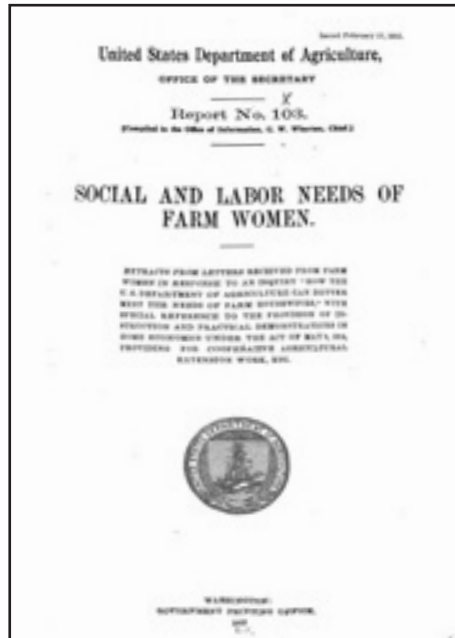


# “An Uneasy Alliance”: Farm Women and the United States Department of Agriculture, 1913–1965

Cherisse Jones-Branch

Little scholarship has been done on the relationship between farm women and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Understanding farm women’s experiences is key to highlighting the gendered ways in which they navigated their interactions with federal government farm programs. This article addresses this little known history through an examination of American rural women’s interactions with the USDA between 1913 and 1965. It seeks to answer several questions. Namely, what were the connections between farm women and USDA programs? How do local records help to provide a better understanding of these relationships? How were farm women impacted by agricultural bureaucracy in federal and local relationships? How did women project their identities as farmers to effect important change in their communities and beyond?



This 1915 report included abstracts of letters from a 1913 inquiry sent out to farm women by the federal government asking how the USDA could help them improve family and community life.

Asking and subsequently answering these questions requires a very specific reading of federal and local sources that probes the hidden silences of women’s experiences in rural spaces. Women’s labor has always been a fundamental part of agricultural life. When the USDA issued farming literature in the early 20th century, it marginalized farm women, but it could not completely ignore them.

---

Cherisse Jones-Branch is a professor of history at Arkansas State University.

The agency reached out to women more deliberately in 1913, when it published “A List of Free and Available Publications of the United States Department of Agriculture of Interest to Farm Women.” The publication included information on agricultural education and clubs, as well as on food preparation, hygiene, and sanitation—areas that were assumed to constitute women’s domain. However, it also contained a “Syllabus on an Illustrated Lecture of Farm Architecture” and another on “Farmer’s Institutes for Women.”<sup>1</sup> The USDA had been primarily concerned with male farmers, but it learned from farmers’ letters that women performed critical roles on the farm and in rural life generally. The outreach to women became particularly active during World Wars I and II, when the federal government and the USDA looked to farm women to increase agricultural production to feed the nation and military troops.

This article focuses on the transformative period between 1913 and 1965, with the impact of the World Wars on farm women’s lives and the historical changes resulting from the Great Depression and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. That period began with the USDA newly directed to expand government involvement in the improvement of agricultural life, work conditions, and productivity. The article explores farm women in a wider sense, including not only those who labored on farms, but also those who worked in rural and agricultural spaces along with and for them. Some of these women, like home demonstration agents for instance, were employed by the USDA. Others included economists and scientists whose research focused specifically on understanding farm women’s lives and experiences. This wider perspective allows us to see women’s involvement in improving their work lives and on larger agricultural and administrative issues. The article explores farm women who resided in the northeastern, western, and southern United States. In doing so, it exposes how region and race dictated the contours of farm women’s relationship with the USDA.

Most of the primary source records used in this study are from the Hathitrust Digital Library. This free resource contains easily accessible government documents that reveal much about the inner workings of farm women’s lives between 1913 and 1965. Other documents consist of digitized newspapers and Extension Service records from the Agricultural Extension Service Annual Reports, 1909–1968, that are housed at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, and at its regional archives at Fort Worth, Texas.

---

<sup>1</sup> “A List of Free and Available Publications of the United States Department of Agriculture of Interest to Farm Women,” (Wash., DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 1913), 1, 3, 9.

