiences have remained relatively consistent. Women’s roles on farms were always subject to change, and as Sachs argues, were contingent on “the context of the changing structure of agriculture.”

For example, Karen’s mother-in-law still tends a large garden and cans food, but she no longer operates a plow or disc tractor. “She used to be really out there,” Karen stated in describing her mother-in-law’s involvement on the farm. Her role also changed after the family started ferreting hogs in sheds rather than in A-frame huts. She was no longer needed on the farm, and as result, neither was Karen. When Karen married Bill, the farming operation had become so large she was never required to help on the farm.

Although their farm had drastically changed, Karen’s housework responsibilities were no different from those of her mother-in-law. Traditionally, housework and child-rearing responsibilities in the home belonged to the farm wife. In this way, the domestic tasks performed by women in farming families have changed very little. However, the farmhouse used to be a space where everyone in the family would congregate and manage business tasks related to the farm. For example, Karen described how her husband had to persuade her father-in-law to purchase a cellphone. Her father-in-law was resistant because he expected her husband, Bill, to come to his house at 7:00 AM. This
was the way her father-in-law had worked with his father, so it was a tradition and expectation for Bill, too. “He couldn’t understand that things happen. Bill might need to be somewhere,” Karen stated in disbelief. Although technological innovations such as cellphones helped provide more flexibility and a sense of safety for farm wives, they also assisted in further situating the home as a domestic space for women.

Karen’s husband and father-in-law also built a separate building next to the house, which became the space where they met. As Karen explained, after her father-in-law purchased a cellphone, he then wanted to build a separate building next to her home for farm business.26 Like the farm, the new building or farm office became a space for her husband, father-in-law, and other male laborers, and the home effectively became Karen’s space. Explaining the gendering of spaces, Heynen notes that a whole set of ideas were developed during the rise of industrial capitalism that denoted the home as a feminine or domestic space.27 As a consequence of the rise of industrialization, the home became associated with domesticity or women’s work, which was opposed to workshops or places of work outside the home that were denoted as men’s work.

The situating of the home in opposition to work outside the home, Heynen argues, led to the emergence of the private/public sphere dichotomy.28 The home was the private or feminine sphere, and outside the home was the public or masculine sphere. The split between the private and public sphere also gave rise to the ideology of domesticity, or the construction of the home as a domestic space with a particular set of ideals and expectations. Heynen explains that the ideology of domesticity:
Domesticity stressed a separation between male and female spheres. The ideology gendered the home as a space belonging to the wife. By relegating women into the private sphere of the home, the ideology of “caretakers” and “breadwinners” also emerged. Women were ascribed as caretakers of the home, children and elderly family members. Men were placed in the public sphere and recognized as the earners of income for the family. The whole ideology of domesticity, effectively led to the justification of the gender division of labor, space, and power. As a result of these ideals, women, on the basis of gender, were not supposed to work outside the private sphere of the home.

On a family farm, Karen explained, women were supposed to work in the home and men worked outside on the farm. The ideology of domesticity had ascribed the farmhouse as the place belonging to women. As an outsider, she detailed how she never perceived that working outside the home would be a problem. Karen described how she had grown up in the suburbs of Chicago and that both of her parents worked outside the home as teachers. So when she married her husband, she had expected to work outside the home as her mother had. She told the following story:

I had a Master’s degree when I moved here. After I moved here, I got things all set and I had a job lined up. The first morning of starting my new job, I was getting ready to go to work and Bill said, “You aren’t really gonna do this, are
you?” And I said yes. On the farm, if your wife has to get an off-farm job it means that you’re not taking care of the family or you’re in financial trouble. So to him by me working it was like making him look bad to his friends. What he didn’t realize was that all of his friends our age had wives that worked. When he was growing up, if a wife had to get a job it was because the farm was in bad financial shape. From day one he said, “You aren’t really gonna do this, are you?” Almost like you aren’t gonna do this to me . . . so . . . (shakes head) . . . . .

This story illustrates how Karen intended on utilizing her master’s degree to work outside the home, but her husband had different expectations. She stated that early in her marriage, she and her husband fought a lot about her working outside the home. Karen explained that her husband did not want her working outside the home because it implied to others that the farm was not financially successful. Through Karen’s story, I realized that her husband saw Karen working outside the home as a threat to his power and identity as the breadwinner for the family. Unbeknownst to her, the construction of domesticity on the farm had also stressed the separation between the female sphere of the home and the male sphere of working on the farm.

Learning that women were not supposed to work off the farm and earn a separate income was visibly shocking to Karen. Shaking her head, she stated, “Our parents can’t believe our marriage has survived.” Karen married into a family with a different ideology about the role of women. Although farm wives were often employed off the farm, Sachs posits that the domestic ideology helped to emphasize the “primacy of women’s domestic role” at home and on the farm.³² Sachs also notes that farm men were eager to support
their wives if they were “teaching other women the moral value of staying in the home.”

As a consequence of the gender expectations for a farm wife in her husband’s family, Karen only worked outside the home for four years. It was quite clear she found herself in a situation where she had to choose between her marriage and working as a physical therapist. When Karen told me about how she missed working at the clinic, but could no longer fight with her husband or mother-in-law, I realized how pervasive the expectation for a farm wife was in the family.

Children

The topic of Karen’s children came up frequently during her interview. We spoke more about her children than I had with any of my other participants. It seemed that because she had two boys and then a girl, she was particularly worried about her sons farming. Having married into a fourth-generation farming family, Karen also described how she felt pressure from her in-laws to encourage her eldest son to take over the farm. When I asked Karen if there were any ways she helped to connect her children to the farm, she told the following story:

They’re connected to the farm. I don’t know how much more they could be. They’re living it. They understand the financial concerns and they understand . . . when we need rain or when Dad is in a bad mood because we’ve gotten too much rain. They understand the emotional highs and lows of it. They understand that big checks come in the mail and that’s really cool, but things can go poorly. Our oldest son, Jacob helps his Dad too, and so does Connor, our second son. They’re
involved with the farm and not only the physical part. We treat them like little adults . . . so they have a full picture.

Whereas many of my participants fondly told stories about connecting their children to the farm, Karen did not. Even Neely told stories about her children riding in the combines and tractors at a young age. Unlike many of my other participants, Karen did not wish to teach her children about how to be future farmers. Her children also did not regularly help their dad or have farm chores. As an outsider, I learned it was far more important to her to supplement her children’s education with at-home school lessons and serve as a school board member. After Karen moved to the area, she experienced a series of school consolidations within the school district. As she explained, three separate schools consolidated in order to secure class sizes of thirty-five. The consolidations removed many of the advanced classes and fine arts from the education curriculum and required her children to travel more than forty-five minutes to school. She was also unconcerned about the expectations by her in-laws for her children to be involved in 4-H and Future Farmer’s of America (FFA) clubs. Instead, she was primarily focused on providing her children with the type of high-level education she experienced in the Chicago suburbs.

Shaking her head, she said, “I just know what they’re missing out on going to school here.”

Past and Future

Karen was like many of my other participants because she also discussed the past and the future of the farming operation. However, unlike the others she expressed very little nostalgia about the history of the farm or her home. In Place: A Short Introduction,
geographer, Tim Cresswell notes that a home is a place where people feel a sense of “attachment and rootedness.”34 As a space, Cresswell argues that home is fraught with contradictory meanings rather than one single homogenous meaning for all people.35 One reason why Karen felt a lack of attachment to her home was because she felt beholden to her father-in-law, who owned the home. Even though her home sat on her father-in-law’s farmland, it did not become part of the family estate until the 1980s. Her father-in-law purchased the home from a cousin as a result of a bankruptcy. I sensed that her father-in-law felt tremendous pride that he was able to purchase the home and avoid bankruptcy, perhaps because of how the home was acquired. It was challenging for Karen to feel a sense of home because her father-in-law would state, “It’s my house,” if there were any renovations or repairs to be made. After Karen moved to the rural western Illinois countryside, she anticipated purchasing a home. The reality was far different and quite complex. Karen told the following story:

When we were first looking for a house, well . . . I didn’t understand. I had been living on my own . . . and all of a sudden I was expected to live in a house that my in-laws own. I finished my physical therapy degree and I was making good money. I could afford a mortgage. Why is that my only choice is to live in a house that my in-laws own? I was twenty-five . . . not an eighteen-year-old schoolgirl.

As I listened to Karen’s story, I realized that from the moment she moved to the countryside she struggled to understand family farming culture. “I may as well have moved to a different country,” she said laughing. For Midwest farmers, the relationship among farmland, rural community life, and their family is frequently laden with cultural
guidelines. As Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote explain “town spouses” who marry a farmer are often unaware of the close relationship between the family and the farm. As an outsider, Karen did not realize that the home was also connected to the farm. Much like Neely, Karen also struggled to understand the culturally bound context surrounding the farmhouse. Many farming families have adopted the cultural practice of joining the farmland with the farmhouse. This practice helps to keep the farmland and farmhouse lineage together and most importantly, neither are treated as a personal possession because they belong to the family estate.

One important cultural guideline embedded in a farming family is the expectation to raise the next generation of farmers. Nearly all of my participants explicitly expressed that they attempted to persuade their children not to farm. However, it was also clear that there was a sense of relief for many of my participants when their children chose to continue the farming way of life. For example, in reference to her son taking over the family farm, Sophia stated: “We were relieved to see him continue this way of life.” However, the historical and ideological importance of continuing the family farming way of life was not as important to Karen. She said:

I try not to think past where my sons would come . . . I don’t want to get a picture in my head of my kids being back or not being back. I don’t want to pressure them into coming back here. I have no visions of things with the future of the farm. You know we talk about farming . . . like you know when Dad comes in and he’s all stressed out. He makes good money, but there’s that in any job too.
Karen expressed that her sons (ages fourteen and ten) were already talking about whether they wanted to stay home and farm, go to college and return to the farm, or choose an entirely different career path other than farming. She explained that she believed that there are “better opportunities in a bigger area” for her children in terms of professions. Only she and Neely recognized the cutthroat and economically challenging reality of farming today. She stated:

I have a good friend, but her husband is one of the worst farmers in the area. Well, I should say . . . my husband hates him. He’s the kind that calls up another farmer’s landlord to see how much he pays in rent. He’ll offer to pay a little bit more just so he can get more farmland . . . steal your farmland without you even knowing it . . . until you get a notice in the mail.

For Karen, this was a primary reason why she recognized the profession of farming as “unhealthy.” She said: “You can’t even trust the people in church with you.” In a small area, many of the farming families attend church together. Both Karen and Neely told stories about attending church with farmers with a reputation for stealing grain, using chemicals to taint crops, and calling farmers’ landlords. As an outsider, it was evident through our conversation that Karen had little to no interest in her children becoming farmers. For her, farming was her husband’s profession and their financial livelihood, but it was not the only desirable way of life for her children.

Farming Dangers

Karen was the only farm wife who expressed concern about the dangers of her children working on the farm. For many of my other participants, children were seen as
an integral aspect of the family labor on the farm. This was especially true for my older participants: Ellie, Annie, and Margaret, whose children helped contribute to the family farming economy. Over the years, the philosophy of children replacing farmhand labor dissipated because children were mandated to attend school. However, Karen was adamant about the dangers of her children helping out on the farm. She explained:

I have a huge problem with the safety issue right now and especially with my kids being boys and starting to drive tractors. My son has driven a grain cart since he was twelve (now fourteen). He’s very responsible and everything. But that’s a big piece of equipment.

Prior to interviewing Karen, I had naively taken for granted the dangers of children working with heavy machinery on the farm. In speaking with Karen, she told a horrifying story about a young teenager in the area who fell into a grain bin and had the skin ripped off his leg by an auger. Luckily, the teenager survived because someone returned to check on him. “He would have died. He was fifteen years old,” Karen firmly stated. Over the years, farm equipment has increased in size and more farms utilize various toxic chemicals and pesticides. Whether it was heavy machinery, pesticides, or fertilizers, Karen was deeply concerned about her sons’ safety on the farm.

Confirming Karen’s concerns about farm safety Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote explain that “farming is a dangerous occupation, even for adults, and for children, who often can be easily distracted, the farm and farm work can be life-threatening.” As I learned through my participants’ stories, there was a romantic myth about children working in the fields with the family. For many families, it was presented as one of the
few times when the entire family could be together and therefore it was a means for the family to remain relationally close. My other participants also viewed their children working on the family farm as a rite of passage. Young children would have chores like feeding livestock, helping clean stalls, and riding in the machinery. Eventually, children would learn how to operate machinery and be given greater responsibilities as they aged. Unlike many farm wives, Karen was unconcerned with whether or not her sons would take over the family farm. As an outsider, she was more concerned about their safety than passing on the farming way of life.

