

## Anna Oleson

Deborah Fink

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1986 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

Fink, Deborah. "Anna Oleson." *The Annals of Iowa* 48 (1986), 251-263.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol48/iss5/2>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

# Anna Oleson

## Rural Family and Community in Iowa, 1880-1920

DEBORAH FINK

POLITICAL ECONOMY has historically shaped the ideology of the family.<sup>1</sup> In the middle nineteenth century the need for women's fertility helped to determine United States policies in promoting "family farms" of 160 acres. The government seems to have envisioned farm families in terms of a basic husband-wife pair, whose children would strengthen the farm workforce and populate the land. Federal census takers listed the man as head of the household; the man was the formal, legal head of the family. Women operated in the domestic sphere, while men handled commercial and governmental affairs. Numerous scholars have described the familiar pattern of a male-dominated public sphere in both rural and urban areas of the United States.<sup>2</sup> Without idealizing the agrarian past or minimizing the importance of legal equality for women, it is possible to find the seeds of an active, quasi-public traditional role for women of the last century. While law and custom limited women's sphere of interaction to family members and neighbor women, farm life shaped a broad

An earlier version of this article was delivered at the Missouri Valley History Conference in Omaha, April 1985. I thank Wilda Smith, discussant; Christie Dailey, panel member and editor of the *Annals of Iowa*; and two anonymous reviewers for comments on the original draft.

1. The use of the term "political economy" emphasizes that an economy arises out of a distribution of power. A given economy does not operate by natural or inevitable laws, but proceeds according to the interests of those who shape or control it. See Lisa Peattie and Martin Rein, *Women's Claims: A Study in Political Economy* (New York, 1983), 1-15, for a discussion of this concept.

2. See Elizabeth Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), and Ruth Gallaher, *Legal and Political Status of Women in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1918), for a history of male political dominance in the United States and more specifically in Iowa.

definition of family and family concerns. Assessing the breadth, as well as the limits, of rural women's social experience enables a more complete view of what has been lost, as well as gained, with modernization.

In 1883, at the age of fifty-one, Anna Oleson purchased 640 acres of farmland in O'Brien County in northwest Iowa, moved to the area, and lived there until her death in 1925. She was the core around which a Friends meeting and a Norwegian rural community developed. Her life demonstrates that the world of a woman, while focused on family, might yet encompass flexibility and power within a local community. Oleson had the power to shape community life even though her most significant interaction was with women and children rather than with men, who held the formal offices in both the meeting and the government. Historian Sandra Myres has suggested that western women participated in community life to a greater extent than did eastern women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> Although this study does not encompass a comparison of the roles of eastern and western women, it does indicate that Anna Oleson achieved a larger and more public position than is usually associated with women in the family.<sup>4</sup>

The "family farm" was not an automatic product of western development. Before European settlers arrived in Iowa, native Americans practiced subsistence agriculture with a different concept of land tenure and ownership. Later, Iowa land fell to private ownership by individuals or land companies. Northwest Iowa was not permanently settled by Europeans until the late nineteenth century. Although ostensibly some cattle ranchers had occupied the area and a few farmers had tried to farm earlier, not until the 1880s when the railroad was built and the farmers had

3. Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque, 1982), 174.

4. In addition to published records mentioning Anna Oleson, information on her was gathered during a year of anthropological fieldwork in O'Brien County in 1982. Rachel Henderson Hodgkin and Lydia Henderson Standing Thompson, granddaughters of Anna's sister, Rachel Ravnaas Meltvedt, were major sources of information on Anna Oleson. Rachel Hodgkin, born in 1892, and Lydia Thompson, born in 1901, lived in closed proximity to Anna Oleson until her death in 1925. In this article I have departed from my practice as an anthropologist and identified some of the proper names of people. For informants other than Rachel Hodgkin and Lydia Thompson I have followed the usual anthropological practice of not identifying specific names.

solved the grasshopper problem did permanent European settlers come. Promotion of this settlement was part of a larger plan to people the middle of the continent with individuals who maintained economic and political ties to the markets and other institutions of the East. By granting land to railroads in exchange for building railroad lines across the state and by establishing local units of government, the federal government laid the infrastructure necessary for populating the region with European cash crop farmers. Indian treaties and military removal of the native population eliminated the possibility of this independent subsistence-based farm economy in Iowa. The Homestead Act of 1862 granted 160 acres to each family head who would live on the land and farm it. While such a head of household could be a woman, in fact it was usually a married man.

