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Author(s): Anne B. W. Effland, Denise M. Rogers and Valerie Grim

Source: *Agricultural History*, Spring, 1993, Vol. 67, No. 2, American Rural and Farm Women in Historical Perspective (Spring, 1993), pp. 235-261

Published by: Agricultural History Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3744060>

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Women as Agricultural Landowners: What Do We Know About Them?

ANNE B. W. EFFLAND

DENISE M. ROGERS

VALERIE GRIM

“Thus who owns the land determines to an extent not only the purposes for which it is used, but more importantly determines the methods and practices followed in utilization.”¹

Without question, women have owned agricultural land throughout American history. How they come to own such land and what they choose to do with it, however, are subjects that have received little attention from scholars interested in the place of women in American agriculture. With only a few exceptions, research on women’s roles in farming neglects ownership questions, while researchers studying farmland ownership shed little light on the role of women as landowners.

Some of this neglect arises from the scarcity of evidence with which to answer these questions. Women as farmland owners appear intermittently in the historical record in two different kinds of sources: narratives that describe the experiences of women farmers and why they chose to farm, and quantitative data measuring the numbers of women farmland owners at different times, sometimes in different places, and never in

ANNE B. W. EFFLAND is a historian in the Agricultural and Rural History Section, Economic Research Service, USDA. DENISE ROGERS was an economist with the Land Ownership Section, Economic Research Service, USDA, during the time the research for this article was being conducted. VALERIE GRIM is Assistant Professor of Afro-American Studies at Indiana University, specializing in research and teaching on African-American rural life.

1. John H. Southern, *Farm Land Ownership in the Southwest*, Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station, Southwestern Regional Bulletin No. 3, December 1950, 41.

agricultural history volume 67 · number 2 · spring 1993. © agricultural history society

statistically comparable forms. As a result, generalizations and attempts to measure change over time are risky.

Yet there are indications that women have controlled surprisingly large amounts of agricultural land, both in the past and currently. Attempts to recover their experiences need to be undertaken, if only tentatively and inconclusively. Not only does knowledge of women's historical role in farmland ownership add a new dimension to the story of America's agricultural past, but a clearer picture of who owns and has owned farmland in the United States will help us understand the role of land ownership in the development of American agriculture and rural life. If it is true that "who owns the land determines . . . the purposes for which it is used . . . [and] the methods and practices followed in its utilization," we must discover whether ownership of the land by women makes any difference. Answering such questions ultimately requires research on men as well as women agricultural landowners, but this study serves as an initial step in that larger process.

In this article we compile historical and contemporary evidence available on women agricultural landowners. We have gathered published narrative accounts about women farmland owners, both historical and contemporary, in order to glean some information about why and how women have owned agricultural land and what they have done with it. We have also examined available quantitative data, both published and unpublished, on women farmland owners in order to gain some indication of the prevalence of women's landholding in the twentieth century. Although results are sketchy at many points, they are suggestive of some trends that inform our understanding both of women and of agricultural landholding; they are also suggestive of new directions for research and data collection.

Three related reasons explain why economic research on women's roles in farming neglects ownership questions. First is the pervasive American ideal of "land to the tiller" that has fostered a tendency to merge the distinct functions of ownership and operation of farms.² While this "ideal" has never been completely realized, the inclination of researchers to equate farm operation with farm ownership has contributed to the misconception that because few women are farm operators, few women are farmland owners. Throughout the twentieth century, however, a large percentage of women farmland owners have been landlords, rather than farm operators, and women landowners have consis-

2. Jack R. Kloppenburg, Jr., and Charles C. Geisler, "The Agricultural Ladder: Agrarian Ideology and the Changing Structure of U.S. Agriculture," *Journal of Rural Studies* 1/1 (1985):59-72.

tently leased out a larger percentage of their land than have men. Their landownership patterns have therefore been overlooked by researchers.³

Second, women's interests in farmland have been subsumed by men's. While many women have owned farmland independently, women have also owned land jointly with men. Such joint ownership could be recorded on land deeds or derived from laws that protected women's rights to property acquired during a marriage. In both cases, women's joint-ownership interests have been marginalized legally. According to legal scholar Joan Younger, "land that is jointly owned by a man and woman has been, until recent years, the property of the man."⁴

Perhaps because of this, most researchers have chosen to classify jointly owned land as male-owned land. As one researcher in 1950 indicated: "Legally land may be held jointly by husband and wife, varying according to the particular laws of a particular state. However, as the husband usually controls and manages the land, it is considered satisfactory to classify such ownership as male."⁵ Researchers' interpretations of joint ownership, in whatever form, therefore often disguise the prevalence of women farmland owners.⁶ Evidence of the extent of women's land ownership is clear, however, from the results of a 1979 study, jointly sponsored by USDA and the National Opinion Research Center, of more than 2500 women who lived on farms. Seventy-eight percent owned at least some farmland, often jointly with their spouses.⁷

Because property and inheritance laws for women have strongly influenced the history of women's agricultural landownership, a brief, simplified review of such laws may be useful. Restrictive property laws and custom have kept married women from owning land in their own names over most of American history, although with notable exceptions: Native-American cultures included women in community landholding; Spanish

3. The Census of Agriculture, the primary source of current and historical information on agriculture, focuses on the farm operator. Therefore it does not report on the largest group of women landowners—those who own farmland but do not farm.

4. Charles C. Geisler, Nelson L. Bills, Jack R. Kloppenburg, Jr., and William F. Waters, *The Structure of Agricultural Landownership in the United States, 1946 and 1978*, Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station, Search Agriculture Number 26, 7.

5. Southern, *Farmland Ownership in the Southwest*, 13.

6. Other research offers an indication of the degree of understatement of women's ownership interests when jointly held land is listed as land owned by men. In a 1956 study of land ownership in the Great Plains, Strohbehn and Wunderlich found that 59 percent of the owners were married couples and 49 percent of the holdings were jointly held by husband and wife. Similar research by Strohbehn in the southeast found that 64 percent of all owners were couples and 53 percent of the holdings were owned by husband and wife. (Cited in Charles C. Geisler, William F. Waters, and Katrina L. Eadie, "The Changing Structure of Female Agricultural Land Ownership, 1946 and 1978" *Rural Sociology* 50/1 (1985):76.)

7. Calvin Jones and Rachel Rosenfeld, *American Farm Women: Findings from a National Survey*, NORC Report No. 130 (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1981), 17.

and French settlers lived according to community property laws that considered women as joint owners of marital property and allowed married women to own property in their own names; and under English common law married women could retain ownership of separate property through prenuptial agreements. Not until the middle decades of the nineteenth century did common law states begin automatically granting married women the right to separate property. In any case, by custom married women generally did not own land independently of their husbands until well into the twentieth century and the common use of joint ownership of farmland did not appear until the latter half of the twentieth century.⁸

Inheritance laws have also restricted married women's landownership. Though laws vary from state to state, in most states women's rights to their deceased husband's property have been protected only by dower laws that provide a lifetime interest in land equal to one-third of the value of all the deceased husband's real property. The widow's dower has first legal claim on the estate. Men have often provided for full inheritance or more generous maintenance than the minimum provided by law, but the basic protection derived from English common law did not consider a widow the heir of her husband's property. Even when a widow received the property as inheritance, the law ignored her contributions to the creation of a successful farm. As recently as 15 years ago, women who were not joint owners of their family farm properties were required to pay estate tax on the entire farm left to them by their husbands, unless they could show actual cash contributions to the enterprise.⁹

The third factor that has tended to minimize the role of women farmland owners has been the tendency for women to have less than full ownership interests in their land. Historically, it has been common for women to have a life estate rather than full title to land they inherit. An Illinois land tenure survey in 1940 found that although most men were

8. For detailed discussions of married women's property laws, see Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). For a helpful summary that includes information on community property states/territories and Native-American landholding, see Joan M. Jensen, *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 1-6.