Daphne, 45, Rural Mercer County

A few days after I interviewed Karen, she texted me the name of friend and said, “You have to interview Daphne. She’s married into one of the bigger farming families.” She explained that her friend was also originally from a Chicago suburb. On the phone, Daphne questioned my intentions for the interview. “This is for a project?” she asked inquisitively. “Yes, my dissertation project,” I confidently replied. I was hoping my confidence would reassure Daphne. “I heard from Karen that you’re a nice girl,” Daphne stated. Realizing that Daphne’s hesitancy was similar to Karen’s, I again reassured her that I was interested in collecting stories about farm wives and Midwest culture. After a short dialogue about my dissertation, Daphne invited me over that same afternoon. “We’re going on vacation soon, so this is the only time I can do this,” she said. “Very good. No problem at all,” I replied. After ending the call, my feeling that Daphne had reservations about our conversation lingered.
After I hung up the phone with Daphne, I walked through the house to look for Laurie. The sun porch is her favorite place in the home, and as I looked through the glass door she smiled and asked, “Whom are you interviewing next?” I told her that it was a woman named Daphne who lives ten miles outside of town. She replied, “Oh, Betty is her mother-in-law.” I had interviewed Betty, a sixty-eight year old farmer's wife from rural Warren County earlier in the summer. I recalled that Betty provided me the names of other farmers' wives, but not the name of her daughter-in-law, Daphne. Learning about relationships was important to understanding how to navigate the political sphere of family farming in the western Illinois countryside. Family farming relationships structured and organized the community in that they revealed which families worked together or disliked one another, owned grain elevators, or exclusively grain or livestock farmed. Taking note of Betty and Daphne's relationship, I prepared my field notebook and set off.

As I pulled into Daphne’s gravel driveway, I looked out across the pasture and I noticed a haze in the air. To the naked eye, this may look like just any other blurry image, but it is far more special. On this day in late July, the sun was hot and the air was rife with humidity. Right before the sunsets, you can see the humidity on hot summer days in the countryside. This was the first day during the summer that I was able to see the humidity. It hung like a blanket over the pasture and farm fields. After weeks of rain, this was the weather the farmers (figuratively or not) had prayed for in July and August. I learned that farmers spend a lot of time talking, praying, and cursing weather out. Right
after I snapped this picture, Daphne opened the door and greeted me. “You found it okay?” “Oh yes,” I replied wiping sweat from my forehead.

Figure 15: Humid Day on Daphne’s Farm.

After entering Daphne’s home, I noticed the century-old split-timber framework construction. Much like Karen’s home, Daphne’s also lacked country knick-knacks and gingham furniture. Instead, her home looked like a page out of a Pottery Barn catalog. The home was more chic than shabby and not country at all. It featured freshly honed, dark, wide-plank wood floors, iron based floor lamps, and large artwork was mounted on the walls. The home appeared meticulously maintained. Each piece of pottery, decorative pillow, and magazine had a place. As we walked through the open-concept living room
into the kitchen, Daphne invited me to meet her daughters and have some chocolate chip cookies. After we ate a few cookies, Daphne suggested that we go into the dining room for the interview. “It will be quiet in there. Well it’s quiet everywhere out here,” she said laughing.

Compromises

Following Daphne into the dining room, I noticed a cat run through in the direction of a screened in porch. The cat jumped onto the back of a couch and began sniffing a large hanging plant. “Odd, isn’t it?” Daphne said, finishing a chocolate chip cookie. I was unaware of the fact I was staring at the cat. Tilting my head, I replied “What?” “Animals for farmers live outside. We had to do a lot of compromising,” she said. Daphne was my twenty-fifth interviewee, but she was the first farmer’s wife who had an indoor cat and dogs that slept on the porch. I learned from Daphne that after a lot of compromising the two family dogs and the cat were allowed to be inside the home. Whether it was cats or dogs, hogs or heifers, all animals had a job on the farm. Farmers view animals as part of the farming livelihood. This was especially true for Daphne’s husband Rodger, who grew up raising hogs. Daphne explained that her mother-in-law, Betty, could not understand why she would want to have animals in the house. “Farmers look at animals differently,” she said. I learned that her husband and mother-in-law both viewed animals as bringing dirt into the house. However, after more than a decade of compromising, as Daphne stated, “I won.” Having agreed to forgo Christmas presents in lieu of her dogs receiving orthopedic cots, Daphne’s husband agreed both dogs could
come and go into the porch as they pleased. They were, however, not allowed in the house.

This was just one of the many ways Daphne explained that she learned to compromise after moving to the rural countryside. As I listened to Daphne talk about her marriage, I realized that unlike many of the other wives, she detailed how she and Rodger made decisions together. Karen, for example, was told throughout her marriage what her role was in the family. This resulted in a lot of tension in her marriage and with her in-laws. According to Daphne, in her marriage, Rodger was willing to compromise as long as the farm was not negatively affected. When I asked Daphne if she could share an example of a time when she and Rodger had compromised, she told the following story:

We’re going on vacation. Growing up, I would always go to South Carolina every summer with all of my cousins and family. That’s where we were married. When we first got married Rodger said, “Look I can’t leave the farm for two weeks.” Being a teacher I was used to having the summers off. I thought, okay . . . but how long can you leave? When the girls were born he would say, “I’m only going for a week.” I would go ahead and go alone for the first week and Rodger would meet us out there. I think eventually he felt . . . well, like he was missing out time on the beach and with the kids. He’s started to let go of the idea that you can’t leave the farm, you know? If he has all of his work done then why shouldn’t he go on vacation with us?

For many people the summer months are a time when they might take a family vacation. Daphne grew up taking planned vacations and relaxing on the weekends with her friends.
and family. However, I learned from Daphne that her husband did not grow up taking vacations or leaving the family farm for an extended amount of time. Rodger had grown up primarily on a hog farm. For farmers who raise livestock, it is often not feasible to leave the animals for any amount of time. This compounded with a work ethic that Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote argue is predicated on “you either worked or you were lazy and felt guilty.” For many farmers, there simply is no such thing as free time because there is always work on the farm. The farm carries a burden not just for the farmer, but also for the wife and children. Daphne explained to me that she learned that holidays and the weekends were not a time for rest, but rather just another workday for Rodger.

The pace of life on farming operations was remarkably different for the outsiders I interviewed. Growing up, Daphne observed her mother and father working outside the home. Her mother was a psychologist, and her father was a schoolteacher. Her family had set work schedules and vacations. On the farm, there is no set schedule for when a heifer will give birth, and as Daphne described, “In the middle of the night he’ll just be out there helping her.” When she married Rodger, Daphne detailed how she had to adjust to the everyday realities of living on a farm. One significant compromise she made was staying home with their two daughters. Daphne was a high school teacher for five years, but when their first daughter was born, she was forced to quit. She acknowledged that her mother-in-law could have potentially watched the girls, but she also worked as a real estate agent. Daphne told the following story:
I always thought teaching was the perfect job to raise your kids. Now, I just think there’s no way I could’ve parented. Being a stay-at-home mom was essential when Rodger was working twelve or more hours a day. During the busy seasons (fall and spring) he’s not available at all.

Giving up her career as a schoolteacher was necessitated by the amount of farming her husband did as well as his sideline professions. Women in farming families are frequently encouraged to remain in the home and on the farm. Both Daphne’s husband and her in-laws expected her to stay at home and raise the children. Child-rearing by mothers in American farming families, according to Rugh, is understood as a “badge of pride.”\(^\text{42}\) In part, this is because a woman was most often responsible for instilling the farming values and expectations for the next generation.

While Daphne expressed gratitude for being able to be home with her daughters when they were young, she also faced the realization of being an empty nester. Although nearly a decade away, being an empty nester was an uncomfortable reality for Daphne as her eldest daughter entered high school this fall. It is worth noting that as a result of Daphne’s outsider status, she was also unlikely to become what Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote describe as a “full partner” on the farm.\(^\text{43}\) She lacked the knowledge about the farming operation and also had no interest in operating machinery. As an outsider, Daphne remained uninformed about the farm and as she said, “I leave the farming to Rodger.” Daphne was clear that she nevertheless saw herself as a farmer’s wife even though, as she said: “I’m not out there taking a role in it.” I realized that being able to
identity as a farmer’s wife was possibly comforting to her because it allowed her to fill the future void of being an empty nester.

*Helping Out, Volunteering, and Neighboring*

Throughout my fieldwork, I heard numerous stories about how people in the area helped each other out in times of need. I heard stories about how thirty farmers helped plant a farmer’s fields because he had to have heart surgery. Daphne told a story about how the people in the community came together after a tornado touched down and left massive destruction. “People just kept bringing cases of water and helping clean up,” she said. Particularly in times of crisis, Rugh explains, there is an expectation that the “core neighborhood and distant neighbors” assist each other. The notion of community members helping each other out was historically pragmatic in rural spaces. Prior to reliable transportation, farmers and their families did not travel far from the farm and if they did, it was for a purpose. The main purpose for leaving the farm was often to help a farm neighbor. Further, the cultural value of helping each other out, or as I heard “neighbors helping neighbors,” was arguably more feasible prior to the expansion of farming operations. Between fifty and seventy years ago, farmers were able to farm 500 acres of cash rented or share cropped land and be a profitable enterprise. According to the wives I interviewed, today a minimum of 500 owned acres and an additional thousand or more was required to make a profit. In the rural community, this means that there used to be many more farmers than there are today and the farmers who do exist are massive in size.
Regardless of the changes to the size of family farming operations, the notion of neighbors helping each other has remained a value. This is especially true among farmers and their families. As an outsider who was from a Chicago suburb, Daphne had a difficult time understanding the expectation of helping others. The concept of helping other members of the community was often spoken about as part of the area’s identity. Neth explains that women in rural farming areas were expected to maintain and provide a sense of unity in the community.\textsuperscript{45} This unity helped signify a supportive and helpful community for the citizens living in the rural countryside. According to Neth, women enacted informal and formal social ties through the church, community engagements, and neighborhood functions.\textsuperscript{46} For example, I heard stories about ice cream socials, bake sales, and cook-offs that are regularly organized to raise money for needy families. Over the years as farms have grown in size, the number of citizens living in the rural communities has declined. However, as I learned from Daphne, the declining population did not alter the expectations for volunteering or helping out in the community. She stated:

How involved you are in the community is important to people here. Rodger’s involved in this committee and that committee . . . but I’m just not a joiner. I have to think first, do I want to spend time there or would I rather be at home? Joining a small church . . . well, I felt like . . . I’m sorry . . . I know you need a lot of people helping . . . I taught Sunday school a few times, but I really did not want to join a committee and be up late at a night. Rodger has come to terms with it. He feels compelled and I do not . . .
Daphne’s husband, Rodger, was from a farming family and viewed serving on committees as his responsibility to the rural community. It was also a means for him to socialize and cultivate farming relationships. Farming families living in the rural countryside are expected to “pull together” regardless of the population declining and the increase in farm size.\textsuperscript{47} For farm wives who were from farming families, it seemed that helping neighbors out and volunteering were an aspect of their identity. Neth’s study of women’s lives on farms reveals that women’s lives often coalesced around social events. She suggests that participating in rural community life “linked men, women, and children” and “emphasized familial and communal meaning of agriculture.”\textsuperscript{48} For women, volunteering and helping out were a means of maintaining and creating relationships across the countryside. As an outsider, Daphne did not share the same enthusiasm for helping out neighbors or volunteering for committees.

Through Daphne’s stories, I realized that the notion of helping out in the community was also tied to neighboring. Neighboring is a longstanding ritual that continues to provide social opportunities for all family members and close friends. Neth explains that the ritual of neighboring “linked the past and future through repeated celebrations that neighbors shared with neighbors and then shared with neighbors’ children.”\textsuperscript{49} Historically, it was once common for an entire family to live in the same neighborhood. Today, only a few of Daphne’s family members live in her neighborhood or within a ten to twenty mile radius. Overtime, more and more family members have moved further away and no longer live all together in the same neighborhood.
Daphne married into a family with a history of neighboring with almost every single family member. It was a ritual that was passed down from one generation to the next. In the essay, “Perceptions of Family Communication Patterns and the Enactment of Family Rituals,” communication scholars Leslie Baxter and Catherine Clark explain the importance of family rituals for the structure and relationships in a family. Family rituals, as Baxter and Clark argue, bond and socialize family members. Her husband’s family had neighboring traditions for holidays and birthdays. She shared the following story about her daughter’s first Halloween:

Angelica was born during the harvest. She was two months old at Halloween. Rodger said that I had to take her to all six great aunts because they take pictures. I thought okay and I started at 4:00 p.m. I didn’t get back to his parents’ house until 9:00 p.m. and I thought I was going to pass out. I remember being at his mom’s and making myself a sandwich because I hadn’t eaten since lunch. I said, “I’m sorry. I’m putting my foot down.” Now if anyone living wants to see them they just come to his parents’ house. That was a fight . . . I can remember Rodger saying, “It’s just what we do. It’s how it works. How hard is it?”

Including every family member in all neighboring functions was unusual for Daphne, but her husband told her that it was a tradition. Daphne explained, “I tried to not hurt anyone’s feelings, but it was getting a little out of hand.” This story illuminates how historically, social ties were maintained by including all relatives and neighbors in holiday functions. Neighboring was a means through which emotional, social, and likely economic ties were created and shared by the entire neighborhood. As farms increased
in size and members of the family discontinued farming or moved away, it was less feasible to visit all family members for every holiday.

Conclusion

The stories in this chapter reveal the lives of three outsiders who married into farming families. From the women’s stories, we recognize how distinctly different family farming culture is for farm wives who are outsiders. While every family maintains, re-creates, and creates new cultural practices, farming families are unique in that they merge the family with the farming business. As depicted in the stories from the outsiders, the role of the farm wife is tied to long-standing gender expectations. Neely, Karen, and Daphne’s stories help to illuminate the experiences of women who married into well-established farming families with generations of farming history. They married into families that had gendered expectations for a wife’s role. Through their stories we gain an understanding of the challenges they experienced.

