

The “Good Wife” and Her Farm Husband

Changing Household Practices in Rural Saskatchewan

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Dans le but de contrer les revenus précaires et l'absence de mesures et de politiques pour les aider, les familles d'agriculteurs de la Saskatchewan ont imaginé certaines stratégies concernant la gestion des revenus, le travail domestique et les membres de la famille impliqués. Le travail des femmes ressemble à celui de leurs soeurs urbaines et les piège dans des contradictions inhérentes au travail payé alors qu'elles sont plutôt des aidantes et affectées à des tâches domestiques.

Canadian state policies orchestrated the settlement of the prairies into individually owned farms lived on by nuclear families of European origins for the dual purposes of producing grain for international buyers and providing markets for manufactured goods (Fowke). Throughout the twentieth century, subsequent generations of women and men used great ingenuity to combat fluctuations in the international price for grains and livestock; increases in the costs of inputs such as fuel, equipment, and chemicals; vagaries of the climate as well as unsupportive state policies (Sterling; Knuttila). One hundred years after the formation of the Province of Saskatchewan (1905-2005), farm women and men continue to strategize in ever diverse ways to combat the irregular and unpredictable farm incomes associated with global economic and political forces.

On prairie farms, a gendered division of labour developed in keeping with patriarchal homestead policies, ancestral traditions, and imperatives of participating in a market economy (Strong-Boag; Van de Vorst; Kinnear; Rollings-Magnusson; Jaffe). Men, having signed the homestead agreements, prioritized their labour to gain title to the land: building a home on the farm and converting the prairies into income-generating grain fields. Tying the livelihood of the family to production for international markets prioritized the time and the labour expended on producing cash crops. Women in response to this imperative organized their labour to maximize men's productivity in the fields and, depending on circumstances, helped with market-related farm production. Women intensified self-provisioning of household consumables to minimize expenditures so farm income could be invested in producing cash crops. These farms became both business and kinship units with fused kinship rights and obligations (Bennett; Kohl).

These patterns continued on some farms: legal ownership of land reinforced the husband's power (Strong-Boag); women's on-farm labour directly and indirectly contributed to the reproduction of the farm (Smith; Wiebe; Jaffe); and relationships and labour were intertwining in the home, at work and in the community (Kubik

and Moore). Changes have occurred though as many women and men have taken off-farm jobs (Jaffe; Kubik; Olfert, Taylor and Stabler).

Women gained more power (Young), a separate identity, economic benefits, and a distance from farm tensions (Keating, Doherty and Munroe). Off-farm work by women intensified on-farm division of labour in that women were not available to help in the fields (Wiebe). If children lived at home, women's off-farm employment increased men's participation in domestic labour and younger men helped more (Kubik).

The intent of my research is to map women's responses to this state of flux by comparing the labour of ten families who farmed adjacent land in the 1950s and 1960s to the labour of their nine adult children and spouses who later farmed in the same vicinity. These people of largely British and Scottish ancestry farmed in South-Central Saskatchewan. At different times, they were involved in overlapping labour processes including household and caring work, self-provisioning of household consumables, market-related farm production, and off-farm paid work. In the 1950s and 1960s, these mixed farms produced cereal grains and livestock supplemented by extensive self-provisioning. By 2005, farmers had diversified into many kinds of cereal and pulse crops but few kept live-

stock. For the women, earning a wage or salary had replaced reliance on self-provisioning.

This exploratory case study indicated that the homogeneity of labour and social class location common to these farm women and men in the 1950s and 1960s had vanished by 2005. The seasonal nature of women's work was replaced by a work day driven by the time requirements of

come-generating farm work and received payment in the forms of checks in their names for grain and livestock production. All the farm men engaged in the same standard agricultural work each season. Men farmed similar amounts of land so everyone had equivalent field work. Because farmers grew the same grains—spring wheat, durum wheat and oats—planting, harrowing, cultivating and

rounding communities pursued other options, such as teaching in rural schools (Corman 2002). The importance of generating an income from the sale of agricultural products and the assignment of men to this priority labour constrained women to maximize the time available for their husbands and sons to do income-generating work. By assuming barnyard chores, running errands, doing housework, and caring for family members, women's work facilitated men's productivity. Time men spent on household and farmyard tasks was time away from income generating agricultural work. Thus even on days when women actively participated in the fields, their husbands rarely assisted with housework or food preparation

Women laboured, in seasonally determined ways, to make home made essentials instead of buying consumer goods so farm income could be used to pay down the debt incurred by land purchases, land taxes, equipment, fuel and chemicals. Baby chicks were cared for with heat lamps through the spring. In the fall, the roosters were butchered and frozen. Hens from the previous year were canned. Planting and tending the garden stretched through the summer and in fall women preserved beans, tomatoes, and pickles and stored root vegetables. The availability of electricity in the post-war period provided additional opportunities to stretch the garden produce until the next summer. Large sewing projects and repainting the walls were reserved for the winter months.