9. Changes in federal estate tax provisions in the Tax Reform Act of 1976 ended this requirement, formally recognizing the contribution of women to the building of family farm enterprises by automatically exempting half the value of the farm from inheritance tax. For a detailed discussion of inheritance laws for women, see Carole Shammas, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, eds., *Inheritance in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987). Details on dower protections may be found in W. J. Nuckolls, Jr., Arthur J. Walrath, and W. L. Gibson, Jr., *What Will Become of Your Property?*, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Bulletin 169, revised July 1960, 6. Discussion of inheritance and estate tax issues for women in the late 1970s may be found in Ann Beaudry, *Equity for Farm Women: Proposals for Estate Tax Reform* (Washington, D.C.: Conference on Alternative State and Local Policies, n.d.).

fee simple owners, about one-third of women landowners held life estates rather than full title.¹⁰ A West-South-Central region study (1950) also found that women more often had life estates rather than complete ownership rights.¹¹

Under a life estate an owner acquires only the right to use the land during his or her lifetime, *not* the right to mortgage the land, convey the land to another person by sale or gift, or devise it by will.¹² The purpose of a life estate in the past was most often to provide security and income to a surviving widow, while assuring the farm's eventual inheritance by a son.¹³ More recently, life estates have been used to protect heirs from burdensome inheritance taxes. Land beyond tax-free inheritance limits can be placed in life estates, protecting future heirs by dividing inheritances into smaller tax-free portions, while at the same time allowing a surviving spouse use of the land during her or his lifetime.

One of the concerns noted in the historical ownership literature was the potentially detrimental role of life estates in maintaining the productivity of farmland. Life estates, most frequently held by women, were believed to result in exploitation of resources, as the life estate owner, having no future interests in the land, tried to obtain the largest possible income during his or her tenure.¹⁴ Such a worry might be mitigated by the realization that in many, if not most, cases, the women with life interest were mothers of the eventual heirs to the property and not any more likely to jeopardize their children's futures than the fathers.

Despite these limitations, women have been and continue to represent a significant category of farmland owners. For the twentieth century a series of thirteen regional and three national surveys provide quantitative data with which to measure the phenomenon.¹⁵

10. "Farmland Ownership and Tenancy in Illinois: A Graphic Summary," 5–6.

11. Southern, *Farm Land Ownership in the Southwest*, 29.

12. Arthur J. Walrath and W. L. Gibson, Jr., *Farm Inheritance and Settlement of Estates*, Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 413, Publication No. 2 of the Southeast Land Tenure Committee, January 1948, 18.

13. Sidney Henderson, Russell L. Berry, and E. B. Hill, "Keeping the Farm in the Family," *Agricultural Situation* 33/7 (July 1949):6.

14. Nuckolls, Jr., Walrath, and Gibson, *What Will Become of Your Property?*, 17.

15. Following is a chronological listing of the survey reports analyzed for this article:

G. F. Warren and K. C. Livermore, *An Agricultural Survey: Townships of Ithaca, Dryden, Danby and Lansing, Tompkins County, New York*, Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 295, March 1911.

G. H. Von Tungeln, E. L. Kirkpatrick, C. R. Hoffer, and J. F. Thaden, *The Social Aspects of Rural Life and Farm Tenantry in Cedar County, Iowa*, Iowa State University Agricultural Experiment Station, Rural Sociology Section, Bulletin No. 217, August 1923.

Lorian P. Jefferson, "A Study of Farm Ownership in Massachusetts," *Journal of Farm Economics* 5/4 (October 1923):214–231.

J. O. Rankin, *Landlords of Nebraska Farms*, University of Nebraska Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 202, November 1924.

The majority of the regional surveys were sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with state experiment stations. The rest were sponsored by university departments of agricultural economics or rural sociology. Most of the studies focused on tenancy and the characteristics of landowners who leased land to others. Though in many cases the role of women received only brief mention, the surveys consistently noted the presence of women as agricultural landlords. The results from these surveys cannot be used to make statistical comparisons either over time or between regions. They provide only a broad

L. C. Gray, Charles L. Stewart, Howard A. Turner, J. T. Sanders, and W. J. Spillman, "Farm Ownership and Tenancy," in U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Agriculture Yearbook 1923*, Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1924, 507-600.

Howard A. Turner, *The Ownership of Tenant Farms in the United States*, U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin No. 1432, September 1926.

Howard A. Turner, *The Ownership of Tenant Farms in the North Central States*, U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin No. 1433, 1926.

J. G. McNeely and Howard A. Turner, *Land Tenure in Arkansas*, University of Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station, 1937.

John H. Bondurant and Wendell C. Binkley, *Land Tenure Classification and Areas in Kentucky*, Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station in cooperation with Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA, 1939, Box 15 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, Record Group (RG) 83, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. (NARA).

David M. Pettus, "Farm Rental Agreements in Caswell County, North Carolina," in "Planning Information, Caswell County, North Carolina. Report III: Farm Rental Agreements," North Carolina, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, North Carolina State College, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, October 1940.

Anderson, "Kansas—Types of Tenancy," 1940, Box 14 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG 83, NARA.

J. C. Elrod, *Types of Tenancy Areas*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, March 1941.

"Farmland Ownership and Tenancy in Illinois: a Graphic Summary," c. 1941, Box 12 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG83, NARA.

William Hildreth Scofield, "Characteristics of Illinois Landlords," M.S. thesis, 1941, Box 12 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG83, NARA.

Ronald Wade Jones and O. R. Jonson, "A Study to Delimit the Type of Tenancy Areas in Missouri and to Describe the Present Tenancy Situation in Each Area (Progress Report)," Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Missouri, November 1940, Box 19 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG83, NARA.

"Farm Tenancy Areas in Missouri (A Preliminary Report)," Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station and Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA, October 1941, Box 19 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section RG83, NARA.

Buis Inman and William H. Fippin, *Farm Land Ownership in the United States*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Miscellaneous Publication No. 699, December 1949.

John H. Southern, *Farm Land Ownership in the Southwest*, University of Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 3, December 1950.

John F. Timmons, "How Owners Get Their Farms," *Iowa Farm Science* 6/2 (August 1951):30.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey (1988)," *1987 Census of Agriculture*, AC87-RS-2, Vol. 3, part 2, July 1990 and change sheet, December 1990.

sense of the extent of women's agricultural landownership and the characteristics of women landowners, particularly those who leased their land to others.

The earliest of these regional studies covered four townships in New York State in 1911. Several others were done in the 1920s, but the largest number of the studies were completed in the 1930s and 1940s. Land tenure issues drew the attention of federal agricultural economists during this period because of the massive displacement of farmers during the Dust Bowl and the Depression. A series of state and national studies quantified land ownership patterns and analyzed the relationship between ownership and successful operation of farms. Women operated few farms, but owned enough farmland to be considered in the studies as landlords.

Only two national surveys contain statistically comparable information on land ownership, the 1988 Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey (AELOS) and the 1946 Agricultural Land Ownership Survey.¹⁶ The AELOS, a followup survey to the 1987 Census of Agriculture, provides detailed information on individuals who owned land in 1988. The 1946 Agricultural Land Ownership Survey was a followup survey to the 1945 Census of Agriculture. A third national survey, the 1920 Census of Agriculture, provides data on land ownership, but includes women only as landlords.