Neely’s story illustrated how her family tolerated her choice to work as a schoolteacher because her income benefited the farm. Nevertheless, her story also affirms that a farm wife who works an off-farm job is still expected to perform domestic tasks. Similar to Neely’s, Karen’s story shows that her family was far less accepting of a farm wife working an off-farm job. As an outsider, she also presented apathy for the past and future of the farming operation and had little interest in her sons becoming the next generation of farmers. Finally, from Daphne we learn that a farm wife is expected to follow the traditions and rituals of the family. All three women’s stories expand our
understanding of the lives of farm wives living and working in the rural western Illinois countryside.

Finally, through the perspectives from women who married into farming families, we realize the complexity of family farming culture. We better understand the challenges faced by not only women who marry into farming families, but all women who are farm wives because of their shared identity. Each woman’s story illustrates the fact that a farming family reflects a unique type of family culture. There are rituals, customs, and gender ideals that are passed down from one generation to the next in the family. Despite being outsiders, they were also expected to learn and adhere to the gender role for a farm wife. It seems that just as family farms are heavily steeped in American myths and traditions, so too, is the role of the farm wife.

3 Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote, Harvest of Hope, 81.
4 Rugh, Our Common Country, 73.
5 Transitioning the family farm from one generation to another typically occurs over many years. For example, it might take place over ten or twenty years.
6 The main house is the farmhouse that sits on the family farmland. There maybe more than one house on the family farmland, but the main house is typically the largest. The family living in the main house is traditionally viewed as the primary farming family.
7 Monmouth, Illinois, has a population under ten thousand. The town has a few chain stores and is important to the people of the rural western Illinois countryside because of its historical downtown.
8 Salamon, Prairie Patrimony, 140.
9 Salamon, Prairie Patrimony, 140.
10 A farm is “declared” by the Illinois Department of Agriculture.
11 A centennial farm means that the same family has owned the land for 100 years. Centennial farms are a point of pride for farming families because it means that the farmland has passed from one generation to the next without ever leaving the family. The farms are marked with elaborate signs by the Illinois Department of Agriculture.
Through my fieldwork, I learned that it was quite common for family farms to have a separate “office barn.” This space was explicitly referred to as “the men’s place.”
Chapter VIII: Changes

From the front porch on 30th Avenue, I have seen sunsets and sunrises rich with colors that saturate the sky in oranges, pinks, yellows, and reds. On rare occasions, you can even watch both the sunset and the moon appear in the sky. I have spent a lot of time looking out over the countryside from the front porch swing. The screened in porch is a special place during the summer months because you can feel the warm sun, watch the crops mature, and hear the sounds of birds and bullfrogs. By July the soybeans are fully matured. The leaves from each plant overlap slightly and when the wind blows, a wave of leaves appears across the fields. The wind lifts and separates the delicate leaves and overturns them, revealing a silvery underside that glitters in the sun. As the summer goes on, the air begins to smell heavy from the maturing soybeans and corn crops. It is a smell that lingers and is intensified with the humidity—or as they say “cooked up by the summer rains.”

Across the gravel road there is an old farmstead with a small, one-room house and pond. The long boat dock is warped and heavily leans to one side. The house was probably built in the 1930s for farmhands. Today, it sits vacant, and the pond is over run with algae and turtles. The massive chicken coop is missing all of the feeders and the large, sliding barn door lies discarded on the ground. The horse barn is in disrepair except for the hand axed timber beams that stand strong. The beams were most likely milled on the property near the turn of the century. Evidence of the original homestead exists only in the form of crumbling stones and weather worn wood. Vines and trees now jut out from the windows. I try to imagine this farm long ago, when it breathed life and had the
pulse of a farm. I wonder what stories it could tell, and who lived here, and for how long, before everything went quiet.

Sometime ago, the quietness leaked into the rural towns and communities, the places where the gas stations, clothing, hardware, and grocery stores once were, where the schools and churches once pulsed with community members, but are now vacant and boarded shut. Delilah, Jane, and Betty witnessed the rural communities change. Their stories revealed how rural towns were once vibrant and populated, and provided an important relational connection for community members. These towns were once more than bedroom communities or a halfway point for citizens whose jobs were in the Quad Cities. Some believed the economic downturn in the area was inevitable after the factories left and further exacerbated because rural towns are not located on major highways. The farm wives’ stories revealed that there was also an intimate and undeniable connection between farming and rural communities, but the connection was altered with the industrialization of farming machinery because it streamlined the profession of family farming.

All over the rural western Illinois countryside there are abandoned buildings, short gravel roads that lead nowhere, and barns without a complimentary farm. They are part of a story, an ongoing story, about what has happened to family farming in the rural countryside. The relationship between farming and the rural communities is political, but as I heard stories from Delilah, Jane, and Betty, it was also personal and emotional. The stories in this chapter reflect how changing farming practices altered family farming and relationships, as well as rural communities. From their stories, we realize the
interdependent relationship between family farming and rural communities. As farming changed, so too, did the rural countryside.

Delilah, 62, Warren County

Laurie and Delilah’s friendship began over forty years ago when they both worked as switchboard operators for a local phone company. Even after the phone company downsized and they both lost their jobs, they remained friends and stayed in contact. “We were young and worked the early morning shift after partying with friends all night,” Laurie said, laughing. From the stories she told, it was clear that they had a lot of fun together. Before the interview, Laurie was eager for Delilah to come over to the house. Last summer, Delilah’s mother-in-law was hospitalized, as was Grandpa Jay, so they missed seeing each other regularly. Inviting Delilah to the house was serving two purposes on this sunny June afternoon, first, for my interview, and second, for meeting with an old friend. Unbeknownst to me, Laurie explained that I already knew Delilah from the Monmouth Bank. “She’s the drive-through-teller,” she explained to me as I was dusting the kitchen table and organizing my documents. Nodding in acknowledgement, I thought that if Delilah is as outgoing today as she is at the bank, then this interview should be fun.

Delilah arrived promptly at 3:00 p.m. and after drinking a glass of iced tea on the porch with Laurie, she appeared in the kitchen with a smile. “You ready for me?” she said laughing. “Yes, I am,” I responded and invited her to sit down at the kitchen table. Fiddling with a few short locks of salt and pepper hair, she looked at me and said, “I married into this farming thing, you know?” After a number of interviews, I learned
about the unspoken hierarchy among farming families that dictated that women from farming families were more respected than those who were not. Although the distinction is antiquated and carries with it less importance now, it is nevertheless a facet of a farm wife’s identity. These remnants were reminders of the history of family farming. After Delilah made this comment, I could sense that she was nervous, and so I stated, “I’m only interested in farm wives’ stories.” Delilah’s face turned serious and then she let out a laugh and said, “Well good because I wasn’t leaving without doing the interview anyway.” I knew from this exchange that Delilah would remain candid with me for the rest of the interview.

*Figure 16: View from Laurie’s Kitchen Window.*
History of Farming

To appreciate the changes to rural communities in the region, we must first understand the history of Euro American farming. Farming and rural communities in western Illinois have a long interdependent history. For many Americans, the institution of farming evokes depictions of hard working, self-disciplined farmers and families. Family farming is a cultural institution that Strange depicts as conveying romantic images of “fresh air and sunshine, simple pleasures, and straightforward ways.” However, today family farming is an elusive concept because there are so few family-owned and-operated farms. Through my archival research, I was able to examine plat maps that depicted how there were once many eighty acre farms throughout the countryside. Over time, the size of farms increased, and the number of family farms decreased. Through Strange’s analysis of farming we learn that rural farming underwent the following transformations: small-scale to broad-based and finally to industrialized farming. In short, gone were the days of small-scale family farming operations that financed the family household.

Explaining how she witnessed changes to farming in the area, Delilah stated:

Farms used to be itty-bitty compared today. They used to be just eighty acres . . . every eighty acres there was a farm out there (pointed out the window). It’s funny because I can remember my father-in-law saying how 160 acres was a lot for him . . . today that’s nothing. If my son wanted to buy 300 acres and get started with his own farm. . . uh-uh, no that’s not happening. No, because somebody is biding it up and buying the farmland. The little farmer can’t get started unless he works
into it somehow. Otherwise they’re screwed . . . you can’t just start farming anymore, well . . . and you can’t survive off it either.

As family farms changed, there was a trend towards expanding and growing the size of the farm. The transformation of family farming in the rural countryside, as Strange notes, was “complex, incremental and pervasive.”4 The modifications to farming occurred over a period of time, and for many farm wives, including Delilah, the far-reaching effects of increasing the acreage of a farm or specializing in crops or livestock were not fully understood. As agriculture changed the traditions of farming with family members, maintaining small operational family farms and living exclusively off the farm dissipated. Specialized agriculture meant that farms narrowed the types of crops they planted and livestock they raised. Strange argues that as farms grew in acreage they also became increasingly more specialized, a trend that he notes led to the “separation of people from the land.”5 As farmers and their families became further separated from the farm, this also meant a dramatic cultural change in the rural countryside.

*Rural Countryside and Farming*

The rural western Illinois countryside became a space that was no longer inhabited by numerous family farmers. Delilah explained that over the years the family farms disappeared. A consequence of agricultural specialization was the separation of people from the land and the emergence of fragmented farming operations. Whereas Delilah suggested that the area tries to continue to embody a family farming way of life, the reality is far more complicated. Today there are fewer family farms than ever before and fewer than 2 percent of Americans farm for a living as of 2014.6 The situation is
complex because there are still numerous farms in the western Illinois countryside, but as
I listened to Delilah and other women’s stories, I noted that there are increasingly more
corporate or farm-finishing operations. Teasing out the complexities and tenuous
relationships among the different types of farm entities occurred through the course of
listening to my field stories.

*Corporate and Farm-Finishing Farms*

In order to differentiate corporate and farm-finishing operations from family-farms, I had to consider how these entities operated. Corporate farms in the area are
financed by outside investors and because they operate on a large scale they also market
and sell their own products. For example, these farms will not only store, but also process
both livestock and grain crops on their own property. This practice is in opposition to
family farming operations that sell their products to be processed and sold by a secondary
farming company. Farm-finishing operations in western Illinois are financed by outside
investors and serve as a type of farmland brokerage company. The farm-finishing
company will purchase farmland or lease farmland from the owners and, for a fee, hire
farmers who are looking for additional work. These companies, as I learned, would also
supply top of the line equipment to farmers for a fee. Through the stories I heard, I also
learned that farm-finishing companies worked with wealthy entrepreneurs who had
purchased substantial acreage during the rise and demand of ethanol in the 2000s. Some
farm wives spoke of these entrepreneurs purchasing ten thousand acres of farmland at
time. They would proposition struggling family farms with undeniable offers for the
purchase of the farmland. As I listened to the farm wives’ stories, I realized that working
as a farm-finisher was not viewed favorably because it denoted a lack of familial connection to the farmland. Working as a farm-finisher meant that the farmer did not work on his own family farm, and most importantly, was associated with a company that had no interest in supporting the local communities.

In our minds, when we think of American farming, we conjure images of multi-generational family farms, but the reality is far from these picturesque notions. Farming has changed a lot in the past century, and one of the biggest changes experienced by Delilah and her husband was the advent of farm-finishers. Today, there are numerous farm-finishing companies and their presence has grown stronger in the area. Delilah loathed farm-finisher operations because of their dishonest business practices. According to her and other farmers’ wives, these companies would contact farmland owners who were renting their farmland and offer to pay more to the rent the property than the current tenant. These business strategies were deemed “greedy and un-neighborly” by Delilah who expounded on this explanation by providing the following story:

Family farmers have a work ethic. The family is raised to work together and stick together. There are problems in our family. I’m not saying that there aren’t. There have been divorces . . . and arguments, but we’re all hanging in there for each other. All the small farmers are being gobbled up by these farm-finishing companies . . . they’re like a conglomerate and they spread out all over out here. They have quite a few acres over here and over there and they’re working constantly. They’ll plant so early just to make sure they have gotten their planting
started that their crops will get frosted off . . . and then they have to go back and replant everything. It doesn’t matter though . . . they have money. We’ll hear them complaining when it’s almost Thanksgiving about how they’re still harvesting and I want to say, “If you didn’t think you needed to farm half of the county you wouldn’t have this problem.” They just keep hiring help, though, when they get more land.

In western Illinois, farm-finishing companies replaced many family farms because they had access to extensive financial means from outside investors. Delilah’s anger towards farm-finishing companies is understandable because these companies dramatically changed the rural countryside. As a result of these companies, there are simply fewer family farmers in the rural countryside. I heard numerous stories about how corporate farm-finishing companies would purchase any available farmland in Warren or Mercer Counties regardless of the cost. As a result, this made it impossible for family farmers to purchase additional farmland. In their essay, “Breaking New Ground: Oral History and Agricultural History” Jones and Osterud offer an interpretation of contemporary family farming as a system that must coexist with continuity, change, and reconcile between circumstances and choices. Farm-finishers were integrated as a facet of farming a decade or so ago and remain firmly implanted as a reality for farming families. Sadly, family farmers will continue to struggle against farm-finishing companies in order to maintain the family farming way of life.
Family Farming Values

Unlike farm-finishers or corporate investors, family farming is rife with idealistic values about hard work, family, and honesty. These values are used to describe family farming alongside the myth of this profession as the backbone of America. In this way, Neth suggests that when family farming is described as a “way of life,” we are reminded of the nostalgia and romanticized history of farming. These idyllic notions, however, reveal how family farms organize labor in a fundamentally different way than other businesses. Through her analysis of Midwest family farms, Neth contends that farmers and their families do not view their farm as an industrialized enterprise. In many ways, family farming is a celebration of a way of life in which honesty guides all decision-making related to the farm. There was a resistance from Delilah and Jane to engage in farming practices that would undermine the value of living and operating an honest farm. For them and others, a core value that described their farm was “honesty.” This was a toil to non-family farms, which they positioned, as “greedy” and operating with unscrupulous business practices.