From season to season, women's day-to-day routines revolved around the working patterns of her husband and the needs of her children. Women rotated tasks—laundry, making bread, baking pies, cakes and cookies, washing and vacuuming the floors, and shopping for necessities—throughout the week. Women prepared three meals a day, usually served at the table, but at times taken to the men in the field. Women did all dishes, made and often delivered af-

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paid employment. Paid employment and the pull to live in urban centres had structured women's work to resemble their urban sisters. Women were trapped in the contradictions inherent in holding paid employment while maintaining responsibility for household and caring work, and, as Ginette Busque has argued, faced inadequate state policies regarding childcare, elder care and safety issues.

1950s and 1960s: The Seasonable Pre-requisites of Women's Work

A distinctly gendered division of labour, with tasks defined by seasonal requirements, characterized the ten farm families in the 1950s and 1960s. On a daily basis women's work was much the same from farm to farm while their husbands also engaged in similar daily agricultural labour processes. In complementary ways, women and men made separate yet interconnected contributions to ensure the viability of the farm. These families lived on farms in a homogeneous setting surrounded by other farm operators and their families.

The ten men in this study—four sets of brothers and one set of cousins—assumed responsibility for in-

combining were done at the same time on each farm. Winter activities were similar because almost everyone raised beef cattle and many occasionally kept pigs.

These men had made a seamless transition from helping their father on his land to cooperating with their father to farmland independently owned. As with practice established during the homestead period, men held title to the land. These men had begun farming prior to marriage and consequently their wives entered an already existing farm operation. After marriage, men retained control of the agricultural income-producing work, such as growing grain and raising livestock. On these ten farms, women with some exceptions, were not extensively involved on a day-to-day basis with this work. Cooperation among male kin—father, brothers, and sons—relieved women of direct participation in agricultural production. As the men's fathers gradually did less of the day-to-day field work, their children, sons in almost all cases, grew into these tasks.

The women, having lived on other farms, easily assumed the responsibilities traditional for farm wives upon marriage. They resigned from paid jobs to work full-time on the farm although a few farm women in sur-

ternoon coffee to the men, made the beds, and tidied the house. In the absence of any formal childcare support, women found methods of looking after the children as part of a seamless web.

This structured gendered division of labour had implications for their 37 children: 18 girls and 19 boys. From childhood onward girls learned the skills required of farm wives, many of which were foreign to their town friends: retrieving eggs from under hens; rendering pork fat into lard, killing and cleaning chickens; and planting and weeding rows of trees. They also learned at least a minimal amount of skills related to grain and livestock production: clipping teeth from baby pigs; delivering calves; driving a tractor in front of a stone boat; and stacking a bale wagon. Both parents, in different ways, imparted the knowledge necessary so their girls would make a young farm man a good farm wife. Working with their fathers, boys had opportunities to learn agricultural skills but, by not assisting their mother, they did not acquire domestic knowledge.

2005: Time Clocks Structure Women's Lives

By 2005, the seasonally informed regularity that had characterized both women's and men's work for the previous generation of farm families had vanished, as their adult children and spouses responded to the low price for wheat by adopting very diverse strategies. Twelve of the adult children had farmed in this district between 1970 and 2005. Three of these attempts were unsuccessful. By 2005, nine descendants, eight men and one woman, ranging in age from 40 to 57, still farmed in this district. Eight were married and in total had 18 children, 13 girls and five boys. Of these 18 children, two boys are currently farming part-time, and there is the possibility of only one more future farmer.

The work done to produce an income from agricultural products var-

ied among the farms because of different farm sizes, different commitment to livestock production, and diversity in cash crops grown: spring wheat, durum wheat, lentils, chick peas, dried peas, bird seed, coriander, oats, barley, canola, and flax. Equipment use and timing of the work varied by the requirements of each crop.

New agricultural practices raised

background, and their school-aged daughters, when the wife's employment and daughters' school schedules allowed. The woman had a full-time off-farm job and the man generated an off-farm income by hauling grain from farms to elevators.

For families living on farms, women's contributions to the family unit had changed dramatically from the previous era; all four women earned

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important occupational health and safety issues for women and men. Lack of familiarity with extra-sized new equipment resulted in near fatal accidents: swinging the extra tall grain auger into the live power wires and capsizing the super-sized combine on a familiar slope. The heavy use of assorted chemicals exposed all family members to serious health problems without extensive knowledge of safe storage, application, and disposal procedures.