### Expanding Relationships with the USDA

Widespread economic changes and hardships in the nation's agricultural sector in the period 1880–1913 led to unprecedented farmers' movements and calls for reform, federal assistance, and change. The Progressive reformist zeal of the late 19th and early 20th centuries employed local and state mechanisms to correct economic, political, and societal problems. Reformers' concerns also extended to rural environments. These ideas, combined with increased demands for what scholar Carmen V. Harris termed "agriscience" or the observation and demonstration of new farming strategies and technologies, and increased farm profitability, ultimately led Congress to pass the Smith-Lever Act of 1914.<sup>2</sup> The act also included programs to introduce rural women to new household and technological innovations, thus placing farm and home demonstration work under the purview of the federal government.<sup>3</sup>

Named for Representative Asbury F. Lever of South Carolina and Senator Hoke Smith of Georgia, the Smith-Lever Act used federal, state, and local funds to establish a Cooperative Extension Service at state land grant colleges and universities that had been established under the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862.<sup>4</sup> Black land grant colleges were created under a second Morrill Act in 1890, which adopted the oft-quoted language of "separate but equal" in declaring that "the establishment and maintenance of such colleges separately for white and colored students" was legal as long as federal appropriations were equal. This, as Carmen V. Harris has posited, effectively "normalized racial discrimination in educational policy and practice."<sup>5</sup> The Smith-Lever Act also allocated for a segregated and unequal Negro Extension Service at black colleges and universities. Its agents answered to white administrators.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Smith-Lever Act placed farmers under the watchful eye of the federal government, farm women were not immediately on the USDA's agenda. In 1915, their concerns were noted in a USDA circular, the "Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women." This

<sup>2</sup> Carmen V. Harris, "The Extension Service is Not an Integration Agency: The Idea of Race in the Cooperative Extension Service," *Agricultural History* 82 (Spring 2008): 194.

<sup>3</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, "Better Homes on Better Farms": Domestic Reform in Rural Tennessee, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 1 (2001): 52. The USDA was founded in 1862. Elizabeth Engelhardt, "Canning Tomatoes, Growing 'Better and More Perfect Women': The Girls' Tomato Club Movement," *Southern Cultures* 15, no. 4, *The Edible South* (Winter 2009): 80.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy K. Berlage, *Farmers Helping Farmers: The Rise of the Farm and Home Bureaus, 1914–1935* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Carmen V. Harris, "State's Rights, Federal Bureaucrats, and Segregated 4-H Camps in the United States, 1927–1969," *Journal of African American History* 93 (Summer 2008): 363.

<sup>6</sup> Pete Daniel, *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 157.

report included abstracts of letters from a 1913 inquiry sent out by the federal government, specifically by the secretary of agriculture, titled “How the U.S. Department of Agriculture Can Better Meet the Needs of Farm Housewives.”<sup>7</sup> The inquiry was initially prompted by a letter from a North Carolina farmer to the secretary of agriculture that suggested that the USDA “have some bulletins for the farmer’s wife as well as the farmer himself. The farm woman has been the most neglected factor in the rural problem and she has been especially neglected by the National Department of Agriculture.”<sup>8</sup>

Farm women also had plenty to say about what the USDA could do to help improve the quality of their lives. One woman from Virginia wrote that “isolation, stagnation, ignorance, loss of ambition, the incessant grind of labor, and the lack of time for improvement by reading, by social intercourse, or by recreation of some sort are all working against the farm woman’s happiness and will ultimately spell disaster to our Nation.”<sup>9</sup> Another farm woman from Colorado asserted that,

as a farmer’s daughter and housekeeper, school teacher, county superintendent of schools, and ranchman’s wife, I have been almost constantly in touch with the women of rural communities, and I do not hesitate to say that these women are becoming more and more dissatisfied with the lives they live. . . [there must be] variety in the home life of farm women. . . . Home studies and things along this line . . . would bear good fruit.<sup>10</sup>

The circular recommended that farm women should organize boys and girls in rural communities to teach advanced farming methods, animal husbandry, and homemaking skills. The USDA in cooperation with local officials also offered “Farmers’ Institutes for Women.”<sup>11</sup> Often planned in cooperation with agricultural colleges, the institutes disseminated agricultural knowledge to farmers through lectures and demonstrations. They later included farm women’s issues and concerns.<sup>12</sup> In 1919 for instance, the Illinois Farmers’ Institute featured Dr. Caroline Geisel, the head of the National Federation of Women’s Clubs Health Committee, who spoke to farm women about ways to improve family and community health care.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> “Reports: Needs of Farm Women,” Report Number 103 (Wash., DC: GPO, 1915), 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey M. Moss and Cynthia B. Lass, “A History of Farmers’ Institute,” *Agricultural History* 62 (Spring 1988): 154, 160.

<sup>13</sup> *Illinois Farmers Institute: A Handbook of Agriculture*, (Springfield: Illinois State Journal Company Printers, 1919), 58, 59.