The labor required to build a house, break the sod, and farm 160 acres was more than one person could provide, and the income would not support a paid workforce. It was crucial that the farmer have access to cheap labor, and this was what the family would provide. With women on the land as wives, the population would steadily increase. European women's fertility within the family, as well as their work in farming, supported the United States' continuing claim to the land. Consequently, their role as wife and mother was central to the development of the family farm policy. The Department of Agriculture articulated the primacy of the husband-wife farm family in its 1862 Agricultural Report.<sup>5</sup>

The average farm size in O'Brien County was just over 160 acres until after World War II. Although very little land in O'Brien County has homesteaded, settlers and land companies followed the government's farm leadership both in terms of the size of the operation and in terms of the relationship to the market. As taxpayers and commodity producers seeking to expand their operations, the European settlers were tied, from the first years of settlement, into the cash economy and depended on the agricultural policy formulated in Washington.

On farms of this type the basic household unit was the nuclear family composed of husband, wife, and children, as dis-

5. Joan Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, New York, 1981), 103.

covered more generally for the plains area by social historians Scott and Sally McNall. The McNalls have claimed that the extended family was a popular myth and that the basic structure of the family has remained the same since the 1860s.<sup>6</sup> But to find that the nuclear family prevailed as a residential unit is not the same as contending that the extended family was a myth. On the contrary, Anna Oleson's O'Brien County community was cross-cut with kinship ties basic to its social life. Repeatedly, brothers and sisters of one family married sisters and brothers of another family so that the kinship connections defy depiction on a flat sheet of paper. The operating definition of family was a large body of kin with vaguely defined outer boundaries, the "kindred" of anthropological terminology. Although individualism has been a much acclaimed frontier virtue, cooperation and mutual aid among households were basic for both physical and psychological survival in daily life.<sup>7</sup> Women maintained family ties to provide the links enabling households to take care of each other. The realities of living and farming in O'Brien County necessitated reliance on a larger family group than the nuclear family.

While a farm household centered around a nuclear family, many also included cousins, aunts, and grandparents in residence. Farms with a labor surplus sent teenage children to work on other farms. When the 1900 census was taken, the township in which Anna lived had 101 households, 50 of which had household members from outside the nuclear family.<sup>8</sup> The composition of the farm household was fluid as people moved according to economic and social contingencies. Anna Oleson's

6. Scott G. McNall and Sally Allen McNall, *Plains Families: Exploring Sociology Through Social History* (New York, 1983), 19, 304.

7. See Dorothy Schwieder, "Labor and Economic Roles of Iowa Farm Wives, 1840-80," in *Farmers, Bureaucrats, and Middlemen: Historical Perspectives on American Agriculture*, ed. Trudy Huskamp Peterson (Washington, D.C., 1980), 165, for a discussion of how Iowa farm women's socializing grew out of their domestic responsibilities. Seena Kohl, *Working Together: Women and Family in Southwestern Saskatchewan* (Toronto, 1976), 31-36, found that on the frontier in Saskatchewan cooperation and mutual aid were essential to survival and that women played a vital part in the social development that promoted this adaptive pattern.

8. This information was tabulated from the 1900 manuscript census for O'Brien County. The quality of these data has, however, been disappointing. Much of the information, including the names and kinship relations of Oleson's household, was in error according to other sources.

travels and her mutual support of kin and community members demonstrate how one woman played out the possibilities of this family system.

ANNA OLESON was born Anna Ravnaas in the parish of Strand near Stavanger, Norway, in 1832. She received the common education and at the age of twenty-four, having come in contact with Norwegian Friends and traveling Quaker ministers from the United States, she left for the United States with a group of young emigrants led by her cousin, Ole Tow.<sup>9</sup> When she reached the United States she worked for a short time as a servant in Illinois. In 1857 she reached the home of Eric Knudson, a Norwegian Quaker living in Salem in southeastern Iowa's Henry County. She worked in this household for a year. In 1858 she married Soren Oleson. Anna and Soren, looking for land to farm, traveled west to settle in Marshall County in central Iowa, the first Norwegians in what would grow to be a large Norwegian settlement. In 1864 they built a Norwegian Quaker meeting house, the Stavanger Meeting, in Marshall County. Ole Tow, with whom she had traveled to the United States, also joined this community. Another of the Norwegians who joined them in Marshall County was Anna's sister Rachel (Americanized from Ragnild), who came from Norway in 1866 with her husband, Knut Meltvedt, to take up farming alongside Anna and Soren. Anna's other sister, Inger Wiik, also apparently lived in Marshall County at some time, although she eventually returned to Norway. Anna had a core of kin around her in addition to her husband and the three children who were born.<sup>10</sup>