For example, both Delilah and Jane’s father-in-laws could have purchased hundreds of acres of farmland during the 1970s when the value of farmland was low. As they both explained, their fathers-in-law did not do this because they were conservative with their money and refused to go into debt to purchase more farmland. Again, both fathers-in-law viewed debt as dishonest and immoral. They described how the men vehemently protested the concept of mortgaging owned farmland to finance additional acreage. “You don’t take more than you need,” Delilah stated in explaining why her
father-in-law had not purchased additional acreage. Her statement reveals how the value of altruism guided all farming practices and decisions. However, unbeknownst to her father-in-law, honesty would also serve to the detriment of the family farm. Through Delilah’s stories, she explained how family farmers used to purchase only farmland that was adjacent or across the road from their farm. As a consequence, her father-in-law purchased only roughly 150 hundred acres of farmland. Distancing themselves from this value, Delilah and her husband purchased a 300-acre farm in Mercer County, even though the family farm was in Warren County. Their decision to purchase a farm that was not close to their family farm evidences how Delilah and her husband had to adapt to the changes to farming in the area. At present, if there is farmland for sale and it is affordable, family farmers purchase it regardless of the location.

When Delilah married her husband Greg, he was farming with his father on the family farm. Her father-in-law was the last farmer in the family to have never held an off-farm job. Even though Greg has worked on the farm his entire life, he has also always worked an off-farm job. First, he worked at the Maytag factory with Delilah, but when the factory closed, he began working as the water and sewer superintendent for the town of Alexis. Even though Delilah and her husband purchased a 300-acre farm in Mercer County, they have both always worked off-farm jobs. When I asked why her husband continued to work for the city of Alexis after her father-in-law died, she responded: “We’ve always worked other jobs because you can’t be a farmer and not have an outside job.” In reality, the future of the family farm was decided when Delilah’s father-in-law did not purchase additional farmland when the prices were low in the 1970s. By the time
Delilah and Greg were financially able to purchase more acreage, they could only purchase a fraction of what her father-in-law could have purchased.

In some ways, family farmers in the area were guided by values that were incompatible with emerging changes to farming. Delilah, Betty, and Jane all spoke with pride about how frugal they, and previous generations of farmers, lived. “My father-in-law was very frugal,” Delilah stated. To illustrate his frugality, she shared a story of her father-in-law refusing to have indoor plumbing installed until 1978. She detailed how her mother-in-law happily washed dishes in a metal washbasin and used a wringer washer. In disbelief, I asked, “Are you sure it was 1978?” Laughing, she confirmed that it was 1978 and noted, “It was the year our son was born.” These stories about living frugally illustrated how her in-laws believed that any additional income should be saved. “You have a rainy day fund and you don’t mix farm and house finances,” Delilah stated about farm finances. Any surplus capital that her in-laws accrued was saved. This also meant that unlike farmers today, they did not borrow operating capital from banks to run their farm. They also avoided renting farmland and were committed to the tradition of farming with other family members rather than using corporate-supported farmers or farm help.

**Family Will**

Through my interviews, I realized that the finances for a farming family were tied to how much land they owned and rented. For this reason, it was difficult for me to reconcile why both Delilah and her husband would continue working full-time off-farm jobs when they owned their farmland. One of the challenges of interviewing farm wives from old farming families like Delilah’s is that they tended to be more hesitant about
sharing details about their farmland. However, just as candidly as Delilah had spoken about challenges with her mother-in-law, she explained the situation with the family farmland. Delilah said:

We’re scared. I’m scared about what’s going to happen with the farm. Greg has put his life into the farm. He took it over when his dad slowed down and he couldn’t get up and down out of the tractors anymore. The problem is there are so many family members. The will says the farmland is to be divided up evenly among all nine kids. Now one brother passed away, but he has a daughter so that still makes nine who inherit. Greg put his life into that farm and brought it back when the ground was run down. It’s a good productive farm again and he wants to keep farming it.

Delilah’s story illustrated the burgeoning tensions over the future of the farmland. Even though Greg was the oldest sibling, his father had decided, as Salamon articulates, to “give each child an equal portion of the farmland.”\textsuperscript{10} This is an inheritance practice that Salamon further suggests assists farming families in estate planning and the persistence of family farmland ownership.\textsuperscript{11} As I learned from Delilah and Jane’s stories, passing the family farmland evenly to all children is a complicated inheritance practice today. First, many inheriting relatives no longer live in the area as they used to years ago. Salamon explains that well-organized inheritance practices became critical for farming families when people began to “out-migrate” or leave the farming community.\textsuperscript{12} One of the main reasons why people left the farming area was to attend college. As more people attended college and secured professions outside of the rural countryside, farming families became
more prescriptive in their farmland inheritance practices. Theoretically, a strict
inheritance practice was implemented to ensure that the family farmland would not be
sold. However, this was predicated on the ideology of keeping the farmland in the family
for future generations. Over time, this ideology simply lost significance and meaning.

Today, splitting the farmland among nine family members in Delilah’s family was
a challenge. Of the nine inheritors, only two farmed and the rest lived scattered across the
United States. Delilah’s father-in-law believed in the tradition of passing the farmland to
all of his children. However, the family will was established before many of the children
left the area. It was also written before the dramatic rise in the value of farmland. These
changes were unforeseen for her father-in-law, who believed in maintaining the family
farming way of life for future generations. Family farming, Strange contends, is a social
system with shared values and goals that are expressed by each member of the family.  

Through Strange’s analysis of family farms, we realize that the tradition of family
farming stresses it as a business but one that is built on the values of frugality, modesty,
honesty, and responsibility to the community.  

The family will was predicated on the
embodiment of these values and goals by all of the children; however, the cultural
ideology of keeping the family farmland together for the genealogy of the family has
diminished over the years as fewer family members farm and live in the area, but also in
large part because of the increasing value of farmland.

*Inheriting the Family Farm*

Delilah stated that a factor complicating the inheritance was the increased value of
the farmland. She explained that one tillable acre of farmland in Warren or Mercer
Counties sells for approximately $14,000 dollars. The family will prescribed that each of the nine inheritors would receive an equal inheritance of fifty-five acres of farmland. Because the price of farmland has rapidly increased over the years, the obvious concern for Delilah and Greg were that a number of the siblings would sell their portions of the land. When I asked her if it were possible for her and her husband to purchase the land from the siblings before it was placed on the market, she laughed and said:

    Greg and I talked about . . . but I don’t know if he has actually talked to his mom about it. We have researched the idea of trading our Mercer County farm for her Warren County farm (the family farm). That way it stays in the family and then we would buy the Mercer County farm back from her . . . nothing ever came of it though. I can see it in the back of Greg’s mind . . . if his mom should pass before something gets figured out there is going to be a big struggle.

The family members who left the rural countryside felt less commitment to maintaining this cultural ideology. The remaining siblings and one niece lived scattered all over the United States and had little connection to the community than the inheritance of the farmland.

As an outsider, I had difficulty appreciating the importance of land values in the story about family farming. Prior to my fieldwork, I had heard stories about the exorbitant farmland prices but failed to fully understand the implications. In many ways, Strange argues that American farming is an enigma in that it is a productive business but also troubled by the American government and global politics.\[15\] The difficulty of understanding what has happened to American family farmers is partly due to the
complexities of the system. The prospect of her husband not being able to continue farming the land he had farmed for twenty-five years was emotional for Delilah. I watched as she explained the complicated and strained relationships among the nine siblings. Some had ongoing struggles with substance abuse and her ninety-year-old mother-in-law refused to discuss the family will. Delilah’s eyes were pensive and her brow furrowed when she said:

Nobody wants to talk about what’s going to happen to the farmland. It worries the heck out of me . . . especially what it’s gonna do to Greg. Nobody wants to talk about what’s gonna happen . . . unfortunately it’s gonna get ugly someday . . . and the rest of his siblings don’t farm except Mike, but he don’t really . . . his boys do.

The way her father-in-law had set up the will weighed heavily on Delilah’s mind. As a system, family farms like Delilah’s have attempted to maintain the historical values of farming with family, using smaller machinery, and keeping the family land together. However, family farming is no longer a simplistic family way of life. It is a business that is tied to decisions far beyond the rural western Illinois countryside. Whether it was the food shortages of the 1970s or the demand for ethanol in the late 1990s, the need for agriculture and the choices made ultimately affected the farmland prices. These periods were business opportunities for family farmers who could either continue operating without debt or accrue debt in order to purchase additional farmland. The unforeseen consequence of what Strange calls the “land boom” was the self-fulfilling prophecy of farmland increasing in worth year after year.16 In the western Illinois countryside, this
self-fulfilling prophecy is a reality that has priced out many family farmers and causes challenges for farming families when the farmland is inherited.

Jane, 37, Rural Mercer County

Earlier in the summer, I interviewed Margaret who lives in the only other house on 30th Avenue. The 30th Avenue gravel road used to have at least five farmhouses and family farms. Through my archival research, I was able to examine plat maps and analyze how the family farms on this road disappeared. Over the years, the only family farm remaining on the lane is Margaret’s, which is farmed by her son. Jane’s home is located on ten acres of farmland behind Margaret’s house. When I interviewed Margaret, she explained that her son Kyle and daughter-in-law Jane lived in another farmhouse on the property. At the time, Margaret offered me a few names of her friends and sisters who were farm wives, but failed to suggest the name of her daughter-in-law. Later, I would come to understand that familial relationships are more complicated when members are involved with the farming business.

From the second story window in Laurie’s home, I pushed aside the floor length curtains and looked out across the soybean fields. In the distance, above the matured soybeans I could faintly see Jane’s blue farmhouse. To the west of her farmhouse was a freshly painted red pole barn. Over the past week, I had watched a van with two men drive down 30th Avenue and turn onto 240th and eventually turn on 40th Avenue and pull into Jane’s driveway. When only two cars leave and return on your road, I learned that you become watchful of your surroundings. Each morning and afternoon, I was able to watch the company van loaded with scaffolding speed down the gravel roads. The second
story windows are ideal for examining the landscape because they are situated high above the crops. Farmhouse windows are large, much larger than windows in average urban or suburban homes today. They let in the summer breeze, and warm sunshine fills the home.

Like Laurie’s home, Jane’s was also built in 1848, and although the farmhouse was remodeled, its past was carefully preserved. The doorways were narrow and still had their original glass doorknobs and wood trim. Being in Jane’s home felt familiar to me. The structural elements were similar to Laurie’s home, and so was the summer breeze that was moving east to west through the house. Momentarily pausing to feel the breeze, Jane
caught me and said, “Farmhouses let in the best breezes, don’t they?” She was right. Maybe it was their windows or the positioning on the land, either way old farmhouses captured the summer breezes and removed the need for an air conditioner.

Farming Changes

It would be far too simplistic to suggest that there were never disagreements among family members over farmland before the price of land increased. Farming families embody a network of relationships, but also have an added layer of complexity because of the farm. The farm combines relational and business concerns with family farming ideologies that are embraced by some, but often not by all members of the family. To imply that farmland was always passed down from one generation to the next without any acreage sold would oversimplify the complexities experienced by a farming family. It would also fail to recognize the ebb and flow of decisions family farmers made over the years. As farming changed, something did happen to the organization of farms like Jane’s. When Jane married her husband, she married into a multi-generational farming family that had farmed with the same farming practices for generations. However, as I realized from her stories, her family would be faced with the decision to maintain their family farming practices or alter them based on capitalistic interests.

Often, I heard stories about how farming practices were passed down from one generation to the next. Regarding her husband Kyle’s farming practices Jane noted, “He leaves the creeks alone so that the tall grasses grow because that’s best for the environment.” She went on to describe how Kyle also let trees grow along the creeks in spite of pressure from other farmers to bulldoze them. Seeing my confusion over why
trees would need to be bulldozed, Jane explained “Oh, because some farmers don’t like the roots.” I quickly realized that whereas some farmers removed all vegetation from the property in order to increase grain production, Jane’s family had maintained old farming practices. During the early part of the twentieth century, Neth suggests that farming practices changed in significant ways as a result of increased demands for agriculture. As a result, family farmers were pressured to change their production practices. Neth notes that this increased demand for agricultural production caused farmers to focus on maximizing profits, which altered the importance of farming relationships. Neth explains:

In rural America, the development of industrial capitalism directly collided with a family-based labor system. Only recently have historians begun to examine the countryside itself as a place transformed by capitalist economic developments.

In the early twentieth century, midwestern agriculture underwent its own process of industrialization. Machines replaced human labor and agricultural industries were consolidated but farm labor, unlike urban industrial work, does not lend itself to an assembly line.

