GENDER, WORK, POLITICS:
Southern Alberta Farm Women, 1905-1929

by

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Abstract

The farm women of Canada's prairies have been remarkable in their absence from much of the historical record to date, and the critical tool of gender analysis has rarely been applied in the work which has been done. Utilizing women's diaries, the women's pages of farm newspapers, and the records of the United Farm Women of Alberta, this thesis provides a preliminary analysis of the construction and meaning of gender in the lives of Southern Alberta's farm women.

The white, English-speaking women who arrived in Alberta by the thousands in the first three decades of this century came from the United States, central and eastern Canada, and England. They transplanted to the region a construction of "woman's" gender which was in many ways very like that of the places they had left behind: respectable, white, English-speaking women were concerned with domesticity, and maintained close connections of friendship and aid with female relatives and neighbours. They were to be patient with the slow process of homesteading, and quietly persevere in the face of tragedies and setbacks.

This notion of "womanhood" was challenged and modified by the experiences of work shared by many farm women. The "usual" women's work of childrearing, housekeeping, cooking and cleaning remained largely unchanged, although the completion and management of these tasks required even more ingenuity and patience. What was different was the amount and kind of productive outside work performed by many of these women, from milking cows to the back-breaking labour of harvesting. Accommodating these new activities into a coherent gender construction was easy for some women, and less so for others. At the individual level this work was generally absorbed into a woman's construction of gender. At the broader social level of the farm journals, however, few women spoke of the outside labour they performed, and concentrated on articulating their strategies for overcoming the new challenges to the

usual tasks. A gender construction which accommodated outdoor work might be coherent at an individual level, but it was much less comprehensible and acceptable to broader societal norms.

When the official political voice of the United Farm Women of Alberta began articulating a broader construction of "womanhood," the flexibility and coherence of their construction met the rigidity of legal and political discourses which retained the more limited view of a woman's place. Where farm women's activities coincided with traditional gender roles, in areas such as health care, for example, they were generally very successful. Where they clashed, particularly during the struggle for married women's property rights, the women's political goals were not fully realized.

While the individual constructions of gender on the farm and the construction the U.F.W.A. tried to articulate at the political level were coherent, there was a fundamental gap in the articulation and reception. Women on the farm knew they worked inside and out, and knew the value of their contributions to the farm. Within the forum of the farm newspapers, however, socially accepted gender roles dictated that women's outside work take a lower profile. When it came time to advance their political aims, the more traditional roles firmly entrenched in the social, political and legal discourses of the day eventually prevailed.

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Table of Contents

Abstract ii

Table of Contents v

Acknowledgments vi

Dedication vii

Introduction 1

Chapter One 16

Chapter Two 43

Chapter Three 63

Conclusion 84

Bibliography 88

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For my parents

Introduction

On the first of January, 1915, Charlie Bowlus wrote in his diary "'Count your Blessings' - I have one of the best and most faithful wives at Home Scribner Neb. and 5 Daughters - a credit to any man."[1] His wife Harriet had not yet joined him in Alberta, but Charlie had arrived in 1914, one of the many white homesteaders who would swell Alberta's population from 73,000 in 1901 to over 730,000 people thirty years later. The federal government's aggressive advertising campaign throughout these years was designed to convince large numbers of immigrants to come farm Canada's prairies, and it worked very well: by 1914 over 70% of Alberta's population was considered "rural", and that proportion was still over 60% in 1931.[2] Certain groups of immigrants were preferred, of course, like the British, Americans and eastern Canadians, because they were white, spoke English, and the government assumed that they would make the best farmers. By 1911 these three groups made up over half of Alberta's population,[3] and by the mid-1920s almost half of the farms in Southern Alberta were owned by American-born immigrants.[4]

Although the homestead regulations actively discriminated against women, the number of women in Alberta was increasing steadily by the time Harriet Bowlus and her youngest daughter Ruth arrived from Nebraska in 1916, from 32,000 in 1901 to more than 331,000 in 1931.[5] Single or married men could acquire 160 acres for $10.00 and minimum residency and land improvement requirements. Women could take advantage of this policy only if they were widows, divorced or separated, and could prove that

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1 Bowlus, 1 January 1915. Glenbow Archives, M 5789, Box 1, File 1.

2 The designation "rural" applied to people who lived in villages and hamlets as well as those who lived on farms.

3 R. Douglas Francis "'Rural Ontario West': Ontarians in Alberta." In *Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity*, Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, eds. (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985), p. 129.

4 Howard Palmer, "Patterns of Immigration and Ethnic Settlement in Alberta: 1880-1920." In *Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity*, Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, eds. (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985), pp. 10-12.

5 Canada, *Census*, 1901 and 1931.

they were the head of a household with dependents under the age of 21. Yet many women did come to Alberta in the first decades of this century, alone or with parents, husbands and families. They came to a new place and new homes; some arrived with farming experience, but many came to an entirely new way of life.

This thesis discusses the construction of gender and its meaning by and for the farm women of southern Alberta, the impact of gender on the division and valuing of farm work, and how this construction was articulated at the "public" political level. "Gender" is taken to mean here the socially constructed meanings attributed to biological sex, the knowledge that creates sets of characteristics labelled "feminine" and "masculine" and then applies those characteristics to women and men. These "meanings vary across cultures, social groups, and time", and so there are a myriad of time- and place-specific constructions of gender.[6] Gender is fundamental to the social organization of the sexes, because the sets of characteristics labelled "feminine" and "masculine" are integral to what are considered "appropriate" and "inappropriate" attitudes and behaviours. The construction of gender is an ongoing process not just between the sexes but also among the members of each sex; it is negotiated at the most personal level in a woman's life, as well as in the broader public discourses women participate in, like sexuality, work and politics. "Discourse" is used here to mean a way of constituting meaning, a system within which knowledge is constituted. All forms of language, material culture, and social institutions make up and are made up by discourse: not "language as separate from the real world" but "organized sets of signifying practices" which are "themselves shaped by pre-existing social relations (mainly of gender, race, and class)."[7]

In short, I am analyzing the construction and meaning of gender among Alberta's farm women, and the role it played in their lives, work, and politics. While their

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6 Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 2.

7 Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), pp. 9-10.

construction and understanding of gender was considerably more flexible than the contemporary notion of "womanhood," and broad enough to encompass a wide range of experiences and activities, it was at the same time coherent enough to accommodate these experiences and activities and still be consistent and comprehensible. This construction also maintained many of the same clear boundaries; it did not, for example, include women who strayed too far from a prevailing notion of womanhood, the "deviants" and undesirables affected by contemporary discourses such as eugenics, or First Nations women.[8]

Much of Canadian rural history has treated women as peripheral at best, generally including brief references to their "isolation," the "drudgery" of their lives or their "civilizing" role in new communities, in an attempt to add them on to the historiography of pioneer and settlement life.[9] Of the historical writing which has been concerned solely with farm women in Canada, their lives, work, and activities, much of it has been descriptive and narrative, rather than analytical.[10]

Sara Sundberg has criticized the one-dimensional image of women as "helpmates" in her article "Farm Women on the Canadian Prairie Frontier: The Helpmate Image." She argued that both women's "substantial contributions to the business of farming," in roles as diverse as homemaker, manufacturer, field hand, and doctor, as well as the "diversity of farm women's experiences" are lost "when they are assigned the blanket role of

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8 I am indebted to Ruth McDonald for her insights here.

9 Examples of Canadian monographs of this type include Paul Voisey's *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); Lyle Dick's *Farmers 'Making Good': The Development of Abernethy District, Saskatchewan, 1880-1920*, (Ottawa: Environment Canada, Canadian Parks Service, 1989); and Donald Wetherell and Irene Kmet's *Useful Pleasures: The Shaping of Leisure in Alberta, 1896-1945*, (Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism/Canadian Plains Research Center, 1990).

10 These necessary first steps are represented in the Canadian writing by Susan Jackel's introductions to Georgina Binnie-Clark's *Wheat & Woman* , (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) and *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: British Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), and Eliane Silverman's *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier 1880-1930*, (Montreal: Eden Press, 1984).

helpmate."[11] Not all women were wives and mothers, for example, or voiceless in the decision-making process. She concluded that the "image of the stoic, hardworking helpmate not only homogenizes prairie women's experiences, it leaves some experiences out altogether."

Veronica Strong-Boag's article "Pulling in Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairie" took an uncritical approach to the "drudgery" of prairie women's lives but argued that women derived a certain power from their shared experience of hard work. Strong-Boag suggested that this shared experience was channelled into the grassroots, pragmatic feminism of the Canadian prairies in the two decades following suffrage. She asserted that prairie women knew that the "crux" of their "oppression lay in their heavy responsibility for work in the private sphere."[12] By assuming, however, that prairie women universally felt oppressed by their labour, this argument robs them of any agency and obscures an opportunity to explore other reasons for their feminism.

It has only been some of the most recent work on farm women that has begun to examine the relationship between family roles, economics and gender, as well as how beliefs and work roles did or did not change over time. Mary Kinnear's article "'Do you want your daughter to marry a farmer?': Women's Work on the Farm, 1922" examined the results of a 1922 survey conducted by the United Farm Women of Manitoba, and the responses to an essay competition run in the same year by *The Grain Grower's Guide*, a major prairie newspaper of the day. The survey confirmed all of the U.F.W.M.'s worst fears by showing that farm women were "expected to do large amounts of manual labour ... habitually hauled water from an outside well, and ... relative isolation was part of the

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11 Sara Brooks Sundberg, "Farm Women on the Canadian Prairie Frontier: The Helpmate Image." In *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, eds. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1986), p. 104.

12 Veronica Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairie" *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Fall 1986), p. 47.

job."[13] This bleak picture is offset, however, by the responses to *The Guide*'s essay contest. The question was "If you had a daughter of marriageable age, would you, in the light of your experience as a farm woman, want her to marry a farmer and make her future life on the farm? If so, why? If not, why not?" Of 440 entries, 360 said yes, generally stressing the "physical and moral superiority of the country" and the partnership farm women enjoyed with their husbands. The 80 negative responses emphasized "overwork, monotony, loneliness, and financial pressure."[14]

By looking at these bodies of information together, Kinnear provided a detailed and concrete analysis of the nature of the farm women's lives and work, and balanced it with a discussion of how women perceived their own situation. While the survey results revealed enormous amounts of labour and significant material constraints, the essays indicated that few farm women, at least in Manitoba, saw themselves as mere "drudges" or "helpmates". Kinnear's article also goes some way towards explaining the limited analytical framework of much of the earlier writing. If taken alone, the results of the survey would lead one to conclude that a woman's life on the farm was one of unending toil. Combining these results with the essays sent to the Guide, however, provided an opportunity of comparing the physical constraints of farm women's lives and their opinions of those constraints to produce a more well-rounded picture.

A significant contribution to the historiography of Alberta farm women in particular and Canadian rural women more generally has been made by Catherine Cavanaugh's work on the Alberta campaign for dower rights. Tracing the struggle for property rights through various dower laws from the 1910s to mid-1920s, she concluded that the ultimate failure of the Alberta women's movement to gain significant improvements to the property laws was due to the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures of the land policies. Her conclusions will be discussed more thoroughly in

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13 Mary Kinnear, "'Do you want your daughter to marry a farmer?': Women's Work on the Farm, 1922" In *Canadian Papers in Rural History, Volume VI*, Edited by Donald H. Akenson. (Gananoque, Ontario: Langdale Press, 1988), p. 147.

14 Ibid., p. 148.

Chapter 3, below, but what should be noted here is the way her findings provided for the first time a close look at what was a significant and ongoing struggle for Alberta's farm women in the "public" and "male" sphere, and thus a significant challenge to the traditional notion that Canadian farm women were "rewarded" for their labours.[15]

One of the best examples of a thorough analysis of the relationship between economics and gender roles is Marjorie Griffin Cohen's *Women's Work, Markets, and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*. In it she argued that continuing ignorance of the significance of the rural household economy leads to a severely skewed view of economic development, because "the patriarchal relations of production within the family economy" were the "most prevalent type of productive relations" in Canada's early staple-exporting economy.[16] Any discussion of economic development must therefore "focus on the gendered nature of the productive process and the class configuration of the basic productive unit of the family. An understanding of the labour of women, both in the household and in waged labour, is critical for a more complete view of the nature of capitalist development."[17] The significance of Cohen's work is her insistence that women's work cease to be considered as something separate from "the real work" of a pre-capitalist or capitalist economy, and instead be analyzed as an integral part of economic development.

American western women's history to date has been a larger and considerably more developed field in its own right, particularly in terms of critical and theoretical analysis. As early as 1975 Beverly J. Stoeltje critiqued the stereotypical image of frontier women as "helpmates."[18] In 1980 Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller's groundbreaking

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15 Catherine Cavanaugh. "The Women's Movement in Alberta as seen through the campaign for Dower Rights" (University of Alberta, M.A. Thesis, 1986) and "The Limitations of the Pioneering Partnership: The Alberta Campaign for Homestead Dower, 1909-25." *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXIV, 2, 1993, p. 199.

16 Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets, and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 154.

17 Ibid., p. 158.

18 Beverly Stoeltje, "'A Helpmate for Man Indeed': The Image of the Frontier Woman." *Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 88, No. 347 (Jan-March 1975), pp. 25-41.

article "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West" established a critical framework for the next decade of American western women's historians. They noted that "by virtually excluding women from western studies on the one hand, and emphasizing their rareness on the other, the impression is left that women played insignificant roles in settling the American West. ... [T]here has been a strong tendency to replace solid research on women's roles with lofty rhetoric distorting western women beyond recognition."[19] They argued for a multicultural and comparative approach, one that would draw on the wide range of available historical materials, utilize gender as an analytical tool, and reexamine, among other things, women's work and the issue of suffrage.[20]

One year later John Mack Faragher echoed their call, and added that "embedding the study of the sexes in the study of economics, reproductive strategies, and the social structures of power and authority [will] provide us with the opportunity to be comparative as well."[21] In 1987 Susan Armitage argued that reevaluating the history of western women would provide "a new perspective" from which to rethink and reconceptualize all of western history.[22]

Early American writing on western women took much the same path as the later Canadian material did, beginning with compensatory efforts to add women in to the historiography.[23] Some of the first steps towards a more critical analysis were made by

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19 Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West." *Pacific Historical Review*. Vol. 49, 1980, p. 178.

20 Ibid., pp. 212-213.

21 John Mack Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 5 (Winter 1981), p. 557.

22 Susan Armitage, "Through Women's Eyes: A New View of the West." In *The Women's West*, Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds. (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 17.

23 See, for example, Joanna L. Stratton's 1981 book *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier.* It represented a collection of approximately 800 written memoirs of women's experiences from the 1850s to 1890s. Its key weakness was that when Stratton intruded into the narrative, it was clear that she was working within the traditional images of frontier women, particularly emphasizing "the drudgery and monotony which filled their lives" and the "fortitude and resilience which enabled them to withstand the privations and overcome the hardships." Joanna L. Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), p. 75.

Julie Roy Jeffrey's 1979 work *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1880*, and Glenda Riley's 1981 book *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience*. Jeffrey was one of the first to critically assess women's experiences in terms of the impact on gender relations of the overland trail and the different frontiers women encountered, as well as provide an interesting analysis of the extent to which many women retained traditional notions about their place in society.[24] Riley focussed on white women in Iowa between 1830 and 1870 to penetrate "the myths and legends" surrounding them,[25] and noted that "for every one myth" - like isolation or drudgery - "there are several levels of reality." Women's reactions to the frontier "were as varied as the women themselves", and she concluded that the question "where does myth and reality begin?" must continually be asked if we are to "fully understand the lives, concerns, and emotions of frontierswomen...."[26]

In 1983 Marilyn Ferris Motz published *True Sisterhood: Michigan Women and Their Kin 1820-1920*, which situated rural and urban women within their female kin networks to counter the historical tendency of focussing primarily on women as wives and mothers. She argued that the roles of daughter and sister coincided with those of wife and mother throughout a woman's life; as valuable lifelong sources of support, therefore, the significance of these roles must not be discounted after a woman's marriage.[27]

Perhaps the most extensive and ongoing debate in the historiography of rural women, on both sides of the border, has been the effect of women's work on gender roles. Common in much of the writing on the subject has been the argument that women's work on the farm during the homesteading period gave farm women increased power in the

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24 Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), p. xiii.

25 Glenda Riley, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains*. Lawrence, (University Press of Kansas, 1988), p. 171.

26 Ibid., p. 181

27 Marilyn Ferris Motz, *True Sisterhood: Michigan Women and Their Kin 1820-1920*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), pp. 130-131.

family structure, and led to a fundamental shift of gender roles. Anthropologist Seena B. Kohl, for example, has argued that surviving in the frontier environment "necessitated the learning of new skills and the putting aside, or holding in abeyance, the traditional concepts of feminine behavior." Women were not released from their "primary tasks" of household maintenance and caring for children, but "the frontier did permit greater variation from accepted behavior and ideology - a tendency which has continued into the contemporary period."[28]

Many writers have also concluded that it was a recognition of women's work and their contribution to the farm that led to their early provincial enfranchisement - drawing a direct and highly problematic line between doing something and being recognized and rewarded for having done it. Leslie Robinson has stressed that the woman on the farm "was an equal partner, farm worker as well as housewife," because her work was "particularly important" during "the first years of the homestead...."[29] She noted that farm women "were not only wives, mothers and cultural and moral leaders of pioneer communities, but also farmers conversant with the business of agriculture," and that their role in the agrarian movement "rested upon their work in the family farm enterprise in partnership with their husbands."[30] She also argued that the "ideas of equality and partnership which existed in the pioneer rural West" were reinforced by the widely-read farm journals, which emphasized "women's paramount role in agrarian society...."[31]

As late as 1987, Katherine Harris contended that not only were gender-role distinctions "muted" in Colorado's homesteading period, but that this muting affected "the division of labour between males and females in families." She argued that "necessity frequently required men and women to assume each other's tasks," which led "to the

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28 Seena B. Kohl, "The Making of A Community: The Role of Women in an Agricultural Setting." In *Kin and Communities: Families in America*, Allan J. Lichtman and Joan R. Challinor, eds. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979) p. 178-179.

29 Leslie M. Robinson, "Agrarian Reformers: Women and the Farm Movement." (University of Calgary, M.A. Thesis, 1979) p. 10.