Living on the Farm

Of the nine households with a farming income in 2005, only four families and one single man lived on farms. In another departure from the previous generation, one woman had taken over ownership of the family farm. She lived in the original farmhouse and as farm operator made decisions and worked in the fields. She and her husband shared the work on her land and on his land, located outside this district. In two cases, men managed the farm and did all the agricultural labour with the help of male kin. Their wives had grown up in towns and had not acquired farm-related skills. In the remaining family, the man farmed with assistance from his wife, who had a farm

an income unrelated to agricultural production. Having a job was now more possible because opportunities were readily available and urban centres were accessible by car even in the winter. Taking paid employment reduced the amount and transformed the type of domestic labour done in these farm households. Leaving the farm to work in town limited the time available for household and caring work as well as for self-provisioning work. Paid employment generated more money than allocating the equivalent time to producing home made goods. Families now purchased the goods produced by the earlier generation of farm women: curtains, pot holders, clothes, vegetables, chicken, milk, eggs and bread.

The household work processes became uniform from season to season as women purchased consumer goods and as the time requirements of paid employment regulated their working day. The domestic labour processes and, in turn, the consumption patterns of farm-based families came to resemble urban families.

Because of the importance of her pay check and the time obligations of paid employment, these women, in contrast to the earlier generation, could not organize their working day to facilitate men's productivity in the

field. Thus, for example, instead of women making and delivering fresh, hot meals at noon to men in the fields, the men packed their own sandwiches and coffee.

In contrast to the uniformity among women in the past as they responded to seasonal work pressures, by 2005 women's work varied from one to another in accordance with the time requirements and demands of their diverse income earning ventures: teacher's aid, insurance agent, sales clerk, and managing owner of rental properties. Three women had delayed taking a job until their children had started school while the fourth resumed her job immediately after the maternity leave, using a variety of childcare strategies: paid care, grandparents, and the children's father.

Women found social and personal advantages to paid employment. These women had an independent income, a luxury never enjoyed by the previous generation. They could help finance the farm, renovate their home or enjoy more consumer goods. As well working in town gave them access to a wider friendship network. An observation by a 75-year-old farmer captured the new realities that characterized farm families:

My daughter-in-law enjoys having a job in town. She has a chance to meet her friends for lunch and she has her own money to spend. Their toddler enjoys playing with friends at daycare. My son can look after himself on the farm.

In the farm-based households, structural conditions that had privileged men's absence from domestic labour had changed. Women's employment created the possibility for male participation in domestic labour by decreasing the privilege afforded the male income earner. Women now earned an income too. Moreover, women were not on the farm during the day and could not be called on to assist with farm work such as moving equipment from field

to field. And since snow cover decreased the work load for men but did not affect their wives' hours on the job, men had more time available than women did during winter months. Women still organized and were primarily responsible for domestic labour, but, in all cases, domestic labour was shifted among the female and male family members to accommodate the demands of paid employment. Most pronounced, men fended for themselves, particularly for meal preparation, much more than in the previous generation and most men assumed more childcare responsibilities. The type and timing of domestic labour shifted in response to women's employment patterns.

For these farm-based women, having paid employment shaped their lives in ways similar to urban wage or salaried workers. Not only did consumption patterns change, but participation in the paid labour force raised the same workplace issues for them as for urban women in terms of struggles over pay, benefits, and working conditions. They shared the same rigidity and consequent lack of flexibility: leaving and returning home, at times regulated by their employers. Caring for family members no longer formed a seamless part of their work day because they were trapped in the contradictions inherent in holding paid employment while assuming household and caring work.

Living in Urban Centres

In the four families who did not live on farms, men exclusively made the farm-related decisions and did the farm work with the assistance of other male kin or seasonal labourers. Two of these men considered farming as their lives' work even though over the years, they had earned money at other seasonal ventures. During peak periods, the man without male kin, hired help rather than relying on his wife. His wife's income more than off-set the cost of seasonal farm labour. This man and his family had

lived on his farm until he semi-retired in 2003.

The final two men had full-time, full-year employment and farmed with their fathers, now in their seventies, during the peak planting and harvesting periods. These two men did not own any land independent of their fathers. One of these men and his father lived 250 miles from the farm; the other man and his father lived 14 miles from their farm. For these two younger men, farming remained a sideline in terms of time allocated and money earned. In all four cases, given both the diversity of the sources of their off-farm income—custom sprayer, heavy equipment operator, carpenter, electrician—and the divergence of their participation in farming, the day-to-day labours of these men varied much more than the routines common to their fathers.