The circular further outlined how women could be assisted by the provisions in the Smith-Lever Act. The funds appropriated under the act were to fund men and women as county agents to “move about the farm people, demonstrate good methods of agriculture, and home economics.”<sup>14</sup> Gender divisions clearly defined the female agents’ jobs. They were expected to enroll farm women and girls in home demonstration work and organize girls’ clubs. Their efforts were supported by circulars, letters, and bulletins issued by the USDA through state agricultural colleges that reified understandings of farm women’s roles as domestically oriented.<sup>15</sup>

New Mexico State University Professor Emerita Joan Jensen has written extensively about farm women and the ways in which they navigated the Department of Agriculture’s shifting gender politics. Part of this shift occurred, she believes, when “farm women would no longer be ‘helpmeets’ to yeomen farmers but partners in the modern production of food and the policies that guided it.”<sup>16</sup> That is, it was patently clear that women were not merely auxiliaries to men, but farmers in their own right, and that they increasingly acted in ways that demonstrated their critical roles in agricultural modernization.

In addition to contributory roles on the farm, some women worked as administrative and scientific professionals in advancing agricultural knowledge. Indeed, Jensen wrote about such women as Emily Hoag, born in upstate New York in 1890, who in 1920 began working as an assistant economist for the USDA’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life. While employed by the USDA, Hoag wrote what Jensen described as “the only study of farm women to be sponsored by the government during the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>17</sup> Hoag was not the only woman employed by the USDA. According to Jensen, 18 worked in the Bureau of Animal Industry, and 14 were employed in the Bureau of Plant Industry, including 2 women with doctorate degrees. Additionally, the USDA hired women zoologists, pathologists, mycologists, and a xylotomist.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1920s, USDA circulars began to directly assert that the farm home was a vital part of the farm itself. In November 1920, Florence E. Ward, a USDA employee in

---

<sup>14</sup> “Reports: Needs of Farm Women,” 89.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Joan M. Jensen, “Good Farms, Markets, and Communities: Emily Hoag and Rural Women as Producers,” in Joan M. Jensen and Linda M. Ambrose, eds., *Women in Agriculture: Professionalizing Rural Life in North America and Europe, 1880–1965* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Jensen and Ambrose, *Women in Agriculture*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

charge of “women’s work” in the Office of Extension in the northern and western United States, asserted that “women were a necessary partner in the (farming) business.”<sup>19</sup> Information from a survey sent to 10,000 women in rural communities revealed that women often migrated to urban areas in search of more lucrative job opportunities. The USDA paid particular attention to this issue because so many people, regardless of race, gender, or region left farms and relocated to cities during and after World War I. Indeed, in at least one 1920 report, rural communities were studied in cooperation with colleges of agriculture and the USDA to address the following concerns: “the influence of farm families upon national life” and the “remedy for over migration.”<sup>20</sup>

Ward argued that the migration tide among young women was often stemmed by the influence of home demonstration agents who helped them recognize their economic importance on the farm and in the home. She additionally asserted that this loss of labor necessitated a closer working relationship between farm women and the USDA because “the compensations [*sic*] of the farm woman is as practical and is as scientific” as “the studies of the labor, the machinery and the crop returns of the farmer.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the circular predictably captured such concerns as the lack of power, heat, lighting, and running water needed in order for farm women to run efficient homes and to decrease their domestic labors. This also included the scarcity of domestic labor. However, the USDA addressed women’s grievances about their work on the farm itself. Thirty-six percent of the women reported helping with the milking, 56 percent cared for gardens, 81 percent cared for chickens, 24 percent cared for livestock, and 24 percent worked in the fields an average of six to seven weeks per year.<sup>22</sup>

Yet northern and western farm women’s interactions with the USDA were not representative of all women. In many instances, the USDA was slow to respond to the needs of nonwhite rural women. Furthermore, in the popular imagination, the ideal rural woman and family were white.<sup>23</sup> While home demonstration agents were employed in most rural communities, black women agents were usually paid significantly less than their white colleagues. The USDA did little to enforce equal

---

<sup>19</sup> Florence E. Ward, “The Farm Woman’s Problems,” United States Department of Agriculture Circular, Number 148, (Wash., DC: GPO, 1915), 3.

<sup>20</sup> “Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, 1920,” (Wash., DC: GPO, 1920), 572.