9. Written accounts of Anna Oleson differ on the details of her early years and her experiences with Quakers. According to her sister's son, Bart Wick, because of her frail health, Oleson went to Stavanger, Norway, to learn to be a seamstress and there she came into contact with Friends. Mary B. Henderson, an O'Brien County Friend who was related to Oleson by marriage, wrote that traveling Friends reached the parish of Strand, where Oleson was living with her parents, and it was in Strand that she made the decision to go to America. See B. L. Wick, *A Sketch of the Life and Services of Anna Olson [sic]* (Cedar Rapids, 1925), 3, and Mary B. Henderson, "Reminiscences of Anna Oleson," *The Friend* (1925), 600.

10. Biographical facts on Anna Oleson were published in a number of places. See B. L. Wick, *Life and Services*; Mary B. Henderson, "Reminiscences of Anna Oleson," *The Friend* (1925), 599-600, 614-15; *The Fortieth Anniver-*

Soren Oleson died in 1879. Anna, who had already been doing substantial farm work before his death, ran the farm herself with the help of her children. With three children to establish in farming, Anna sought western lands for more space. The railroad was completed to northwestern Iowa and untilled lands were being parcelled out. Her son Obadiah married a woman who had family members in northwest Iowa, and through this daughter-in-law Anna found a section of land. Selling her improved farmland in Marshall County she bought O'Brien County land and gave each of her three children 160 acres.

Although she moved to O'Brien County with her children, Anna almost immediately became the center of a wide group of kinsfolk, just as she had been in Marshall County. Historian Glenda Riley found that many pioneer women of Iowa managed to create women-centered social niches which provided a structural underpinning for their rural communities.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, while a woman played a central role in her household, the experience of Anna and other frontier women tends to negate the validity of the separation of the domestic circle from the wider socioeconomic realm.

This extrahousehold role of women was not unique to Iowa or the frontier: the roles of traditional Norwegian women held roots of this pattern. Like many rural Norwegians of the early nineteenth century, Anna's parents farmed, having a horse and a few cows and sheep and growing crops of hay, oats, barley, and potatoes. But the Norwegian peasant household went beyond farming. Anna's father made wooden shoes, her mother spun, the family cut and sold firewood, and they did some fishing for cod, herring, and anchovies. As Swedish ethnohistorian Orvar Löfgren has pointed out, the typical Scandinavian peasant was a "jack-of-all-trades."<sup>12</sup> The economy of Norwegian peasants was a household economy. Anna would have observed her mother

---

*sary of the First Settlement of Norwegians . . . In Marshall County, Iowa, 1898* (pamphlet in author's possession); Louis Thomas Jones, *The Quakers of Iowa* (Iowa City, 1914), 176, 179; Wilmer Tjossem, *Quaker Sloopers: From the Fjords to the Prairies* (Richmond, Indiana, 1984), 25-31, 60.

11. Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames, 1981), 173-76.

12. Orvar Löfgren, "Historical Perspectives on Scandinavian Peasantries," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 9 (1980), 191.

milking cows, keeping a flock of poultry, helping with the harvest, and spinning. Anna herself herded her parents' sheep. In the culture of Anna's youth, women were producers and they, as well as men, expected to participate in the Norwegian peasant household economy.

Not only did Anna observe women in the family being economically active in her youth, once in the United States she also saw the home and family as part of a major political event. During the period of her residence in Salem the Quakers of southern Iowa were transporting fugitive slaves from Missouri. Eric Knudson, in whose house Anna lived, was arrested under the Fugitive Slave Law and it is likely that the members of his household, including Anna, would have been aiding the escapees. Whether or not she was directly involved, the 1850s and Salem, Iowa, were a time and a place where daily life involved political actions and risks for the sake of the Quaker vision of society.

She followed these early experiences by assuming economic and social responsibilities throughout her life. Healthy and strong in her middle years, she did many kinds of farm work during the time she and her husband were farming in Marshall County. She also took an active part in decision making. In 1875 Soren traveled to visit his old home in Norway. An account of this travel claimed, "His wife cheerfully took charge of things at home, with rare business ability, and even had a barn erected on the place, and all paid for in his absence, which was a pleasant surprise to him, as he dreaded and shrank from such undertakings."<sup>13</sup> At another time, when they considered migrating to Oregon with a group from Marshall County, Anna vetoed the move. Her nephew quoted her as saying, "When I saw all the guns that Davidson placed in his covered wagon as a protection against the Indians, my desire to remove westward lessened, and I felt that [as] one of my peace loving profession, I must decline this tempting offer."<sup>14</sup> Anna seems to have made this decision on her own. The statement gives no indication that she had a husband who would also be part of the decision.