Our conclusions are based primarily on information from AELOS (1988), contrasted with the 1946 Agricultural Land Ownership Survey when comparable statistics are available. Results from the regional surveys are also included to provide historical evidence of the role of women in farmland ownership. We have settled on nine statements about women as agricultural landowners that are supported by the data, each of which is described below.

First, **women own agricultural land.** There are 2.95 million private owners of agricultural land in the United States. Most private farmland owners (87 percent) are individuals or families. These landowners own 69 percent of the privately held agricultural land.¹⁷ The data from AELOS

16. In 1978, a Land Ownership Survey was conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This survey is not comparable to the 1946 or the 1988 surveys because of the different populations from which the samples were drawn. Though it is tempting to use the 1978 survey because of the scarcity of national data on land ownership, we have elected not to provide direct (and inaccurate) comparisons of the 1978, 1946, and 1988 survey results.

17. Eight percent of all owners are partnerships. Corporations, both family and non-family, make up 3 percent of all owners. However, these corporations own 15 percent of all privately owned agricultural land. The "other" category for organization type consists primarily of trust or estate forms of ownership. Also included are lawsuit judgements and foreclosures. This final category contains only about 2 percent of all owners and 3 percent of acres owned.

permits identification of the sex of individual and partnership landowners. Male, female, and joint owners are separately identified. Joint landowners are typically husband and wife but may include siblings or parent and child landowners. Sixty-seven percent of individual and partnership landowners are male, 21 percent female, and 12 percent are joint landowners.

In the 1946 Agricultural Land Ownership Survey the sex of the landowner was determined according to whether the name listed in the 1945 Census of Agriculture was of a man or a woman. This procedure classified the owner as male or female, even though ownership may legally have been common or joint. According to the USDA agricultural economists who reported the results of this survey, "although many rights in much of our farmland are divided between two or more parties, particularly man and wife, it is considered relatively accurate to classify the owner as a male when the name of the owner is so indicated." The economists assumed "the husband or male owner customarily controlled and managed the property when his name appeared as operator or landlord on the census schedule."¹⁸ Following this convention for the purpose of comparison, 89 percent of 1946 landowners were male compared to 79 percent in 1988 and 11 percent of 1946 landowners were female compared to 21 percent in 1988 (see Figure 1).

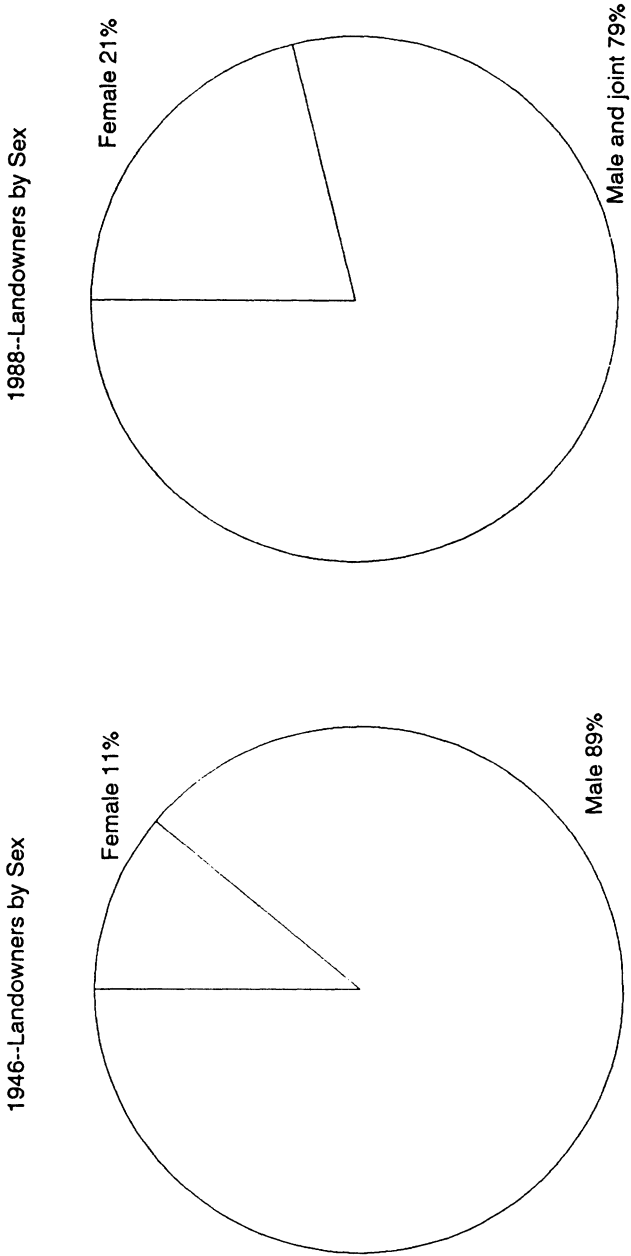
Both the 1988 and the 1946 surveys also provide data on the number of acres owned by men and women. In 1988 male landowners owned 72 percent, female landowners 17 percent, and joint landowners 11 percent of privately held agricultural land. Observing again the conventions of the 1946 survey for comparison, males owned 91 percent of private agricultural land in 1946 compared to 83 percent in 1988, and females owned 9 percent of such land in 1946 compared to 17 percent in 1988 (see Figure 2).

Studies at other times and other places during the twentieth century also show that women have constituted an important percentage of agricultural landowners and have owned a meaningful percentage of farmland. For example, in 1911, in the townships of Ithaca, Dryden, Danby, and Lansing, Tompkins County, New York, 9 percent of all agricultural acres were owned by women.¹⁹ In 1940 in Illinois, women owned 20

18. Buis Inman and William H. Fippin, *Farm Land Ownership in the United States*, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Miscellaneous Publication No. 699, December 1949, 8.

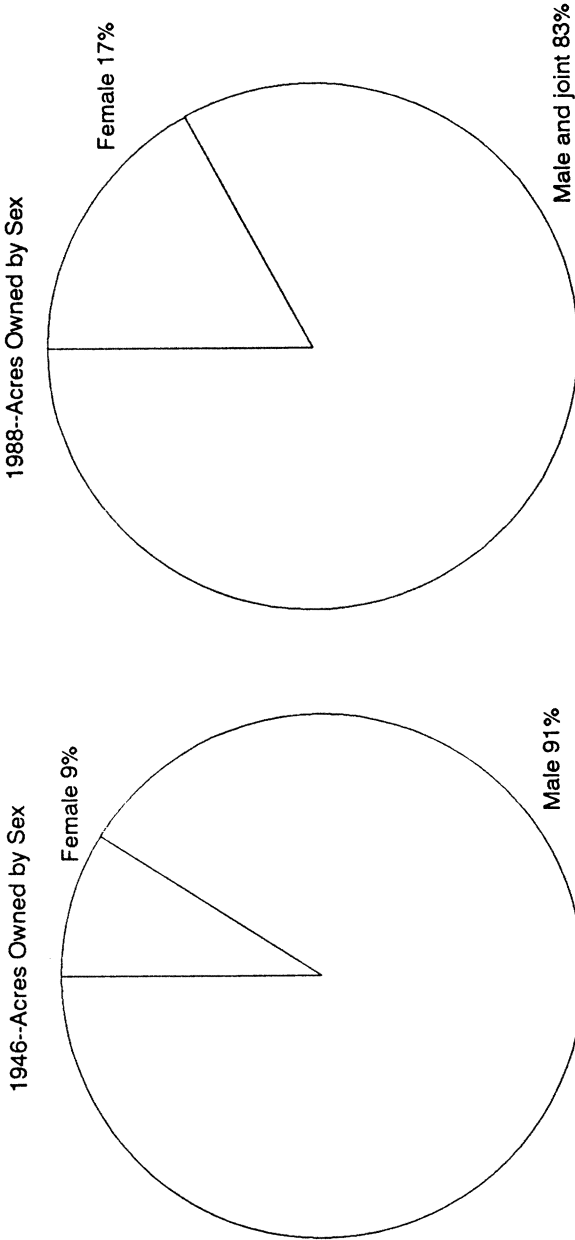
19. G. F. Warren and K. C. Livermore, *An Agricultural Survey: Townships of Ithaca, Dryden, Danby and Lansing, Tompkins County, New York*, Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 295, March 1911, 544.