Farming was always a business and a way of life for farming families; however, industrial capitalism stripped away many of the old farming practices. Inherited farming practices like raising livestock were abandoned when grain prices steadily increased. I listened to how my participants rationalized changing their farming practices at the cost of their family history, family, and even community relationships. The family farm could no longer embody a family farming way of life because, as Jane pointedly said, “Farming is a business now.”
Industrial capitalism altered the organization and farming practices on family farms in western Illinois. For farming families like Jane’s, the long-term consequences of industrial capitalism were unknown. Neither she nor her husband realized how they would increasingly have to work more in order to earn profits through farming. Similar to many farm wives’ experiences, Jane also worked a full-time off-farm job so that the family had health insurance and steady income. Having grown-up in a farming family, Jane explained that she did not realize that she would be forced to work a full-time job throughout her marriage. Jane grew up in a farming family that lived exclusively on the income generated by the farm. In part, this is because Jane’s father farmed during a time when farming was less reliant on industrialized machinery. As she said, “I never minded working as a teacher because I love the kids, but there is also no choice with Kyle farming.” I later realized that the family relied heavily on Jane’s income to live on and to absorb the high costs related to farming. In many ways, this left her with little choice in whether she wanted to work as a teacher because the farm was not financially profitable enough for the family to live on.

Explaining the dangers of industrial capitalism, philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that the merger of capitalism with manufacturing would create a rapid demand for commodities at the expense of workers. This would effectively make workers an “appendage of the machine.” In *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels warned against capitalist modes of production because they would cause individual laborers to lose independence and effectively become a commodity of the industrial enterprise. The argument of their essay was that capitalism would produce
class struggles and worker exploitation. Marx and Engels contended that industrial capitalism would exploit workers and convert small businesses into factories. In many ways, this is all too true for farming in western Illinois. As Marx and Engels had suggested, industrial capitalism replaced many family farms with large-scale corporate or farm-finishing operations. Once this shift occurred, the rural countryside was forever transformed into an industrial farming area.

For many farming families, industrial capitalism was welcomed as it eased the physical labor process of farming. However, industrial production troubled Marx and Engels, who viewed it as monopolizing industries and creating a system of industry that was revolutionized by machinery. The use of industrial farming machinery in the rural countryside has eroded the image of the “workman” or family farmer and replaced it with the “great factory” or corporate farm. For Marx and Engels, this shift also meant the establishment of a manufacturing system that was production-and profit-focused. In order to maximize production, Jane explained that the family had purchased more efficient planting and harvesting machinery. The machinery was designed to maximize the amount of yields per acre of land. Noting how this could be visually seen, Jane said:

"Look at the crops out there. You see how close the rows are? When I was a girl you used to walk between the rows and weed beans . . . tassel if it was corn, you don’t do that anymore. The rows are barely six inches apart . . . not the feet they used to be. All the crops are sprayed now. No one uses a sickle to weed. You don’t walk up and down the rows checking the crops . . . we don’t have one, but some around here have drones . . . that’s how they check their fields."
Jane’s story illustrates how industrialization changed their farming equipment, but also their farming practices. Industrialization also arguably spurred the inputs of pesticides, fertilizers, and insecticides that are used to increase grain yields. Together, these inputs and industrialized machinery replaced family labor. It also forced Jane to continue working as a schoolteacher even though she wanted desperately to quit. However, her income was vital for the family to live on as well as necessary in order to secure an operating loan each spring. Confirming the negative effects of industrial capitalism on human beings, Marx and Engels argued that it forced laborers to “sell themselves piecemeal” or as a “commodity like every other article of commerce.” By replacing the family labor, the ideology of the family farm also changed to focus on efficiency and productivity. In effect, the family farm became exclusively focused on production and profits because it became a market driven enterprise.

Farming Challenges

When Jane’s husband, Kyle, took over the family farm he entered into farming at a time fraught with the challenges of industrialization. Jane explained that because Kyle had decided to go to college, he was largely removed from witnessing the industrialization of farming. Kyle transitioned into working on the family farm after his father died. Jane’s father-in-law operated the farm according to more traditional family farming practices. He farmed with relatives, shared equipment, and frequently volunteered to help neighbors with calving and raking of hay. “He believed in helping neighbors and family out,” Jane stated, describing her father-in-law. Her father-in-law and his brother Bob owned separate farms, but they farmed all of the farmland together.
This meant that they considered all of the farmland one enterprise. They shared the expenses of machinery and all inputs including seed, fertilizer, and pesticides.

It was more economically beneficial for Kyle and Bob to continue the partnership and farm a thousand acres together. Switching to industrial farming was difficult for families like Jane’s with only 500 acres of tillable farmland, and as Neth notes, farm families with less farmland lacked the financial means to make the industrial agricultural shift. Industrialized machinery was significantly more expensive, as Jane stated: “One piece of equipment will cost a $500,000 dollars or more, how can we afford that?” The only way for Jane and her husband to finance the expensive machinery was to take out operating loans and mortgage the farmland; however, debt was not a part of traditional family farming practices. Resisting the pressures to industrialize, Kyle and Bob farmed together in order to reduce their operating costs. For example, by working together they would only purchase one planter, combine, and grain truck. They purchased these pieces of equipment, split the costs, and negotiated a schedule for their use. Both Bob and Kyle cherished the engrained cultural practice of family members working together on the farm. It was an ideology that valued the relationships among family members for the success of the family farm.

Jane’s husband, Kyle, also valued the farming practice of working with family and valued learning and working alongside his uncle Bob. For nearly a decade, Kyle and Bob farmed together and maintained the family farming values of combining resources for the success of the farm. She explained that Kyle continued to farm all of the land even when his uncle was too sick to operate machinery. “We split the profits like we always
had,” Jane stated. However, the relational situation on the farm changed when Bob was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and transitioned his portion of the farm to his son Mike. When this transition happened, Mike was more than a decade younger than Kyle. He had remained in the western Illinois area and studied agricultural business at a local university. Smiling, Jane said, “Mike had a lot of ideas.” Almost immediately after the transition occurred, struggles between Kyle and Mike ensued because of differences related to farming practices. Jane explained:

Well, when Kyle’s dad died . . . and then his uncle couldn’t farm anymore . . .

Mike and Kyle . . . they just had different ways of thinking. Each generation has its own way of thinking. It gets more complicated when you have someone from a different generation who might have different ideas. Mike had a different way of thinking about things . . . it wasn’t congenial anymore like it was between Kyle and Bob. I should say Kyle is very much a business guy, too. He sees this farm as a business, but it’s also important to him and to me that we remember the roots of this farm. We see ourselves as stewards of the land. His cousin Mike is much more of a cutthroat business guy. Kyle isn’t . . . well, I guess . . . it’s like he loves to have cows because his dad did and he wants the barn to look like it did when his grandpa farmed. Those kind of things . . . we’re sentimental farmers.

The differences between Kyle and Mike eventually caused tensions in their work farming relationship. In many rural areas, the rise of capitalism, Osterud explains, influenced farms to change their farming practices because of economic opportunities. While some farmers were more passive about changing their farming practices, Osterud contends that
others embraced the use of industrial machinery because it offered similar wage opportunities to urban spaces. As more farmers adopted industrialized farming, relationships among family members and rural society changed. After trying to work through their differences, Jane’s husband decided to separate his farmland and equipment from Mike’s. Ultimately, they decided to not even share the most inexpensive farm machinery. Kyle believed in old family farming practices and Mike was motivated to industrialize the farm so that they could increase their profits. The strain and irreparable differences between Kyle and Mike illustrates how capitalism altered the meanings surrounding farming.

Marx and Engels maintained that capitalism could accumulate considerable economic gains, but also warned about the dangers of capitalism’s focus on production. The focus of production was particularly concerning because it postulated that it would treat human beings as a means of the production process. An inquiry into the dangers of capitalism reveals how a market-driven industry like farming becomes concerned with the relationship between inputs and outputs—profits. The difference between the inputs and outputs was denoted by Marx and Engels as surplus value, which resulted from surplus labor or unpaid labor. This reveals how market focused farming became tied to the means of production process. Drawing on Marxist economic theory, Osterud suggests that capitalism in farming communities also produced the “commodification of economic relationships among farmers, labors, merchants, shippers, and processors.” This commodification stripped away the social and relational values attributed to family farming and instead transformed these relationships into opportunities for personal
advantages. From the women’s stories, they explained that relationships became more connected to the farming business—leaving them isolated and separated from other farming families.

Beyond the potential economic possibilities, the onslaught of capitalism, according to Marx and Engels, would consequently concentrate private property. The philosophers argue that an issue with capitalism is the associated modes of production because they focus on generating capital for the “modern bourgeois private property” or property that is based on class antagonisms and worker exploitation. When private property was connected to production, Marx and Engels noted that the wage-labor did not create property but rather capital that exploits wage-labor. The exploitation of wage-labor and capitalism’s focus on production were revealed through Jane’s worry about corn prices. From the beginning to the end of summer, she explained how corn prices were beginning to drop significantly. Her worry over corn prices also represents how industrial capitalism creates exploitative relationships between labors and markets. Her family farm was financed through operating loans, so as she said “We have always lived on debt.” For all family farms, but especially those with operating loan debt, the decline of corn prices meant less profit and the terrifying possibility of carrying debt for another year. The viciousness of capitalism is realized when we consider how she and many other family farmers must go into debt with the hope of making a profit.
Betty, 68, Rural Mercer County

Betty lives in a picturesque farmhouse. In every possible way, her home and property emulate the romantic notions of family farming. On one side of the yard sits an antique wood wagon with the original wood wheels. Once a piece of farm equipment, today it is a decoration and a remnant of the past. The two-story farmhouse also includes third floor attic rooms. The third floor windows of the farmhouse are adorned with stained glass windows. On this sunny June day, the colorful blocks of glass catch and reflect rays of sunshine. The front of the farmhouse includes a wraparound front-porch and well-groomed hanging and potted flowers. A purple lilac tree is in full bloom, and I
smell the blossoms. I realized that I never appreciated the beauty and tender up-keep of the home during my daily runs or walks over the summer. Her home was meticulously maintained. As I walked up to the front door, I noticed the freshly painted window trim and intricately carved lattice above each old farm window. The doorbell was a relic of the past and made of solid brass. After I rang the bell, I was greeted by Betty, who upon opening the door, said, “I’m so glad to finally meet you.” I realized that I was also glad to meet Betty.

Much like Betty, her home was also warm and friendly. As I waited for her to bring a cup of coffee and a piece of strawberry rhubarb pie, I relaxed on her overstuffed couch. The living room was decorated with a careful mix of antique decorations and modern furniture. Next to an old wood barrel and spinning wheel sat a large Lazy Boy recliner. In Betty’s home, old and new objects are placed side-by-side. Betty was full of stories about everything from her father using teams of horses to farm, to the first tractor he purchased in 1946. She explained that both maternal and paternal sides of her family were farmers. “They were small farmers, not wealthy by any means,” she stated sipping her coffee. Betty was forthcoming about the history of her family and their farm. In her words, “They had weathered the storms over the years and I guess we did too.” I heard similar comments from other farmers’ wives about their families managing the challenges of farming, but Betty’s stories were different in that they revealed a deep sense of sorrow. Her sadness, I realized, was in part because her family had maintained a successful farm when many of her neighbors and family members were unable to and lost everything to bankruptcy.
The Old Ways

As farming changed, so did the culture in the rural countryside. Material aspects, like the number of farmhouses and barns, declined and after these structural features disappeared, so did the people. There is no simple way to explain what happened to the western Illinois countryside or why communities have dried up and populations have evaporated. However, as I heard story after story, I noted how the farm wives stated that as the population decreased their relationships did, too. According to Salamon, relationships in the rural countryside are built through networks of people, where everyone shares the same identification with the area."

Betty told the following story about remembering the rural countryside forty-eight years ago when she moved into her farmhouse:

When we first moved here, there was a family that lived down the lane and just across the field from us. We live on a road, but they lived on an unmarked lane. They had grain bins that would operate all of the time. I can remember hearing those running in the fall and I just loved it. I didn’t want my own because they’re too noisy (laughing), but it gave you the feeling that everything was okay . . . that this way of life is moving forward. That there were good things going on . . . I miss hearing those grain bins and seeing their tractors in the fields when I put my laundry on the clothesline.

Telling stories about her life in this space was enmeshed with feelings of sadness and loss. For Betty, very little had remained the same. As farms grew in size and were consolidated, Betty’s neighborhood drastically changed. Through Salamon’s historical
synthesis of farm and rural community relationships, we learn that family farms implemented cultural systems that were connected to the vitality of the communities. The manner in which family farmers managed and operated their farms revealed their level of commitment to the area. Decisions to maintain small farms, own rather than rent farmland, farm with family members, and hire local farmhands were all means by which farms used to maintain strong ties to the community; however, these traditional means underwent a series of restructurings as machinery advanced and the demand for farmland increased.

*Rural Life*

At the onset, it was not immediately clear to me how the western Illinois area morphed into a region permeated by large scale farming operations. Through the stories from Betty and other farmers’ wives I began to understand the deep effects farming changes had on the rural communities. The rural countryside, notes historian, John Fry dramatically changed as the price of land increased and farmers focused more on capital-intensive agricultural inputs like fertilizers, seeds, and pesticides. Changes to farming practices were not only important to farms; they also affected the rural communities. In effect, a consequence of the modifications to farming practices was the lessened interdependent relationship between farms and rural communities. Prior to the advent of capital-intensive agricultural inputs, farms and rural communities reflected a harmonious relationship, in part out of necessity, but nevertheless as a result of the physical isolation of the rural spaces. It was difficult to speak with Betty about how she would describe the
area because as I learned, she felt deeply conflicted about the role her family played in it. She explained:

Well, a lot of it happened because this was . . . is an agricultural orientated area. A lot it happened because of agricultural . . . farmers have to farm so much ground now, not like they used to before. There used to be a farmhouse on every eighty acres and in that home there was a family with children.