<sup>21</sup> Ward, “The Farm Woman’s Problems,” 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriel N. Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 8.

pay in rural southern communities where virtually all black home demonstration agents labored. Salaries for county and home demonstration agents were almost always determined by local quorum courts. In southern states, black and white agents were not equally paid. For instance, in 1925 in Arkansas, the Pope County quorum court voted to retain a black home demonstration agent at \$600 per year, less than half of the \$1,300 a white agent earned.<sup>24</sup>

The USDA assumed an even more integral role in farm women's lives during the Great Depression. The USDA responded to the worldwide economic depression by asking extension workers to temporarily set aside "much of their regular programs and devote the major part of their time to initiating and directing measures designed to help farmers relieve the distressing conditions."<sup>25</sup> It appears that as the number of extension agents increased, so too did the extension services and activities in rural communities due to the pressing needs wrought by the Great Depression. A 1932 USDA circular reported that more activities "relating to rural home and rural life" were conducted in 1930 than in previous years. The total number of county and assistant home demonstration agents increased to 1,352, or a five percent increase over the previous year. Of this number, 125 were African American agents. In rural counties without home demonstration agents, county agricultural agents assumed their responsibilities.

But what did these changes mean for farm women? It meant the formulation of closer working relationships with state agricultural specialists who developed projects, guided by USDA directives for farm women, on such topics as poultry, gardening, and "home engineering," tasks informed by contemporary understandings of gendered



Farm women often held meetings with Extension Service workers to discuss family and community concerns.

<sup>24</sup> "Demonstration Agents Retained by Pope County," *Arkansas Gazette*, Nov. 1, 1925, p. 3. Each Arkansas county is governed by a quorum court that levies taxes and makes appropriations for its expenses. Quorum court members are called justices of the peace. They are elected by the voters in their county in November of every even numbered year. See "Quorum Courts," <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=6348> (accessed Feb. 6, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> *Report of Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics in the United States, 1931* (Wash., DC: GPO, May 1932), 1.

labor divisions.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, by the end of the 1930s, these ideas were upheld in yet another USDA publication, the 1938–39 issue of the *Extension Service Review*, published monthly, wherein home demonstration agents and clubs extolled their accomplishments and celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Smith-Lever Act’s passage.<sup>27</sup> One article queried, “What is the most outstanding problem of the farm women in your state?” The Extension Service agent condescendingly answered, “To help farm women realize they have problems.”<sup>28</sup> This response underscores one of the problems many farm workers had with Extension Service agents and the USDA, the assumption that the federal government, not they, recognized that rural communities had issues and concerns that needed to be addressed and resolved. While home demonstration agents prided themselves on introducing new canning techniques and equipment to rural women, they were not navigating communities that were unaware of their particular needs and problems. In fact, they quickly realized that it was critical to establish working partnerships with farm women and not simply view themselves as working on the women’s behalf. Indeed, one of the agents noted that the years since the Smith-Lever Act’s passage had

demonstrated a few things to the home demonstration agent. One of them is that she must keep her ear to the ground and her eyes alert to find a common denominator upon which the farm woman may express her problems and the home demonstration agent may present a demonstration which will radiate to all phases of farm homemaking.<sup>29</sup>

Home demonstration agents routinely used the *Extension Service Review* to support such major initiatives among farm women as food preservation and production. The government further encouraged farm women to observe federal laws in their work. In a 1936 issue of the *Extension Service Review*, for instance, farm women received advice to “Use the Protection of the Food and Drugs Act,” which included directions on how to read labels for foods produced under federal government supervision. If a farm woman was unable to comprehend the label on food items, she could request copies of a guide titled *How to Read the Label* from the Food and Drug Administration.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. USDA directives typically assumed that farm women’s labors were primarily performed in or around the home. In most cases, however, they worked wherever they were needed on the farm.

<sup>27</sup> “Home Demonstration Work Steps Out,” *Extension Service Review* 10 (Dec. 1939): 186–87.

<sup>28</sup> “Needed, A Common Denominator,” *Extension Service Review* 10 (Dec. 1939): 176.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> “Use the Protection of the Food and Drugs Act,” *Extension Service Review* 9 (Jan. 1939): back page; Lynne Rieff, “Revitalizing Southern Homes: Rural Women, the Professionalization of Home Demonstration Work, and the Limits of Reform, 1917–1945,” in Melissa Walker and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *Women, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century South* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 136.



Directives from the USDA also included measures to eradicate illnesses stemming from food insecurity. The May 1938 issue of the *Extension Service Review* noted that in 62 Arkansas counties, 7,735 families saved on “cash, medicine, and doctors’ bills” because they had followed the “corrective diets” recommended by the federal extension service for pellagra, anemia, constipation, and high blood pressure. In fact, the article asserted that pellagra had nearly been wiped out in the Arkansas Delta counties by plentiful gardens and education from the Extension Service’s “Live At Home” program that had been established in the state in 1931.<sup>31</sup>