Figure 1
Percentage of Landowners by Sex, 1946 and 1988



Source: Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey, 1988, U. S. Bureau of the Census, and Buis Inman and William H. Fippin, Farm Land Ownership in the United States, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Miscellaneous Publication No. 699, December 1949.

Figure 2
Percentage of Acres Owned by Sex, 1946 and 1988



Source: Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey, 1988, U. S. Bureau of the Census, and Buis Inman and William H. Fippin, Farm Land Ownership in the United States, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Miscellaneous Publication No. 699, December 1949.

percent of all agricultural land.²⁰ As with the 1946 survey, these numbers probably understate women's ownership interests in land given the tendency for jointly owned land to be counted as male-owned land by researchers.

Second, **women's land ownership patterns vary by region.** AELOS divides the United States into 4 regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. Male landowners dominate in all regions in terms of numbers of owners and acres owned, but their dominance is more pronounced in the Northeast and the West. This was also true in 1946.²¹ Women own a larger percentage of acres in the South and Midwest.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of farmland owned by men and women in 1988 in the nine divisions of the United States used by the Census Bureau. The largest percentage of acres owned by women is found in the West-South-Central division, where women own 21 percent of agricultural acreage. Other divisions with a high percentage of acres owned by women landowners are: East-North-Central (18 percent), South Atlantic (18 percent), West-North-Central (17 percent), and Pacific (17 percent). In the East-South-Central and Mid-Atlantic divisions, women own a smaller percentage of farmland, 13 and 12 percent, respectively. The lowest percentages are found in the Mountain and New England divisions, where women own only 11 percent of the acres.

Third, the surveys show that **women landowners own smaller parcels than men landowners.** As the concentration of farmland has increased since the turn of the century, the average landholding has increased.²² However, although average landholdings for both men and women increased between 1946 and 1988, the average size of male landholdings continued to exceed the average size of female landholdings by about one-third.

Without exception, the regional surveys also show women owning less acreage on average than men. In some cases the difference is large. In the West-South-Central region, including the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas, the average acreage held by male owners in 1946 was 50 percent larger than that held by females.²³ In 1940 in Kentucky, comparison of men and women landlords found that

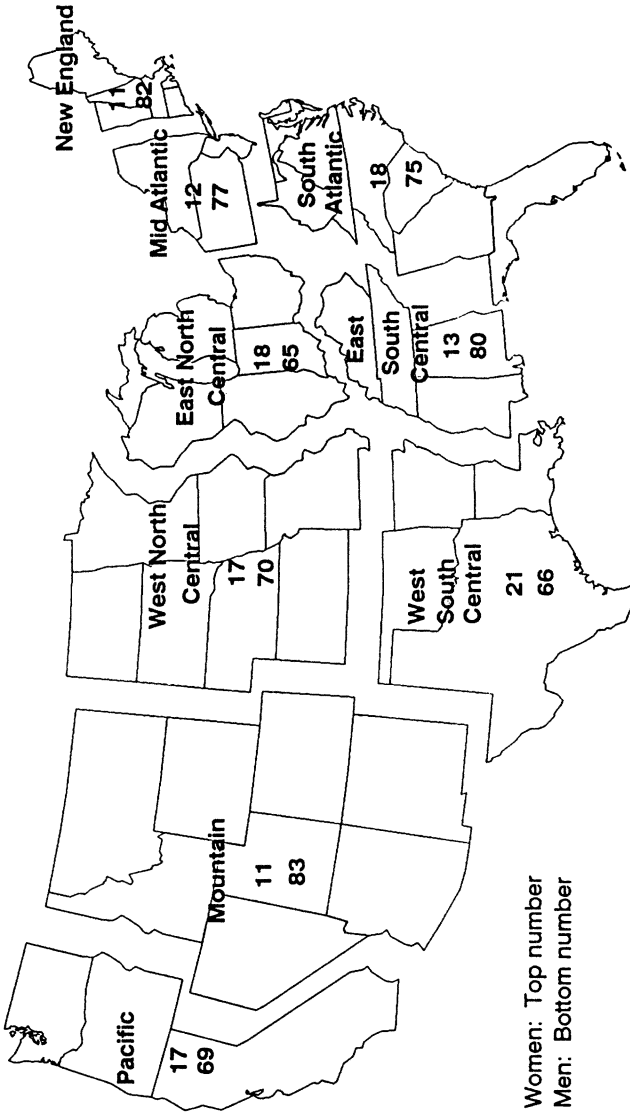
20. "Farmland Ownership and Tenancy in Illinois: a Graphic Summary," Box 12 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG 83.

21. Inman and Fippin, *Farmland Ownership in the United States*, 8.

22. Gene Wunderlich, *Owning Farmland in the United States*, Economic Research Service, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 637, 4.

23. Southern, *Farm Land Ownership in the Southwest*, 13.

Figure 3
 Percentage of Acres Owned by Women and Men by Census Division, 1988



The third category of individual or partnership owners is joint owners—typically husband and wife.
 Source: Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey, 1988, U. S. Bureau of the Census.

women had average holdings of 92 acres, compared to 144 acres for men.²⁴

Fourth, the surveys indicate that **women are more likely than men to have acquired their land through inheritance.** In both 1946 and 1988 women were less likely than men to have acquired land through purchase and more likely than men to have acquired their land through gift or inheritance, which for women might include inheritance from husbands as well as from parents. In 1988 the percentage of women who acquired at least some of their land through inheritance or gift (47 percent) was almost twice as high as the corresponding percentage for men (24 percent). In 1988, 80 percent of men had purchased at least some of their land, compared to 57 percent for women.²⁵

Results from Iowa in 1950 indicated that 63 percent of women acquired land through gift or inheritance, compared to 25 percent for men.²⁶ The 1911 study in New York found of the women farmers they encountered, "Nearly all were wives or daughters of farmers and *inherited* their farms." The authors may have overstated the case, however, when they claimed that "with a few possible exceptions these women were concerned with the business of farming simply as a result of chance. It was not their choice to be farmers."²⁷ The 1940 Farm Tenancy Study in Missouri also found that women landlords frequently acquired ownership through inheritance but noted several cases in which women acquired ownership through outright purchase or foreclosure.²⁸ Figure 4 provides some evidence that though women have been more likely to inherit land than men, they have nevertheless acquired some of their land through purchase.²⁹

AELOS provides information on 1988 acquisitions of land and their financing. Though these results refer only to what happened in 1988, they probably reflect other recent years. Of the owners acquiring land in 1988,

24. John H. Bondurant, *Land Tenure in Southern Logan County, Kentucky*, Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 464, June 1944, 7.

25. There are some concerns about the quality of the data on method of acquisition. In particular, when a woman landowner reports on her method of acquisition, it is unclear whether she reports how *she* acquired the land or if she reports how *they* (she and her husband) acquired the land. If the latter, the importance of inheritance as a method of acquisition may be understated.

26. John F. Timmons, "How Owners Get Their Farms", *Iowa Farm Science* 6/2 (August 1951):30.

27. Warren and Livermore, *An Agricultural Survey: Townships of Ithaca, Dryden, Danby and Lansing, Tompkins County, New York*, 544.