I came to learn that understanding the changes in the rural farming countryside began with understanding the effects of farming. I learned that remembering the people who used to be neighbors was emotional for the women because it recalled memories and experiences. As an outsider, I realized that the countryside was a remarkably different place when there were many family farms, unlike the few dozen that exist today.35 People moved away, and over the years fewer people chose to move to the area. Rural communities in western Illinois were not always as isolated as they are today. Each community used to have its own population and network of relationships. Betty remembered a time when there was a farmhouse and a farm every mile or two miles in her neighborhood.

*Rural Relationships*

Philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies has argued that rural social life depends on interpersonal and group relationships, as well as social institutions. In Tönnies’s foundational work, *Community and Civil Society*, he explains that industrialization would alter the relationships among people in rural areas because there would be a greater focus on capitalistic gains and individualism rather than interdependent community

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Betty reminisced not just over the people who used to live in her neighborhood, but also the relationships she used to have with them. She reflected on former relationships that were built on common interests related to the community. One such example was the pride Betty had for the town of Alexis, Illinois, which is the home of the Clydesdale horse. “It’s where the first Clydesdales were brought to America,” she stated. Nodding in agreement, I wondered if this was true or not, but that was not the point. For Betty, believing that Alexis was the home of the Clydesdale horse was part of re-remembering the celebrations that brought together hundreds of citizens from the area. I could see the pride on her face when she told me about Alexis’s yearly Fourth of July celebration and community fundraisers. “Those were different times, though,” she said.

Although Tönnies romanticized the rural countryside and idealized the types of relationships that existed in this space, his conceptions of Gemeinschaft (community) relationships are nevertheless useful in understanding how the changes to farming altered relations in the rural countryside. His thorough analysis of Gemeinschaft relationships revealed them as relationships that “stay together in spite of everything that separates them.” Betty’s story about her family and other community members gathering together for the Fourth of July celebration illustrates how there were Gemeinschaft relationships in this rural area. Betty stated:

People used to care about the community and loved getting together to do things like parades or celebrations. The Fourth of July parade was a lot of fun, but it got wore out too. Same families . . . same people . . . and eventually there were just a few of us.
Her stories told me that there was a time when citizens used to get together regardless of the farming they had to do. When I asked Betty why there were no longer any celebrations, she solemnly responded: “It was just the same people over and over again doing it and finally it got wore out.” I learned that her family and a few other families tried to maintain the community traditions. However, after some time the Elks Lodge (fraternal organization) and the Shriners clubs (freemason organization) memberships declined, and there was no longer relational or financial support for community events.

As farming in rural areas industrialized, according to Tönnies, these changes resulted in producing Gesellschaft (society associations) relationships that were focused on business and had an instrumental rather than expressive focus.\(^{38}\) This was particularly relevant for Delilah as she narrated stories about family members who would forgo attending family gatherings in order to attend hog and beef expositions. She explained that many relatives stopped attending the annual family fried chicken cook-off, a fifteen-year tradition, because, “They didn’t see the point in driving down and hanging out with the family.” As I learned from Delilah, these same family members were also more concerned with attending livestock and machinery auctions in Iowa. This was a place where farmers could network and advance their farming business. Her comment helps to illustrate how community members felt it was less important to build social or emotional relationships and instead they focused on expanding their farm.

Just as Delilah found her family members disgraceful for failing to attend family gatherings, Betty did, too. However, Betty had an issue with family members and local neighbors who did not volunteer at her country church. For Betty, the church was a space
of religion, but also social gathering. Through my archival research, I was able to discern that the church used to have a congregation of more than one hundred parishioners. Over the years, Betty explained:

We’re lucky if we have twenty or so . . . they’re just not enough people around here. Well, and a lot of people don’t take their kids to church. Since our numbers keep dropping we have had to share our pastor with another little country church. They’re in worse shape than us though . . . they have seven or so people. So, I guess you could say we’re doing pretty good, right?

As family farming changed and became more industrialized, many of the country churches were affected. The congregations were entirely supported by farmers and their families and with fewer family farms in the area, many of the country churches had to consolidate or close. The immediate consequences of industrialization to the social relationships and institutions in the rural countryside were not initially realized. However, they were visible in the women’s stories. For instance, Betty noted with deep sadness that her daughter-in-law offered little help to the struggling country church. Her daughter-in-law and others in the rural countryside felt waning importance for *Gemeinschaft* relationships. “There’s only twenty of us and seven in our youth group, so we all should do our part,” Betty remarked referencing her daughter-in-law and other farm wives who did not volunteer their time to teach Sunday school. Tönnies’s wariness of the negative impact of industrialization on *Gemeinschaft* relationships in rural communities was accurate. As farming industrialized in the western Illinois countryside, there were first,
fewer community members and next, many relationships became increasingly more focused on farming business.

*Our Community is Fading*

![Figure 19: Downtown Alexis, Illinois on a Saturday Afternoon.](image)

The more time I spent with Betty, the more I realized that she felt a deep unwavering sadness about the town of Alexis. It was through her stories that I came to better understand the conflicted feelings many farm wives had about farming in the rural area. In order to earn a profit today, it meant purchasing more farmland, which often meant putting other family farmers out of business. I witnessed the emotional and often teary stories from other farm wives’ who had purchased bankrupt farms from friends or neighbors. I sensed an aura of guilt from them. Betty’s stories illustrated the tension of farming changes and the impact these changes had on the community. The technological and mechanical changes morphed farming from a way of life into a business enterprise.
Industrial changes altered farming, community members’ relationships, but also the texture of rural communities.

In listening to Betty’s stories, I realized that these changes also affected the town of Alexis. She told stories about community businesses coming together to organize benefits for individuals who had fallen on hard times. She explained that it used to be common for the businesses to set up benefits for people who had medical bills, suffered from house fires, or experienced farming accidents. For more than fifty years, she had watched as one by one, small businesses closed in Alexis. Tears welled in her eyes as she told stories about a time when the town flourished with successful businesses. She stated:

Oh the town of Alexis was a busy little town. We had lots of businesses, not as many as when I was child, of course, but there were still a lot. When I was a child we even had a movie theatre. On Friday and Saturday nights, everybody went to town. The streets would be lined up with cars and people. You just visited with everyone when you went into town because during the week you were at home working.

The sadness and sorrow that Betty felt about her community and the town of Alexis was not only because of the economic downturn in the area that included the closure of businesses and increased unemployment. She also longed for the network of relationships that once connected community members. Through Betty’s stories, I noticed her yearning for the way the community was before all of the small farms started disappearing. I realized that she, like many farmers’ wives in her generation, had internalized the
importance of *Gemeinschaft* relationships. These often intimate and enduring types of relationships were woven into the everyday fabric of the rural countryside.

Betty remembered Alexis when it was vibrant with businesses and community members. Sociologists Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas explain how citizens who reside in rural communities after “hollowing out” or an exodus of citizens occurs, experience the collapse of industry, shifts in agriculture, and economic decline. Betty witnessed a prosperous area experience economic turmoil. She said, “Our town is looking pretty sad.” Today the town of Alexis has more closed stores than open. I had underappreciated how difficult it would be for Betty to talk about the town of Alexis. I sensed that Betty felt guilt over contributing to the state of Alexis and the surrounding area. Carr and Kefalas point out that an economic downturn in rural midwestern communities occurred as “manufacturing made firms and farms outsource and automate, rural regions witnessed a collapsing demand for labor.” Carr and Kefalas argue that when farming began to require increasingly more farmland, it was immediately necessary for farmers to abandon the old farming way of life and adapt the very practices that would be the economic demise of their community. The adaptation or industrialization of farming practices has left an indelible mark on Alexis and other rural communities in the form of boarded up businesses and low populations.

**Conclusion**

The stories in this chapter illuminate the interdependent relationship between farming and rural area. It was through Delilah, Jane, and Betty’s stories that we are able to understand how changes to farming altered the rural countryside. Changes to farming
practices were always occurring, but the advent of industrialized farming practices significantly altered both family farms and the rural community. Once machinery replaced physical labor, farming was forever transformed in the rural western Illinois countryside. It was no longer a profession that required a network of family members to assist with planting and harvesting. Industrialization paved the way for corporate farming and farm-finishing operations. These operations were unconcerned with maintaining family farming practices that were passed down from generations. Instead, these operations, along with family farms, are now inexorably tied to purchasing more farmland in order to increase production yields and earn great profits.

Family farming is a system that carries with it ideological values that were imbued into the rural area. Notions of helping neighbors with farming or during hard times are today all but myths as they are incongruent with industrial capitalism. I sensed the sadness in Delilah when she explained the future challenges related to the family farmland. Keeping the family farmland together for future generations was increasingly difficult because of its monetary value. From her story, we learn that the challenges many family farms face as traditions are no longer widely held among all family members. Similarly, Jane’s story depicts the challenges of industrial agricultural practices in a farming family. Her story illustrates the tensions and eventual breakdown of relationships that were once common on farms, however today are treated as relics of the past. Finally, Betty’s story presents the effects of industrial farming on relationships. Industrialized farming practices altered the close-knit relationships and fabric of rural communities.
The western Illinois countryside remains an agricultural area. Today there are family farms speckled throughout the region in far fewer numbers than fifty years ago. The iconic image of multi-generational family farms has nearly vanished, but as these farm wives’ stories show, family farming still exists. Families like Delilah, Jane, and Betty’s were motivated to maintain their family farm and some semblances of generational farming practices. Their farms were in part industrialized, but they felt the tensions of maintaining the family farming way of life for future generations. Through the women’s stories we realize the sadness they felt as they watched their community and other family farms disappear. We are also invited into the guilt they feel over being a part of purchasing foreclosed farms in order to expand their farmland. As farming changed, so did the material and eventually social culture in the rural countryside. These stories help us to more fully understand how changes to farming practices affected family farms, social relationships, and the rural countryside.

1 Strange, Family Farming, 1.
2 Owning and operating the family farm was a point of pride for my participants.
3 Strange, Family Farming, 1.
4 Strange, Family Farming, 2.
5 Strange, Family Farming, 2.
7 The farmland in Warren and Mercer Counties was noted as the most profitable soil in the region.
8 Whatmore, The Farming Women, 19.
9 Neth, Preserving the Family Farm, 18.
10 Salamon, Prairie Patrimony, 161.
11 Salamon, Prairie Patrimony, 161.
12 Salamon, Prairie Patrimony, 162.
13 Strange, Family Farming, 32.
14 Strange, Family Farming, 35.
Strange, *Family Farming*, 16.
I heard numerous stories about farmers bulldozing trees and clearing all vegetation prior to mandated wildlife/conservation guidelines forwarded by The U.S. Department of Agriculture. These practices were not viewed favorably by the farm wives.
Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 3.
Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 3.
Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 5.
Osterud, *Putting the Barn Before the House*, 8.
Osterud, *Putting the Barn Before the House*, 9.
Fry, “‘Good Farming-Clear Thinking-Right Living,’” 35.
Tönnies, *Tönnies*, 52.
Tönnies, *Tönnies*, 78.
Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle*, 5.
Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle*, 5.
Chapter IX: Conclusion

It was sometime in July when Laurie, Kurt, and I all piled into the Volkswagen Jetta to drive back to southeastern Ohio. The drive from the western Illinois countryside to Athens, Ohio is long. The trip takes eight hours and covers over 500 miles. Over the past four years, we have made the trip often, but I savor it each time. Driving from the western most edge of Illinois to the southeastern corner of Ohio reveals a diversity in topography. As we pulled out of the driveway I took more photos of the corn on 30th Avenue. Now it was beginning to turn a dull, yellowish color, which indicated that in less than a month all of the corn would be harvested.

Figure 20: Cornfield on 30th Avenue.
After spending much of the summer driving around with Laurie, I had grown quite comfortable being in the car for hours at a time. It may sound odd to some, but I actually like being chauffeured around. I enjoy driving, but I prefer sitting in the car and being able to observe familiar or new spaces. I find it tranquil to be a passenger in the car because I can ponder my own thoughts or daydream. Selfishly, I also enjoy being a passenger during long road trips because I can read. When I was given the choice by Kurt to ride in the backseat and navigate us back to Ohio, I gladly accepted the offer. During the summer I was very little help navigating the rural countryside roads, but as someone from the city I am familiar with interstates. Kurt handed me the Garmin and instructed me to be ready with alternative directions in the event of road construction. I typed my Athens address into the GPS, opened the back door and slid onto the backseat.

Field Reflections

As I looked out the car window, across the farm fields, I began thinking about my fieldwork. I had interviewed twenty-five farm wives from Warren, Mercer, Knox, and Henderson Counties. While I had intended on keeping track of the mileage Laurie and I covered during the summer, I lost track somewhere around 600 miles. I think I lost track of our mileage on the day we drove to Stronghurst for Annie’s interview. Since Annie only used a rural route address, Laurie and I spent over thirty minutes searching for her home. Truthfully, I am disappointed that I lost track of our mileage because I wanted to have it as evidence of my work. I wanted it to be a part of the story of my fieldwork. I intended for the mileage to illustrate how the rural countryside seemed like a small space,
but it covered an expansive area. After I interviewed Annie, I realized that the total mileage Laurie and I drove paled in importance to other stories from my fieldwork.

