
Mary Neth’s Preserving the Family Farm, an eloquently written and extensively researched study of community and family farm survival strategies from 1900 to 1940, places gender at the center of the historical analysis. Neth includes data from Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota, but her research deals primarily with dairy farming in Wisconsin and, to a lesser degree, corn and livestock farming in Iowa and wheat farming in North Dakota. Although Neth offers some insightful comparisons based on differences in commodity specializations and geography, many of her regional generalizations rest heavily on evidence from Wisconsin, particularly on the diaries of Anna Pratt Erickson. On balance, however, Neth’s ambitious book succeeds in placing individual and local experiences within the context of the larger region and in juxtaposition to government policies.

Despite technological changes and government policies that fostered farm consolidation and increased production, Neth argues, the years between 1900 and 1940 constituted a period of flux in the rural Midwest rather than one of steady change from traditional to modern practices. Farm families “adopted, adapted, and resisted” new technologies and methods while continuing to rely on traditional patterns of family and neighborhood mutuality (p. 121). Since men held property and were the heads of families, women “had the most to gain within the family by emphasizing the mutuality of family labor and the farm enterprise” (p. 18). After detailing the integration of men’s and women’s gender-specific tasks in the productive work of family farms, Neth demonstrates how mutuality also characterized neighborhood and community patterns of social and economic sharing and reciprocity. Through the 1930s exchanges of products and labor in gendered networks within rural neighborhoods were essential for the survival of small family farms; families outside neighborhood networks had the most trouble staying in farming. Exclusion, Neth posits, was the flip side of cooperation, and “length of residence, economic or tenure status, ethnicity, religion, race often created barriers that farm people did not attempt to cross” (p. 71). Her balanced handling of these variables suggests, however, that barriers could be overcome and did not always preclude formation of diverse coalitions of rural people.

Neth joins several scholars in sharply criticizing United States Department of Agriculture policies and agricultural and home economics extension programs that “placed family and community
needs into a separate ‘women’s sphere,’ and then devalued them by subordinating social and family concerns to economic production—the ‘business’ of farming” (p. 5). Professionals concerned with social and economic problems of rural families lacked status in government agencies and academic institutions that placed higher value on the scientific and commercial aspects of agriculture. Insecure themselves, they did little to counter the dominant agribusiness orientation of policymakers and often joined in denigrating farmers who did not adopt progressive methods as “backward” and farm women who labored both on the farm and in the home as “drudges.”

Neth argues that women had the most to lose in the eventual triumph of agribusiness in the post–World War II period. Changes in marketing and agricultural production, she explains, eliminated women’s economic base on family farms and “they became more like their urban counterparts, contributing wages and unpaid household labor to the family economy” (p. 241-42). By terminating her study in 1940, Neth illuminates the persistence of traditional survival strategies in the midst of change but leaves the reader longing for similarly deft analysis of the crucial war years. Nonetheless, this is an ambitious and important study that provides a valuable analytical framework and raises countless questions for more detailed examinations of twentieth-century rural change in individual midwestern states.

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Philip A. Hart served three terms as United States senator from Michigan from 1958 to 1976. A liberal Democrat, he served during the most important period of legislative social reform after World War II, a period that also was one of social and political upheaval. Hart was, in addition, one of the most influential legislators, earning the respect and then admiration of both constituents and colleagues for his intellect, humility, compassion, quiet congeniality, and formidable tenacity. Senator Edward Kennedy said, “he was like a brother to me.” Before his death from cancer during his last year in office, his colleagues voted to name the new Senate office building for him.

Hart was a graduate of Georgetown University and the University of Michigan Law School and a World War II veteran (he was wounded by shrapnel on Utah beach). He fell in love with and married Janey Briggs (daughter of the owner of the Detroit Lions foot-