28. "Farm Tenancy in Missouri (A Preliminary Report)," Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station, Columbia, Missouri, October 1941, 18, Box 19 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG 83, NARA.

29. U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Agriculture Yearbook 1923* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1924), 536.

Method of Farmland Acquisition by Sex of Landlord, 1920

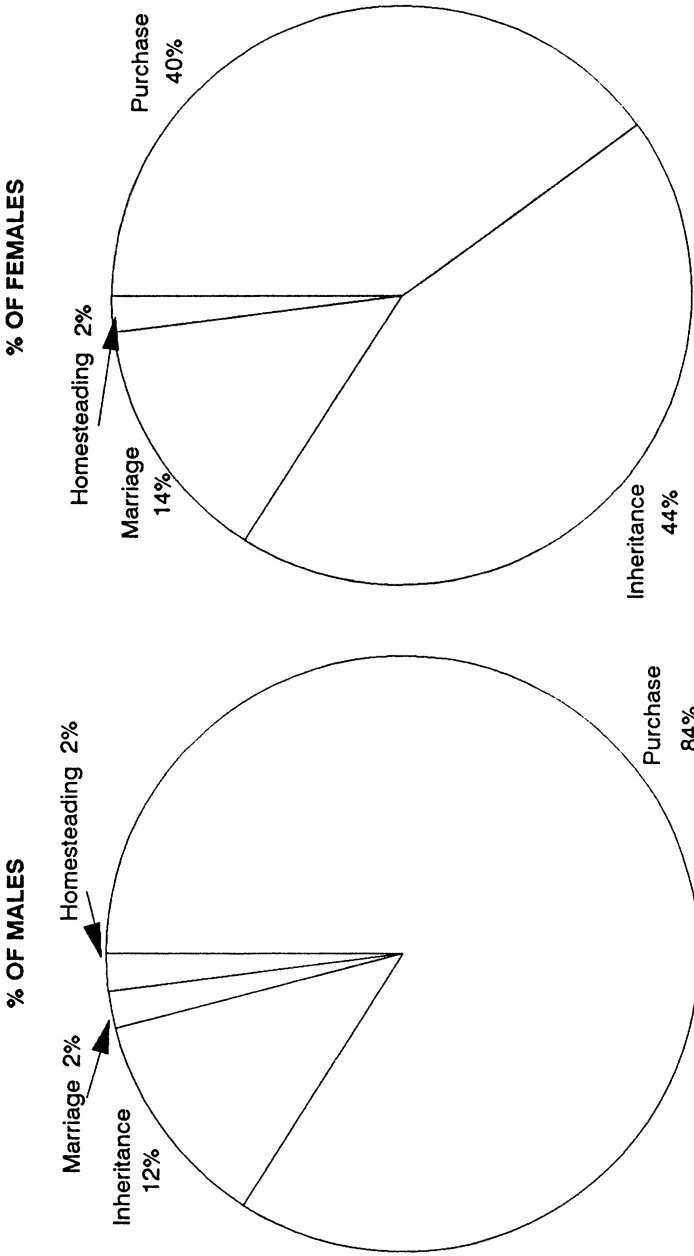


Figure 4

These data were cited in the Yearbook of the Department of Agriculture, 1923. It was based on returns from 23,000 landlords in 24 states to a special inquiry made by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Division of Land Economics in 1920.

81 percent were men, 7 percent were women, and 11 percent were joint owners. Forty-two percent of men who acquired farmland financed their land (and building) purchases. These 42 percent financed 32 percent of the value of their acquisitions. Twelve percent of women financed land acquisitions in 1988; they financed 9 percent of the value of their acquisitions. This difference between men and women in their use of financing is due in part to women more often acquiring their land through inheritance. Other possible explanations may include women's unequal access to credit or unwillingness to incur debt.

Fifth, women owners tend to be older than men owners. In 1988, two-thirds of female landowners were over 60 years of age and 43 percent were 70 or older, compared to 41 percent of male landowners who were over 60 and 18 percent who were 70 or older. Evidence from the regional surveys indicates that women landowners have consistently been older than men landowners. In 1942 in Kentucky two-thirds of male and three-fourths of female landlords were over 50 years of age.³⁰ A part of this age difference is linked to the fact that women are more likely to acquire land through inheritance, often from their husbands.

Sixth, a larger percentage of women landowners than men landowners are nonoperators. In 1946 and 1988 men were more likely to be owner-operators than were women. The results from AELOS indicate that the vast majority (85 percent) of female landowners lease out their land, while only a minority (27 percent) of male landowners do. Female landowners lease out 75 percent of their owned acres, compared to 18 percent for male landowners. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that women landowners are older than men landowners; older men landowners also often lease their land. The regional surveys show a consistent pattern of women owning farms while not operating them. The West-South-Central area study typifies the regional studies in finding that women are primarily landlords, renting out most of their land, in contrast to men, who operate the major portion of the acreage they own.³¹

Seventh, and related to the above pattern, women owners tend to participate less in farm operation management. For five different management decisions, the AELOS asked whether the decision was made by the landlord, the tenant, or jointly. The data from AELOS indicate that female landlords are less likely to make management decisions, either alone or jointly with the tenant, than are male landlords.

30. John H. Bondurant and Wendell C. Binkley, *Land Tenure Classification and Areas in Kentucky*, Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station in cooperation with Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA, Box 15 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG 83, NARA.

31. Southern, *Farm Land Ownership in the Southwest*, 14.

Results from the 1940 study in Illinois indicated that women landlords typically provided less supervision than other types of owners. About 15 percent of female landlords had given supervisory responsibilities to relatives or professional managers.³² However, the 1940 Missouri study, which measured supervision by the number of landlord visits to the leased land, found that the number of visits was not related to the sex of the landlord.³³ It has been argued by at least one author that women landlords' lack of participation in the management of the farm operation frequently resulted in inadequate maintenance of the farm buildings and reduced soil fertility.³⁴

Eighth, the data show that **women and men who rent their land use similar leasing arrangements.** Men and women landowners are similar in their use of different lease types, with the majority using cash leases. According to 1988 data from AELOS, both men and women landowners receive comparable per-acre rents: men receive \$34.77 per acre and women \$34.10. There is little difference between men and women landowners in their use of share leases; 29 percent of acres leased out by women are leased on shares, compared to 32 percent for men. One might expect female landowners to use cash leases more often, given that share leases, in which the landlord receives a share of the crop in exchange for use of the land, typically allow for greater participation by the landlord in the management of the farm operation and the sharing of expenses.³⁵ Evidence suggests, however, that use of a particular lease type is more related to the region, physical factors such as soil type, and the crop grown, than to the gender of the landlord.³⁶

Finally, we conclude that **in the past, women landowners have been more dependent on income from agriculture, specifically land rentals, than men landowners, but that difference is diminishing.** In Illinois in 1940, over 60 percent of women landowners were entirely dependent on the income from their farm property.³⁷ One-third of all landlords in Kentucky in 1940 were women, practically all of whom were elderly widows

32. "Farm Land Ownership and Tenancy in Illinois: A Graphic Summary," 19.

33. Ronald Wade Jones and O. R. Johnson, "A Study to Delimit the Type of Tenancy Areas in Missouri, and to Describe the Present Tenancy Situation in Each Area, (Progress Report)" Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Missouri, November 1940, Box 19 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG 83, NARA.

34. William Hildreth Scofield, "Characteristics of Illinois Landlords," M.S. thesis, 125, Box 12 Land Economics, Records of the Land Tenure Section, RG 83, NARA.

35. Denise M. Rogers, *Leasing Farmland in the United States*, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, AGES-9159, December 1991, 8.