Women in these families, who lived off the farm, had paid employment and therefore organized their lives to negotiate both the obligations of their job and the demands of running a household. Because two of the men moonlighted on the farm in addition to full-time jobs, these women were left fully responsible for the household during these periods. The third man, who was only involved in seasonal off-farm work, was very active with childcare and housework during non-peak farm periods. When the fourth semi-retired man lived on the farm, he had done his own laundry but was relieved of many tasks because they employed house-cleaning services.

The women and children in these families by virtue of where they lived were not part of the day-to-day activities on the farm. Living an urban-based lifestyle, the activities involved in establishing and maintaining these households were vastly different from the "family farm" experience of the previous generation. Thus although these families earned money from farming, they had not formed a family farm unit and were not preparing their children to do so.

Diverse Work and Complicated Needs

The homogeneity of labour and social class location common to the farm women and men in the 1950s and 1960s had vanished by 2005. In the earlier period, both women and men responded to financial pressures by working longer hours: women by intensifying self-provisioning work and men by working more land and doing more of their own equipment repairs. By 2005, in the period of neo-liberal agricultural policies and practices, families had responded to precarious farm-generated incomes by developing a much wider assortment of coping strategies. Agricultural work became more industrialized; some men farmed part-time and women replaced self-provisioning with paid employment. These assorted strategies generated complicated class locations within families and variations in class locations among families who farmed adjacent land.

When women earned an income independent from farm production, new contradictions and conflicts materialized in their personal lives. Women's obligations to their paid job generated tension over finding enough time to accomplish all their commitments. Farm women in the 1950s and 1960s balanced time spent on routine domestic labour, caring work, self-provisioning, and assisting in producing grain and livestock for sale. Working around the needs of their husbands and children, they had flexibility to structure their labour throughout the day. By 2005, women were constrained to organize their lives around the time requirements and other obligations of paid employment. Women had reduced time and reduced flexibility to facilitate their husbands' productive in the fields, to do self-provisioning, and to do household and caring work.

In the 1950s and 1960s, farm women, with great ingenuity, worked with their children at their side. Quality, affordable childcare was not avail-

able. Childcare became a pronounced issue for the next generation of families because waged and salaried jobs did not offer the flexibility to take children to work and, from spring to autumn, fathers were not available.

Taking paid employment had another dimension to the negotiations over family finances. The earlier generation had experienced tension associated with allocating the men's grain and livestock checks between farm-based expenditures and lessening women's domestic labour by buying consumer goods. For the next generation, control over the assignment of women's off-farm income entered the negotiations.

By 2005, the earlier interconnection between home, work, and community had eroded (Corman 2003) and had been replaced by new forms of social organization; each family fashioning responses to constraints imposed both by global agricultural markets and by the new realities of taking paid employment. The work day of women (in town) and men (on farms) did not interlock, contribute to or depend on each other to the same extent as for the previous generation.

Over the decades, prairie families have struggled to make a living producing food for people in Canada and around the world. By 2005, women were not burdened with arduous physical work, instead they responded to precarious farm economics by earning an income in urban centres. These complex new realities require thoughtful rural policies that are attentive to the increasing diverse needs of the farm-based population. These policies will be most successful if developed with the involvement of those concerned.

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SUSAN BRALEY

Country Bounty

Classic Country Cooking!

The magazine trumpeted from its rack by
the cash;
On the cover
A burnished matriarch presided,
smiling, satiated,
over a rustic spread in crocks and bowls:

Roast beef (our own!) floating in cream
gravy
with buttered mash on the side,
Homemade bread swaddled in calico cloth,
and from the garden, of course, c
arrots and cabbage and peas...

Then, withheld until the end, for those
meat-and-potatoes men,
Taut red cherries, plucked fresh from the
orchard,
Simmered, sauced and latticed into pies,
And anointed with whipping cream before
their demise.

Should last till the day after tomorrow,

She thought, unloading her six items onto
the belt;
Boxed mac-and-cheese dinners, tinned peas
on sale,
And no-name peanut butter to spread on day-
old white bread:

Not what the last locum doctor ordered
when he saw her pale skin (she didn't push
up her sleeves to reveal the real reason she
came in).
Derek's under pressure too, he says, there's
no money except for bills, banks, and (truth
be told) booze...

She should tell someone, of course, but the
shelter is forty miles away;
The computer at the library ties her fingers
and stomach into knots, A
nd how can she ask when she can't do the
search on her own?
Best submit to the troubles she knows.

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