The popular assumption was that farm women were only interested in matters concerning the domestic sphere, but stories in the *Extension Service Review* demonstrated that nothing could be further from the truth. In May 1938, farm women in Vermont gathered for a series of meetings sponsored by the USDA and the University of Vermont extension service to address their concerns at what were known as “women’s agricultural policy meetings.” One of their primary concerns was the trend in Vermont agriculture away from such easily transported products as wool and meat in favor of such perishable items as sweet cream, fruits and vegetables, “high quality eggs,” and “fluid milk.” These women had thoroughly educated themselves about agricultural

## A Woman's Interest In Farm Problems

### Vermont Women Enlarge Their Field To Include Agricultural Policy



**C**OOKING, sewing, caring for the children, and doing the housework are still rather generally considered to be “women’s work,” but Vermont rural women are not content to consider only these things. They are interested in the things that are taking place in farming in the State and what farm families can do about them. They feel that such matters affect the family as a whole and should be considered by “both sides of the house.” Many of them have expressed a desire to consider these things in connection with the work of their home demonstration groups.

Accordingly, a series of meetings for women on trends in farming and what can be done about them is being held by the Extension Service of the University

of Vermont. These meetings for women are similar to farmers’ agricultural policy meetings that have been held in the State for the past 3 years. Each meeting is attended not only by Dr. Varney, but by the county home demonstration agent and Marjorie E. Luce, State home demonstration leader, or a home demonstration specialist.

Enthusiastic discussion on the part of the women has marked most of the meetings held so far, which have been on the first of the questions listed for consideration. At the meetings it has been brought out that there has been a trend in Vermont agriculture away from the production of concentrated, easily transported products, such as wool and meat, and toward the production of bulky, perishable products, such as sweet cream, fresh fruits and vegetables, high-quality eggs, and fluid milk.

It has also been brought out that there has been a tendency in cash-crop production toward increased specialization on the

part of the farm, what kind of a farm set-up will you have to have?”

In order that they may be aided in answering this question, the women will be asked to consider such other questions as: “How many cows will you have to milk?” “How much milk will you have to get per cow?” “Will you have to have a farm where you can use modern machinery?” “How much of your own food supply should you raise?”

#### Iowa Summer School

A new 4-week term for county agents and vocational agriculture teachers working toward masters’ degrees while retaining their positions will be an innovation of the 1938 summer quarter at Iowa State College.

The new arrangement, announced by Summer Dean J. E. Foster, will make it necessary for agents and teachers to

Women in Vermont had thoroughly educated themselves about agricultural policies in their state.

<sup>31</sup> “Yearbook, 1944–1945, Negro Home Demonstration Clubs of St. Francis County,” Narrative Report of the County Home Demonstration Agent, St. Francis County, Jennie B. Wright, Negro Home Demonstration Agent, December 1, 1943 to November 30, 1944, Record Group 33, National Archives at Fort Worth, Texas.

issues in their state, including the depopulation of farms. They used evidence gathered from data on population and farms in Vermont to argue that both were actually decreasing as the number of inhabitants in the state’s cities and villages increased.<sup>32</sup>

The ongoing development of farm women’s finely attuned assessment of home, family, and agricultural concerns occupied a perpetual space on the federal Extension Service’s agenda, particularly as rural areas became increasingly depopulated and the number of farms decreased. In July 1938, Oliver Edward, or O. E. Baker, an economic and sociological geographer employed by the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, under the auspices of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, wrote:

Unless the farmers and farm women of the Nation think more about the things that are fundamental and how they can encourage their children to love the farm and the farming people and turn their faces toward the home community instead of the distant city, they will continue in all likelihood to lose ownership of the land.<sup>33</sup>

Baker positioned farm families as an integral element in the perpetuation of the American “democratic spirit” that limited dependence on the federal government. He argued that “as the responsibility [for maintaining farm life] of the family decreases, the responsibility of the Government increases; and unless the people feel themselves to be a part of the government and direct its policy, the spirit of democracy declines.” That is, in Baker’s estimation the farm family, and farm women in particular, were positioned as those most responsible for raising children and for upholding the “rural philosophy of life.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Expanding Goal of Useful Citizenship**

The ideology of democratic responsibility continued to hold sway during World War II. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the USDA’s 1941–1942 “Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics” asserted that “the work of 2323 county home demonstration agents with rural families changed to a wartime basis after the attack on Pearl Harbor,” and that farm women immediately and patriotically queried, “What can we do to help?”<sup>35</sup> Their question

---

<sup>32</sup> “A Woman’s Interest in Farm Problems: Vermont Women Enlarge Their Field to Include Agricultural Policy,” *Extension Service Review* 9 (May 1938): 68.