36. Scofield, *Characteristics of Illinois Landlords*, 48; Telephone interview with Jean L. Humphrey, Ames, Iowa, 7 April and 14 May 1992.

37. "Farmland Ownership and Tenancy in Illinois: A Graphic Summary," 19.

and largely dependent on rental income.³⁸ The West-South-Central area study found that women were more dependent upon income from land rents than any other group of landlords.³⁹ The AELOS survey, however, found that women landlords in 1988 were only slightly more dependent on income from agriculture, measured as a percentage of total income earned from agriculture.

Having analyzed the data available from contemporary and historical quantitative sources, we also searched for narrative evidence of women's agricultural landholding. With this evidence, we hoped to characterize women's landholding before the twentieth century and to fill in the twentieth-century numbers with details on why women owned farmland and what shaped their decisions about how to use the land. Although the story of women landowners in the United States as reconstructed from historical documents is incomplete, historians have unearthed an impressive array of examples in newspapers, land records, diaries, correspondence, and published accounts of the experiences of women on the land.

We have limited our research at this stage to published sources, both primary and secondary, but published sources alone yield evidence regarding women agricultural landowners since the colonial period. Up to the second half of the nineteenth century, we have depended upon research by other scholars for our examples of women landowners. For later periods we have used both collections by other scholars and published primary sources that offer details on landowning women. To this point, our gathering of historical sources has concentrated on the English colonial experience and the developing United States, although we hope eventually to add information on Native-American women and Spanish and French colonial territories in North America as well.

Sources on landholding by women in the English colonies and the early American republic reflect the working of common law restrictions against married women owning land. Although our examination of sources collected by scholars of this period cannot be considered a comprehensive accounting of women landowners, certain trends appear. Most women recorded as landowners in the colonial period were widows or single women. In colonial Georgia from 1755 to 1775, for example, of the 117 women who received grants of land, 68 (58 percent) were widows, 27 (23 percent) were single women, and only 22 (19 percent) were married women. Of these married women, most received grants based

38. John H. Bondurant and Wendell C. Binkley, *Land-Tenure Classification and Areas in Kentucky*, Kentucky Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 421, January 1942, 44.

39. Southern, *Land Ownership in the Southwest*, 13.

on claims inherited from relatives or previous marriages. Those lands might remain in the woman's name through a premarital agreement.⁴⁰

Women who acquired agricultural land through grants represented a spectrum of colonial society. Some were very wealthy and well-connected, like the Brent sisters of Maryland, who received large grants of land through their family connections to the colony's proprietors; they drew large incomes from their landholdings and wielded considerable political influence.⁴¹ New settlers obtained small grants of land on which they supported themselves and their families throughout their lives. Ann Moodie, for example, acquired 200 acres of land from the colonial government of Georgia after her husband's death and supported her six children on this farm, which she apparently held until her death.⁴²

Women could, however, accumulate sizable holdings by acquiring title to, or patenting, a series of grants over a number of years, allowing them to become wealthy through wise land transactions. Ann Toft patented over 20,000 acres in claims to new land in Accomack County, Virginia, more than any other man or woman, in the 1660s, when land prices appeared poised to rise as free grants of land came to an end.⁴³ Hannah Bradwell acquired 500 acres in her first grant from Georgia, then received an adjoining 300-acre tract six months later to expand her plantation.⁴⁴

Most women who owned agricultural land, however, acquired their land through inheritance from husbands and parents. Although some sold their land, a number of women continued operating their farms. Harriet Martineau, in her travels through the United States in the early nineteenth century, commented specifically on the surprising number of widows operating plantations in the South.⁴⁵ Women might also retain ownership of their inherited land but rent the property to others to farm.

Among the more difficult aspects of women's agricultural land ownership to document are the economic relationships between women landlords and their tenants. A study of the agricultural history of a rural New Jersey county provides a rare glimpse into the details of just such an arrangement. Rebeckah Compton, in 1811, arranged a share tenancy with William Birch that required the tenant to provide the owner "one

40. Lee Ann Caldwell Swann, "Landgrants to Georgia Women, 1755-1775," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 61 (Spring 1977):30.

41. Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, *Colonial Women of Affairs*, 2d ed., revised (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 98-100.

42. Swann, "Landgrants to Georgia Women," 27.

43. Susie M. Ames, *Studies of the Virginia Eastern Shore in the Seventeenth Century* (Richmond, Va.: Dietz Press, 1940), 25.

44. Swann, "Landgrants to Georgia Women," 27-28.

45. Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, *Career Women of America, 1776-1840* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950; reprint ed., Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1972), 187.

third of all grain, flax, and potatoes, one half of all hay and fruit, and all the firewood which she might need." William Birch would pay the taxes on the land, but have "no other cash outlays." The author of this study considered this a typical rental arrangement for the area, based on review of a number of similar contracts recorded for the township.⁴⁶

The historical record provides evidence of another rarely glimpsed example of women's agricultural land ownership. A study of property-owning free African Americans in antebellum Virginia discovered women among the farm-owning African-American population. The study showed that African-American women often inherited land from husbands and parents. African-American women also occasionally inherited large estates, or at least lifetime use of those estates, from white men, often former masters and the fathers of some of their children. Some African-American women, however, acquired property through purchase. In a table of property acquisitions in Sussex County, Virginia, showing 32 land purchases, 7 of the grantors and 3 of the grantees were women. The women's purchases ranged in size from 7.5 acres to 75 acres; the men's purchases ranged from 8 acres to 320 acres. In one case a woman sold 34 acres to another woman.⁴⁷

In 1862 the Homestead Act granted single women the right to claim public land in the West, although women do not seem to have made many homestead claims until later in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Between 1888 and 1943, single women received close to 12 percent of the 6,527 homestead patents issued in a six-county sample in Wyoming. Women claimed between 8 and 20 percent of homesteads in a sample of 9 counties in North Dakota during approximately the same period. Of a sample of 306 women who homesteaded land in North Dakota, 83 percent were single and 15 percent widowed.⁴⁸

The story of women homesteaders has intrigued many historians. Many homesteading women kept diaries and wrote letters home, offering insights about their interest in owning land. Some secured land before marrying with the intention of combining their claims with those of their future husbands. Others hoped to meet eligible men and marry, either selling their claim or combining it with their new husband's. Many, however, homesteaded land in the West quite independently. Some single women sought a long-term alternative to city jobs, while others planned

46. Hubert G. Schmidt, *Rural Hunterdon: An Agricultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1946), 67.

47. Luther P. Jackson, "The Virginia Free Negro Farmer and Property Owner, 1830-1860," *The Journal of Negro History* 24/4 (October 1939):415, 417-19, 426-27.

48. Paula M. Bauman, "Single Women Homesteaders in Wyoming, 1880-1930," *Annals of Wyoming* 58/1 (Spring 1986):48; H. Elaine Lindgren, "Yes, They Really Did Homestead," *North Dakota Research* 48/1:21-22.

to secure a claim, then return to the city and sell it to a later settler for a profit. Widows often wanted a healthy rural life for their families. In one case an African-American widow homesteaded land in Deerfield, Colorado, to give her father "a place to garden and putter around on," while she earned the family's income at a job in Denver.⁴⁹

Other single and widowed women purchased farmland in the East for many of the same reasons that such women attempted homestead claims in the West. Popular magazines and country journals promoted the idea that farming could provide support for a widow and her family or for a single woman. The work, though hard, would be healthier and probably more satisfying than the routines of office work or teaching in the city. Journals and magazines published the stories of women farmers to promote occupational alternatives for women.