For instance, there are many moments from Annie’s interview that have remained with me. Maybe it was the unexpected closeness I felt with her, a woman who had lived a much harder life than myself. She was a widow, homebound, frail from osteoporosis, and had lost a young child to leukemia. However, these were not the stories or moments that have remained with me. When I left Annie’s interview, I sensed someone was watching me from the house. As I looked over my shoulder, I saw Annie standing at the storm door hunched at a ninety-degree angle. She was smiling and waved to me with her right hand. Her torso and left hand were leaning against her walker. I remember being scared for Annie. I was worried about how she had safely left the kitchen table and if she would be able to maneuver her way back safely. These worries raced through my mind as Laurie and I drove away from her house.

I still ponder whether or not I should have gone back into the house to see Annie safely back to kitchen table. I had underappreciated how difficult it would be for me to leave her. It was challenging for me to leave Annie’s interview in part because I could sense her loneliness. It was moments like these that linger. Sometimes there are stories that fail to fit thematically with other stories. The stories are different in their own way, but no more or less important. In the following section, I tell some stories that linger.

*Blood Heirs*

Some of my field stories were unfathomable because the experiences the women detailed were so different from own lived experiences. After I heard their stories, I also
found myself wrestling with whether or not there was any so-called truth to them. For instance, Karen told me about an elderly farm wife named Beth who belonged to her church. Beth had married into a wealthy farming family over sixty years ago, and she learned only after she got married that her husband’s family had a detailed family will. For farming families, a family will is a widely accepted way of prescribing the inheritance of the family farm; however, Karen stated that startling details were revealed after Beth’s husband died suddenly in his twenties.

The will stipulated that only blood heirs to the family were eligible to inherit family farmland. This meant that Beth’s two children were both inheritors. However, at the time of her husband’s death her children were too young to farm. According to Karen, the widely accepted story was that there was also a so-called re-marriage clause in the will. This clause stipulated that if Beth remarried before her children were old enough to farm then the farmland would go back to the family estate. Effectively, the farmland would be re-divided among her husband’s siblings and their children. Eventually her children would also inherit farmland when they were of age. However, as Karen explained, “Beth was a traditional farm wife,” meaning that she never worked an off-farm job and so, she had always depended on the farm for her income. If Beth remained a widow, then she would maintain possession of the farmland and could hire laborers to farm.

Through Karen’s story, I reflected on how vulnerable a woman’s life could be in a farming family. Her story left me feeling unsettled because a woman’s life was constrained and arguably limited by a will. In the end, Karen stated that Beth never
remarried and eventually her children did take over the family farmland. I wanted to interview Beth, but I sadly learned that she died a few years before I began this project. I still wonder what stories she would have told about her life. Did the will truly include a re-marriage clause? Or were there other reasons why she remained a widow most of her life? I am not sure whether this story in fact happened the way Karen told it, but I also have no reason to disbelieve her. In part, I think my skepticism is linked with my hope that the person or persons who drafted the will would have had more humanity than forcing a woman to remain a widow so that she would have an income. I will never know.

*Connections*

There were other stories like the one about Beth that farm wives told me. These were stories that the women heard from their friends or family members. Sometimes they shared stories that were, as they said, “Church lady gossip.” I also learned rather quickly that in the rural countryside stories traveled fast. For example, Margaret, Neely, Betty, Mary, and Jolene all told stories about how they loathed a middle-aged lady who had inherited thousands of acres of farmland in western Illinois. During each of their interviews, they referenced the same lady, who among other names was called an “old shrew.” The lady lived in Pennsylvania and rented farmland and farmhouses to farmers in the area.

Through the women’s stories, I learned that the woman was a ruthless landlord who would break rental agreements with longtime renters. She would solicit offers from other farmers who were willing to pay higher rent in order to make greater profits. Oddly
enough, she also arrived uninvited to inspect her properties. According to the farm wives, she would often only leave after she had altered the terms of a rental agreement. The women told stories about how she levied unreasonable requests like not allowing window air conditioning units to be installed or forbidding cars to be parked on certain sides of the driveway.

Figure 21: Neglected Barn on 30th Avenue.

It took me quite a while to piece together that the different stories I heard about the woman from Pennsylvania were all about the same person. In fact, this was a woman that I had heard stories about for years because she owned a farmhouse and farmland on 30th Avenue next door to Laurie’s home. Some years ago, the family that had rented this farmhouse explained to Laurie that they had to move because the landlord would not
make necessary roof improvements. The family did not want to move, but they felt that they were left with little choice because of the significant roof issues. After much disagreement with the landlord, the family eventually moved into another home across the county. As more and more years have passed, the farmhouse is now infested with raccoons and possums. The barns that were once well maintained are dilapidated. With each passing year the structures become further run down and in disrepair. I wonder if anyone will ever live in the farmhouse again. I know that eventually the farmhouse and the barns will likely succumb to the same fate as many other farmhouses in the rural countryside—bulldozed. The thought leaves a pit in my stomach.

Forgotten

As we drove across the rural Midwest countryside, I thought about the different stories that I had heard about farming communities. By all accounts, much of the western Illinois countryside is a forgotten space by many politicians and outsiders. Some of the women insisted that state officials had “played a heavy hand” in ruining the area. They cited the state’s long history of corrupt political officials. The farm wives shared stories about the pothole-laden roads that evidenced the poor infrastructure in the area in spite of the high taxes. Many of the rural countryside roads needed to be repaved and widened. In fact, many roads were dangerous to drive on because they lacked accurate “sharp curve” or “blind turn” signs. “We’ve been forgotten,” Mary said. These words nagged at the back of my mind as I recalled how she explained that she wanted her children to go to college and never return to the area. It saddened me to reflect on this moment during our conversation because it revealed her deep unhappiness with the area.
Mary and her husband operated a successful family farm, but it was not the type of life that she wanted for her children. In addition to owning a local farm, her husband also worked over an hour and a half away where he raised over 150 head of cattle.

Mary had spent much of her life raising their children alone. Her husband would only come home two nights a week during the summer because he slept in a truck in the fields with the cattle. According to Mary, her husband slept in the fields during calving season or if he suspected a cow had a transmittable disease. He did this in order to be near the cattle heard in the event something happened or if the herd was spooked by a sound.

Since her husband was gone a lot, Mary was the primary caretaker for the children. She never directly told me she did not want her children to farm. Instead, she explained how she wanted her children to have more opportunities for their lives than the countryside offered.

It was Mary who introduced me to the issue of school consolidations in the area. She explained that school consolidations brought together many different school populations from the rural countryside into one main school. I remember how disappointed Mary was in the lack of opportunities for her children at school. I had heard stories during my fieldwork about how over the next few years the western Illinois area would have the widest sprawling school consolidations in the state of Illinois. According to Mary, some children would have to ride on a bus for over an hour to get to school each morning. Her children already rode the bus forty-five minutes one-way. The notion of school consolidations was a foreign concept to me. In fact, I grew-up in area where the schools were overcrowded and new school buildings were regularly built. I was shocked
to learn that it was common for a high school graduating class to be as small as fifteen or twenty students. For Mary and other farm wives, the small class sizes were not their main concern; it was the lack of educational opportunities at school. As consolidations increased, advance placement courses, arts and music courses were cut from the curriculum.

As an educator, I found that the stories about the lack of educational opportunities nagged at the back of my mind. It felt like the area was forgotten and so were the children. In many ways, the low population in the area has contributed to the region being overlooked. As farms grew in size and factories closed, people moved out of the area. First, the one-room schools closed, and then the smaller in-town schools. Over the years, there were so few people living in the area that the schools did not have enough children for each grade level and struggled with enrollment numbers. The most significant and expansive consolidation occurred a few years ago when both Mercer and Henderson Counties implemented countywide consolidations. Although Mary and other women were told the countywide consolidations were necessary and a money saving endeavor, there were also unforeseen consequences. Inevitably, school consolidations also meant job layoffs in an already economically depressed area.

Mary’s conversation about school consolidations was a reflection of the economic depression in the area. She said, “The towns around here just dried up.” When we think of economic depression, we often first consider store closings and the lack of other types of infrastructure, but educational opportunities are also inevitably impacted. “Why would anyone move here?” was a question I often heard. While disheartening, the question was
honest. Unless a person owned a farm or worked for Alexis Fire Equipment or at a business/factory in the Quad Cities, there were no employment opportunities in the area and as such, hardly any reason to move to the area. One night at dinner, Kurt said, “This is what happens in an area with no opportunities.” He was referencing a guy who went to school with Keith who was a day laborer and frequently moved from one house to another because he did not have a steady income. As I learned, this was typical for many younger people in the area.

Untold Stories

There were many stories that were not what I had envisioned of my fieldwork. It was harder for some women to access their memories and re-remember experiences from their past. I realized that for many of the farm wives it was difficult to talk about everyday experiences because they were rarely asked (if ever) about their lives. Since women’s experiences are often muted, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai in Women’s Words explain that oral history interviewing is capable of “making available in accessible forms the words of women who had previously been silenced or ignored.”¹ That is, oral history is capable of recovering women’s personal experiences.² Through oral history interviewing, I found that their stories were often riddled with worries about the number of bushels of corn harvested or the cost of fertilizers. These concerns made it challenging for some women to share stories about living and working on a family farm. While at times challenging, it did not prevent any woman from sharing at least some stories about her daily experiences on the farm.
Over the years, I had heard many stories about Gwynn but her interview did not go as I imagined. I anticipated that Gwynn, a longtime friend of Laurie’s, would share stories about growing up and living on a family farm her entire life. I thought that she would tell stories about her parents who resembled the *American Gothic* painting that I heard so much about. I expected her to share stories about her parents’ family farm and how she married her high school sweetheart. During our interview, Gwynn did not talk much about her parents and shared only a few stories from her childhood. She also only briefly described her husband who she said was “a business farmer.” Reflecting back on our conversation, I think maybe I had too many expectations for the stories I wanted to hear from Gwynn. After all, she shared the stories she wanted to and perhaps even needed to during our interview.

While Gwynn was hesitant about sharing stories about her life, she was eager to give me a farm tour of her parents’ farm. Upon visiting her parents’ family farm, I was surprised to see a once-functional outhouse that her parents had used. Her parents’ farm was well maintained, so much so that it was like stepping back in time. The barns were freshly painted, the surrounding farm property was mowed and the house appeared lived in, not vacant. According to Gwynn, after both of her parents died the house was closed up. Through a window I could see a calendar from 2010 hanging on the back porch wall. The home was like a tomb of memories and artifacts for Gwynn. Each room was fully furnished; nothing was removed from the home, and other than a housekeeper or Gwynn, no one else entered the home. Gwynn explained that emotionally she could not handle
cleaning out her parents’ house after her mother died in 2010, who was preceded in death by her father.

Figure 22: Old Outhouse on Gwynn’s Parents’ Farm.

Although I enjoyed doing a farm tour with Gwynn, I felt an uneasiness between us, as if she wanted to share stories with me, but simply could not. It was as if something was stopping her. Maybe her close relationship with Laurie affected her willingness to share her experiences with me. Or maybe it was the loneliness she felt after her children moved out of the home. I also wonder about Gwynn’s deep sadness over the loss of both of her parents. Perhaps, she was still grieving for her parents who she described as “love
birds.” Regardless, during the interview Gwynn had a scripted answer for every aspect of her life. Whether it was her childhood, parents, husband, or family, her responses always followed a pattern. First, she would share facts and then a description about the person or life event. However, there was a reservation or hesitancy that she displayed that has left me feeling as if there was more that she wanted to share. Over and over again she said, “I wish I could . . . Oh, boy I wish . . . I could tell you a story,” while tearing up.

Gwynn’s difficulty in sharing stories about her life reveals a challenge women often have in uncovering and expressing their experiences. Although Gwynn did not share detailed stories about her life, her interview reminds us how women are inclined to censor their insights and emotions when they fail to fit with prevailing narratives. Perhaps, it was her subjectivity as a farm wife that explains her difficulty in sharing stories about her life. After all, she was a woman living and working within the patriarchal system of a family farm. Gwynn was the daughter of a farmer and married into her husband’s farming family. Farm wives like Gwynn were doubly-subjugated because of their gender. First, they were subjugated as a daughter who could only inherit farmland and not be able to farm. As farmwives, their husbands were the primary decision-makers for the family farm and all of the farmland. Maybe I had underestimated the reality of living in the deeply gendered and prescriptive system for women. The farm, her husband, and his family had constrained many choices throughout Gwynn’s life. She had reluctantly given up a career and stayed at home with her children because as she said, “That’s my work.” In many ways, Gwynn’s story reveals that gender roles and patriarchal ideologies are powerful and straining forces for women—all women.
Final Thoughts

As a researcher, I acknowledge and accept that it is impossible to gather an entire story or all the stories about farm wives lives in western Illinois. Through this project, I engaged with twenty-five farm wives who shared stories with me about their everyday experiences on family farms. Each woman invited me into her home and allowed an outsider from the city into her life. We shared coffee, tea, cookies, and lunch together. Materially these nourishments paled in importance to witnessing woman after woman realize that she was capable of talking about her life, the farm, her family, and the community. She did not need to solicit advice from her husband, as I so often heard would be required to “get the story right.” I listened carefully to their stories and continue to think as well as reflect on my interpretations.