30 Ibid., p. 15.

31 Ibid., p. 32.

development of unfamiliar skills, especially among women. Children grew up with fewer constraints on their behavior and work patterns than their parents had known. A few even acquired a conscious recognition of equality within the family circle."[32]

Assertions like these are problematic because they are difficult to prove. Why would outside work develop skills less familiar to women than housework would for men, for example? Simply because necessity periodically required men and women to do things gender-marked as "other" does not automatically mean that children would thus observe a more egalitarian environment. Was this possible expansion of gender roles really a redefinition, or merely seen as a temporary aberration, tolerable because it was "necessary"? Hard work may have been some kind of leveller on pioneer homesteads, in that everyone had their share of it to do, but it cannot be taken as a given that working hard in and around the farm home translated into increased power or redefined gender roles. A shared responsibility does not automatically mean that the original, separate roles of either party are fundamentally altered.

Harris went on to argue that because labour was in "such demand" for most homesteading families the "gender of the laborer was relatively unimportant", but then conceded that "women's work did not have the same prestige as men's.... Moreover, the record shows many more girls and women transcending gender-defined work roles than boys and men."[33] She insisted that the "contribution of women and children to the family economy of the homestead was acknowledged in the degree to which they could direct the allocation of resources," and that women had

> considerable status within the family. Men and women generally had different roles to play, but the mutuality between the sexes enforced by the needs of homesteading expanded women's power to negotiate and win. Inevitably, the strength of women's position affected the power dynamics of the whole family...

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32 Katherine Harris, "Homesteading in Northeastern Colorado, 1873-1920: Sex Roles and Women's Experience." In *The Women's West,* Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 169.

33 Ibid., p. 171.

> This does not mean, of course, that equality actually existed in homesteading families. But the fact that it occurred even as an ideal is significant.[34]

This last statement is critical, and undermined much of the force of her argument because even if "equality" did exist as an ideal, the fact that it did not exist in practice creates a tension that Harris did not explore. She assumed that women's hard work was explicitly recognized and consciously rewarded in areas such as decision-making and the allocation of resources, and yet provided little evidence for this assertion.

Elizabeth Jameson's 1987 article "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West" examined women's work on the homestead in terms of the dominant ideology of the day, to assess the extent to which the one affected the other. She argued that "neither the civilizer nor the helpmate was an actor who helped to shape her own history, and thus neither image explains how beliefs and work roles changed."[35] Although careful to note that the "existence of separate work roles does not tell us how women perceived or valued their labour," she contended that "family survival depended on flexibility and interdependence in work roles", and one "consequence may have been that men and women understood the labour involved in each other's work and respected one another for it."[36]

Other writers have been even more cautious, and considerably more critical about assumptions that women's work was explicitly recognized and rewarded. Julie Jeffrey has argued, for example, that although some of the activities pioneer women were engaged in did defy "a number of nineteenth-century stereotypes about women ... this did not necessarily mean that pioneer women abandoned the larger conception of women's nature or that they ceased to value female culture. Nor did it mean that they attempted to work out a new definition of woman's sphere." Although one might expect "that women's

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34 Ibid., pp. 172-174.

35 Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West." In *The Women's West,* Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 158.

36 Ibid., p. 150 - 151.

economic importance to the family enterprise might result in a reordering of family relations and the reallocation of power within the family," Jeffrey argued that "what evidence there is suggests that ... husbands still made major decisions.... They consulted their wives, and it may be that female power was really the right of consultation."[37] The difficulty with this conclusion is that very few writers have attempted an extensive analysis of how decisions were actually made by and within farm families, and the power relations around which the decision-making process revolved.

Echoing Jeffrey, Cohen has also noted that the "apparently strict nature of the division of labour by gender in an economic setting which might have encouraged some deviation from more traditional forms is somewhat surprising; one would have expected that more revolutionary forms in the division of labour might have emerged." Ultimately, she concluded, "the patriarchal structure of the households and the economic imperatives of a country on the periphery of capitalist development ensured that the division of labour be maintained...."[38] Unlike Ontario, Cohen's focal point, the actual division of labour in Alberta was not particularly rigid, but the division of responsibility was.

Perhaps the most important work for this current study is Nancy Grey Osterud's 1991 book *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York*. Less focussed on a purely economic analysis than Cohen's, it provides a thorough gender analysis of women's lives, work, and relationships situated within an economic and community context. The greatest strength of the book is that Osterud used diaries and letters from women and men in multi-generational kin networks and a limited geographical area, as a basis for exploring rural gender relations. She examined the effect of kinship, work relations and patterns of sociability to argue that "women nurtured gender equality and integration under conditions of male dominance," resisting "the ideology of separate spheres."[39]

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37 Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, pp. 62-63.

38 Cohen, *Women's Work*, p. 68.

39 Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 278.

Osterud concluded that the "gender system was riddled with contradictions" because women obviously "participated in income-producing work and performed much of the subsistence production that made capital accumulation possible," but yet they occupied a very different position within civil society and the capitalist economy than men.[40] She has attributed greater significance to the gender system than any of the writers discussed above, and insisted on its centrality to rural economic, social, and familial relations.

This thesis, then, is a contribution towards a more critical and theoretical analysis of the lives and work of rural women on Canada's prairies. The research is based around a core of eight diaries, seven memoirs, of which two have been published, and ten oral testimonies, by women who settled in the area south of Edmonton after the turn of the century.[41] The women's birthdates ranged from 1857 to 1907, and the material used here represents the years from 1903 to 1929 inclusive. This work is focussed on a remarkably homogenous sample of representatives of the dominant culture in rural Southern Alberta; the women whose diaries and memories I used were all white, English-speaking, Anglo-Canadians, -Americans and -Europeans, with some level of literacy, apparently Protestant, and apparently heterosexual. I do not deal in any way with constructions of gender among First Nations women or non-English speaking women, because of obvious language and cultural barriers, although some effort is made to portray how these groups were perceived by these women from the dominant culture.

Given the scope of this work, I was unable to address such factors as the prescriptive literature of the day, or the influence of discursive phenomena such as the

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40 Ibid., pp. 226-227.

41 The oral testimonies come from the oral history project conducted by Eliane Silverman in the mid-1970s. Her goal was to find as many women as she could who had come to Alberta before 1930, and, without any formal questionnaire, get them to talk about their lives. I relied on the diaries and memoirs as much as possible, because the interviews were conducted very informally, and the experiences which were recorded often reflected memories mediated through the discourse of gender at the time of the interview, and less the construction of gender in the past.

Cult of True Womanhood in nineteenth-century America. The similarities can certainly be demonstrated: Welter argues that the four characteristics of "true women" were piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, and these are evident in the gender construction of Alberta farm women.[42] Direct connections, however, would have been difficult to prove and often purely speculative. Another factor I was not able to deal with is the role and impact of religion in these women's lives, quite simply because of the lack of information: in some instances I read months and years of a diary without ever determining a woman's denomination. Only occasionally could I even determine how often a woman or her family attended church, which, given the often long distances to places of worship, might not have been very frequent. While it was easier to determine a woman's involvement in various church-related organizations, this was an aspect of their organizational life outside the range of this work.

Chapter One discusses the gender construction of white, English-speaking farm women in southern Alberta, how it was understood and shaped by and for individual women, alone and through their relationships with each other, and what meaning it had in their lives. The chapter examines the common experiences and patterns in these women's lives, and reveals a gender construction remarkably similar to what one might expect from any group of respectable white married women at the time. They were concerned with their homes and families; domesticity was prized and rewarded; they retained the responsibility of maintaining family connections through letters; and they sustained the social geography of the community by actively seeking the company of other women. There were clear standards of acceptable behaviour and dress for women, and these standards were policed by female neighbours by offering or withdrawing aid, or actively voicing their disapproval of transgressors.

Chapter Two analyzes the impact of farm women's experiences and opinions of work on this construction of gender. The chapter combines material from the diaries and

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42 Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), p. 152.

memoirs to discuss the connections between work and gender on the farm, and then turns to the representations of farm women's work in the women's pages of the farm journals. Gender played the crucial role in the division of labour, and the general invisibility of women's work within a capitalist system contributed to its undervaluing. While farm women did articulate very clearly a sense of the value of their own labour and contributions to the farm, they tended to stress their inside work and rarely mentioned their outside work at all. This certainly suggests a significant degree of conformity to publicly appropriate gender roles, yet at the same time the belief held by many women that they were equal partners with their husbands also clearly influenced the expansion of their construction of gender.

Chapter Three looks at the ways in which Alberta's farm women articulated this expanded, flexible gender construction through the United Farm Women, at the level of "public," political discourse. The organization's range of activities and goals, from improved health services to struggling to equalize women's and men's relationships to the land, reflect the flexibility and breadth of their construction of gender. A woman who never worked outside and believed that she had no place outside her home could support the organization's more traditional activities, and a woman who believed that her inside and outside work entitled her to a fair share of the rewards could support resolutions calling for improved property laws. Combining material from the diaries and memoirs with newspaper reports and U.F.W.A. records, this chapter argues that while the organization did attempt to articulate a more flexible gender construction, their more progressive political aims were not able to displace the traditional, public, discursive representation of women.

Chapter 1

The women who settled in Alberta before 1929 came from the United States, England, and other parts of Canada. Some had previous farming experience, but many of them were confronting new and often very different living conditions from those they had left behind. These women brought with them conceptions of femininity, of what it meant to be a woman, that often could seem to be at odds with life on a farm. A respectable married woman was supposed to be preoccupied solely with her family and home, moral guide of "the family" but subordinate to her husband in every other way. She was to be clean, neat, modestly dressed, and an efficient household manager. Since a woman's family was presumed to be more important to her than her own "self," she was also responsible for maintaining familial ties and her community's social landscape. These boundaries of appropriate femininity were usually collectively and strictly enforced.[1]

Maintaining such high standards for womanhood might have seemed to be a daunting task in the overwhelmingly masculine environment of homesteading. The diaries, memoirs and interviews discussed below suggest, however, that many of these traditional concerns and attitudes remained intact in the new environment. Farm women were still expected to be clean, neat, efficient household managers, and - in spite of the often significant distances - they continued to retain the responsibility for maintaining familial and social ties through their letters, visits, and networks of assistance. A farm woman was expected to face each new challenge without complaining and be able to take her man's place, but only when he was incapacitated or absent. Although gender roles and the boundaries of acceptable femininity are constructed and reinforced at all levels of society, their immediate and individual meanings are negotiated at the most personal and

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1 For further discussion of these elements see, for example, Mariana Valverde's *The Age of Light, Soap and Water*, especially the Introduction and Chapter 5; her article "'When the Mother of the Race is Free': Race, Reproduction, and Sexuality in First-Wave Feminism," in *Gender Conflicts*, edited by Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Barbara Welter's classic article on the Cult of True Womanhood; and Veronica Strong-Boag's *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939*, (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988).

private levels of a woman's life. It was at this level that the gender construction of Alberta's farm women so resembled the contemporary norm.

Sexuality, pregnancy and childbirth can be the most significant elements in a woman's personal experience and construction of gender, but these topics rarely appear in the diaries and written memoirs. Sexuality is completely absent, and few of the diary-writers became pregnant or gave birth in the course of their surviving written record. One of the exceptions was Kathleen Strange, who described all three of her pregnancies. She later wrote that until she became pregnant in 1921 she "had never thought very much about babies." She had no relatives with young children, and her three stepsons were already well beyond the toddler stage, so she "hardly knew one end of a baby from another. I was really quite afraid of them."[2] She knew most of the "facts of life" long before she was married, but "knew little or nothing about the physical phenomena of human pregnancy and birth." Having no "intimate" friends to rely on for "advice or sympathy," she "began to feel very bewildered, and sometimes terribly frightened, at the prospect of what was going to happen to me."[3] Ola Bowlus Rice's last two children were born in 1921 and 1925, during the time period covered by the family diary. Her pregnancies were not noted, just the actual births. Both were home births, generally assisted only by her husband, and she and the baby were generally recorded simply as "doing well."[4]

The only time the subject of birth control came up was in the oral testimonies when the interviewer had asked specifically about it. For some women even the crudest ways of limiting the number of children were apparently unknown, as were many basic facts about pregnancy and birth. Mrs. Fredericks[5] did not recall any forms of birth

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2 Kathleen Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes: The Story of a Modern Pioneer*, (New York: Dodge Publishing Company, 1937), p. 163.

3 Ibid., p. 164.

4 Bowlus, 10 June 1921 and 3 May 1925. Glenbow Archives M5789, Box 1, files 4 and 5.

5 I have been unable to find a reference anywhere to this woman's first name, so she will appear only as "Mrs. Fredericks" throughout. I have not regularized the spelling or grammar of any of the excerpts from the diaries or interviews.

control whatsoever, and said "We didn't tamper with nothing...."[6] Mary Edey later recalled that she knew "absolutely nothing" about pregnancy and childbirth when she became pregnant with her first child. As she remembered it, "in those days sex was taboo. Nobody mentioned it."[7] She saw a doctor only once during her first pregnancy, and both of her sons were born at home sometime between her marriage in 1914 and the mid- 1920s.[8]

Although there was a wide range of childbirth experiences, from hospitals to maternity homes to home births, the different time periods do not seem to have been a factor and the women who mentioned the birth of their children at all generally seem to have retained a sense of control over the decision-making process. Mrs. Fredericks had her first child in 1910 at the Calgary General Hospital, but disliked the experience so much that two of her last three children were born at home and the other was born in a private nursing home.[9] When Gladys Bodington got pregnant with her first son in 1913, her mother wanted her to come home for the birth but her "lady Dr. poo-pooed it and said it was absurd." She went into a hospital in a neighbouring town, but "was fed up waiting" and eventually moved into a maternity home closer to home.[10] Kathleen Strange's first baby miscarried, but she gave birth to a girl in a Calgary hospital in 1924 and her second child was born at the new hospital in Stettler.[11] Yet even into the mid-1920s Ola Bowlus Rice and Mary Edey gave birth to their children at home. This likely reflects the uneven availability of medical facilities, as well as a conscious decision to have their children in their own homes. Not one writer or speaker ever mentioned getting their husband's opinion, and only Rice's husband seems to have been involved. This near-total exclusion

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6 Mrs. Fredericks, Public Archives of Alberta (PAA) Eliane Silverman fonds 81.279 #50. p. 8.
7 Mary Edey, PAA Eliane Silverman fonds 81.279 #56. p. 19.
8 Ibid., pp. 19 and 7.
9 Mrs. Fredericks, pp. 6-8.
10 Gladys Bodington, Glenbow Archives M106.
11 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, p. 234.

of men from the process suggests that these women retained a great deal of control over what was considered a strictly female event.

Because all but one of the diary-writers were already married, it is very difficult to get a sense of a single woman's impressions of marriage and how this might have contributed to her perception of gender roles. Two of the five Bowlus daughters, Ruth and Hattie, never married, but since they have left no personal records it is impossible to determine why. Only Sophie Puckett remained single throughout the course of her diary, although she was engaged by the end of it. Interestingly enough, she was decidedly ambivalent towards the idea of marriage even after her future husband had proposed. She wanted very much to continue her education and have a teaching career, and this ambivalence suggests that she viewed marriage and a career as quite incompatible.

In 1907, for example, she wrote "I really wonder if I'll ever run across any one who will think of me before all others; and that I'll have a mutual liking for? I sometimes think I won't - I'm too much of a crank to ever love or be loved." She concluded that entry, however, with the remark "(I never have calculated on being an old maid - [**unless educated**!!!]"[12] She did want to marry at some point, but was determined to make her own choices and not be influenced by others' opinions. When a friend speculated on Sophie's relationship with a young man she spent some time with, she declared to her diary "Jim's not going to walk into any such trap as that - nor am I - If we had any such notion tho', 'twould be as well for her to spare her breath, for I intend to marry whom I please."[13] As it happened, Jim proposed to her in November 1907, but she did not accept until the end of January 1908. Her comments are particularly interesting because she was the youngest of the diary writers and the only unmarried one, as well as the only one to strongly articulate a desire for education and a teaching career.

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12 Sophie Puckett, 16 August 1907, Glenbow Archives M843, Box 1, File 2. Emphasis and parentheses in the original. In the diary these last two words were underlined three times each, as opposed to only once for the other words, so I have added the extra emphasis as best I could. In most of the diaries any form of added emphasis was rare, and usually only extended to underlining the words once. These instances will be noted when I have used such sections.

13 Ibid., 18 June 1907.

With these more intimate experiences so difficult to access, then, other common elements of farm women's lives must be used to determine what sort of gender roles were created or recreated in Southern Alberta. Many women mentioned having some time for reading, music, and fancy sewing, and obviously many had the time to keep a regular diary - which in itself can be a significant allocation of time. Leisure pursuits such as these were ways to relax and learn, as well as engage in some activity that was "creative and expressive rather then merely functional."[14] The significance of these activities, and the high regard they were held in, is clear. For example, shortly after her 24th birthday in 1920 Ruth Bowlus spent $100 of her own money to buy herself a 97-year old cello, nicknamed "Constance."[15] The family diary recorded her many trips to Calgary for lessons over the next year and a half,[16] and as late as 1926 she still practiced occasionally.[17] Sometimes the weather would cooperate to the extent that a necessary task could become pleasurable, as when Helen Millar recorded in her diary two February days when she could take her sewing out on to the verandah, or when a game or two of chess could be played outdoors.[18]

Besides the personal enjoyment women got from leisure activities, such pastimes served other purposes. In early 1904, having recently arrived on her family's homestead, Sophie Puckett recorded reading the Bible, a couple of novels, and "trying to sing my restlessness away."[19] Sarah Roberts wrote that most of her family's evenings were "put in reading, writing, or studying. Aunt Fannie subscribed for us to 'The Saturday Evening Post' and 'The Ladies Home Journal,' and we read these eagerly. Roy has been good about sending us reading matter, and we have subscribed to two magazines ourselves." Besides the occasional game of cards or chess, they also sang "frequently," and "so the

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14 Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, p. 191
15 Bowlus, 27 February 1920.
16 See, for example, Ibid., 19 March 1920, 8 April 1920, 24 March 1921, 7 April 1921, 19 May 1921.
17 Ibid., 3 September 1926.
18 Helen Millar, 27-28 February and 13-14 March 1923, Glenbow Archives M849.
19 Sophie Puckett, 17-18 and 25 January, 2 and 9-10 February 1904.

evenings have passed, reading, studying, singing, playing games, and indulging in utter nonsense - and perhaps it is the nonsense that has helped to keep us sane."[20]

There is a clear connection between these leisure activities and a woman's construction of gender, because of their similarity to acceptable womanly pursuits. Reading, fancy sewing, music and singing were all admired accomplishments for a woman and an acceptable way for a woman to spend her free time. There is also an obvious connection between the amount of time a woman had for such leisure pursuits and the amount of work she had to do: Eva Cumming recalled having plenty of time for the embroidery work she loved,[21] and Helen Gillespie always had time to read,[22] for example, but these were two of the few women who stated explicitly that they did little or no outside work.

