

WOMEN AND CHILDREN ON THE FARM

From “A Lady”—clearly a farmer’s wife—as published in *The New England Farmer* in 1852:

But there are those who sincerely believe, that no class of women in this country, do work so hard as the farmer’s wives. That circumstances often require this, it is useless to deny. But that a woman is constantly to work, and have no leisure, because she is a farmer’s wife, I do deny. A man who owns a small farm, is not required to hire much help, so that the labor of his wife is not very great. One who owns a larger one, and is required to hire help “out of doors,” if he manages as he ought, with economy and skill, will also be able to hire all needful assistance “in doors.” Where a man owns a large farm and is still unable to hire all needful help for his wife, we infer that there is an exception, and is not the general rule. Bad management, an avaricious disposition, or anything which tends to increase the burden of the wife, are wrong management somewhere, and this makes not necessarily the result of tilling the soil, but these same habits and traits of character would exhibit themselves in any other situation in life, and of course the result would be the same.

On New England farms from the seventeenth through the nineteenth-centuries, there widely observed gender boundaries that identified the fields and woods as men’s sphere and the house and garden as women’s sphere. Tillage crops, activities that required major physical force, the care of vehicles and large domestic animals, the handling of unprocessed raw materials, and the use of edge tools were customarily seen as the preserve of men. Domestic and child-rearing tasks, the care of smaller animals, the garden, textiles, cloth and needlework, the art and mystery of the dairy, were women’s realm. Men’s and women’s activities interlocked and depended on each other for the successful functioning of the farm, yet were primarily distinct.

Some tasks on the farm were substantially interchangeable as to sex (and age) such as gathering berries and nuts, picking squash and pumpkins; in the farmyard, men’s and women’s roles frequently overlapped in the feeding and handling of domestic animals large and small. When New England women did sometimes work in the fields, crossing a significant gender boundary, it was under the pressure of necessity. By far the most common occasion that put women in the fields was haying, the most urgent farm labor of all. The threat of a rain storm when hay was drying in the field sent every available hand to the field. This was in addition to the work she did in the “domestic sphere.”

Throughout the 19th-century New England women (and children) responded to the urgency of the haying season by going into the fields to rake, turn and load hay. A smaller number of women – largely those who were maintaining agricultural operations without men in their households - worked with livestock, sowed, cultivated and

gathered in the fields, dug potatoes and harvested corn, cut wood, and made minor repairs. With the exception of the heaviest, most traditionally male labor with plough, scythe, sickle or felling axe, it would certainly have been possible to see women undertaking virtually all other kinds of farm work. However, there is no evidence that women ever ploughed, used scythes to mow hay, used sickles to harvest “small grains” such as rye, oats, barley and wheat, or that they worked in the woods cutting timber.

School-aged farm children had farm chores to complete before going to school, which often included feeding the chickens and pigs. They may assist with milking the cows or collecting eggs. In early spring children would help to collect sap to make maple syrup, and later go to the fields to pick up the never-ending crop of rocks (Connecticut’s most renewable resource) to prepare the field to be tilled.