We collected 18 publications from this period that profiled independent women farmers. Of the 27 women described, 20 were single and 7 were widows. Nearly half (9) of the single women whose previous occupations could be determined had worked as teachers or in offices in a city before acquiring farms; 6 of the single women had farm backgrounds. Acreages varied widely. Eight women, all single, operated mixed farms ranging in size from 20 to 200 acres. One group of 3 single women operated a ranch, one widow operated a cotton plantation, and a single woman raised hogs. The remaining farms concentrated on fruit, hay, poultry, and dairy. Nine of the 20 single women inherited their farms, while 5 of the 7 widows inherited land, 2 apparently from parents rather than husbands. Only 1 of the 9 single women without farm backgrounds inherited her property, while all but 1 of the 6 single women reported to have farm backgrounds inherited their land. In general, women who inherited land held larger properties than those who purchased it. Just over half (5) of the mixed farmers had inherited their property, but only 1 of the 6 fruit and hay farms were inherited by their owners.⁵⁰

49. Jensen, *Promise to the Land*, 6; Bauman, "Single Women Homesteaders in Wyoming," 39–48; Lindgren, "Yes, They Really Did Homestead," 21–24; Harriet Joor, "Two Women Homesteaders," *Craftsman* 27 (January 1915):436–40; Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press and New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 114–16; Carol Fairbanks and Bergine Haakenson, eds., *Writings of Farm Women, 1840–1860: An Anthology* (New York: Garland, 1990), 203–20; Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961). Many other sources by and about homesteading women may be found. State historical journals for the public land states in which homesteading occurred carry many such articles, as do most collections of essays and primary sources on the history of rural and farm women.

50. The earliest of these stories of independent women farmers appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1875. D. Lothrop and Company published an expanded version of that story, *How Two Girls Tried Farming*, by Dorothea Alice Shepherd, in 1879. Other stories

Although these publications from the early twentieth century generally ignored women as agricultural landlords, some of the women profiled had been landlords before deciding to operate their farms on their own, and one publication noted a group of three daughters who inherited farmland from their father and chose to rent out the land rather than farm it.

A 1917 article described a mother and daughter who purchased 20 acres in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri and rented "the fields" to a neighboring farmer on shares while they set up their garden and small livestock operations. They received only one-third of the crop and the neighbor neglected their fields whenever his own land required his attention. They planned to buy equipment to farm the fields themselves and to plant most of them to pasture.⁵¹

A 1916 article described a widow who continued renting out a farm her husband had bought. She rented to a young couple for three years, who managed to save enough to go into farming on their own. Her next tenant could not get along with the hired labor and so, unable to sell the farm because land prices were too low, she decided to move onto the farm and operate it herself.⁵²

The example describing the arrangement made by three daughters who inherited land from their father appeared in a book published in 1900. The daughters inherited over 4000 acres distributed among three farms. They divided the farms into small sections and then leased the sections to tenants in return for half the crop.⁵³

Stories about landowning women virtually disappeared from the popular and farm press between 1920 and 1970. Women's equality issues in general received little attention during the period. Economic hard times in the 1930s, followed by World War II in the 1940s and an effort to

appear in such farm journals as *The Southern Farmer and Dixie Farmer*, *Farm and Fireside*, *Country Life in America*, *Suburban Life*, *The Ohio Farmer*, *The Country Gentleman*, *The Fruit-Grower*, *The Woman's National Farm and Garden Association Monthly Bulletin*, and *Wallaces' Farmer*, and such popular magazines as *Munsey's Magazine*, *The Outlook*, and *Century*. They cover a range of dates from 1887 to 1919, but are concentrated in the second decade of the twentieth century. We did not locate coverage of individual women as farmers again in the popular press until the 1970s, except for an article in *The Country Gentleman* in 1954 describing a single woman who operated and at least partly owned her family's plantation on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and two published reminiscences in the 1960s of widows who "made good" as independent owner-operators, one on a sheep ranch in Idaho, the other on a rice plantation in South Carolina. A complete list of these sources is available from the authors.

51. Beatrice Van B. Mendsen, "Two Women and a Farm," *The Fruit-Grower* 28/2 (January 15, 1917):27.

52. "An Ohio Woman Farmer," *The Ohio Farmer*, October 14, 1916.

53. William Drysdale, *Helps for Ambitious Girls* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1900), 422.

restore stability in the 1950s, undoubtedly discouraged the press from investigating and highlighting nontraditional lifestyles for women. We located only two sources recounting the experiences of women who owned farms during the middle of the twentieth century, both of which focused on women's use of their land to survive hard times. One described a group of women living together on a farm in North Carolina in 1939. The women, two elderly sisters and a niece, inherited their 10-acre farm from the sisters' father. They worked the land as long as they could, and then rented out part of it to provide some income while raising chickens and a garden for food. The other source described a widow who, for lack of any alternate source of income, kept the farm her husband left and supported her children on the land.⁵⁴

The popular press's interest in women and farming reappeared, however, in the 1970s, paralleling, as it had in the 1910s, a rising interest in women's rights and a back-to-the-land movement. We have not attempted a comprehensive search for the years 1970–1990, having collected only 7 articles, but our findings suggest an interestingly different coverage of women farmers in these two decades compared to the early part of the century.⁵⁵

Among these 7 articles from the past 20 years, 5 profiled widows who carried on their husbands' farm operations rather than sell or rent the land they had worked together with their husbands. All of the widows had been farm wives and continued to operate the farms they inherited from their husbands. The other two articles profiled single women. One described a pair of teachers who operated a beef farm on what had been the land of one of their fathers. The other described a women's collective of six farms in Mendocino, California, that consciously rejected living with men; a number of the women lived as lesbian couples. At least one of the women teachers had grown up on a farm, but the single women in the collective all had urban backgrounds.

Five of the articles noted the size of the women's farms. They ranged from 50 acres to 880 acres, although the 2 operations whose size was not noted appeared to be large cattle ranches. Four of the operations described in these articles raised beef. Two others raised row crops: corn, soybeans, and wheat. Only the women's collective raised specialty animals and crops.

These articles from the 1970s and 1980s reflect an interest in farm

54. Jensen, *With These Hands*, 184–87; Evelyn Harris, *The Barter Lady: A Woman Farmer Sees It Through* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1934).

55. The articles we collected appeared in *Michigan Farmer*, *Ms.*, *Newsweek*, *The Florida Cattleman*, *Farm Journal*, *Buckeye Farm News*, and *Rangelands*. They range in dates from 1974 to 1983. A complete list is available from the authors.

women who have survived hardship and carried on, rather than the young and independent city woman looking for a refreshing new life on the land. Only the women's collective and the teachers in Michigan echoed this focus of the early part of the century. Most of the recent articles seemed to indicate, instead, a growing respect for the abilities of farm wives to learn the business of modern farms and ranches. Instead of recommending horticulture and small animal raising, the commentators admiringly described women operating relatively large-scale grain and livestock businesses. Nearly all these women learned farming while working with their husbands and carried on the operation in much the same fashion, although changing and expanding as they confronted new problems and opportunities.

Undoubtedly changes in agriculture and in definitions of women's roles and abilities over the century account in large part for the changes in focus of the popular and farm press. Perhaps most importantly, the claims of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s expanded the variety of occupations available to women and helped the press, and farm women themselves, recognize women's ability to handle business management decisions, not just a special sphere of women's farm work revolving around home, garden, dairy, and poultry.

In addition to collecting articles about women landowners of the twentieth century, we conducted a series of interviews with women who own agricultural land. We hoped to find insights into some of the questions that the land ownership studies do not answer. We wanted to ask for personal details about women's land ownership, particularly why women acquire and keep land and how they make their decisions about how their land will be used. We included in our study 8 interviews with women in Iowa (1), Colorado (1), Virginia (1), and an African-American community, Brooks Farm, in Drew, Mississippi (5).⁵⁶ In one case, the interview in-

56. The list of questions on which the interviews are based, copies of completed questionnaires, and audiotapes of interviews are in the possession of the authors.