Reading magazines and farm journals was also an important means of staying in touch with the rest of the world, one of the few means other than private correspondence before the radio and telephone became more common in farm households. Mary Crocker Wyndham recorded the arrival of their first copy of *The Farm and Ranch Review*, a subscription to the Ladies Home Journal which her parents gave her for her 38th birthday, and described a magazine club order that she and her sister-in-law shared: "Carrie is to have McClures and Cosmopolitan and we are to have Everybody's & American."[23] These various activities signified the amount of leisure a woman had, gave her something to do for her own pleasure, and helped her maintain a sense of connection to the world outside the farm.

A particularly evident characteristic of the diaries is the ongoing concern for domesticity, fully in keeping with traditional notions of femininity. The care and improvement of the farm house received a lot of attention, since by necessity and by

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20 Sarah Roberts, *Of Us and The Oxen*, (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1968), pp. 93-94.
21 Eva Cumming, PAA Eliane Silverman fonds 81.279 #54
22 Helen Gillespie, PAA Eliane Silverman fonds 81.279 #59.
23 Mary Crocker Wyndham, 29 July 1913, 29 January 1914 and 9 March 1914. Glenbow Archives microfilm AB.

choice that was where women spent the greater part of each day. Many women viewed it as their responsibility to improve the interior and exterior of the house, no matter what kind of accommodation it was. Evelyn Slater McLeod's first house in Alberta reflected the extent of her family's material resources, as it was a spacious sixteen by forty-four feet sod house with the added luxuries of a plank floor and a summer kitchen.[24] As soon as the Slater family's houses were up the women "all learned firsthand how to use a whitewash brush." As time went on "some housewives covered their walls with inexpensive cheesecloth and wallpaper." She recalled that "every family had a 'parlour' with a large rug, or all-over carpeting." Her family's parlour was particularly well-equipped, with "an ornate heater ... a leather horsehair stuffed couch with raised head, as well as a fine pump organ. The 'frosting on the cake' was our large resplendent coal oil lamp with pink roses on its china base and globe. Potted plants always bloomed on the deep window-seats and were carried to the cellar at night during the winter months."[25]

Sarah Roberts set about getting her household in order as soon as possible after the house was built on her family's homestead. Her husband built some shelves

> so that I could have a place for dishes and other things which were scattered around wherever I could find a place for them. We lived in terrible confusion for five or six weeks, and until some of these things were done I couldn't bring order out of chaos, while the dust and dirt were simply terrible. I thought at times that I would just go crazy, but I've tried to be as patient as possible, for I knew that Papa and the boys were bringing things to pass as fast as they could.
>
> The hay on the ground floor was my worst trial, for it disintegrated into a fine powder, and I can never tell how I longed for a floor. One day in December I returned from the store with a broom, for which I had no earthly use. When Papa asked why I had bought it, I replied, 'For the moral effect. I am going to hang it on the wall and look at it often, and keep hoping that some day, I'll be able to sweep my floor with it.'[26]

This quote highlights the combination of womanly domesticity, cleanliness, and patience. During a subsequent winter, when her husband was finishing the house and making

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24 Evelyn Slater McLeod, "Our Sod House" PAA 78.12 SE.
25 McLeod, "Restless Pioneers" PAA 77.39 SE.
26 Roberts, *Of Us and The Oxen*. pp. 52-53.

various improvements, she told him that she wanted a corner "in which I can express myself." She eventually got what she asked for, "as I usually did when it was at all possible."[27] Completely unquestioned, of course, was the assumption that a "cosy corner" within the home was the most, if not the only appropriate place for a woman to express her personality. Not only did Sarah personally spend almost all of her time indoors, women are so strongly identified with hearth and home that, had she requested any other personal space (in the barn, for example), her request would certainly have been viewed less favourably.

In an interesting expression of her control over the domestic space she "decreed" that there would be an invisible line dividing their one main room, which measured approximately fourteen by eighteen feet, in half:

> On the south side of the line would be our sitting room, drawing room, parlor, library and reception room, and on the north side would be the kitchen and dining room. I ruled that they must never cross the line into the south room while wearing their out-door garments, and moreover, that if they took them off they must leave them on the north side of the line.[28]

She noted that this "edict ... at first met with some opposition from Papa and the boys, who thought it violated their privileges," but they did comply. This first house was a "log" house of vertical poles and mud because Sarah had been determined never to live in a sod house, but after the family's first two harsh winters they did build a smaller and warmer "soddie."[29]

When they visited another couple in the area on New Year's Day 1909, Sarah was impressed by the other woman's interior decorating. She wrote that

> They had their house fixed up so much more cosily than it had been. Besides the improvements they had made in the house itself, Mrs. Preston had brought a number of decorations and accessories from Winnipeg, where she had gone for a visit; things that don't mean much to a man but which are dear to a woman's heart.

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27 Ibid., pp. 168-169.
28 Ibid., p. 169.
29 Ibid., pp. 48 and 145.

> These, with a canary and blooming plants, make it seem more homelike than any house I had been in since I came to Alberta.[30]

It was Mrs. Preston's effort, the small decorations and accessories, which signified homelike comfort. Men might be content with mere functionalism, but women were not.

Kathleen Strange's family started their life in Alberta with a tiny wooden shack and granaries for bedrooms. She decided to fix up the shack while waiting for the new two-storey lumber house to be built, "to make some changes and improvements that would render our living conditions there more practicable and pleasant." The shack gained a cellar when it was moved over one that had been dug, and additional shelving was added inside for the crockery and their "precious library of books." She used fabric to brighten up the interior, added a tablecloth, a few pictures, "a vase or two of flowers," and "the place began to take on a new air. Of course, it was far from being the kind of home we had dreamed of, but at least it had now acquired some of our own personality and that gave it a homelike atmosphere."[31]

It is interesting to note that, like Sarah Roberts, Strange's task also involved gaining male compliance: she had to "persuade" the men to hang their clothes on curtained pegs instead of bare nails. Although Roberts issued edicts and Strange had to persuade, in both situations the women had to get the men to adhere to domestic principles. In Roberts' case, her husband and sons thought they had a right to leave their outer garments wherever they wanted to, but complied anyway and jokingly referred to the line as the "dead line." Roberts and Strange also shared the conviction that it clearly took a woman's touch to make a house into a home.

Strange had also insisted that the kitchen in their new house be small, "since I was determined that we would not 'live in the kitchen' as so many farm people seemed to do. I did, however, plan for a large living room. My idea of a home was a place in which

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30 Ibid., p. 153.
31 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, pp. 57-58.

every room was used every day of the year." Displaying remarkable optimism for 1920, she and her husband also "planned to have the house wired for electricity and the plumbing fixtures installed, in happy anticipation of the day when we would be able to afford the luxury of power and running water."[32]

Some women also made the time for the enjoyment and aesthetic improvement of the outside of the home as well, putting energy and a good deal of optimism into creating decorative gardens. Sophie Puckett and her sisters planted flowers, and Harriet Bowlus "Planted pansy seeds north of shed."[33] Besides the aesthetic improvement to the property, Helen Millar's decision to plant "Caragana and Russian Poplar" reflected the practical acceptance that they were two of the few shrubs and trees that would grow well in Southern Alberta and thus provide a windbreak within a few years.[34]

It is clear that many women used whatever resources they could to create a more pleasant environment for themselves and their families. It mattered very much that "home" move beyond a merely functional use of space and become a comfortable and attractive place. It would not have been easy to make a "soddie" aesthetically appealing, but clearly many women tried hard to do just that. The farm wife was the one person, even in a large family, who spent the majority of her time indoors, so the energy she devoted to making it "homelike" as well as comfortable and efficient had an immediate effect on her working environment. Contrary to any fears that the harsh conditions of homesteading might coarsen women, "'Home,' crude and impermanent though it might be, received the kind of attention which would have pleased the proponents of domesticity."[35]

Whatever creativity and ingenuity a woman could bring to her personal space might have also reflected the amount of determination she brought to the homesteading

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32 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
33 Sophie Puckett, 26 May 1904; Bowlus, 1 May 1929. Emphasis in original.
34 Helen Millar, 17 May 1916.
35 Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, p. 73.

endeavour.[36] Farm women devoted a good deal of time and attention to home improvement to render their space as clean, comfortable, attractive, and "homelike" as possible. A determination to reproduce whatever sense of the home she had left behind gave a woman a familiar base from which to face other new challenges. Attempts to recreate familiar homelike settings became, then, "an unconscious way of asserting female power and reassuring women of their sexual identity."[37] These impulses were certainly evident in the situations discussed above where Roberts and Strange exercised their feminine control of the domestic space over the men they shared the space with, and so were able to successfully create and maintain a feminized space within the masculine milieu of homesteading.

Much of the historiography on rural society has assumed that the biggest challenge faced by farm women was coping with social and physical isolation, as if such isolation was somehow intrinsic to what it meant to be a woman on the prairies given the relative lack of feminine spaces and minimal reinforcement of a feminine identity. Certainly many women did record periods of time when they felt alone. Sarah Roberts was initially more isolated than many of the women discussed here, and she wrote during her first winter "This weather and being cut off from everybody is almost too much for me." A few months later she recorded that they had had "very few callers" and, perhaps more importantly, "only one woman, Mrs. Hunter, has been on the place since we have been here."[38] When she was still quite new to the homestead and alone for the first time, she felt overwhelmed with a sense of "littleness and helplessness."[39] She took every chance she could to get off the farm, because she never knew how long it would be until the weather and time would allow another chance. She wrote that "the same conditions which have kept me so closely at home have kept my neighbours from coming to see me.

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36 Angela E. Davis, "'Country Homemakers': The Daily Lives of Prairie Women as Seen through the Women's Page of the Grain Grower's Guide 1908-1928" In *Canadian Papers in Rural History Vol. VIII*, Edited by Donald H. Akenson. (Gananoque, Ontario: Langdale Press, 1992), pp. 163-171.

37 Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, p. 38.

38 Roberts, *Of Us and The Oxen*, pp. 76 and 85.

39 Ibid., pp. 18-19.

Women, indeed, have been "shut-ins", and I am sure that many besides myself have been very lonely."[40]

Emma Rowe's diary did not mention being alone or feeling lonely until she and her husband George moved to a more isolated ranch in 1918.[41] After that her husband was away more often, sometimes for days and weeks on end, and she was further away from female companionship. In August 1919, she recorded a "Lonesome Day."[42] A few months later, while George was away, she noted four straight days when she and Susie, a neighbour who usually stayed with her when George was away, were "alone."[43] The entry "I alone all day" became more common.[44] She would also note the days when she and George were alone all day.[45]

After Mary Wyndham and her family moved to a new house some distance away from their previous home, visitors became even more important to her. A few months after the move she wrote "We have had some callers - the first except for Dubucs.... We had a very pleasant visit - I quite enjoyed it."[46] She was also alone more often, and would keep close track of the number of hours her husband was away: "Spencer went over to help Tim with his stacking this morning so I was alone from 7:30 till about 5:30." There were days when she was particularly displeased to be alone, as when she wrote in 1919, "This is our wedding anniversary and I have been alone all day - nice way to celebrate."[47]

Just as these periods of solitude were always remarked on, so were the times when the men went into town and the women had to stay at home. Mabel Barker commented that many farm women hardly ever got into town, and Viola Cameron recalled that her

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40 Ibid., p. 85.

41 See, for example, Emma Rowe, 24 October 1919, 23 January 1920, 6 April 1920, 16 May 1920, 16 June 1920, 27 December 1920, 5 March 1921. Glenbow Archives M7076 Box 1, File 2.

42 Ibid., 31 August 1919.

43 Ibid., 10-13 December 1919.

44 See, for example, Ibid., 15 June 1920, 2 October 1921.

45 Ibid., 30 July 1920, 26 September 1920, 3 April 1921, 1 May 1921.

46 Wyndham, 9 November 1919. Emphasis in original.

47 Ibid., 30 September and 24 October 1919.

aunt rarely got off the farm because she was too busy.[48] Shada Dunbar only went into Vulcan about once a week, and was dependent on her husband to take her.[49] Mary Edey was quite lonely when she first arrived in Alberta because she and her husband did not initially own a buggy, and it was often up to three weeks between trips to town.[50] These women were interviewed many years later, however, and they were generally the same ones who did less outside work around the farm and had felt less connected with their communities.

Although this sense of isolation has been so "frequently identified as a problem for farm women," and apparently not for farm men, there have been remarkably few attempts to analyze critically the nature, causes, and effects of this isolation.[51] Two Alberta researchers who have attempted such an analysis, Nanci Langford and Norah Keating, concluded that the two most significant factors in whether or not a woman felt isolated were satisfaction with her marriage and satisfaction with farming as a way of life. If a farm woman was involved in farm work, enjoyed it, and received some measure of recognition and support for her work, she was less likely to feel isolated.[52]

The most interesting aspect of Langford and Keating's work is the emphasis they placed on a woman's perception of her own isolation. Most of the women discussed here lived on large farms often remote from neighbours or towns and with relatively little adult companionship, but this did not automatically lead to feelings of isolation. True isolation, in terms of not having another living soul around for miles, was also generally "a short-lived phenomenon."[53] Due to the rapid pace at which the land was filled with white settlers, the opportunities for social contacts also tended to improve quickly. As

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48 Mabel Barker, PAA Eliane Silverman fonds, 81.279 #20, p. 5; Viola Cameron, PAA Eliane Silverman fonds, 81.279 #17.

49 Shada Dunbar, PAA Eliane Silverman fonds, 81.279 #46, p.4.

50 Mary Edey, pp. 9 and 14.

51 Nanci Langford and Norah Keating, "Social Isolation and Alberta Farm Women" In *Women: Isolation and Bonding, The Ecology of Gender*, Edited by Kathleen Storrie. (Toronto: Methuen for the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1987), pp. 47-49.

52 Ibid., p. 54-55.

53 Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, p. 56.

the area around Sarah Roberts was settled, for example, she was able to socialize more often, both with other women and in the context of the many mixed gatherings like dances and card parties.

Isolation, then, was clearly not necessarily an intrinsic part of what it meant to be a farm woman in Alberta, because her various relationships with other women and her desire for a sense of connection to the rest of the world led to the active work of maintaining familial links and other social relationships. Writing letters and the arrival of mail, for example, predominantly to and from female friends and relatives, was important for many women. Women seem to have handled most of each family's letter-writing, using their letters to pass along information, opinions, and advice, but also to provide "a source of tangible and emotional support for family members."[54] Personal letters had to "substitute for personal contact,"[55] and so farm women likely included in their letters "all the vital information which was the basis for an intimate female dialogue."[56] Since some farms still did not have telephones by the mid-1920s, women's letters were the means by which affection was expressed, aid offered, and extended families maintained. They were the only way for a woman to still feel a part of whatever family she had had to leave behind when she came to Alberta.

Most of the diary writers recorded regularly when they went for the mail, and that act in itself often kept them in contact with their families, friends, and the rest of the world. An acquaintance of Emma Rowe's ran the post office near their ranch south of Macleod, for example, so going for the mail also gave her a chance to socialize.[57] Sophie Puckett was always particularly eager for the mail to arrive, writing in 1904 "O, I hope we shall get a whole bundle of letters."[58] In 1905 she wrote "We didn't get a letter from Mama last mail day. I wonder why?"[59] Mary Wyndham also expressed disappointment

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54 Motz, *True Sisterhood*, p. 53.
55 Ibid., p. 62.
56 Jeffrey, *Frontier Women*, pp. 73-74.
57 See, for example, Rowe, 27 January 1922 and 16 August 1922.
58 Puckett, 19 February 1904.
59 Ibid., 2 October 1905.

when "No mail came but the papers. There must be something wrong with the service."[60] After her parents moved away, she regularly wrote "Letter from Mother on time" or "No letter from Mother yet. last one dated March 9."[61] She had a fairly regular timetable in mind, noting one day that her sons had brought her mother's letter, "the earliest I have had it for a long time." She learned of her father's death in 1919 in a letter from her mother, and a distant aunt announced in 1921 the safe birth of a new addition to the family.[62]

The relative infrequency of mail delivery when an area was new to white settlement meant that any improvement in the service was a major improvement. Sarah Roberts commented that "ever since we came to our claims, the arrival of the mail, whenever and by whatever route it came, had been an event of paramount importance. When the mail comes, everything else waits while we read with eagerness the loving messages that come to us across the two thousand miles that separate us from our dear ones."[63] When they first arrived their closest post office was in Stettler, 65 miles away, and so they only got their mail when someone from their area made the long trip. Within a year they were receiving semi-weekly service at the 'local' store, which made them feel "that we were a part of the world after all."[64] This sentiment was echoed by Evelyn Slater McLeod, who wrote that when her community got a local post office and postmaster they "again felt in touch with the world we had left."[65] Even Harriet Bowlus, who rarely underlined anything in her diary, noted in 1926 that "Rural delivery is supposed to start today."[66]

The importance of the telephone for maintaining a woman's sense of connection to the rest of the world was clear from the excitement expressed when it arrived. Emma Rowe recorded in very large letters the arrival of the telephone on their first farm in 1915,

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60 Wyndham, 11 January 1913.
61 Ibid., 22 February 1919, 22 March 1919. Emphasis in original.
62 Ibid., 23 October 1919, 7 May 1919 and 17 November 1921.
63 Roberts, *Of Us and The Oxen*, p. 91.
64 Ibid., p. 92.
65 McLeod, "Restless Pioneers."
66 Bowlus, 2 September 1926.

from signing the papers and having the holes dug in July, to the installment of the box in October.[67] Five years later, when the phone was connected out on their ranch, she again added the infrequent emphasis:

> Telephone gang dug holes for poles.
>
> Telephone men here stringing wire.
>
> Telephone men put in phone.[68]

She did not seem particularly pleased when her husband "called Gantiers over phone and talked to Josie while I was out at henhouse" but the following day "Josie called me & talked to me over phone long while."[69] This displeasure and subsequent redress further suggests the importance of the immediate personal contact which the telephone offered.