<sup>33</sup> O. E. Baker, “The Family—Basis of Rural Prosperity,” *Extension Service Review* 9 (July 1938): 97. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics was established in 1922. See also, Baker, O. E. (Oliver Edwin), 1883–1949, <http://snaccooperative.org/ark:/99166/w6x6468v> (accessed Nov. 17, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Baker, “The Family—Basis of Rural Prosperity,” 97.

<sup>35</sup> M. L. Wilson and Reuben Brigham, “Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics,” (USDA, Mar. 1943), 12–13.

did not go unheard by the USDA. Farm women were among those targeted in a USDA-produced film titled “The Home Demonstration Agent, Friend to Farm Women,” revised in 1941, and “Farm Women in Wartime,” released in June 1942. The first film focused on farm women and homemakers, and declared that “good homemaking is the basis of the Nation’s economic and social well-being.” The second emphasized women’s responsibility for increasing agricultural production during the international crisis. Indeed, the film’s description employed wartime rhetoric and evoked the emotionalism that ensued following the December 1941 bombing at Pearl Harbor to underscore not only farm women’s duties, but also those of the home demonstration agents with whom they worked:

Since Pearl Harbor, the home demonstration agent’s work with rural families has changed quickly to a war basis. She emphasizes better gardens, better nutrition for health, greater responsibility for community welfare, careful spending, paying debts, buying war stamps and bonds—and no waste. Farm women’s efforts to do their part in the war program are well portrayed in this slidefilm.<sup>36</sup>

In the postwar years, the USDA continued to emphasize farm women’s important labors as the purveyors of food preservation and security, but they also turned to harnessing women’s interests outside of their individual and familiar rural environments. In the 1948 “Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture,” the USDA noted that farm women understood that broadening their horizons was an important element of their domestic and farm labors. “Greater interest,” according to the report, “is being shown in what goes on in local and state government activities and international affairs.” In at least one example, Illinois farm women asserted that “Home is the Center of a Woman’s Life, Not Its Circumference.”<sup>37</sup> Farm and rural women



During World War II, the USDA produced two films specifically addressing farm women’s wartime roles.

<sup>36</sup> *Slide-films of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Price List for 1942–1943*, Misc. Pub. 506, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, 1948* (Wash., DC, GPO, 1948), 27.

leaders, usually representatives of home demonstration clubs, from around the nation attended training schools and institutes and discussed the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in their home demonstration club meetings. These were also spaces where in the years following an international conflict farm women could query, “Can nations be neighbors?”<sup>38</sup>

Encouraged by the USDA and state extension service agencies, farm women expanded their worldview by corresponding with and engaging in exchange programs with rural women from all over the globe as a part of the “letters for friendship” program sponsored by the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW).<sup>39</sup> They also studied the United Nations’ effectiveness as a vehicle to ensure world peace following the war, with a particular emphasis on such organizations as the Security Council; the United Nations’ Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization; and the Food and Agricultural Organization. More affluent farm women’s expanding horizons were informed by their participation in International Day programs and by attending the 1947 ACWW’s annual conference in Amsterdam.<sup>40</sup>

By the 1950s, the United States was embroiled in yet another international conflict in Korea. The impact of this most recent war was not lost on USDA administrators and Extension Service agents. Farms were once again called upon to maximize production of “food, feed, and fiber.” Farm women were tasked with preserving food supplies. And like during World War II, the USDA worked with Extension Service agents to help rural people understand and engage the most recent iteration of civil defense programs. But the USDA, in cooperation with the Farmers Home Administration (FHA), which helped with financing, also helped rural people by accelerating the construction of “efficient, livable, and attractive homes.” In the USDA’s view, farm women’s role in home construction was clearly determined by their gender. That is to say, farm women, who had allegedly suffered due to the scarcity of home furnishings during the World War II years, were “made happier” because they were able to live in new or remodeled homes, with the assistance of extension workers.<sup>41</sup> This type of rhetoric, found

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> *Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, 1952*, (Wash., DC, GPO, 1952), 50.

<sup>40</sup> *Report of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, 1948*, 28. For more information about the Associated Country Women of the World, please see Linda M. Ambrose, *A Great Rural Sisterhood: Madge Robertson Watt and the ACWW* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> *Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, 1951*, (Wash., DC, GPO, 1951), 14.

in USDA publications throughout the 1950s, subtly projected expectations that farm women would return to the domestic sphere following World War II. Yet, farm women's expectations of the USDA had changed. While they were expected to embrace domesticity, farm women turned to the USDA and their local Extension Service agents for education about ways to become "more useful and intelligent citizens." They sought to improve their understanding of international organizations and policies by cooperating in the 1950 United Nations' flag making project. They participated in the "Betsy Ross" project, wherein information about the United Nations was disseminated and discussed in home demonstration club meetings.<sup>42</sup>