I still have questions about my participants’ lives and the rural countryside. I wonder why some of my participants were more forthcoming than others in sharing about their role as a farmers’ wife. I also wonder about the lives of other women who live in the rural countryside. What are their stories? Through my fieldwork, I learned that stories could be strange, fickle, and even unwieldy. Some stories my participants shared with me were deeply intimate and emotional. Sometimes we cried, other times we laughed, and sometimes we just existed in each other’s presence. For many of the women, it was their first experience being heard or listened to and I took this responsibly seriously. They entrusted me with stories about their childhood, marriages, children, family, and their farm—stories that are still ongoing. I wonder what stories they will tell when I return?
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Appendix A: Participant Abstracts

Addie, 66, is from rural Warren County, Illinois and was raised on a grain and cattle farm. Her maternal and paternal family farmed for at least three generations. Her children are the sixth generation of grain farmers with her husband’s surname. She was an elementary school teacher for over twenty years. The family farm consists of 1,500 acres of owned/rented/inherited acres of grain crops. Her two sons own a farming management company in addition to farming the family land.

Annie, 87, is from rural Henderson County. She moved from her childhood home in Henderson County to her current residence in 1954. She raised her four living sons on the 300 acre grain and livestock farm. The farm was inherited through her from her husband’s grandmother’s family, and when she passed away, her husband purchased the farm from his eight siblings. Today, three of her four sons live on the farm. Only her son, Paul, farms the family farmland.

Belle, 50, is from rural Henderson County. She has lived in Henderson County her entire life. She raised their two kids (one girl and one boy) on the family farm. For seventeen years, she worked on the farrow to finish hog farm site with approximately 550 hogs until the operation was closed and a new site was opened. The new operation consists of 25,000 sows farrow to finish and is owned by her and husband; his brother and his wife; and his cousin.
**Betty**, 68, is from rural Mercer County and has lived in the county her entire life. She was raised on a rural farm outside of Alexis, Illinois where her son and daughter-in-law, Daphne, live today. She raised her three children (two sons and a daughter) on the family farm. Her and her husband own a sizable amount of acreage and rent additional farmland with their two sons. Her husband has also always worked as an auctioneer. Together, they own and run a real-estate agency specializing in the sale of farmland and homes in the area.

**Caroline**, 41, has lived in the rural Warren County countryside her entire life. She lives with her two children (one daughter and one son) and husband on an eighty acre grain farm. Her husband primarily grain farms approximately 1,500 rented acres of land, but also raises forty head of cattle for production purposes, and also laborers as a farm-finisher. Additionally, Caroline works full-time as a special education teacher and Rodger works as a road commissioner.

**Cora**, 25, is from rural Knox County and currently lives in Warren County. After marrying her husband, they began a purebred cow calf operation primarily for breeding and 4-H projects. Presently, the farming operation is run by Cora, her husband, Hunter, and her brother-in-law, and they raise approximately 1,000 head of cattle a year. Both Cora and her husband also work for an artificial insemination company and earn commission for their services. As young family farmers, they are unable to rent or purchase farmland in the western Illinois area.
Daphne, 45, is originally from a Chicago, Illinois suburb and currently lives in Mercer County with her husband and two daughters. She moved to the rural country after marrying her husband, Rodger, almost seventeen years ago. Rodger farms approximately 2,000 acres of rented and owned farmland with his brother and father (Betty’s husband). He is also an auctioneer, real estate agent, life estate consultant, and works with his father and mother in their real estate business.

Delilah, 62, is from Monmouth, Illinois and currently lives in Alexis, Illinois. She married into one of the original farming families in the area and then moved to Alexis, Illinois. Her husband cash rents 550 acres of farmland from his mother in addition to farming his own farm. Delilah works as a bank teller and her husband, in addition to farming, works as the sewer superintendent for the city of Alexis.

Dorothy, 66, is originally from Mercer County and moved to Warren County to be a schoolteacher. She currently lives in Warren County with her husband, Paul, who is semi-retired from farming due to health issues. Presently, one son rents and farms approximately 400 acres. Her and her husband have farms in Mercer, Warren, and Rock Island Counties. Previously they owned an agriculture/chemical business and served farmers in Warren and Mercer Counties.

Ellie, 88, is from rural Warren County and has lived in the area her entire life. She grew up on a family farm and married her husband who worked as a farmhand on her parents’
farm. When they married, they purchased a 1,500 acre farm in Warren County and moved only five miles from their childhood homes. For 87 years Ellie farmed with either her parents or her husband. After her husband passed away, Ellie, and her two sons took over the family farm. Today Ellie’s two sons and her grandson farm the land and raise a calf cattle herd.

**Gwynn**, 54, is from rural Mercer County, Illinois, and currently lives in Warren County with her husband. Gwynn’s family has farmed since her great great-grandparents immigrated to the United States from Sweden. Her husband farms approximately 3,000 acres in Warren, Mercer, and Henderson Counties and also owns and manages a grain elevator operation with his father.

**Jane**, 37, is originally from Warren County and moved four miles west to her current residence with her husband. Jane was raised on a farm, as was her husband. She has lived in the rural Warren County countryside her entire life. She raised her two children (one boy and a girl) on approximately forty acres. Presently her husband cash rents 500 acres of tillable ground in Warren County from his mother, Margaret, and raises fifty chickens, twelve lambs, and five cows. Jane is a schoolteacher and her husband also works full time as a crop insurance agent for a major insurance company.

**Jeanne**, 80, is from rural Warren County and grew up on a grain farm in Mercer County. When she married her husband they began a sharecrop partnership with their farm landlord, and together farmed 800 acres of grain crops and cattle. They did not inherit or
purchase any farmland through the course of their marriage. They farmed as sharecroppers until 1960, when Jeanne’s husband died.

**Joy**, 67, is from Warren County and has lived in the rural western Illinois countryside her entire life. Her and her ex-husband farmed 600 acres of farmland and raised a small cattle herd for twenty-five years until her father decided he could no longer make a living splitting the profits. Together, she and her ex-husband had three boys, none of whom farm today. Jeanne is remarried to Kevin who is a retired farmer.

**Jolene**, 37, is originally from thirty miles east of Alexis, Illinois. After marrying Neely’s son, she moved onto a 260 acre rental farm in Warren County with her husband. Her husband farms approximately 1,500 acres of owned/rented farmland with his father. Her husband also works for a major seed company as a sales representative. Jolene is from a farming family and is the sole heir to her parents’ farm. Jolene recently quit her job as a schoolteacher to stay home with her children.

**Lillian**, 45, is from rural Warren County and currently lives in the city of Monmouth, Illinois. During Lillian’s childhood her father purchased an eighty acre farm in Warren County. Today, Lillian and her husband rent the farmland from Lillian’s mother. Both her and her husband have fulltime jobs outside of farming.
Margaret, 85, is originally from Kewanee, Illinois and currently lives in Mercer County. Margaret moved into the area after she accepted a job as a schoolteacher for Alexis High School. After she married her husband, Jim, in 1957, they moved onto the farm where she currently lives. The farm belonged to her husband's mother, and eventually Margaret and her husband purchased it from the family estate. Today, her son, Kyle, who is married to Jane, farms the 550 acre family farm.

Mary, 45, is from Mercer County and currently lives in Warren County. She moved only six miles east from her childhood home when she married her husband. She lives with her husband and three children (two boys and a girl) on the farm. Her husband raises 150 head of cattle in Mercer County and grows grain crops on approximately 1,500 acres of cash rented land in Knox County. Currently, they also farm with her father-in-law.

Neely, 62, is from the town of North Henderson, Illinois. After she was married to her husband, she moved into a farmhouse owned by her father-in-law in Warren County. After nearly 35 years as a middle school teacher, Neely retired and currently works part-time at a local community college. Her husband farms with their son who is married to Jolene. Neely and her husband are in the process of transitioning the family farm to their son and daughter-in-law, Jolene.

Karen, 43, is originally from a Chicago, Illinois suburb and currently lives in Mercer County with her husband and three children (two boys and a girl). Karen married into a
fourth generation farming family in Mercer County. After achieving her physical therapy degree, she married and moved to the rural Western Illinois country. Her husband grain farms approximately 2,500 acres, feeds and finishes 11,000 hogs and manages a cow-calf herd.

Kay, 52, is originally from Galesburg, Illinois and currently lives in Knox County with her husband. After marrying into a farming family, Kay and her husband raised his son and her two daughters on the farm. Her husband farms approximately 2,000 acres of rented/owned land in rural Knox, Canton, and Warren Counties. Her husband’s family has farmed for over 150 years. Her husband currently employees her son-in-law as a farmhand.

Sally, 51, is from rural Warren County and currently lives with her husband on their family farm. Both Sally and her husband work fulltime, off-farm jobs. Sally works as an administrative assistant for a local school and her husband is a banking professional. They farm approximately 200 acres and raise forty head of cattle on pasture ground. They raised their three children (two boys and a girl) on the family farm. Currently, Sally’s husband primarily manages the family farm but does have occasional help from their son, who is married to Cora.

Sophia, 79, was born and raised in Warren County on a family farm. After marry Tom, they moved onto the farm where they have lived for over sixty years. They raised their
three children (two boys and a girl) on their 500-600 acre grain and dairy farm. Today, their oldest son operates a hog confinement on farmland Sophia inherited from her parents.
Appendix B: Oral History Interview Schedule

Opening: I am collecting oral histories from 15-20 women who currently live in rural western Illinois. I am interested in how farmers’ wives talk about their identities in the farm, their marriage, their religious community, and so on.

Demographic Questions

Name:
Age:
Home Town:
Pseudonym:

I. Background:

A. To begin, can you tell me about your farming operation?

*Probe 1:* How long has your family farmed?

*Probe 2:* How did the land come into your family? Do you rent/inherit land?

*Probe 3:* Where is the land located?

*Probe 4:* What kind of farming do you do? (Livestock, soybean, corn, grain)

II. Early life: To begin, I would like to ask you some questions about your childhood and your relationship with your parents.

A. Would you tell me some stories from your childhood?

*Probe 1:* Would you share a story about farm life from your childhood?

*Probe 2:* What was growing up in a farming community like? Would you share some stories with me?

B. Would you tell me about your parents? How would you describe them?

*Probe 1:* Growing up, what stories did/do they tell you about their childhoods?

*Probe 2:* Do you remember any stories they told you about farming? Would you share these stories with me?
Probe 2: What stories were told about other family members who farmed? Would you a share a few of these stories with me?

III. Later/current life: I would also like to learn a little about your adult life. In particular, I would like to ask you some questions about your marriage and children.

A. Would you tell me about your marriage/husband?

Probe 1: How has farming shaped your marriage? Can you tell me a story?

Probe 2: Did your view of farming change after you were married? If yes, how?

Probe 3: How has farming with other family members shaped your marriage? And you?

Probe 4: How has farming shaped your immediate family?

Probe 5: What challenges have you faced throughout your marriage? (economic, personal, social)

B. Do you have children? If, yes then would you tell me about your children?

Probe 1: What is/was it like to raise children on a farm?

Probe 2: What are/were their responsibilities on the farm?

Probe 3: What do/did you do to connect your children to the farm and/or the land?

Probe 4: Would you like your children to farm? Why or why not?

IV. Rural farming: I want to learn more about rural farming life, so I would like to ask you some questions about how you understand the area.

A. Rural farming communities in America reflect a unique culture. I would like to ask you some questions about rural life since you are a local.

Probe 1: What do you think of when you think of farming communities? Describe an image, a story, or an idea that comes to your mind.

Probe 2: Tell me a little bit about the culture of a rural community. Would you tell me a story that shows the culture of your community?
Probe 3: How have rural communities changed over the years?

B. I would like to ask you a few questions about your farming operation.

Probe 1: If I were to ask you to describe your farming operation, what are the stories, or values that would come to mind?

Probe 2: What are the images, sounds, smells that come to mind when you think of your farming operation? Why do you think these are important?

Probe 3: How do you see your farming operation in the future?

C. Would you describe what your average farm workday looks like? Do you enjoy farming? Why or why not?

Probe 1: What responsibilities do you have on (and outside) of the farming operation?

Probe 2: How have your responsibilities changed over the years?

Probe 3: What problems have you faced with your farming operation?

V. Gender: I want to ask some questions about being a woman in a rural farming community.

A. What stories can you tell me about being a woman in a rural farming community?

Probe 1: Are there any stories that you were told about women’s roles (on the farm/in the home) that impacted you?

Probe 2: Is being a farmer’s wife an important way that you define yourself? If yes, tell me why. If not, tell me why not.

Probe 3: Do people tell stories about the role of the farmer’s wife? If yes, do you remember any story? If so, tell me about them.

VI. Religion: Next, I would like to ask you some questions about the role of faith in your life.

A. Are you religious? If yes, then what faith do you follow?

B. Tell me a little about religion and your childhood.
**Probe 1:** In what ways does religion shape who you are as a wife, farmer, mother? Would you give me some examples?

**Probe 2:** Do you think there is a relationship between your faith and farming? If yes, then tell me about it.

**VII. Closing:** As we wrap-up our conversation, I would like to give you an opportunity to discuss anything we have not covered.

A. Is there anything else you would like to share with me? Anything you think we should have talked about, but have not?

B. Would you like to ask me any questions?