In O'Brien County, as the widowed mother of three grown children, she gained increased freedom and power. Her farming

13. Henderson, "Reminiscences of Anna Oleson," 615.

14. Wick, *Life and Services*, 11.

on the relatively inexpensive, newly settled lands of Iowa gave her economic means. These means, with her Quaker simplicity and frugality, provided her a comfortable living in her middle and later years. In addition to the expenses of moving and building, she paid three dollars per acre for her O'Brien County land, a total of \$1,920—a substantial sum. She was also able to lend money to other family members who were starting their farming.

Once in O'Brien County she drew a number of Norwegian and English Quakers to the area, once again establishing a Quaker community. She was an impetus behind the founding of the Paullina Friends Meeting in 1885. In 1886 she helped to establish a Friends day school in the homes of Paullina Friends; a school building was built in 1899. Anna unfailingly attended midweek meeting with the school children and some of the adults of the community.

Her sister and brother-in-law, Rachel and Knut Meltvedt, who moved to O'Brien County from Marshall County in 1885, were among the central Iowa Norwegians who followed her. The 1900 census schedule shows Anna living with them in a household of three. Through her Quaker connections she recruited to the area a Scottish-Canadian Quaker, Archibald Crosbie, who was a registered (but unpaid) minister, to the area. Following Crosbie was his sister's son, Archibald Henderson, who married Rachel's daughter Anna, and his daughter Jessie, who married Anna Oleson's son, Christopher. In addition to the Crosbies and Hendersons, who in turn attracted their family members to the area, Anna recruited a number of Norwegians from the Strand and Stavanger areas of Norway, most of them related in a distant way that no one today can exactly explain. She was also instrumental in attracting a small group of English Quakers from Rome, New York, to O'Brien County, and these people soon married into the existing community. Until World War II there was a great deal of intermarriage within the Quaker and Norwegian community as the kinship ties grew increasingly intricate. At the time of Anna's death in 1925 she had a kinship link with everyone in the Quaker meeting, and with many of the non-Quaker Norwegians in the area.

Anna's large family circle provided homes for her as she moved through the community. Her son, Obadiah, built a luxu-

rious farmhouse with elegant furnishings and became a gentleman farmer specializing in Duroc hogs. While he never formally left the Friends meeting, his wife was Presbyterian and he pulled himself away from the Friends community. He changed his name from Oleson to the English "West." Although Anna ostensibly lived with him, she declined to accept the way of life in a house which she regarded as too rich and elegant, and in practice she maintained no set residence. For her, the extended family seems to have taken some precedence over even her nuclear family. She moved among farms as she saw needs and opportunities arise, spending considerable periods of time in the homes of her niece and niece's husband, Anna and Archibald Henderson, and her daughter and son-in-law, Julia and Sam Norland. She also stayed in other Norwegian and Quaker homes. Two of Anna and Archibald Henderson's daughters, Rachel Henderson Hodgkin and Lydia Henderson Standing Thompson, born in 1892 and 1901, remembered that Anna Oleson often stayed with them in their room and they treasured her stories and her presence. Rachel Hodgkin said, "She lived with us a good bit of the time, but she'd go from place to place and do mending—especially when they were looking for a baby. She'd take care of the baby until it was six or eight weeks old. That . . . was the beginning of social work. She'd help them with their mending, piecing quilts and tying them." Archibald Henderson built an addition on his home so that Knut and Rachel Meltvedt could have their own rooms when they were there. Anna, together with Rachel and Knut (her sister and brother-in-law), seem to have been sought and appreciated as part of the household.

Anna provided indispensable social and medical services within her wide circle of kin. Rachel called Anna "the first social worker," and she assumed substantial responsibility for the social conditions in the Norwegian and Quaker communities. According to one of the New York Friends born in 1901, she held the meeting together. She found families for orphaned children, nursed the sick, and sewed for the poor. Her grandson said that she delivered over one hundred babies without losing any.