These efforts among farm women also increasingly included fuller exercise of their political rights. Supported by the USDA and local home demonstration agents, farm women studied the qualifications of political candidates and stayed abreast of legislation, particularly those that impacted the domestic sphere. Many home demonstration clubs worked toward procuring 100 percent membership voting in all elections in addition to addressing concerns about inflation and conserving the nation's natural resources.<sup>43</sup> In Nebraska, USDA leaflets were used by 143 home demonstration clubs to discuss such topics as "Citizenship and Your Government," "Becoming a Better Leader in Your Community," and "You Owe the Land a Living." Further, in an extraordinary reach for the time, farm women discussed their own willingness to run for political office.<sup>44</sup>

In the 1960s, the interests of many farm women remained largely unchanged. There were, however, some additions. USDA publications reveal that farm women regardless of race or region were concerned about such issues as improved library access and health initiatives. In a 1963 issue of the *Extension Service Review*, farm women worked with local librarians to expand library facilities to accommodate adult education courses. In Arkansas, farm women and their clubs worked with Extension Service health specialists to improve health education in rural communities. This health activism also occurred with the cooperation of the local health department, doctors, county health nurses, and sanitary officers.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> *Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, 1952*, (Wash., DC, GPO, 1952), 44.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> "Reading Plan Sparks Homemakers Interest," and "Arkansas Women Look at Health Problems," *Extension Service Review* 34 (Feb. 1963): 29, 30–31.

Of course, all of this happened amidst some of the most historic changes in American history, primarily those hastened by the Civil Rights movement. In some cases, farm women used the rhetoric and increased social activism of these years to improve conditions for themselves and others who resided in rural areas. In 1960s Arkansas, farm women like Phillips County’s Annie Zachary Pike took full advantage of the USDA’s resources to achieve agricultural success on her farm and for black farmers in her community. Zachary Pike was married to an African American farmer who owned and farmed 1,254 acres and employed 27 tenants. Unfortunately, in 1962 her husband suffered a stroke and was partially paralyzed, which required Zachary Pike to assume control of their farming operation. She had long known that women’s agricultural labor was an important component of the economic function of farm life and one that afforded them significant power.<sup>46</sup> In order to hone the necessary skills to operate the farm, Zachary Pike relied on Phillips County’s black agricultural Extension Service farm and home agents employed by the Arkansas Agricultural Extension Cooperative Service and on the information they provided from the USDA. The USDA helped her obtain samples from her farm to test for soil fertility. The USDA Bureau of Soils in particular used soil typology to help farmers like Zachary Pike improve and determine the best use for their land. She further used her close relationship with the Arkansas Extension Service to learn about fertilizers from USDA circulars.<sup>47</sup>



Annie Zachary Pike, a landowner and activist in Marvell, Arkansas (Phillips County), campaigned for civil rights and an end to discriminatory lending practices.

Zachary Pike’s interactions with the USDA in the 1960s led to her engagement in rural civil rights activism and to her appointment to the USDA Citizens Advisory Committee on Civil Rights by Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin, and to the Arkansas Farmers Home Administration Advisory Committee (AFHA).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Nancy K. Berlage, *Farmers Helping Farmers*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Rebecca Kilmer, *Women of the Arkansas Delta: The Pine Bluff Women’s Center, Inc.* (Pine Bluff: The Pine Bluff Women’s Center, 1976), 30; Berlage, *Farmers Helping Farmers*, 35.

<sup>48</sup> Memorandum, October 7, 1970, Rockefeller Collection, RG III, box 136, folder 13; Rogerline Johnson to Winthrop Rockefeller, July 12, 1970, Rockefeller Collection, RG III, box 205, folder 5. Winthrop Rockefeller Collection, 1912–1973, UALR. MS.0001. University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Center for Arkansas History and Culture, Arkansas Studies Institute, Little Rock, Arkansas (hereinafter WRC).

Serving on AFHA was particularly important because it was the primary USDA lending agency for economically depressed farmers. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, an agency created by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, investigated discrimination in farm policies. The report, *Equal Opportunity in Farm Programs: An Appraisal of Services Rendered by Agencies of the United States Department of Agriculture*, revealed that black farmers had no input on policy or representation on county agricultural committees, and were routinely refused loans and benefits.<sup>49</sup> African American farmers especially bore the brunt of the FHA's discriminatory lending policies, and by the 1960s they were rapidly losing land as a result.<sup>50</sup> But in Arkansas, they had staunch advocates in well-connected and politically active farm women like Annie Zachary Pike.