Besides the connections maintained by letters and telephone calls, some women enjoyed the presence of female family members, and even extended kin networks, although these were rare given the relative newness of white settlement in the area. These were both connections of companionship and networks of aid, in keeping with women's traditional responsibility for maintaining a community's social geography. The most extensive network of female kin in my research was that of the Bowlus family. The family had five daughters, and there was always at least one and often up to three of them living with Charlie and Harriet. The youngest, Ruth, lived on the family farm from 1916 onwards, and for a few years another daughter, Ola, lived on a neighbouring section with her husband Ernest and their growing family. Two other sisters, Bessie and Hattie, also lived at their parents' home for extended periods of time, and the eldest daughter, Verna, visited when she could. Even before the death of Charlie Bowlus in 1925, family life was dominated by the presence, companionship, and assistance of female kin. Charlie and Hattie celebrated their 39th wedding anniversary, for example, with two of their

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67 Rowe, 30 July - 14 October 1915.
68 Ibid., 27 September, 24 November, 7 December 1920.
69 Ibid., 6-7 April 1921.

daughters, one son-in-law, and three grandchildren.[70] Most of the family birthdays were also celebrated with large family gatherings.[71] Harriet and Ruth visited Ola regularly, accompanied by Bessie and Hattie when they were available, and Ola brought her children to visit their grandmother and aunts just as often.[72] It was likely a great comfort for Ola to have her mother and sisters so close as her family grew; shortly after the birth of her fifth child, for example, Harriet wrote "Drove to Ola's late in evening. Caroline been sick all week with sore throat, Baby cross and Ola tired out with the work and heat."[73]

After Charlie's death the Bowlus women took over much of the running of the house and farm. Bessie returned to the United States in August 1925, and her mother wrote that she was sorely missed by all of them. One of Ola's daughters had the same birthday as Charlie, so it had always been a joint celebration, and on the first such occasion after his death the birthday cake included both sets of initials. While Harriet was seriously ill in 1928, Hattie took over the diary and recorded that her sisters Verna and Bessie had come up from the States.[74]

Mary Wyndham also enjoyed a close relationship with a sister-in-law who lived close enough for them to see each other almost every day. She recorded Carrie coming over "to work on her dress - grey voile. She stayed until about dark." A few days later Carrie came over again "to get some help with her dress. Hope she will get it finished up all right."[75] The two families spent one Christmas day together when their husbands were away, and the large gathering was joined by still another brother-in-law. Mary wrote that "We had the folks from the other house all down to dinner - fifteen of us in all. Had a nice big turkey with oyster dressing & cranberry sauce, and all the rest except -

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70 Bowlus, 26 October 1920.
71 See, for example, Ibid., 14 July 1923, 4, 5 and 27 January 1926, 10 August 1927.
72 See, for example, Ibid., 4 and 10 May 1923, 26 November 1923, 7 July 1924, 1 January 1925.
73 Ibid., 11 July 1925.
74 Ibid., 17 August and 14 July 1925, 23 February 1928.
75 Wyndham, 15 and 20 January 1913.

plum pudding.... We were very glad to have Tim with us. He did the carving - in Spencer's place."[76]

When female kin were not accessible all the time, even a short visit could mean a great deal. Kathleen Strange's first few days on the new homestead were eased considerably by the presence and aid of her mother-in-law, particularly as she had no idea how to cook. After watching "Grandma Strange" and a neighbour woman efficiently preparing a large breakfast, Strange wrote that she "sneaked outside. I wanted to find my husband and tell him how bad I felt about it all."[77] Her mother-in-law returned to England after a few weeks, and Strange wrote "I shall never forget my first few days on the farm without her. Nor, I am sure, will the people who shared them with me. I have often wondered, indeed, if any of the unfortunate men, who suffered my first attempts at cooking, are actually alive today to tell the tale."[78]

Women who did not have female kin nearby generally had female friends and neighbours to visit with, and a good deal of visiting back and forth between women was common. Much of this visiting was within the context of same-sex gatherings like quilting groups, as this pair of entries from the Bowlus diary in October 1925 suggests:

> Hattie took the car and went to Mrs Farrells, and took Mrs Rockafellow to the "East Side" quilting ... "West Side" came here in the afternoon and quilted my Outing Flannel quilt.
>
> Hattie went to the "East Side" sewing [and] quilting ... Ruth went with Mrs Weber to the "West Side quilting at Mrs Snyders.[79]

Female friends and neighbours could also be counted on for assistance when it was needed, involving women in reciprocal networks of aid. Harriet Bowlus, for example, recorded three consecutive days that Ruth and other women helped a neighbour whose husband was in the hospital.

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76 Ibid., 25 December 1913.
77 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, p. 31
78 Ibid., p. 41.
79 Bowlus, 15 and 19 October 1925.

> May McMillan is keeping house & Norma for Mrs Snyder. Ruth is helping her today ... Hattie & Ruth to town ... Ruth to get groceries for Sny.
>
> Ruth helped May up at Snyders
>
> Ruth went to town for bread and groceries for Mrs Snyders
> Ruth churned our cream & Mrs Snyders
> Mrs Snyders got the Guernisch girl to help May.[80]

When another neighbour telephoned to say that her husband had died unexpectedly, the Bowlus women stayed with her until the undertaker arrived and then brought her home with them for the night.[81]

Mary and Carrie Wyndham seem to have been particularly centred in a network of female aid. Mary wrote in 1913 that the two of them went to help a sick neighbour, Mrs. Little, who "was enough better to be out on the couch in the sitting room. Mrs. Gulliver was there baking the bread. I stayed and baked a cake and did some ironing."[82] A few months later she and Carrie went to help another neighbour. "We washed, ironed, churned, swept and mopped the whole house and made Mrs. Sim three collars. Mrs Gulliver went over after dinner."[83] In July and August of 1914 she recorded helping another woman make a skirt.[84] These networks of help and support were clearly reciprocal, because when Mrs. Sim needed help, Mrs. Little was there washing windows and baking.[85]

When Emma Rowe and her husband were farming near Vulcan, she was close enough to town for regular contact with other women.[86] When a neighbour's husband died, Emma recorded taking her home and "helped her with work."[87] She often visited women in the area who had had babies, and on at least one occasion was summoned to

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80 Ibid., 19-21 September 1927.
81 Ibid., 15-16 July 1928.
82 Wyndham, 15 May 1913.
83 Ibid., 19 September 1913
84 Ibid., 2 July and 4 August 1914.
85 Ibid., 18 September 1913.
86 See, for example, Rowe, 18 August and 8 October 1911, 23 April and 19 June 1914.
87 Ibid., 2 June 1911.

assist at a birth, which suggests that she occasionally acted as a midwife for women in her area.[88]

Besides the invaluable assistance and company provided by these networks of aid and friendship, they also played a role in establishing or reinforcing gender norms. Many of the diarists wrote about relatives and neighbouring women, conveying a sense of what was perceived as normal for the times as well as revealing the characteristics that they admired or criticized in other women. Evelyn Slater McLeod, for example, wrote a detailed description of the aunt who raised her after her mother died. The woman was English, twelve years younger than her husband, and had taught school before marrying. McLeod went on to note that her aunt "was quite good looking in a stern way - her gray-green eyes complimenting her severe mouth. Her everyday gingham and Sunday challis were in the style of the period." She felt that "Aunt Ellen" had taken "good care" of her, braiding her hair "so tightly I had perpetually raised eyebrows" and not permitting her "to make mud-pies because I would soil my pinafore. Her tongue was caustic. She was a stickler for good manners and was determined that I should grow up to be a lady, an eventuality to which she referred often."[89] While McLeod offered little more by way of description of her aunt, it seems that it was Ellen's firmness and determination to raise her niece "to be a lady" that counted most in her favour.

The characteristics most admired in other women were determination and courage, perseverance, a refusal to let adverse conditions triumph and a refusal to complain about the adverse conditions themselves. While it would be tempting to describe much of this stoicism as almost stereotypically British, it is equally visible in the second- or third-generation Americans who settled in the area. McLeod, for example, described the trials and perseverance of another family who moved into their area. The husband was not very healthy but they had a 60-mile trip to make, so he had driven a "four-ox team" while his wife "Clara (with their 3-year old daughter Jean to care for)

88 Ibid., 10 November 1913, 2 December 1914, and 19-20 January 1917.
89 McLeod, "Restless Pioneers."

handled two half-wild cayuse ponies on the other wagon." McLeod noted that "a lot was expected of farm children in those days and they lived up to it": their son Stewart "was of considerable help" and the cattle "were driven the 60 miles by their two oldest daughters - Ethel, age 11 and Pearl 9." Mr. Houston died two years later, and Clara, "his indomitable widow ... was a familiar figure riding the plow in her field and driving four horses."[90]

Kathleen Strange also wrote admirably of a woman whose husband was seriously injured and unable to walk their first winter on the farm. This woman had kept things going all winter, cutting wood for fuel, hunting rabbits and deer for food, and doing "many other things that might have daunted the heart of a strong man." When spring came she "helped her husband to cut logs and build a house. In this house, which with some additions they occupy to this day, all but three of her sixteen children had been born. Of such stuff were the pioneer women of Western Canada made!"[91] By mentioning this woman's large family shortly after describing her temporary adoption of her husband's role, it is clear that this woman was not viewed as having transgressed the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour. She did what needed to be done when her husband could not, but still managed to fulfill her role as mother and wife.

A particularly valued characteristic was the ability to persevere without complaining. While Mary Edey thought that farming was "terribly hard work for everybody," men and women alike, she also thought that the man's burden was heavier "if a woman didn't kind of hold up her end.... If she was whining, you know what I mean?"[92] Evelyn McLeod mentioned visiting a "fine young woman" who was afflicted with an unnamed "insidious disease" and "seven months pregnant with her fourth child." The visitors "watched in disbelief as this uncomplaining woman washed on the washboard, rinsed and wrung garments by hand with one knee on a chair, alternating between the two tubs by the use of her crutch."[93] McLeod did not mention whether this

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90 Ibid.
91 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, p. 242.
92 Mary Edey, pp. 2 and 11.
93 McLeod, "Restless Pioneers."

woman received any assistance from her family or neighbours - she simply marvelled at her apparent ability to cope with illness, pregnancy, and her washing all at the same time.

Apart from exhibiting as much stoicism as possible, women were, of course, still expected to be good cooks and housekeepers. Threshing season was often mentioned as bringing out a competitive streak among local women, as they each resolved to prepare the best and largest amounts of food for the large threshing crews. Sarah Roberts, for one, refused to be drawn in to this sense of competition: "In Alberta, as in Illinois, each housewife vies with the others in demonstrating her ability as a cook, and I was almost in a panic. I finally decided that I would give them plenty of good food, but would not compete with the other women around in a line of work in which I did not excel."[94]

Roberts thought very highly of a Swedish woman their neighbour married, not just because of her "pluck" and capabilities, but also because she fulfilled in every way her role as wife and neighbour.

> I thought at the time that she was very plucky to come to the homestead in the dead of winter and wondered if it was a case where "ignorance was bliss." We thought so much of Eric that we all hoped she would not disappoint him, but would be able, not only to make him happy, but to be happy herself, in the new conditions which she would have to face as a homesteader's wife in western Canada. She seemed to fit perfectly into her new environment. Everyone liked her...[95]

The newcomer was able to suit herself to her husband, the environment, and the community: in every respect a good homesteader's wife.

Roberts described another woman, Mrs Matherly, as being "odd in dress, manner, speech and in other ways, yet, in her way, she was a very capable woman." By the time the two women met the Matherlys were past "the hard stage of pioneering and were prosperous." Mrs. Matherly "had acquired a goodly lot of household equipment - things that lighten labour and make a home attractive, for Mr. Matherly was good to her in his

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94 Roberts, *Of Us and The Oxen*, p. 222.
95 Ibid., p. 233.

rough way." Mrs. Matherly makes "a confidante" of Sarah, who felt very sorry for her because her husband now wanted to pick up and move "still farther into the wilds of Canada," even though they were finally comfortable after years of hard work. Joining the couple for dinner one night, Roberts recorded an incident where Mr. Matherly smashed a cracked dish on the table and said, "you know I don't like cracked dishes on the table, so why do you put them on?" Since Sarah had set the table, she made a mental note to look more closely at the dishes next time but made no other comment.[96]

If characteristics such as uncomplaining perseverance and adapting to the challenging new environment were generally praised and within the acceptable gender role for a woman, then not possessing these characteristics or actively displaying their reverse firmly set a woman outside what was acceptable. Characteristics that were clearly not considered admirable were embodied by two "very odd characters" Sarah Roberts encountered, "the Belgian woman" and "the Dutch woman." The Belgian woman first entered Sarah's life after coming to her husband for medical help. The woman's English was not very good, and her family had recently lost everything in a fire. She "took a great fancy" to Sarah, who initially "tried to be kind to her and to help her in such little ways as I could." The other woman's frequent visits, tales of hardship and demands for help, however, soon began to irritate Roberts. The Belgian woman claimed to have "all kinds of domestic trouble," including a brutal husband and a useless son, and "would pour this tale of woe" into Sarah's ears "by the hour... I didn't know how much of her story was true and how much was false and although I was sorry for her I couldn't help her in this domestic tangle one bit; and so I was truly glad when, in the course of time, she gradually dropped me and transferred her affections to some of my neighbours."[97]

The first appearance of the "Dutch woman" was even less favorable because she

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96 Ibid., pp. 233-235.
97 Ibid., p. 161.

> was a big, raw-boned masculine looking woman whose general appearance would indicate that she had never had a bath. Her clothes looked as though they had never been washed and as though they had been thrown at her and fastened with a pin. Even her face and hands were as dirty as could be and her hair was the stringy, stiff kind that also plainly enough had never made the acquaintance of soap and water.[98]

This description provides a vivid contrast to the appearance of Evelyn Slater McLeod's Aunt Ellen, and the expectations she had for Evelyn. Instead of exhibiting cleanliness, fashionable clothes, and good manners, the Dutch woman was "masculine," dirty, and poorly dressed. Roberts marvelled that "any woman could stow away so much" food, and heard from a neighbour that "the woman never cooked a meal or washed a dish."[99] She soon became even more of a nuisance to Sarah than the Belgian woman had been, not just because she also complained about an abusive husband and mean neighbours but would also borrow things and never return them or expect to get a large quantity of some food item when she came by. Not only did she personally fail to display the appropriately feminine appearance and behaviour, she also failed to fulfill the womanly role of a good neighbour.

Roberts was not sure whether she should believe their tales of domestic violence and would not have intruded even if they were confirmed,[100] but seemed to have particularly disliked these women because they were not capable household managers and could not take care of their difficulties on their own. They also did not seem to make any efforts to conform to the expectations of appropriate femininity, and Roberts was

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98 Ibid., p. 163.

99 Ibid., p. 165.

100 Except for these instances recorded by Sarah Roberts, there is no mention of domestic violence in any of these diaries, memoirs, or interviews. Terry Chapman has researched wife-beating in Alberta from 1905 to 1920, but did not specify how many of the approximately 100 cases she found involved rural women. She has argued that the light sentences and frequent dismissal of the charges, even when the defendant pleaded guilty or had a previous record of assaulting his wife, suggest that the province's justice system "condoned and accepted domestic violence against the wife." Insisting that "men and women expected some degree of physical violence to occur within the institution of marriage," she concluded that the justice system "was merely attempting to reinforce societal notions of acceptable behaviour between the sexes within the confines of the institution of marriage", because the "ideal" was "a dependent, docile and obedient female." Terry Chapman, "'Til Death do us Part': Wife Beating in Alberta, 1905 - 1920." *Alberta History* Vol. 36, No. 4, Autumn 1988, pp. 16-21.

relieved when they eventually left her alone. Mrs. Matherly had also struck her as "odd" and Sarah had witnessed Mr. Matherly's abusive behaviour, but her capability compensated for these and Sarah enjoyed her companionship. The Belgian and Dutch women were set apart by their "otherness," both in their nationalities and their non-compliance with acceptable feminine appearance and behaviour, and so were beyond the limits of female aid. It is not particularly clear what role their ethnic differences played in her disapproval, but it clearly did not work in their favour. Roberts never recorded their names, and admitted that she could never remember or pronounce the Dutch woman's name. These two women were signified by their nationality first, their inappropriate appearance and behaviour second, and little else.[101]

As the contrasting descriptions of Aunt Ellen and the Dutch woman demonstrate, there were firm community standards for acceptable feminine appearance, even during the earliest and most difficult years of homesteading. For example, wearing "masculine" apparel like trousers could be merely noteworthy or provoke a harsher community response. In 1904 Sophie Puckett recorded going berry-picking with a group of girls, and considered it significant enough to mention that three of the girls "wore 'trousers'" for the job.[102] In 1920 Kathleen Strange, having already caused a stir by arriving with a short haircut, "greatly shocked" her community when she wore breeches and her mother-in-law wore old Army pants for horseback riding. A "deputation of ladies" called and insisted on speaking to her husband alone. They

> told him they had called to protest against my wearing breeches. They said that no women had ever appeared in such an immodest garb in that community before, and they wished to inform my husband that I must be stopped from ever appearing in such an outfit again. They did not mention Grandma, though I imagine they considered her appearance equally disgraceful.

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101 Perhaps it should not be too much of a surprise that First Nations women appeared only three times in the diaries and memoirs used here. Emma Rowe, who lived near the two largest reserves in southern Alberta, mentioned native women three times from 1919 to 1920, and then only that they had come to work for her or help her with her washing. Rowe, 30 May and 1 June 1919, 21 July 1920.

102 Puckett, 18 July 1904.

Her husband "listened solemnly" and "promised that he would take me severely to task about it." All he did do was tell her what the women had said, but she was furious and went on wearing her breeches. She eventually "wore the resistance down. But it was by way of being a hard-won victory, for I had to endure a constant atmosphere of disapproval, at least in certain quarters, all of which made those early days of mine the harder to live through."[103] It is interesting to note that it appeared to have been a group effort on the part of the neighbouring women, and that they clearly believed it was her husband's responsibility to control her behaviour. Trousers were something men wore, and therefore it was immodest, disgraceful, and perhaps even dangerous for women to be seen in them. Apparently the presence of her mother-in-law did not signify the same sort of permission only a husband could grant. Grandma herself may have been exempted from the complaint because her pants were looser than Kathleen's breeches, or by virtue of her age, or because she was there without her husband and therefore lacked a keeper to whom the local women would have spoken.

This last example shows most clearly that there were standards and expectations of femininity to which women were supposed to adhere, and a notion of gender not too far removed from what would have been considered acceptable for respectable, white, married, English-speaking women anywhere in Canada. These farm women were responsible for the home and everything it entailed, as well as for maintaining the kinds of social and personal connections that would make a new environment less harsh. They valued the companionship and assistance of other women, and often socialized within the feminine world of quiltings.

A key difference, however, between the gender construction of these Southern Alberta farm women and respectable married women in a more urban setting, was their experiences of farm work and its potential impact on rural gender relations. They left the feminized space of the home to enter the very masculine space of the fields and perform

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103 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, pp. 39-41.

outdoor tasks which were the normal responsibility of men; at the same time, their indoor labour was equally necessary for the family's survival. In this way farm women deviated from traditional gender norms which generally precluded hard work and a productive role; their construction of gender had to expand in some way to accommodate these new experiences. Farm women and their work have generally been lost in the rhetoric of the family farm, and so the significance of their work is only now coming to be understood and understandable.

Chapter 2

While women's work has traditionally been left out of systems of valuing, the work of farm women in particular has only recently begun to command attention. It has long been obscured by the rhetoric of the "family farm", likely "one of the most mythologized institutions in North America."[1] It evokes a unity of purpose and an equal sharing of gains, as well as kinder, gentler productive relations than those found in big corporations. Viewing the farm family as a unit of undifferentiated labour, however, obscures the critical issues of the control of labour and ownership of the land. It remains just as important to consider the patriarchal productive relations inherent in male ownership when discussing farm labour as it does when discussing other forms of market-oriented labour, because the "the non-wage labour of family members" has been considerably more important in the agricultural sector than waged labour.[2]

Farm women in Southern Alberta worked seven days a week and 365 days a year. The kind of work they did on the farm can be divided roughly between unpaid, subsistence, and reproductive labour performed inside, and the labour involved in commodity or income-generating production outside. I am using the words "inside/outside" in a strictly physical sense and not to suggest a rigid "separate spheres" dichotomy. They represent two differently-gendered but highly permeable work spaces: women were responsible for the "feminine" indoor work, men were responsible for the "masculine" outdoor work, and the barnyard was an in-between area of activities where women and men's responsibilities regularly overlapped.[3]

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1 Barbara Cooper, "Farm Women: Some Contemporary Themes," *Labour/Le Travail,* 24 (Fall 1989), p. 167.

2 Cohen, *Women's Work,* p. 6.

3 Osterud, "Gender and the Transition to Capitalism in Rural America." *Agricultural History*, Vol. 67, Number 2, Spring 1993. p. 19.

Both kinds of labour were necessary for the survival of the farm. Women's work cannot be dismissed as mere subsistence labour, performed while the "real work" of the farm went on outside, because farm women's subsistence production freed other limited resources for market-oriented production.[4] Nor was their work confined solely to subsistence production: where a surplus and market existed, for example, egg and butter sales often provided a vital cash income. The labour of farm women, in all its forms, cannot be understood solely in terms of labour and production, as if it was separable from the fabric of rural society. A thorough understanding of the relationship between their work and the gender system is vitally important to a discussion of their lives, and to a broader understanding of rural society.

Not surprisingly, the distinction between "inside" and "outside" work was the crucial one in the division, gendering, and valuing of labour on Southern Alberta farms, because of the very differently-gendered nature of the two spaces. It was also central to the valuing of work and its place in the construction of gender: the "masculine" outside work was the work most clearly oriented towards the market, and the constraints of time and weather meant that women had to put aside their own work and help outside far more frequently than men helped inside. Although most women likely would have agreed on the importance of that outside work in terms of revenue for the farm, they also had a clear sense of how much work they did and the contribution they made to the farm's success or failure. They also knew how often they were also involved in that outdoor labour, but the public gender division of labour was consistently maintained in the public forum. There was, then, a clear relationship between farm women's construction of gender and their experiences and valuing of work. As the primary site of women's work, an analysis of the nature of this relationship must begin by discussing their labour in the home.

Most of the diarists faithfully recorded their own work: the despised washday, ironing, churning, all manner of food preparation, milking and sewing, and numerous

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4 Cohen, *Women's Work*, p. 41

other tasks. The amount of inside work which had to be done and the amount of time a woman spent inside doing it sometimes varied according to the size of the family and the age and sex of her children. Mary Crocker Wyndham had three young sons, and most of her work was concentrated inside. In January 1913, for example, when her eldest son was seven and the youngest eighteen months, she wrote "I did the usual Saturday work - including baths."[5] Keeping her sons in clothing meant that she spent a good deal of time sewing, as these entries from a two-week time period demonstrate:

> I finished blouse for A. [Alfred] today and got a play coat for R. [Ralph] nearly done - made it of Spencer's grey flannel coat...
> ...I finished Ralph's coat.
> I sewed some today...
> Sewed some today...
> I sewed most of the day...
> I sewed a little while this morning...[6]

She wrote the following New Year's Day that she had "celebrated by ironing most of the day. Maryon says whatever you do on New Year's Day you'll do all the year - a nice prospect for me!" A few weeks later, on her birthday, she wrote that she had again "celebrated" by doing the ironing.[7] Although she always knew what was going on around the farm, Sarah Roberts also did very little outside work because she was in her fifties and three of her four grown sons had also come to Alberta. She wrote after one warm winter day that she had been "out of doors for quite a while for the first time in months."[8]

Kathleen Strange initially had three young stepsons to care for, but first had to learn how to cook and manage the volume of washing, cleaning and mending, "every job made doubly hard by my lack of experience and sometimes active dislike for the work."[9] She coped by organizing her daily routine as much as possible, and later wrote that it was

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5 Wyndham, 4 January 1913.
6 Ibid., 1, 2, 9, 13-15 May 1913.
7 Ibid., 1 and 29 January 1914.
8 Roberts, *Of Us and the Oxen*, p. 86.
9 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, p. 44.

possible "to evolve a workable system that allots to each season, to each day, almost, I might say, to each hour of the day, its own particular task." This worked for the first few years, but then she acquired the help of a hired girl, one of the few women to be able to find and afford one.[10]

Most of the women also noted when they received male assistance with their inside work, usually on the dreaded washday. Mary Wyndham, for example, refused to do the washing alone and wrote one day "I did not wash today as I could not have help." A few months later she wrote that Spencer had helped with a "very big washing - over 11 dozen pieces."[11] Washing was clearly not the only heavy task her husband helped with, as she wrote in 1915 "I churned - rather, Spencer did."[12] She sounded pleased and surprised when she wrote that her eldest son Alfred, "washed the dishes for me tonight; the first time he has ever thought of such a thing."[13] By 1921 her two eldest sons were in their teens and helped her with the housework and washing more often.

Shada Dunbar arrived in Alberta in 1917 with her husband and five children, including sixteen-month old twins, and recalled that her husband helped her a lot with the childcare. He would "take care of the babies and bathe the children and you know there's just lots of things a man can do if he will. There's so many of them that don't.... So a man can just do a lot of things if they love the wives well enough, that makes a difference."[14] What remained unsaid were the possible reasons why so many men did not help with childcare, and why considerably fewer men helped with their wives' work than wives helped with their husbands'.

As often as they could, these women also shared their inside work with other women, and indeed shared "their most gender-marked tasks with other women both within and beyond their households more often than they did with the men who lived in

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10 Ibid., pp. 218-224. The lack of available domestic help on the prairies was a frequent complaint in the women's pages of the farm journals, and few farm women had disposable income to pay for the help.

11 Wyndham, 26 January and 22 July 1914.

12 Ibid., 21 May 1915.

13 Ibid., 14 May 1915.

14 Dunbar, p. 2.

their households."[15] Harriet Bowlus always had at least one of her daughters, and sometimes up to three of them, to share the day's work with. When a female relative came to visit Sarah Roberts for a while, she wrote:

> Alice's visit during this summer meant more to me than I could ever tell. The distance between us and our dear ones never afterward seemed so great. And then it was worth so much to me to have a companion in my work. Papa almost always had one of the boys with him ... but I worked by myself most of the time. But while Alice was with me we did the housework together, including the sewing and mending, gathered the eggs, churned and molded the butter, and shared all other tasks.[16]

When another female relative visited in the summer of 1910, Sarah wrote that it "was an easy summer for me as she took over most of the housework." If the inside work was all finished in the mornings, they would "go off to the fields where Papa and the boys were, and enjoyed watching them at their work, and once in a while we would help them, or at least pretend to help."[17]

Sharing her work with other women was one way for a farm woman to escape both the routine and the occasional isolation of housework; another way was to enter the masculine working spaces around the farm by participating in tasks such as by milking, haying, or conducting the farm's business affairs. The allocation of various tasks was flexible, but the division of responsibility remained clear: women were responsible for the inside work, and men were responsible for the outside work.[18]

While some women did not do any outside work, many more clearly did and always noted it. Mrs. Fredericks recalled that, as a child growing up on a farm, "it didn't matter whether you was a boy or a girl. I had to milk cows and help haying...."[19] After she married and moved to her husband's farm, she recalled she helped him when he was busy outside, and he helped her when she had a "bunch of men to cook for" during

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15 Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, p. 187.
16 Roberts, *Of Us and the Oxen*, pp. 125-126.
17 Ibid., pp. 242-243.
18 Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, p. 150.
19 Fredericks, p. 4.

haying season.[20] Emma Rowe was busy enough while she and her husband were farming near Vulcan, but her outside work increased dramatically when they moved to a ranch near MacLeod. Throughout the fall and winter when he was often away she wrote regularly "I did chores alone."[21] Although she vowed in July of 1920 "no more milking for me," by August she wrote again "I did milking alone."[22] She continued to do the milking, as well as watering and riding among the herd, and helping her husband butcher from time to time. By 1921 she recorded the occasional assistance of various hired men, although they were not always of much help; she wrote about one that he "hardly knew what to do with himself."[23] They may have had to share their tasks more regularly because they did not have any children.

Harriet Bowlus and her daughters, particularly Ruth, were regularly involved in the outdoor labour of their farm near Blackie. Charlie Bowlus noted in 1918, "Ruth & I killed a pig & dressed it in cow barn Had a great time at it. Commenced at 3.P.M. finished at 6."[24] Ruth was also involved in some of the most taxing outdoor labour; in the winter of 1919 she helped Charlie unload two loads of baled hay, and during the 1920 harvest he recorded that Ruth drove a team of nine horses one day and stooked two acres of wheat the next.[25] She also accompanied Charlie on all of his business trips while he was alive. In 1924, for example, he wrote, "Ruth & I in Calgary all day - on the Alix-Acme land deal. Pushed it thru today ... Ruth & I took in Picture show ... after our two days of strenuous work."[26]

Not surprisingly, there was a wide range of attitudes towards outside work. Ruth Bowlus clearly seems to have preferred working outdoors, while Eva Cumming recalled that she didn't really do any work outside: "I couldn't milk a cow and I wasn't sorry. But I

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20 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
21 Rowe, March 1919, November and December 1919.
22 Ibid., 10 July and 29 August 1920.
23 Ibid., 15 May 1921.
24 Bowlus, 12 January 1918.
25 Ibid., 20 January 1919 and 20-21 August 1920.
26 Ibid., 30 May 1924.

helped my husband to treat the grain at night.... And I used to help him with that. Sometimes I helped him to clean the grain with the fanning mill." She eventually had five children, however, and felt that her inside work "was enough at that time...."[27]

Helen Gillespie remembered that neither she nor her husband thought she should do any outside work. "I never went out in the field like women do then, I don't like it. He didn't like it." She said that there were women who worked outside, but, similar to Cohen's argument about the rigid division of labour in Ontario, "nobody in New Brunswick ever did that, work outside. I never was expected to go outside to do anything." She stated clearly that she "never did the milking, he didn't believe in that." She did not mention whether she was involved in the subsequent steps in butter production, although it would be safe to assume that she was; it was an activity men apparently never engaged in, and it was performed indoors.[28] She never specified who was responsible for the outdoor tasks when her husband had to be away on business, although it was at those times that most women were temporarily responsible for the outdoor chores.

Joan Hartell recalled that she did all the cooking and baking as well as milking the cows; she churned "a good many pounds of butter" but liked churning and did not consider it hard work. When asked if she thought her husband "appreciated her work", she replied "Sure he did" and agreed that he worked "pretty hard too."[29] While Kathleen Strange loathed the care and feeding of the chickens, which were "considered the natural duty of the farm housewife," she also wound up responsible for the milking for two years and detested it. Only a nasty kicking by two cows eventually freed her from the chore.[30]

Mary Wyndham occasionally worked outside, when it was necessary, but did not like it or see it as her responsibility. She wrote "Spencer 'cocked' up all the hay that was

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27 Cumming.
28 Gillespie.
29 Joan Hartell, PAA Eliane Silverman fonds 81.279 #60.
30 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, pp. 46-48.

down. I did the raking. We were both over there all day. I am not much good tonight."[31] A few years later, having helped with the hay for a few days, she wrote "I helped sweep hay this afternoon - the last I shall have to help with."[32] Two years later, she wrote that she "Left all my morning work and went out when Spencer did. I raked while he mowed. I had all my morning work and the ironing to do this afternoon."[33]

This last comment by Wyndham indicates that, although there were times when the outside tasks were pressing enough that her assistance was needed, she felt that her work also needed to be done. The dictates of the weather and urgency of the harvest regularly required that many women had to lay aside their own work to help outside: tasks like haying and harvesting "were both labor intensive and tightly time constrained; mobilizing a large enough labor force to complete them quickly was essential to the success of the farm." Some men would help with tasks like laundry which "required more sheer muscular strength than most of their own farm labor,"[34] but women had to help outdoors far more often than men helped indoors. Even in the coldest winter months, when the only outdoor tasks involved the care of whatever livestock was on the property, few women found themselves with a full-time assistant.

That there were "definite asymmetries in the degree to which women and men helped each other with the tasks for which each was distinctly responsible" is obvious.[35] The outside work often had to be done by every available worker because it was tightly time-constrained, as well as being the form of production most obviously oriented towards the market. It seems possible to speculate, however, that the outdoor work for which men were responsible, was likely perceived as important not just because of the constraints of time and weather, but because it was the form of production which was most visibly profitable. The inside work, for which women were responsible and which

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31 Wyndham, 28 August 1914.
32 Ibid., 23 September 1919.
33 Ibid., 26 August 1921.
34 Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, p. 186.
35 Ibid.

varied less from day to day, was not visibly profitable for the farm. While women and men likely agreed that getting the grain in as quickly as possible was important, they might well have disagreed about the importance of tasks like laundry and housecleaning. Little conflation would be needed to arrive at the conclusion that men's work was important to women and men, but women's work was important only to women.

In a telling evaluation of her own labour, Hazel Cuyler recalled that "in those days food was cheap if you didn't count the work. We always had vegetables, eggs and butter and milk."[36] Kathleen Strange, shortly after arriving on the homestead, became convinced that "no one ... works harder than a farm woman, not even the farmer himself. Usually, too, she has no conveniences, and not even the mechanical aids that her husband has to make his work lighter in the fields."[37] While on a trip home to England she disputed friends' suggestions that a farm woman's life was one of endless drudgery.

> Drudgery! That is a word with many connotations. What is drudgery to one person may not be drudgery at all to another. I had plenty of hard work to do on the farm, of course, and multitudinous chores, but I had ceased to think of them in the light of drudgery. For the most part I enjoyed them. Even getting up at five o'clock in the morning, and feeding a large flock of chickens before breakfast, can be a most agreeable and even inspiring task when one gets up to the bluest of blue skies, the clearest of fresh, bracing air, and when one knows and loves the living things one is working with.[38]

Later, when she and her husband moved into town, she compared the situation of the farm woman favourably with that of city women. "On the farm I was a real partner with my husband, sharing with him in almost every detail of his daily work. Now his work is carried on in a downtown office, with professional help. There is little I can do now to assist him."[39] It must be noted here that she considered herself a partner when she shared the details of "his" work on the farm, whereas he could conduct his work without her after they moved to the city.

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36 Hazel Cuyler. Glenbow Archives M6013.
37 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, p. 43.
38 Ibid., p. 276.
39 Ibid., p. 292.

After Charlie Bowlus' death in January, 1925 Harriet and her daughters tried to have a full-time hired man year-round instead of just seasonally, as though with Charlie gone it was now considered necessary. Although Ruth had experience at slaughtering, for example, Harriet mentioned that their hired man's father came to help him "kill a hog for us."[40] When finding and keeping a reliable full-time man proved to be an ongoing difficulty, however, Ruth continued to handle the "chores" with occasional help from neighbouring men or her sisters.[41]

From then on, Harriet's comments about her and her daughters' fatigue became more common, like "Hattie cut kindling again. Makes her look pale." Another day she wrote "Hattie and Ruth have headache but worked all the time." After a Ladies' Aid meeting at their house, she noted "We are very tired this morning. Did a little of everything. This is one of the days that dont [sic] count."[42] In 1927, shortly after her 70th birthday, she wrote "I only did the house work." During a bad dust storm more than two years after Charlie's death, she wrote "Girls having hard time doing the chores and looking after the new lambs. wonder why I did not leave the farm It is spoiling the family disposition." A few weeks later she noted that the girls were "late with chores. Sheep are so much work."[43]

She also started noting the many instances when she thought her daughters were working harder than the men. A few months after Charlie's death, during sheep shearing season, she recorded "We got up at 5 but the men did not get up until 15 to Seven."[44] Two years later, when a male renter was on the property and apparently supposed to be doing some kind of work, Harriet wrote

> Ruth & I worked on blankets for Mary K. Bauer
> Ruth went to town with butter and Hattie did all the milking to nite.

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40 Bowlus, 4 March 1925.
41 See, for example, Ibid., 29 March and 9 May 1925.
42 Ibid., 9 July 1925, 25 March 1926 and 18 June 1925.
43 Ibid., 15 March, 18 April and 8 May 1927.
44 Ibid., 28 May 1925.

> Bessie washed dishes made beds etc worked all day
> Renter did not work today.[45]

She did not consider bad weather an adequate excuse, as she wrote a few months later, "Misting ... Girls doing chores Men not working."[46] For two consecutive entries she noted:

> Men doing nothing. here for their meals Girls worked outside all forenoon.
>
> The work is hard for the girls in stormy weather.
> Men in cottage here for their meals.[47]

She seemed particularly irritated when "Girls doing chores men never think of offering to help." It remained a problem, as she wrote the following May "Girls did the chores. Men in cottage."[48] Apparently she did not consider herself in a position to ask or tell them to work, even though she was technically their employer.

In many ways the Bowlus family diary provides the only opportunity within this study to discuss male attitudes towards female work, because it was kept first by Charlie. Even within the group of diaries and memoirs discussed here, this diary reveals a very atypical family, perhaps due in large measure to the fact that they had five daughters and no sons. Charlie Bowlus assigned a cash value to his daughters' work, for example, and paid Ruth a total of four dollars for two days' work during the 1920 harvest.[49] His daughters also had independent financial dealings with him over cattle, sheep, and land revenues. He recorded in early 1918 "Ruth & Verna each rec'd $19.35 for their pigs - one each -"[50] and two years he noted paying four of his daughters their share of the rent money from another section of land.[51] He and Harriet also appear to have considered

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45 Ibid., 16 July 1927. Emphasis in original.
46 Ibid., 29 September 1927.
47 Ibid., 5-6 November 1927.
48 Ibid., 17 November 1927, 13 May 1928.
49 Ibid., 20-21 August 1920. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine if this is comparable to what Charlie paid hired male help.
50 Ibid., 7 January 1918.
51 Ibid., 5, 22 and 24 November 1920.

each other full partners, as he wrote after the 1920 harvest "Mother & I spent all eve figuring over our cattle business for past four yrs" and indicated separate dollar amounts for each of them.

The diary also hinted at some interesting confrontations between Harriet and her son-in-law Ernest, revealing a clash between female and male opinions over the way the farm and stock were to be handled. The following series of entries was written by Harriet while Charlie was away on one of his business trips.

> Milk fallen off half. E. says he was not to feed cows chop. That Papa did not.
>
> E said that he was told to feed barley bundles to the colts.
>
> E. started to pick stone at 10-30 & in afternoon.
> I am not making any more suggestions.[52]

Another cryptic remark in Harriet's hand appeared a few years later after Charlie's death, suggesting that the tension between the two was never resolved: "E. If I were you I would have an Education."[53] When Ola and Ernest decided to sell up and return to the States, Ernest came over and Harriet "paid him what he claimed that Papa owed him."[54]

This brief glimpse of two men's attitudes towards women and their work is a rare opportunity; the women's pages of three main contemporary farm journals (*The Grain Grower's Guide*, *The Farm and Ranch Review*, and *The Western Producer*) offer a better opportunity to discuss what farm women were articulating about their own work. These pages reveal a clear sense that farm women recognized both the volume of their own labour and its value, but were particularly circumspect about discussing their outside work. They might have entered the masculine space of the fields regularly, but in the women's pages, the publicly appropriate division of labour was almost always maintained.

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52 Ibid., 6-8 April 1919.
53 Ibid., 20 September 1925.
54 Ibid., 16 February 1926.

Women's awareness of how hard they worked inside the home is evident from the constant reappearance of the topic of labour savers. In March 1916, *The Grain Grower's Guide* sponsored a contest in which women were to send in descriptions and sketches of how they re-organized their work spaces to maximize efficiency. The winning articles stressed saving as much time and energy as possible by rearranging work spaces and equipment, to save steps and time previously spent rummaging for things. One woman rearranged her pantry, adding shelves and storage cupboards for specific items, while another rearranged everything in the kitchen around the one fixed cupboard which had to serve as the kitchen cupboard.[55]

The Farm and Ranch Review's women's page "In The Country Home" published an article in 1917 called "Save Labor and Conserve Health," in which the author declared that "the women of the rural districts have always had an uphill fight, and probably always will," but could improve their situation if they made "more of a stand for their own good." It is interesting to note that she took care to stress that she did not want "to plead the cause of selfishness," or imply "that men on the farm have indulged themselves and neglected the women," but only wanted "to impress on our women readers that they in their homes have a duty to perform to themselves, and their family through themselves...." It is as if she felt she needed to counter from the beginning any supposition that a woman who refused to suffer her burdens quietly was automatically being selfish. She went on to bemoan that fact that, while electricity was "looked upon as an absolute necessity" in the city, most farm women were still doing without. She concluded that once electricity was available, a whole range of labor-saving devices would become available to the farm woman.[56]

In May 1918, the editor of the "Women's Department" of *The Guide* wrote on "Conserving Woman-Power." Just as Sarah Roberts and Kathleen Strange had to convince the men to acquiesce to their demonstrations of domestic control, this author

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55 *The Grain Grower's Guide* (*GGG*), Winnipeg, Manitoba, 29 March 1916.
56 *The Farm and Ranch Review* (*FRR*), Calgary, Alberta, 20 December 1917.

also emphasized male cooperation. She stressed that women and men had to work together to start saving the energy and health of farm women, and that any "extra work" this might involve for the men would immediately improve the situation of

> the already over-worked farm woman. Any device which will save her work this year should be favorably considered by her husband and no effort spared to install it. Any kind of power in the world is preferable to the expending of so much woman-power. Woman-power has operated the household implements for too long.... Why not conserve what is left and substitute something else?[57]

A few years later *The Guide* asked its women readers what they would do with $1000 if it was given to them on the condition that it be spent to make their life on the farm more happy and contented. Almost all of the respondents said they would use the money to improve their working conditions in the house. Not surprisingly, 70% said they would purchase a water system, a cistern, or an indoor pump for the house, and the next most popular item was a power washer. The winning letter stated

> One of the farm wife's greatest bugbears is washday. The average farm wife does her washing by a hand washer, and when she has to wash for a large family and hired help, the task is overly strenuous for the good of her health. My first expenditure, then, would be in a power washer and wringer. A washer and wringer with an engine to run them would cost $100. [58]

She added that the engine could also be used for "other work, such as running the cream separator and churn, etc." Other smaller labour savers were also popular wishes, and yet only 4% said they would use part of the money to hire domestic help. This may reflect the fact that hired domestic help was extremely hard to come by on the prairies, but it also suggests that farm women accepted the responsibility for the work, no matter how taxing, but did not accept that they should be worked into the ground as a result.

In 1924 *The Guide*'s "Countrywoman" encouraged farm women to get "new notions" about their work so as to avoid falling into a rut and accepting "conditions as

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57 *GGG*, 1 May 1918.
58 Ibid., 11 October 1922.

inevitable. Why should anyone work in a woman-killing kitchen for years without rearranging the equipment so that the various processes can be carried out with the least expenditure of energy?" She exhorted her readers "to prevent the appalling waste of woman power that is going on in many farm homes today" by using their "ingenuity, by exchanging ideas with others, and by reading magazines...."[59]

Besides discussing various ways of improving their working conditions, farm women were quick to correct what they saw as common misperceptions of their lot, and here again there was a very clear sense of the value of their contributions to the farm. In February 1921, for example, "The Countrywoman" (the new name of *The Guide*'s women's page after September 1918) published a series of replies to the Department of Agriculture's recent report which apparently had included comments about the "drudgery" of farm women's lives.[60] One woman wrote "Of course the farmer's wife has a full day; most days are full for the efficient woman who is not satisfied to fritter away her time." Another responded that one of the "fallacies" behind most of the talk about the hardships of farm life was the assumption that it was a "husband's business ... to support his wife in idleness...." A particularly interesting response which echoed Kathleen Strange's contention about her partnership with her husband was, "The farmer's wife is her husband's business partner. In town or country the heads of the firm don't count their hours at the business." One woman argued that the real problem was the economic challenge of farming, and she declared that

> If governments would stop worrying about the lack of running water and electric lights and do some constructive worrying over the fact that in recent years the excessive freight rates consume sometimes one-third of the farmer's returns for his produce, and that while he may sow $2.50 wheat, if he reaps at all he is as likely to reap $1.00 wheat, I have a hunch that the farmer would see to it that his wife got the labor savers she needs.[61]

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59 Ibid., 15 October 1928.

60 While the sources of the various letters were not given, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of them came from Alberta, and the consistency in the responses suggests that provincial divisions may not have made a great deal of difference.

61 *GGG*, 23 February 1921.

Another example of the value farm women placed on their own experiences was provided in March 1922, when *The Guide* asked its women readers "Would you, in light of your experience as a farm woman, advise your daughter to marry a farmer?" They received 440 letters, 360 in favour and 80 against; the answers provide some of the best articulations of women's honest appraisal of their work as it affected their lives. One woman wrote that the farm wife and her husband "are very dependent on each other for society; their work and interests are bound up together, and the things that are 'worth while' they plan together." She felt that another advantage was that the farm woman "has the opportunity of making money in her own home ... and it gives one such a lovely feeling of independence to cash one's own cheques." Another replied that

> We are prone to compare the financial position of the farm wife with the city wife of only the very successful business or professional man, which is not exactly a fair comparison. In our own home I have the power of attorney to write cheques on my husband's general bank account. Besides this I have the butter and egg money to use for household expenses.

A third writer declared that "A woman in the country counts for so much. In the city she is only one of thousands."[62]

In July of 1924 *The Progressive*'s (later *The Western Producer*'s) women's page published a small article in which a farm woman "figured up all the work she had done in the 30 years of her married life." Her list included preparing over 230,000 meals, churning 5460 pounds of butter, and more than 36,000 hours of housecleaning. She estimated "the worth of her labor conservatively at $115,485.50," and while the article concluded that the woman had never collected any of that money, "she swears she still loves her husband and her children and wouldn't mind starting all over again for them."[63] The note of incredulity in the closing line suggests that the writer cannot believe that the farm woman would really do it all over again. At the same time as it expresses the significance and value of their work, the short article still manages to reinforce the idea

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62 Ibid., 12 July 1922.

63 *The Progressive* (later *The Western Producer*), Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 10 July 1924.

that women are supposed to do all this work without getting paid because they love their families.

One of the more pessimistic notes was sounded in *The Guide* in October 1926, when an author warned that women had only two weapons: "labor and sex." A woman can go to work and earn her own money to buy the things she wants, or charm a man into providing them for her. The married farm woman, however, "has neither of these. Her labor is taken for granted, she works without wages. Her charms are supposed to be bought and paid for by a wedding ring. She is accepted as a rightful possession. So the married woman whose husband will not help her to happiness is without defence." The author predicted that farm children of the future were all going to leave the farm, and asked "Do you think the next generation of women are going to accept the life of isolation, work and drudgery we have? We'll be dead, I suppose, but I can see a new era dawning ... when the wife will have her own share of the farm's earnings to spend as she sees best, with some leisure, some friends, a few good times."[64] This kind of cynicism was extremely rare, however. Women were allowed to politely if firmly ask for help reducing their workloads, but not express more fundamental concerns about the whole system.

It is also curious to note how rarely these pages discussed women's outside work, how infrequently a major portion of many women's workloads was ever mentioned in a public forum. Even when it was mentioned, the examples used were from the shared space of the barnyard, the grey area of work which was neither a strictly feminine nor strictly masculine responsibility. Women did not discuss in a public space the frequency with which they entered the masculine world of the fields. In 1926, for example, *The Guide*'s women's page had started a question-and-answer box to serve as an ongoing forum for discussion and helpful strategies to problems encountered by the writers. In the first of these "Mrs. R.B." of Saskatchewan asked if other readers thought that women

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64 *GGG*, 15 October 1926.

should do outside work, referring only to milking cows, when they had more than enough to do inside. It was her opinion that "the state of culture in the farm home drops very rapidly when it is necessary for the woman to do outside work, but I would like to have the opinions of other farm women on this subject."[65]

The following month *The Guide* printed the responses: 50 agreed that women should help with the milking and other outside work if they are suited to it, 36 were against it, and 26 answered that it depended on the circumstances. One respondent, although she only mentioned having helped her husband to seed "two years ago" and the rest of her examples involved work around the barnyard, said that housewives need fresh air just as much as men, and that it "is a great help to know how to take hold and do all these chores" if the "good man is sick." She noted that she had "all the modern conveniences" which gave her "more time to help my husband outside," and concluded that she and her husband "work together. If I am sick he can clean the floor, or do any one of the many duties around the home. Our secret is co-operation."[66] Examples of this kind of debate were uncommon, however, even though many women were doing considerably more work outside than milking the cows. Why, then, was it farm women's outside labour that these pages were largely silent about? The answer has much to do with the social imperative to maintain the appearance of the publicly appropriate division of labour.

Many women deviated considerably from strict gender divisions of labour on their own farms, but participated "in cooperative labor" and represented their own labour in the public spaces of the women's pages "in accordance within the roles deemed appropriate to the community." A woman "might 'help' her husband with the haying on their own farm," for example, but certainly would never have joined the haying crew that "went round from farm to farm...." It is this highly gender-specific cooperative work and its

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65 Ibid., 3 March 1926.
66 Ibid., 1 April 1926.

representation which characterize the "public gender division of labor."[67] On each individual farm it generally did not matter who was actually doing the work, as long as it got done; what mattered a great deal was who was seen to be doing it, and this throws into question the extent to which women would have been publicly recognized for their outside work.

Simply performing tasks outside which might be gender-marked as "masculine" would do very little to improve a woman's position, because the system of rewards depends on the social relations which organize production.[68] Assuming that the power distribution in a family is based on each individual's "relative contribution to the family income" does not take into account the fact that "patterns of authority within families" determine who does what. Labour and power relations shape each other "dialectically within the gender system": gender hierarchies which place men above women and vest the majority of legal and economic authority in men also affect the perceptions of the value of men's and women's labour. A task "might be devalued simply because women customarily performed it." Notions of gender and value are therefore not abstractions external to the family or the allocation of tasks, but are in fact "expressed and embodied in the concrete labour of women and men."[69]

The fundamental issues of control of labour and land ownership clearly must not be obscured behind the image of the "family farm." Within this discussion of Southern Alberta farm women, however, control and ownership must be considered separately, because the debate over "the significance of patriarchy in women's lives" must revolve "around whether or not women *perceive* patriarchy as oppressive."[70] Most farm women obviously did not perceive any such oppression in their lives, given the number of times they argued that they would have all the labor-savers they needed if the government

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67 Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, pp. 217-218.

68 Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 5.

69 Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, pp. 141-143.

70 Heidi I. Hartmann, "The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework." *Signs* Vol. 6, No. 3 1981, p. 387. Emphasis in original.

would just give farmers a fair deal. Most women believed themselves to be equal partners with their husbands, equal partners in the "family farm," and insisted that farm men suffered as much as farm women. They believed that they had far more than just the right of consultation in decisions over the allocation of their labour, its products, and the farm's resources.

This perception of partnership and control would be sorely tested, however, when the issue of who legally owned the farm and its resources became contentious during the struggle to obtain better property rights for Alberta women. Except for independently wealthy single women, men were the only possible legal owners of farmland, machinery, and any profits. The basic principles which govern the organization of labour "are based on who does and who does not own the means of production: ownership implies not simply possession but all the social institutions developed to recognize property rights. How property relations are recognized by society is most directly evident in the laws which protect property relations."[71] In Alberta throughout this time period a married woman whose husband was still alive could not legally own property, and had no legal "say" over the product of her own labour. While the male head of the family was clearly a part of the "family farm's" labouring unit, his position within that unit was "distinct" in that it was his name on the deed, and any surplus or profit "produced by the non-waged workers who did not share in ownership was, in effect, expropriated by the owner."[72] The crucial test, then, of the expanded and equitable gender roles as married farm women perceived them, came when their gender construction encountered the considerably less flexible political and legal discourses of the day.

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71 Cohen, *Women's Work,* p. 44.
72 Ibid.

Chapter 3

In 1921 *The Guide's* "Countrywoman" wrote that "women who saw the importance of the home as a unit of the state now see that the affairs of the state are affairs of the home."[1] Coming as it did one week before the federal election, this epitomized the maternal feminists' argument that women's domestic gifts were just what the contemporary nation-state needed. At the same time, however, it justified women's presence and participation in the "masculine" world of politics. Many of the farm women of Southern Alberta, already familiar with the "masculine" work of farming, entered the world of politics through the United Farm Women of Alberta.

The wives and daughters of farmers were first officially admitted to the four-year old United Farmers of Alberta in 1913, and the women formed their own Auxiliary in 1914. By the end of that year there were already 23 locals, with a membership of over 700; a Provincial Executive for the Women's Auxiliary was formed in 1915. The U.F.W.A. became an autonomous organization in 1916, and membership climbed rapidly, reaching a peak in 1921 of 4536 members in 309 locals.[2] The number of locals would continue to grow throughout the 1920s, although the total membership declined.

The organization addressed the concerns its members had as farm women: such issues as health care, education, young people's work and reform of existing legislation dominated the agenda through the late 1920s. It was within and through the U.F.W.A. that these women articulated their expanded, yet still coherent, construction of gender. Just as the organization's goals reflected farm women's individual and collective notions of womanhood, its successes and failures had as much to do with prevailing gender norms as with the prevailing political climate. The U.F.W.A. was relatively successful in

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1 *GGG*, 30 November 1921.

2 Eva Carter, *The History of Organized Farm Women of Alberta*, (Edmonton: The Douglas Printing Company Limited, 1954), pp. 23-24.

areas traditionally marked as "feminine," like health and education, and less successful when its aims clashed with the dominant, masculine legal and political discourses.

Two characteristics of the farm women's organization which were evident from its inception were the social contact it provided and its "public" political action. Many writers have emphasized the former rather than the latter. In 1916, the U.F.W.A.'s Provincial Secretary Leona Barrett wrote that "this club movement among farm women grew out of a felt need and that need was primarily for some form of social intercourse."[3] The women who were involved with the U.F.W.A. in its first decade had various reasons for joining, not the least of which were the much-needed social gatherings. Mary Edey recalled that the United Farm Women always had "Really nice meetings. And we'd take our turns taking lunch. After my children got bigger I used to go to those and then maybe I'd pick up a lady on the road or she['d] pick up someone else and we'd all ride in one car."[4] Numerous letters to the women's pages of the day emphasized the importance the regular meetings had for women who spent most of the year on the farm with only their husbands and children for company.

Historians have also tended to emphasize the U.F.W.A.'s social and "mainstream" aspects, those activities more in keeping with traditional gender roles, rather than its more radical activity. Eva Carter, the official historian of the U.F.W.A., wrote in 1954 that the "principal aspect of rural life in those days was the natural instinct of new settlers ... to seek social intercourse with their neighbours for worship, for entertainment, for exchange of ideas relative to production and distribution methods, and the setting up of local machinery as related to rural schools and municipal affairs."[5] She went on to insist that the "Farm Women's Organization grew primarily out of a need for some kind of social intercourse. The monotony and isolation of farm life, with its consequent restricted

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3 *FRR*, 5 February 1916.
4 Mary Edey, p. 22
5 Carter, *The History of Organized Farm Women of Alberta*, p. 15.

opportunities for recreation and development of social services, was the despair of many a keen-minded farm woman."[6]

Howard Palmer, author of a recent history of Alberta, stated that the U.F.W.A. began "to provide social contact, and improve rural health services and education." He did note that the United Farm Women, in conjunction with other women's groups in the province, were "crucial in the fights against inadequate housing and poverty, and for better public health and child welfare."[7] He concluded, however, that "their interest in women's rights was secondary" because their "need for social ties and their economic role in the pioneer farm enterprise gave them a strong agrarian identity,"[8] as if the two were somehow mutually exclusive.

In a 1979 thesis on women in the farm movement Leslie Robinson also contended that rural women's organizations "grew primarily out of a need for social contact rather than from a feminist ideology." She insisted that the "work they performed was largely charitable, an extension of women's home role and similar to work traditionally done by women's community organizations." She argues that, although feminist interests were "present," they "were nearly always secondary to concerns for health care, the study of home economics, and educational improvements."[9]

At the same time, however, many of the United Farm Women realized how much they could accomplish by working together. Indeed, it seems likely that while many scholars have understood the organization by differentiating between their social and political activities, the farm women who were involved did not perceive a significant difference. Both kinds of activities and reasons for getting involved in the first place could be accommodated within their gender construction. An observer at the 1915 U.F.A. convention where the women organized their provincial executive noted that "from the first it was quite evident that these women had a distinct need and had come

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6 Ibid., p. 17.
7 Palmer with Palmer, *Alberta,* p. 182.
8 Ibid., p. 181.
9 Robinson, "Agrarian Reformers," p. 47.

with a purpose.... It was clear from the first these women realized the power of union...."[10] In the organization's first ten years as an autonomous body they tackled issues ranging from better health care to property rights for married women.

Both Palmer and Robinson made passing references to some of the more progressive interests of the farm women, but these are generally assumed to have been secondary to their "maternal" and "reforming" interests. Palmer noted briefly that Irene Parlby, President of the U.F.W.A. from 1916 to 1920 and minister without portfolio in the U.F.A. government elected in 1921, was "outspoken in issues of importance to women, especially those in the United Farm Women of Alberta. These issues included a minimum wage for women, mothers' allowances, homesteads for women, married women's property rights, and children's welfare."[11] Robinson suggested that the "need for self-sufficiency on the pioneer homestead required the farm wife to step beyond the role of housekeeper, although this task was indispensable as well.... [T]he topics of farm budgeting and economics were popular fare in the women's pages of the agricultural journals."[12] While even the raising of many of these issues would have had a major impact on rural gender relations, these historians have emphasized the social contact which the U.F.W.A. provided. Yet their interest in women's rights, their social activities, and their activism in areas like health care were all part of a coherent, flexible construction of gender.

Why have the U.F.W.A.'s progressive efforts on behalf of farm women been relegated to secondary status, obscured by their involvement in the organized farm movement as a whole, on the insistence that their "agrarian identity" superseded an interest in women's rights? Perhaps contemporary historians are less able to understand the coherence of their gender construction, as well as the extent to which the farm women's more radical demands were modified when they entered the public forum.

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10 *FRR*, 20 February 1915.
11 Palmer with Palmer, *Alberta*, p. 233.
12 Robinson, "Agrarian Reformers," p. 11.

Many women certainly cared more about the social activities than the political agenda, but the organization continued to address both until the mid-1920s.

Another difficulty with historical interpretations of the U.F.W.A. rests with the gendered notions of "power" and "influence." Current definitions of "power" are limited almost exclusively to the political and military realms; male politicians are said to have "power," while female reformers have "influence." These definitions are clearly operating behind much of the writing on the United Farm Women. The U.F.W.A. has gained historical recognition from their involvement with "significant" (i.e. "public") gains, like the suffrage campaign, or when they have supported the aims of a larger, male organization, like the United Farmers of Alberta. They seem to be particularly worthy of note if they were "influential" in areas of the public sphere traditionally associated with maternal reformers, such as health care and education.

If, however, the definition of power is expanded and fundamentally shifted to include the notion of agency, of having choices, and of exercising a measure of control over one's own decisions and environment, then the U.F.W.A. and the farm women who were involved are suddenly thrown into a different critical light. By organizing and working together on their own behalf, farm women could use their organization to provide a strong voice for their less traditional and restrictive gender construction.

John Mack Faragher has noted that a "romantic notion of a sexually egalitarian rural environment has strongly influenced the modern feminist imagination,"[13] and this romanticized egalitarianism has been evident not only in much of the historical writing on the U.F.W.A., but much of the historiography of pioneer women generally.[14] After all, if the farm women were already operating in such an egalitarian environment, then it is easy to downplay or obscure the significance of their less traditional activities. Discussion of the U.F.W.A. is often limited to their involvement with the suffrage movement, because

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13 John Mack Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America." *American Quarterly*. Vol. 33, No. 5 (Winter 1981) p. 540.

14 See the debate in Chapter 2, above, of the effect women's work had on gender roles.

the organized farmers generally supported votes for women and the three prairie provinces were the first in Canada to do so. Palmer has stated that the "struggle to obtain the vote for women in Alberta was neither long nor arduous" because their "crucial role ... in pioneering, and the consistency of the suffragists' social vision with that of other reform movements, garnered widespread public support...." He also suggested that the organized farm men supported votes for women "partly because, as the influential *Grain Grower's Guide* argued on November 19, 1913, farm wives as 'fellow partners ... in the arduous work of making homes on the prairies' deserved political equality with men."[15]

Many farm women themselves articulated a strong belief in their equal partnership with their husbands, and for these women the U.F.W.A.'s "political" agenda likely had little appeal. The rather distinct limits of this "equality and partnership," however, become obvious when one looks at the areas in which farm women were successful in struggling for changes, and where they were not. Farm women received the vote largely because the organized farm men believed that they could "double the farm vote" if their wives could vote. An editorial in a January 1916 *Grain Grower's Guide* noted that an "encouraging feature" of the recent convention

> was the interest shown by the women delegates in questions which are generally supposed to be outside "woman's sphere." But the women are to have the vote shortly and in all probability the provincial franchise will automatically entitle the women to vote also in federal elections. For this reason there is not now any question of public importance upon which the women should not be as well informed as the men. This very fact will mean a greater interest and a more rapid growth in the ranks of the farmers' organizations in all three provinces.[16]

While it is likely true, as Robinson suggested, that "each farm woman was fully aware that the success or failure of the farm enterprise depended in part upon her contribution,"[17] it is less evident that the farmers necessarily agreed.

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15 Palmer with Palmer, *Alberta,* pp. 177-178.
16 *GGG*, 26 January 1916.
17 Robinson, "Agrarian Reformers," p. 13.

The suggestion that their agrarian identity or class interests took precedence over their identity as farm women is not borne out by their desire to be a separate organization. While the push to become an autonomous organization was led by Irene Parlby, "the creation of a separate, autonomous women's group reflected a strong desire among rural women for full status as an integral part of the farm movement, rather than an adjunct to it, which the terms 'auxiliary' and 'section' implied."[18] As one woman recalled, "The first year it was the Women's Auxiliary to the United Farmers. The next year, Mrs. Irene Parlby was provincial president. She said in no way were they going to be an auxiliary: that they would take care of their own organization and would not be just an arm of another...."[19] While the women of Pibrock did not form a separate U.F.W.A. local until 1927, when they did start recording their own minutes the word "Farmers" was crossed out of the "United Farmers of Alberta" minute books and "Women" added above.[20] Alberta's farm women wanted to be a part of the farm organization, but take their place as organized farm women on an equal footing with the men.[21]

As the observer at the 1915 Convention noted, "the need for perfect freedom in discussing all subjects" was a priority for the women, as were "the probable good results of in some way joining themselves to the men's union."[22] Gaining independence meant that the U.F.W.A. could set its own agenda, and have "free and open discussions on a full range of issues that were of particular concern to women and which might otherwise have been directly or indirectly suppressed by the men."[23] At the annual conventions the

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18 Catherine Anne Cavanaugh, "The Women's Movement in Alberta as seen through the Campaign for Dower Rights." Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1986. p. 48.

19 Silverman, *The Last Best West*, pp. 182-183.

20 Minute Books, Sunniebend local, Glenbow Archives, M 8004, Box 1. This cannot be taken too far, however, as the locals were often called "clubs" by the secretaries and there does not seem to have been any organized objection to *The Farm and Ranch Review* calling its page "Country Women's Clubs" when the men's organizations had their own, properly titled page.

21 The fact that the men apparently saw things differently is suggested by the response of U.F.A. Executive when, in 1920, it was asked to rule on the specific nature of the relationship between the two groups. The executive concluded that the U.F.W.A. was "regarded as a committee or Section of U.F.A. proper." Minutes, U.F.A. Executive Meeting, June 1920, Glenbow Archives microfilm.

22 *FRR*, 20 February 1915.

23 Cavanaugh, "The Women's Movement in Alberta," pp. 48-49.

groups met simultaneously but separately; the women were free to vote on U.F.A. resolutions, but the men could not vote on U.F.W.A. resolutions.[24] This certainly suggests that a separate identity as organized farm women was an important feature of the U.F.W.A. from its 1916 inception.

Faragher has argued that "historians have not heard rural women because they have listened to the powerful, not the powerless."[25] This interpretation, however, rests on the limited, traditional notion of power, one that defines power by such public markers as political and economic control. Nancy Osterud has suggested instead that many historians fail "to recognize rural women's actions as feminist" because they did not "proclaim that women's and men's interests were opposed, but rather espoused a vision and practice of gender integration."[26] "Feminism" remains a problematic term even today, and many of the writers mentioned above are using it in the sense of expressing women's and men's interests as mutually exclusive. In this context, however, it would clearly be more useful for the term to delineate any actions taken by women on their own behalf, to improve their own situation without necessarily being determined to worsen that of men.

The farm women who were involved in the U.F.W.A. did not set out to overthrow the dominant gender system. They wanted to maintain the connection to the U.F.A. as a separate-but-equal organization, and used what resources were available to them to try and reshape rural Alberta's gender relations "in the direction of mutuality," while simultaneously working to improve the overall quality of farm women's lives.[27] They drew the men into their activities, for example, by organizing community socials and fundraising events. These joint social functions did little to challenge the existing gender system, because the women generally organized them, prepared all the food, and cleaned

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24 It was this particular arrangement which led to the request in 1920 that the relationship between the two groups be clarified, see n.20 above.

25 Faragher, "History from the Inside-Out," p. 538.

26 Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, p. 286.

27 Ibid., p. 10.

up afterwards. Nevertheless, farm women were able to use the U.F.W.A. as their own organizational base to expand their role within the larger farmer's movement, and this did contribute to their successes.

The U.F.W.A.'s primary areas of interest and activity were health, education, young people's work, and reforming existing legislation, particularly the civil and property rights of married women. None of these concerns was specific to the United Farm Women; they had been taken up previously by other women's organizations in the province, but the farm women brought a distinctly rural perspective to the issues. Various articles in the newspapers throughout 1916 set out the U.F.W.A.'s extensive activities and ambitious plans. The first Secretary's Report noted that they were co-operating with the University of Alberta's Extension department to bring lantern lectures and circulating libraries to remote districts, working with the Department of Education to improve rural schools, and "furthering the efforts of the Department of Agriculture toward increased production, better quality of farm products, and at the same time trying to increase the attractiveness of the farm and to show boys and girls the desirability of the life close to nature.... More than that," she concluded,

> we are striving, along with the U.F.A., to bring about better economic conditions, so that a degree of comfort as a reward for labor may be attained.... There is no restriction in our organization on what we may discuss. Free Wheat and Better Agricultural Credit are not taboo. Our interests extend beyond the four walls we call home to the larger home which is our own Province, our fair Dominion, and the world.[28]

Her evocation of women's centre of power, the home, was, no doubt, quite deliberate. It soothed any fears that women might be abandoning those homes en masse by stressing that women's maternal concerns naturally extended out into their "larger" homes.

An article in *The Grain Grower's Guide* in May of 1916 expanded on the Secretary's statement of purpose by printing a full list of the "Objects" and "Platform of

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28 *FRR*, 20 April 1916.

the Women's Section." The "Objects" included furthering "the knowledge of the members and their families along social and economic lines, with a view of elevating the standard of living in the rural communities," encouraging "the co-operative method of distribution of farm products, and the supplying of staple commodities," beautifying the home, increasing the efficiency of the "homekeeper," and working for better provincial and Dominion legislation for women. The "Platform" stated that "The Women Grain Growers" advocated such causes as the pro-temperance "Banish the Bar," "Women's Franchise," "Co-operation," and "Just Legislation."[29]

All of these interests were reflected in the enormous amount of activity in the early years of the organization, faithfully recorded in the reports the local secretaries sent to the women's pages of the farm journals. Many of these reports also contained interesting asides which indicate that some women were aware of the "progressive" nature of many of their interests, as well as the differences between their organization and the men's. For example, in December 1916 *The Guide* reported that the Winona local had discussed "Proper Procedure at the Polls" at their last meeting, and the next topic was to be "Laws Governing Canadian Women." The report went on to note that "This club is a regular patron of the University Traveling Library. We always look for unusual and strictly progressive ideas from Winona."[30] In October 1918 *The Farm and Ranch Review* reported that the Delacour U.F.W.A. had been incorporated on September 14. They had also hoped to organize a men's local that evening, but did not do so because "there were two locals within easy reach of that point.... The Delacour ladies we are glad to note are not lacking in initiative, and are evidently very much alive to the possibilities of their organization."[31] Occasional remarks such as this suggest that many United Farm Women saw themselves as being more aware of the potential of organized action than the United Farmers.

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29 *GGG*, 17 May 1916.
30 Ibid., 6 December 1916.
31 *FRR*, 21 October 1918.

There are also comments in these reports which indicate that the United Farm Women did see themselves as equal partners in the agrarian movement, "reshaping" the "ties that bound them to men so that, instead of enforcing women's subordination and segregation, those ties provided a basis for gender integration and more equal participation in decision making."[32] The last Secretary of the Women's Auxiliary wrote in her 1916 report that her involvement with the farm women "has given me a great deal of pleasure, and I have been thankful every day for the great privilege of being able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the United Farmers of Alberta."[33] Provincial Secretary Mary Spiller, in her December 1918 annual report, noted that

> Women to-day as enfranchised citizens, are responsible for the welfare of the Province just as men are, and our farm women must play their part in bringing about conditions in the rural communities which are as near to ideal as it is possible to make them. This can only be accomplished by the closest co-operation of the farming people themselves, both men and women, working together shoulder to shoulder in the ranks of their own organization.[34]

The rhetoric of egalitarianism demonstrates the farm women's genuine belief in their positions as partners in the agrarian movement. Rarely exhibited was any sense of a hierarchy where "farmer" carried more weight than "farm woman."

The farm journals always reprinted the proceedings, speeches, and resolutions for the members who were unable to make it to the annual Conventions, which helped publicize the U.F.W.A.'s activities. The 1918 Convention, for example, passed several resolutions including equal parental rights and equal pay for equal work, although there is little evidence that these resolutions ever went much further.[35] A report in *The Farm and Ranch Review* on the 1919 Convention said that the problems discussed "were not presented in the abstract, they were backed up with actual experience, and behind them all was a dominating dauntless spirit of the pioneer woman who had at least a real bone of

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32 Osterud, *Bonds of Community*, p. 251.
33 *GGG*, 26 January 1916.
34 *FRR*, 20 December 1918.
35 Minutes, 1918 Convention, U.F.A. Annual Report.

interest and an earnest desire to use this organization to make brighter the lives of the rural women of Alberta."[36]

At the 1920 Convention, Parlby noted in her Outgoing President's Report that the "political movement" had developed a great deal of interest among the farm women, and she suggested that "education along political lines should be one of the chief lines of work for the immediate future." She cautioned, however, that the political work should not be taken up "to the exclusion of the community work which we have as an organization been trying to do. Remember that without the educational structure which has been developed with so much labor, so much thought and so much care, this political movement could never have taken place."[37] The Annual Reports and newspaper articles over the next few years indicate that the women did not let the educational and community work suffer, even when they chose to press their claims in the political arena.

The areas of health care and married women's property laws, in particular, were of great interest to the farm women as individuals and as a group. Struggling for provincially-funded municipal hospitals and obstetrical training for nurses was a major concern because the farm women were generally much further from medical care than women in small towns and the growing urban centres. Maternal and infant mortality rates were high during these years, a fact which did not escape the notice of neighbouring women. Emma Rowe, for example, noted local births and deaths in her diary, and from 10 December 1912 to 27 January 1915, a period of only 26 months, she recorded the births of five babies, and the burials of three.[38] In the space of four days during an outbreak of "Infantile Paralysis," or polio, Harriet Bowlus recorded the sudden deaths of three children in their area.[39] If these experiences were shared by many farm women, it is little wonder that improved medical care was such a pressing concern.

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36 *FRR*, 5 February 1919.
37 U.F.A. Annual Report, 1919, p. 81
38 Emma Rowe, 10 December 1912 - 27 January 1915.
39 Bowlus, 29 January - 1 February 1928.

In 1917 the U.F.W.A. Convention passed a resolution asking for the establishment of municipal hospitals. In 1918, largely as a result of pressure from the women's groups in the province, the provincial government created a Department of Health, and a resolution was passed at that year's Convention asking that this new department, instead of local hospital boards, decide where new hospitals were to be located. This move was taken in an attempt to increase the chances that the more remote districts would be considered for new hospitals, and in 1919 the United Farm Women helped other women's organizations to convince the provincial government to start funding municipal hospitals.[40]

Kathleen Strange discussed the controversy which surrounded the building of a Municipal Hospital in Stettler in the early 1920s, and noted that her "own home was divided on the subject." Her husband was against the hospital on the grounds that it would bring higher taxes, and he felt that most people "could be well enough looked after in their own homes...." She countered that although babies "had been, and still were, successfully brought in to the world in farmhouse kitchen tables, who knew how many had been lost, and how many mothers had suffered perhaps for years afterwards, because of it?"[41] She was pleased that the area did get its new hospital, particularly as her second child was born there.

Besides working for new and better hospitals, the U.F.W.A. struggled to get special obstetrical training for nurses. They realized that the remote rural areas were not at the top of the list for new hospitals, but hoped that they could at least get trained nurses in the remote areas to help with childbirth. The question of midwives was raised at the 1919 Convention, as it had been at previous conventions, and that year the U.F.W.A. passed a unanimous resolution "urgently" requesting "that registered nurses be permitted to qualify as midwives, wherever needed as such and that the Government undertake to supply both medical practitioners and service nurses prepared to act as midwives

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40 Palmer with Palmer, *Alberta,* p. 182.
41 Strange, *With the West in Her Eyes*, p. 267.

wherever needed in all those districts not supplied by independent workers...."[42] There was a good deal of governmental opposition to this request, but Parlby was able to report in 1920 that "the Government finally passed legislation providing for the training of a certain number of these nurses at the expense of the Government."[43]

While some concrete advances were made in a relatively short space of time, rural medical and nursing aid remained a concern for farm women throughout the 1920s. There simply were not enough trained nurses or medical practitioners to service the vast amounts of prairie that were quickly being settled. Nevertheless, these were programs and changes that had a direct impact on rural women's access to medical care. Success in areas like health care, however, proved to be easier to come by than in the considerably more contentious area of married women's property rights.

The earliest struggle for property rights for women had included the call that women should have the same access as men to the homestead land. Any man over the age of 18 could apply, while only single women with enough money to purchase land outright or women who were the head of a household with dependents under the age of 18 could gain title. As late as the 1919 U.F.W.A. Convention, a resolution was passed requesting "that Homesteading privileges be extended to women on an equality with men."[44] This campaign, however, was soon bogged down in discussions of federal-provincial land jurisdiction, and the focus shifted to the fight for dower rights.[45]

While the campaign for dower rights in Alberta was initiated by organizations like the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Alberta Council of Women, the rural women "took the lead" after the U.F.W.A. became autonomous in 1916.[46] It provided a "strong, organized voice for women" and the United Farm Women "proved to be a

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42 U.F.A. Annual Report, 1919, p. 95.
43 Ibid., p. 82.
44 U.F.A. Annual Report, 1920, p. 98.
45 Cavanaugh, "The Limitations of the Pioneering Partnership: The Alberta Campaign for Homestead Dower, 1909-25." (Canadian Historical Review, LXXIV, 2, 1993) p. 199-200.
46 Cavanaugh, "The Women's Movement in Alberta," p. v.

political force which could not easily be ignored...."[47] Their most significant contributions towards improving the legal status of women were in the area of married women's property rights. As farm women they had a greater stake in the recognition of these rights, and the U.F.W.A. quickly expanded the parameters of the debate. This issue eventually forced them to confront directly existing gender relations and the inequality between women's and men's relationships to the land, and it was here that they advanced most explicitly their vision for greater equality between farm men and farm women.

The United Farm Women were not entirely without support for their more "progressive" claims in the area of married women's property rights. A 1916 editorial in *The Guide*, for example, somewhat incongruously titled "Justice For Our Mothers," noted that while "Western women" would soon have the right to vote,

> they do not by any means enjoy equality with the men. There are many, many laws on our statute books that unjustly discriminate against our women and these must be removed before our civilization will reach the high plane which we all desire. If there was any doubt in any minds as to the wisdom of granting the women their full rights before the law, their action in the present war has shown them equal in every way to the men. We hope to give more attention in *The Guide* henceforth to the problems of our women on the farms in the West, and to assist them in bringing about better conditions for their sex as well as to improve economic and social conditions for the general welfare of the community.[48]

As early as 1915 the United Farm Women passed resolutions calling for a dower law which would guarantee a woman a share of her husband's property when he died, and calling for legislation which would prevent a farmer from disposing of the property without his wife's consent.[49] At their 1917 convention, they discussed a resolution whereby a wife would receive all of her husband's property upon his death if there were no children, and if there were children for them to share equally.[50] It was tabled at that time because of uncertainty over the proper legal wording of such a petition. When the

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47 Ibid., p. 49.
48 *GGG*, 29 March 1916.
49 U.F.A. Annual Report, 1914, p. 39.
50 U.F.A. Annual Report, 1916, p. 143.

resolution was proposed at the 1918 convention, it asked that "the law be amended so that it shall not be possible to deprive [the wife] of a larger share by will than she would have been deprived of had her husband died intestate."[51] When this resolution made it to the men's convention, it apparently caused "considerable discussion" and the suggestion was made that it be changed to read "deprived of more than two-thirds".[52] It was this wording, guaranteeing a woman only one-third of her husband's property, that was eventually passed. While the issue of female suffrage had received early and sustained support from the United Farmers, the men did not generally support significant improvements in married women's property rights. They treated it "largely as a women's issue," and therefore perceived it as being "limited to proceedings conducted within the U.F.W.A."[53]

In 1917 the Alberta provincial government did pass a Dower Act, which was largely modeled on the American homestead dower. It granted a married woman a life estate in the homestead after the death of her husband, and also provided that a married man could not sell, lease, or in any way encumber the homestead without his wife's written consent. At the time, this was one of the most progressive dower acts in the country, and was heralded by many women and men as the last step in making Alberta women truly equal to Alberta men.

Farm women were not the only critics of this Act but they soon became the most vocal, because it really "only went part way in recognizing the wife's interest in land she had helped to develop."[54] While it did go "further than any previous legislation in guaranteeing the married woman's interests in the family home," the Act fell far short of giving married women equal property rights. Firstly, it did not create a property right in the wife that she could deal with in her own name, so she could not sell, mortgage, or even will the homestead to her children. Secondly, the Act only specified a life interest

51 U.F.A. Annual Report, 1917, p. 315.
52 Ibid., p. 217.
53 Cavanaugh, "The Women's Movement in Alberta," pp. 48-49.
54 Ibid., p. 53.

in the home quarter; the widow was not recognized as having any interest in the rest of the property. Thirdly, homestead dower as laid out in the 1917 Act did not include chattels or moveables. In short, a farm woman had no legal right to keep or use the furniture in the home, the farm equipment, or even any seed after her husband died. The same legal system which could not comprehend a single woman's capacity to homestead also could not recognize a married farm woman as being capable of retaining the land she had helped to develop. She was granted the right to keep an empty house and a piece of land about the size of a few modern city blocks, and could not even sell it to feed herself. The "family home" was protected, but a woman was left without the means to support the family.

The provision preventing husbands from disposing of the homestead without the wife's written consent was a more significant gain, but this provision was interpreted very narrowly in the courts. It was also soon realized that many women might be placed in a dangerous situation if they refused to sign away the homestead when their husbands wanted them to. Some changes were made to the Act in 1919, but they reflected the narrow judicial interpretations of the Act and only served to water down the original intent of the 1917 legislation.[55]

While some of the other women's organizations continued to work for better protection for women by pushing for changes to the existing dower law, rural women soon changed the terms of the debate by calling for the far more controversial principle of community property. Whereas earlier resolutions had called for a "dower law" which would guarantee the wife a share in her husband's property, at the 1920 Convention the U.F.W.A. passed a resolution demanding, among other things, that "all property of both or either shall be considered joint property unless it can be shown that it is not."[56] The resolution was referred to the U.F.W.A.'s Executive Board, to be considered with the U.F.A.'s legal advisor, John Brownlee, in attendance. Brownlee, an urban lawyer who

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55 Ibid., p. 59.

56 Minutes, U.F.W.A. Convention, in U.F.A. Annual Report, 1919, p. 124.

became Attorney General in 1921 and Premier in 1925, thought "it was unwise for women to insist on absolute equality with their husbands in regard to all property, as it would remove the protection" he believed was afforded them by the existing Dower Law.[57] Nevertheless, the United Farm Women remained hopeful that, with the U.F.A.'s victory in the 1921 election, the new government would help them accomplish this goal.

In 1922 the U.F.W.A. passed a resolution calling for the abolition of homestead dower and the statutory recognition of the principle of community property. The concern for protecting the family home had become a claim to full and equal property rights, insisting that what the husband and wife had acquired through joint effort should be recognized as being jointly owned.[58] While this resolution was endorsed by the U.F.W.A. and U.F.A. Conventions over the next four years, no progress was made on the issue at the provincial level until 1925. Once in the Legislature, the U.F.A. government had "quickly put the reins on any radicalism" and, knowing they had to be seen to be able to govern for urban as well as rural voters, frequently ignored resolutions which came from the Convention floor.[59]

In April 1925, however, Irene Parlby, having been elected as a U.F.A. member in 1921, introduced Bill 54 "An Act Establishing Community of Property as Between Husband and Wife" into the Legislative Assembly. The Bill was reprinted in full on the women's page of *The Western Producer* on October 29, 1925, and Violet McNaughton urged her readers to study it carefully. Bill 54 proposed that all property owned by the wife before marriage or acquired as a gift or as part of an inheritance after marriage, was to remain her separate property, as was the husband's. All other property acquired by either husband or wife, or both, during the marriage, including any profits from the separate property of the husband and wife, was to be considered community property. The Act did not go so far as to deny the husband's right to manage and control the

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57 Minutes, U.F.W.A. Executive Board Meeting, 24 January 1920.
58 U.F.A. Annual Report, 1921, p. 39.
59 Palmer with Palmer, *Alberta*, p. 217. I am indebted to Jim Hansen for this observation.

community property, but he would not be allowed to "sell, convey, or encumber the community real estate" unless it was a joint action by him and his wife, and the wife was to be asked apart from her husband if her consent had been freely given. Upon divorce or the death of either spouse the property was to be equally divided.[60]

Other than the clause maintaining the husband's right to manage the community property, the bill Parlby brought before the Legislative Assembly was revolutionary. For the first time in Alberta an elected member of the government was insisting that a woman had her own property right to the community estate she and her husband had developed since being married, and a right to property she had acquired before her marriage or had inherited since.

On the same page in *The Western Producer* as the text of Bill 54, there was a letter from "Martha" who felt that the majority of farm women would hesitate to support the kinds of reforms Parlby was suggesting, because

> the keynote to our economic problems to day is co-operation, not coercion, which principle is being applied in most cases to home life also. It is not only the farm women who are suffering from insufficient remuneration for hard work - the men, too, have had to work hard for years, without sufficient returns from the farm to pay them a decent wage for work done, and I am sure most farm women are making willing sacrifices to help things along. Legislation along that line may be necessary in isolated cases. On the whole co-operation is, I believe, being put into practice in the home where most reforms begin. Let us do all we can to help co-operation ... and our economic status will not need legislation to have equal rights in the home.[61]

Other than this letter, there was little discussion about Bill 54 on the women's pages of any of the major farm journals in the months following its publication. In June of 1926 *The Western Producer* published a letter which expressed support for Parlby's bill and frustration at the apparent lack of interest. "A Progressive" wrote to her "Sisters" that she was

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60 *The Western Producer*, 29 October 1925.
61 Ibid.

> disappointed ... that more women have not written to the page regarding Mrs. Parlby's work for women. Surely there are more women on the prairies that feel the injustice of the Canadian laws regarding what she should earn after years of hard work and broken health. What we call the Dower Act is poor compensation for the woman who has worked side by side with her partner in life and raised a large family. Surely she should have something to say regarding what she has helped to accumulate jointly. I understand the reason why these laws have not been changed is that women have not complained, but have just plodded along under the yoke. Now that Mrs. Parlby's work will make a better standard for the Canadian woman -- let us co-operate along these lines to make a better and a higher standard for the next generation. I think the question deserves some discussion.[62]

As it was, the bill was referred to a committee. The lofty principle of partnership had a good deal of support, but the pragmatic details proved to be more controversial.

The committee was headed by Parlby and included such women as Magistrate Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, then convenor of laws for the National Council of Women, and a woman barrister from Edmonton. After two years of research into property laws around the world, the committee tabled its report in March of 1928 and recommended that the bill not be adopted. The two major criticisms were that the bill constituted the husband as head of the community property, and that "a wife's earnings, her wages, and her profits from her separate estate," would fall into the community estate and thus under the control of her husband. Besides that, "public opinion in Alberta, particularly among women," was against it. The claim that their "property should be withheld entirely while they share in the husband's" was "an unfair position. There should be an equal sharing of both assets and liabilities." The committee did make other recommendations, like legislative recognition of "the economic value of a wife's contribution," but these were not acted upon.[63]

Nevertheless, Bill 54 did represent a real accomplishment for the United Farm Women because they "had succeeded in raising public awareness of the disabilities imposed on the married woman. By their persistent attacks on oppressive sexually

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62 Ibid., 3 June 1926.
63 *GGG*, 2 April 1928.

discriminating property laws they forced a debate on the condition of women in marriage." Although the women's movement in Alberta was divided over the issue of community property, once Parlby was able to get it before the Legislature the issue was harder to ignore.[64]

In 1926 the U.F.A. government passed new legislation "aimed at eliminating some of the more objectionable defects in the existing Dower Act," but in fact did little else but revert back to the intent of the 1917 Act. The one significant change was that the wife was given a life estate in her husband's personal property, so that now she could keep the house and the furniture.[65] By this time, however, many farm women had lost faith, seeing existing legislation as far too narrow. The more radical nature of Alberta's political climate only a few years earlier was being tempered by the mid-1920s, and the provincial government remained dominated by conservatives.[66] As it was, federal legislation was finally changed in 1930 to allow women to take up homesteads, but there was little land left, and farming was rapidly becoming an unprofitable venture.

In effect, it was Alberta farm women's faith in the principle of partnership which forestalled radical changes to property laws. Their construction of gender was both coherent and flexible enough to permit the articulation of a wide range of concerns, including attempts to challenge and change the deeply-embedded patriarchal system of land ownership. Their notion of what it meant to be a "woman" did have its limits, however. Most women were generally very uncomfortable with any reforms which portrayed their interests as being contrary to those of their husbands. The U.F.W.A.'s successes and failures reflected prevailing gender norms as well as the dominant political and legal discourses of the period.

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64 Cavanaugh, "The Women's Movement in Alberta," p. 78.
65 Ibid., p. 66.
66 Palmer with Palmer, *Alberta*, p. 218-219. I am indebted to Jim Hansen for this observation.

Conclusion

The editor of the women's page for *The Guide* wrote an article in 1921 which neatly summed up what the farm women saw as the continuing need for their own organization. She wrote that she had heard the remark, "Oh, some day your farm women will get so progressive that they will not want an organization apart from that of the men," but questioned whether or not that would actually constitute progress. When she read the resolutions to be discussed at the upcoming U.F.W.A. convention, however, and "discovered that the first four had to do with the proposed co-operative wheat pool," she found herself wondering "if we were coming to the place where farm men and farm women would want to meet together to discuss things of common interest."

There was a long way to go, however, before women in Alberta would enjoy political and economic equality with men, and a long way to go before "women's interests" would be subordinate to class interests. She went on to note that the

> difficulty to date has not been that women were not interested in the affairs that might be said to be men's affairs, but that men are less interested in affairs that are said to be women's. When we get men resoluting on better babies' subjects, on medical inspection in schools, on district nurses, on the hot-noon-lunch, and the hundred other things that are going to occupy the attention of the women's organizations at the coming conventions, then we can wonder if the day of the separate organizations has passed - and, incidentally, speculate that progress has been made.[1]

In many ways this article encapsulated the contemporary perception many women had of their own gender role, their own identity as "women." They were concerned with "the affairs that might be said to be men's affairs" because they had to be and because they were genuinely interested. Their construction of gender was flexible enough to accommodate "men's" and "women's" affairs, and they were quite accustomed to discussing both sorts in their conventions and monthly meetings. Farm women were still

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1 *GGG*, 12 January 1921.

going to be concerned with better babies' subjects, medical inspection in schools, district nurses, and hot-noon-lunches. Their diaries and memoirs indicate that they still valued attractive and comfortable homes which reflected their own personalities, even if "home" was a sod shack. They still valued female companionship and an afternoon spent quilting, even if they had to travel off a large farm to do so. Cleanliness and modesty were still desired goals, and standards were still to be maintained and monitored. In short, most married farm women displayed in almost every way the accepted, respectable femininity of a "woman."

But Southern Alberta's farm women also worked, both inside and outside the home. Much of their labour was physically demanding, and a task as common as washing the family's clothing could require a great deal of ingenuity and patience to complete. Similar to the labour of a working-class woman, every aspect of farm women's reproductive and productive labour, inside and out, was necessary for the survival of the family and the "family farm." Just as women had long been interested in the affairs of men but the men had yet to reciprocate, women worked outside because they had to and wanted to but men worked inside only occasionally. At an individual level a woman's gender was flexible, and this flexibility would have been absolutely necessary for survival; she had to step outside or expand or resist the dominant discourses surrounding "womanhood." Most women articulated a knowledge and appreciation of the value of their work in their diaries, yet their "outside" or market-oriented production was all but invisible in the women's pages.

The "public" construction of gender and the rhetoric of the "family farm" obscured a very real aspect of many women's lives by making it difficult to bring the volume and value of a farm woman's work into the public view. At the individual level this work was generally absorbed into a woman's construction of gender. At the broader social level of the farm journals, however, few women spoke of the outside labour they performed, and concentrated on articulating their strategies for overcoming new

challenges to traditional tasks. A gender construction which accommodated outdoor work might be coherent at an individual level, but it was much less comprehensible and acceptable to broader societal norms.

This gender construction broke down when it encountered the less flexible discourses of patriarchy and patriarchal control of resources. When the official political voice of the United Farm Women of Alberta began articulating a broader construction of "womanhood," the flexibility and coherence of their construction met the rigidity of legal and political discourses which retained the more limited view of a woman's place. While the individual constructions of gender on the farm, and the construction the U.F.W.A. tried to articulate at the political level, were coherent, there was a fundamental gap in the articulation and reception. Women on the farm knew they worked inside and out, and knew the value of their contributions to the farm. Within the forum of the farm newspapers, socially accepted gender roles dictated that women's outside work take a lower profile. When it came time to advance their political aims, Alberta's farm women discovered that traditional roles remained firmly entrenched in the political and legal discourses of the day, which did not recognize women's fundamental contributions to the development of the farms. The struggle to reform the legislation affecting the property rights of married women "was a direct assault on arbitrary male privilege that guaranteed sole possession of family assets to the husband," and that fight "raises fundamental questions concerning family relations to reveal patriarchy preserved on the prairies."[2] As the writer in *The Guide* perceived it, the continuing difficulty was that farm men were less interested "in affairs that are said to be women's."

Canada's homestead policies were not designed to recognize a woman's ability to farm, or even the right to try. Farm women then struggled, through the U.F.W.A., to get a dower law which would guarantee them some share of the homestead in the case of their husband's death. Narrow legal interpretations of these laws, however, soon

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2 Cavanaugh, "Limitations," p. 199.

convinced them that they had to try to get legislative recognition of their contributions to the business of farming. The heady political climate of the early farmer's movement in Alberta convinced them that they had a chance of succeeding, but the prevailing legal and public discourse remained unchanged. Women's activism in areas traditionally regarded as feminine, like health care and education, was largely successful and resulted in the foundation of much of Alberta's current social system. Their attacks on the patriarchal system of landholding, however, were less successful.

In 1927, the U.F.W.A.'s president Mrs. R.B. Gunn said that the organized farm men and women were "the warp and woof of a fabric inextricably woven."[3] Constructions of gender and gender relations are fundamental to any social fabric; they affect women's personal spaces, their experiences and valuing of work, and the way women enter the political discourse. Alberta's farm women may have been able to alter their notion of what it meant to be a woman and expand "womanhood" to accommodate a wider range of experiences, but did not and could not remove it from the fabric of their time and place.

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3 *GGG*, 1 February 1927.

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