The interviews with women of Brooks Farm were conducted by Dr. Valerie Grim and are part of her ongoing study of the economic, social, and cultural history of that community. Brooks Farm is a historical African-American farming community located in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Begun as a plantation in 1920, it evolved into an independent African-American community during the 1940s. Brooks Farm residents purchased land from plantation-owner P. H. Brooks and on that economic foundation established their own economic, social, and cultural institutions, including businesses, small industries, churches, schools, civic organizations, community clubs, and juke joints.

For this study, Grim interviewed eight women in the Brooks Farm community about their experiences and attitudes as landowners. Only five of these women are included in the final study because we decided to focus on women who owned land solely in their own names, to avoid the complexities of joint ownership. In the long run, our study would benefit from

cluded details about a mother and great-grandmother from whom the interviewee inherited her land, bringing the total number of women on whom we collected information to 10. Not all interviewees answered all questions, so totals in some categories may not equal 10.

We first sought background data on the age, marital status, education, occupation, and farm experience of each interviewee, as well as the size of her farm and the percentage of her income derived from the land. Of these 10 women, 1 was married, 1 never married, and 8 were widows. Their ages, where recorded, ranged from 62 to 76. Their occupations included retired (5), homemaker (3), landlady (1), and rancher (1). Their education levels varied: 3 held bachelor's or normal school degrees, 3 finished at least some high school, and 2 attended only grade school. Six grew up on farms, 2 married farmers, and 2 were associated with farming only after inheriting their land. The women owned farms ranging from 40 to 2852 acres. In 2 cases the income from the farm provided the majority of the woman's income; in the remainder of cases income from the farm ranged from insignificant to about 10 percent of the interviewee's total income.

We then asked questions to determine how the women acquired their land and how they used it. Five women inherited all their land from their husbands. One woman inherited some from her husband and purchased some. Another woman inherited some from her husband and some from her parents. Three inherited all of their land from parents. Eight of these women leased out their land, although one woman, the owner of the large ranch property, continued to farm a portion of her land. Seven leased out their land at reduced rates for a variety of reasons. One leased at lower than market rates in return for services in kind. Another reduced the rent in order to assure low turnover of renters. She looked upon the arrangement as a favor to her, since she lived some distance away and they "looked after the place" for her. The remaining women who leased their land at reduced rates lived in the African-American farming community in Mississippi. They leased their land at reduced rates to enable family members or other African Americans in the community to farm.

The two women who leased at market value leased on shares, receiving one half of the harvest, which they considered the standard practice for their region. They provided the land, paid the taxes, and contributed half the cost of inputs required to produce the crop, then sold their half

comparable series of interviews in other ethnic communities, both to expand our base for understanding women landowners and to discover whether race and ethnicity, as well as religion and class, influence women's access to land and the ways in which women behave as landowners.

of the crop independently of their lessee. Even though their share lease reflected a market-value rent, however, both of these women, a mother and the daughter who inherited the family land from her, continued to rent to the same tenant as had the father/grandfather who originally owned the land. Their leasing decision was based on a desire for stability and continuity, not to provide the greatest economic return.

Two sisters-in-law did not lease out land at all. They each owned one part of a family tract that was managed jointly by the family members, although they owned their own shares separately. The family had chosen not to have the land farmed, but they did make occasional timber sales from the property.

We also asked questions about the role these women owners played in managing farm operations on their land. The two women who owned parts of a family tract shared management decisions with other landowners in the family. Among the rest of the women interviewed, all had made their own decisions regarding whether to rent out the land or operate it themselves. Among those who rented out their land, however, only three took some part in management decisions with their lessees. The daughter who rented on shares became involved only in issues of special concern to her, particularly environmentally sound use of pesticides and fertilizers on the land. One of the women in the Brooks Farm community rented her land to her son, who consulted with her and his brother regarding management of the farm. The owner of the ranch shared in some management decisions with her lessee and also shared in the work.

All of the 10 women profiled by these interviews kept their land primarily for family reasons. They either lived on the farms or maintained ownership from a distance because of a desire to keep the land in the family. All of the women had children or nieces and nephews who would inherit the land. The 5 Mississippi women lived on their property and kept it as a home for family to return to for visits and in case they should ever need a place to live. Only 1 of the 5 depended upon her land for economic support, although they all saw the land as a place to live and raise some of their food. The rancher in Colorado also lived on and continued to work her land to support herself.

Both the Iowa mother and daughter and the Virginia woman did not live on their land and did not expect their heirs to live there, but still wished to keep the land for the next generation to inherit. A great-grandmother of the Iowa interviewee owned part of the family land as a widow after her husband's death in 1862 and remained on the land to raise her small children. She sold her share of the farm to a son in 1909, who also bought the shares of his siblings and reconsolidated ownership

of the family land. The Iowa farm had been in the family since the 1850s and although it was no longer owned wholly by one heir, our interviewee told us she would buy out other relatives if they ever wanted to sell rather than see the land leave the family. The Virginia farm was only purchased in 1965, but the owner's daughter who will inherit the land did not want her mother to sell it.

A great deal more research is required before we can draw any historical conclusions about the place of women landowners in American agriculture. We can certainly assert without doubt that there have always been women owners of agricultural land, both married and unmarried. We can also assert that more single and widowed women than married women have owned land independently, a phenomenon undeniably influenced by restrictive property and inheritance laws as well as custom.

Although our quantitative data from different times and places are not strictly comparable, we can identify some general patterns. Our twentieth-century data support the conclusion that women have owned smaller acreages than men and that women's landownership patterns vary by region. The data also suggest that women acquire their land through inheritance more often than do men and that female landowners tend to be older than male landowners. According to 1988 data, women are less involved in the operation of farms on the land they own than men but they implement similar leasing arrangements to those used by men who rent out their land. Finally, women landowners who rent out their land appear to depend more on that rental income than do men who rent out land.

The narrative sources we have collected from periods before the twentieth century cannot support general conclusions about women's landownership. We can only say that women owned farms of widely varying acreages; that women often acquired land through inheritance, but also purchased land and patented land grants in their own names; that women landowners ranged in age from young to old; that they often seemed to derive their support from their land but some had other resources; and that sometimes they farmed their own land, sometimes they rented it out, and sometimes they allowed others, especially relatives, to handle their land for them.

Narrative evidence and interviews from the twentieth century, at this point, provide even less certain conclusions. Our research reveals opposing pictures in the published literature of the twentieth century, both probably more influenced by cultural and political trends than the reality of women's land ownership. Our interviews appear to support the survey conclusions on marital status, age, means of acquisition, and involvement in farm management, but not women's dependence on their land

for income. They cannot address questions of regional diversity, leasing patterns, and average farm size. Our interviews do suggest that women are motivated to hold land for the purpose of keeping it in the family, although we cannot claim without more research whether that is different from men's attitudes or even whether it is true for the majority of women.

Women's agricultural landholding in the United States is a vitally important subject for research. Comprehensive research in well-defined localities with good historical records, especially if it could be conducted in places for which later quantitative studies exist, would do much to increase our understanding of women's landowning patterns in the past and over time. Continued collecting of published sources, along with archival research and interviews encompassing regional, class, ethnic, and racial diversity, can improve our data on women landowners, particularly for the twentieth century. Ultimately, we hope our research may identify characteristics about women's land ownership that will help to construct effective agricultural policies, but at the very least it should create a collection of quantitative and qualitative data on the subject useful to others intrigued by the topic.