While USDA leaders claimed compliance with equal opportunity laws, they routinely denied benefits to not only African Americans, but also Native Americans, Hispanics, and women.<sup>51</sup> In Phillips County, however, Zachary Pike was deeply concerned about those whose claims had been rejected by the FHA.<sup>52</sup> When she accepted her appointment, Zachary Pike wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Hardin underscoring the USDA's role in rural civil rights activism:

For many years now, I have followed with interest the programs and functions of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and fully realize the broad scope of activities you are involved in. Certainly as we attempt to strengthen the effectiveness of such programs, it is essential that the civil and human rights of citizens be preserved and protected.<sup>53</sup>

Annie Zachary Pike's concern for the rural poor led her into state politics. In 1972, running as a Republican, she became the first African American farm woman to file and successfully run for an elected position in 20th-century Arkansas when she ran for the state senate.<sup>54</sup> Although she did not win, Zachary Pike's determination and tenacity demonstrates not only the extent of farm women's involvement with the USDA but also their reach beyond their farms to secure important resources for their communities. African American farmers continued to fight farm foreclo-

<sup>49</sup> Daniel, *Dispossession*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2, 4–5, 217–18.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> "Field Report," March 24, 1970, Rockefeller Collection, RG III, box 172, fldr. 6, WRC.

<sup>53</sup> Annie R. Zachary to Clifford Hardin, Secretary of Agriculture, October 1, 1970, Rockefeller Collection, RG III, box 136, file 13, WRC.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Annie R. Zachary, date unknown, The Pine Bluff Women's Center Collection, M92-06, box 3, University of Central Arkansas Archives, Conway, Arkansas.

tures and financial ruin and in 1996 filed a class-action suit against the USDA in the case of *Pigford v. Glickman*. In 1999 the case ended with the largest settlement in civil rights history.<sup>55</sup>

Community uplift continued to inform the USDA’s relationship with farm women throughout the 1960s. Yet the USDA still maintained a limited view of farm women’s responsibilities as confined to the domestic sphere. Articles in the USDA’s 1963 issue of *The Yearbook of Agriculture*, for instance, discussed such seemingly female-only concerns as home, health, food, children, and church. This emphasis continued despite the fact that by 1963, three-fourths of women who lived on farms were in fact employed in nonagricultural labor.<sup>56</sup>

### Conclusion

By 1965, most farm women’s interactions with the USDA occurred through their participation in state Extension Service programs and their contact with home demonstration agents. The Extension Service, which remained segregated in southern states until 1965, provided black and white farm women with better opportunities to maximize and improve their participation on their family farms. Beyond their partnerships with home demonstration agents and other USDA employees, they sought information and resources, such as access to telephones and better health care, that would ease their labors on the farm.

The USDA and its publications largely relegated farm women’s labor to the gendered expectations of the time, thus creating an uneasy alliance between women and the agency. Farm women understood well their contributions to farm life. They increasingly pushed the boundaries of expectations beyond the confines of the rural spaces in which they resided to engage in community activism and to assert their civic and political efficacy. They also sought more educational opportunities, particularly following World War II, for themselves and their entire communities by learning about international affairs and advocating for libraries and improved health care access. Some farm women further connected themselves to rural women’s struggles internationally by attending Associated Country Women of the World’s annual meetings. During the years of the modern civil rights movement, southern black farm women like Arkansas’s Annie Zachary Pike utilized

---

<sup>55</sup> “Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture, One Year of Change,” (Wash., DC: The Team, 1998), 4, 5; “In Re Black Farmers Discrimination Litigation Settlement,” <https://www.blackfarmercase.com/Background.aspx> (accessed Feb. 6, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> *A Place to Live: The Yearbook of Agriculture 1963* (Wash., DC: GPO, 1963), 16.



their political access to advocate for black farmers who faced losing their land because of the USDA's discriminatory lending policies.

Between 1913 and 1965, farm women's initiatives, regardless of race or region, empowered them to demonstrate their loyalty to farm life and utilize their multifarious skills to render themselves increasingly visible on the USDA's agenda and in its publications. As a consequence, the USDA was forced to seriously consider and appreciate their critical roles in the production and maintenance of the nation's agricultural regions in ways that had previously been unheralded.

---

*Picture credits:* USDA Social and Labor Needs, A Woman's Interest in Farm Problems, Slide Films, 1942–43, U.S. Department of Agriculture; Extension Service meeting, Library of Congress; Annie Zachary Pike, Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture, <http://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/>

---

© Society for History in the Federal Government. Readers can download *Federal History* articles and share them but must credit the journal and author. They cannot change the articles in any way or use them commercially. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND).