

Raising Chickens: Women and the Emergence of Poultry Production

An historical look at the role of women in work once woman-centered

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Prior to receiving the CSWS Graduate Student Research Grant I'd spent six months conducting ethnographic fieldwork on two large-scale, industrialized chicken farms. This always led to interesting reactions when people asked what I did for a living. Many people expressed disgust, curiosity, surprise, or they just cut to the chase and asked if I was now a vegan. As a social scientist, I am always looking for patterns in people's behavior, but I found no correlations between people's responses to my work and their identities. In fact, people's responses to my project seemed quite random, except for one group of people: backyard chicken keepers.

Backyard chicken keepers don't care if I'm a vegetarian, or if I found industrialized farming to be disgusting. Instead, they want to know if I know why their hens won't lay, how they can treat coccy, or why their chicken won't cross the road (from the chicken's perspective there is no other side). They seek out practical knowledge of animal husbandry because they are stumped by the difficulty of raising poultry. This was an interesting contradiction to me. How did farmers figure out how to raise thousands of chickens to slaughter while the backyard hobbyists I spoke with could barely coax two hens to keep them supplied for omelets and the occasional roasted chicken?

I knew I needed to go to the past to answer this question. With the support of the CSWS grant, I spent the summer of 2015 in the archives of the Shiloh Museum of Ozark History and the University of Arkansas Special Collections piecing together the early history of chicken farming in Arkansas, a poultry production epicenter and the site of my earlier ethnographic work. Prior historical research on this topic in North Carolina and Delaware demonstrated that women were the early pioneers of chicken farming, and I was optimistic that I'd find the same pattern in Arkansas. With grant money in my pocket, I traded the dusty, fecal-scented air of the chicken house for the musty, windowless environs of the archives and got to work.

Written and archaeological evidence demonstrates the presence of the chicken on the North American continent at the time of colonization. Flightless birds that could eat scraps and survive boat journeys proved to be hearty travel companions to seafaring imperialists, and chickens have been a part of American farms for centuries. However, like much of social and work life, their meaning, care, and usage is gendered. And, as I discovered, poultry work was women's work

in Arkansas until the middle of the twentieth century.

The museum and university archives revealed a wealth of information. One of the earliest poultry programs began in 1914: The Pig and Poultry Club. This club helped secure financing for children's purchase of piglets or chicks with the goal of reducing dependence on cotton as a cash crop and diversifying farm production. Boys often entered into hog production, while girls tended to gravitate toward poultry according to various records of club activities. In 1916, Northwest Arkansas' first round of successful commercial broiler production (that is, chickens raised for meat and not eggs) was undertaken by a high school student, Edith Glover. Although this history is somewhat disputed, because many farmers wanted to claim the title of "first successful broiler farmer," various sources point to young Edith as the broiler pioneer of Arkansas. While the information from this time period is scant and fragmented, women's early contributions to Arkansas' burgeoning poultry industry are significant, yet often overlooked, in published accounts of this history.

The 1914 Smith Lever Act provided matching federal funding through the US Department of Agriculture to support agricultural demonstration work at the county level, with the goal of improving profitability and diversification of farm enterprises in the United States. Given that farming was the dominant occupation of the time, it makes sense that the federal government would take a distinct interest in promoting and improving productivity in this sector. This funding provided support for County Demonstration Agents, who were male and (largely) worked with white men, and Home Demonstration Agents, who were women and worked with white women. African Americans were served by "Negro" Demonstration programs which were funded for less time and with less money. Thus, from the outset, the USDA Demonstration Program was gendered and racialized.

USDA Cooperative Extension Records housed at the University of Arkansas Special Collections provide unique evidence of how programming was geared towards women's work on the farm and in the home from the outset of Extension work. Early demonstrations show that poultry was distinctly women's work in Arkansas from the turn of the century on. In a handwritten letter from 1929, Mrs. Earl D. Jones writes, "Gardening and raising chickens took most of my time". A 1934 scrapbook of work in Carroll County



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details women's involvement: "The poultry industry, which has been considered heretofore, as the source of 'pin' money for the home has developed into an industry in Carroll County of much revenue. The women have taken up the study of breeding, cultivating and care of the flock and have made such progress in the work that exceedingly high producing flocks have been developed. The hen in Carroll County has been bred up to such an extent that she now pays the bill to keep up the family. A number of poultry culling and brooder stove construction meetings have been held during the year."

Clippings from agent Blanche Elliott's home demonstration work in 1930 indicate that she gave demonstrations on culling, sanitation, starting baby chicks, and eggs to women across multiple Arkansas counties. During this time, club women also exhibited their eggs and chicks at county courthouses, demonstrating the effectiveness and need for continued funding for Home Demonstration work, which was voted on yearly by county judges. As prices for row crops declined during the Great Depression, it was frequently women's poultry production that secured the profitability of the family farm, often making women breadwinners in their families.

Home Demonstration programming changed through the years, shifting as women's roles changed from farmer-producers to rural consumers. By the late 1950s, poultry-related Demonstration programming addressed navigating the meat counter at the supermarket or learning how to cook meals in the oven, a big change from just two decades prior when home demonstration agents were teaching women how to hatch chicks and treat poultry diseases. In the 1960s, independent poultry auctions closed in Arkansas, reflecting the shift to privatized poultry production. Today, there is no public poultry futures market, as poultry is produced via private contract in a closed market.

In many ways, the successes of Arkansas farm women led to their marginalization as poultry

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production industrialized: as poultry became more profitable, it became a less feminized agricultural enterprise. Today, the percentage of poultry farmers who are men exceeds the percentage of farmers overall who are men, a radical shift from poultry's women-centered beginnings. A combined analysis of my ethnographic, interview, and archival work will shed light on how the historical trends I've unearthed in the archives connect with the current conditions of industrialized agricultural production observed during my ethnographic field work.

So how did we get to a point in poultry husbandry where millions of chickens can be produced on a yearly basis with very few farmers? We got here through a combination of the ingenuity of farm women, robust governmental financial support and outreach, and the tireless work of Demonstration agents who sought to improve farm women and children's life experiences by bringing more money and nutrition into the home through diversified production based on scientific principles. While marketing, transport, and the development of urban markets for chicken were (mainly) pioneered by men, none of it would have been possible without the improvements in poultry husbandry spearheaded by women.

Today, poultry Extension agents are mainly at the beak, I mean beck, and call of the major poultry production corporations; they generally do not initiate new programs or challenge the status-quo. Instead of taking their direction from constituents or the USDA, they intervene in the farm when requested by these agri-corporations to do so. If one looks upon the contemporary agri-scape and feels that there should be some change in the way things are done, maybe turning to women and the state can provide some new answers for instigating change. In looking back, we might find a new way forward.

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