In addition to her lengthy stays in people's homes, she would frequently make short calls on all people in the commu-

nity to exchange news and to see that everything was in order. These short calls came to be named "Anna Oleson calls." Her grandson drove a horse and buggy for her as she dropped in to check on all the households in her domain. An old Norwegian farmer recalled, "She would go around and call on neighbors. We enjoyed having her come—company for our women. . . . She was there quite often."

The work of Anna and women like her welded households together in networks of relationships. Although the linkages limited the privacy of each household, they drew separate farm households into a community. In the labor-intensive farming system everyone in the community contributed, even reluctant or ambivalent individuals. One Anna Oleson story is of a visit she made to a household where the man was drinking and the woman was sick. Anna told the woman that if she was going to die she had best get up and do what she could for her children in whatever time she had. According to the story, in the weeks Anna stayed in the home she got the man to stop drinking, put the household in order, and got the woman up and working. When asked if people resented her interference, a niece responded that there were some who did, but that she would not repeat any negative stories about Anna. Her grandson said, "I don't think she ever had an enemy." While people remember her gentle, soothing voice, she seems to have been a strict disciplinarian and to have had little levity. A nephew wrote,

A woman of Anna Olson's [*sic*] type of character naturally must possess strong will power. She was frequently headstrong and set in her ways, but she was not impervious to reason. As one of her most intimate friends said of her, "Yes, Anna Olson was tenacious in her views at times, but she was in the main right." She was so fair, so considerate and so careful before she made up her mind in taking a stand on any subject that she could generally convince the other side of their errors of judgment.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the links maintained within the community, Anna reached out, to a lesser extent, for connections outside the local community, particularly among Quakers. She frequently traveled to other Quaker communities in Iowa and other parts of

15. *Ibid.*, 13.

the country. Active in wider Quaker concerns, she supported the establishment of the Stavanger Friends' boarding school in 1891 and moved back to Marshall County temporarily to act as matron of the school the first year.<sup>16</sup> Her history of independent travels indicates that she was not afraid to make her way in the world outside the local community.

CERTAINLY Anna Oleson was exceptional in her range of activities. She remained active in her nineties and seems to have had a great deal of energy which was charged rather than exhausted by her continual moving and visiting. Present day Paullina Quakers call her the matriarch of their meeting and speak admiringly of her work in founding the meeting community and molding the moral consensus of the group. Her name does not appear as one of the first overseers. Indeed, it is hard to find her name in any of the early meeting records, but she was behind the effort. Wilmer Tjossem, who was raised in the Paullina Quaker community and has delved into the history of Norwegian Quakers, concluded that the settlement of Norwegian Quakers in Iowa was due largely to Anna's efforts.<sup>17</sup>

When assessing what "family" meant for Anna, we realize that family ties were crucial to the cohesiveness among households, but that family ties did not dictate an immutable set of relationships. Through family Anna had access to many households, and her situation was not determined by her nuclear family. As feminist anthropologists have proposed, family is not a concrete "thing" but an ideological construct which links the world of personal experience with that of public politics.<sup>18</sup> While the government fostered the ideal of the nuclear farm family, everyday reality of life in rural Iowa called for a larger unit of cooperation and support. Because of the demographic, economic, and political conditions of frontier life, family came to mean something different for Anna and the people of her community than it did in the hegemonic culture of the East. Anna provided services which were necessary for the maintenance of the com-

16. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

17. Tjossem, *Quaker Sloopers*, 60.

18. Jane Collier, Michelle A. Rosaldo, and Sylvia Yanagisako, "Is There a Family? New Anthropological Views," in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Issues*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom (New York, 1982), 37.

munity and she did this through her extended family network. Although some may indeed have resented her, none seems to have openly told her to stay away. No one was in a position to close the door to family help; these services were vital.

Women's social services were as important to the establishment of rural society as their fertility and production. This importance defined the broader family unit. Women were wives and mothers, but, just as significantly, they were sisters and aunts. Women like Anna established and maintained links which not only drew new settlers but also kept people on the farm in spite of economic difficulties that might have isolated and destroyed a single nuclear family living on a homestead. The family, in such a context, was a range of kin that related to each other and provided services not otherwise available.

In this context Anna carved out a broad sphere of influence while remaining largely within the women's community. Although there are significant kinship ties and cooperation among households remaining in rural Iowa today, no one is allowed to assume that she automatically has access to another's home or that she can chastise the members of another household. The latitude and familiarity which is today reserved for the nuclear family was present within a larger extended family group in the early part of the century. The operating understanding of the family has narrowed for Anna's descendants.

This analysis leads us to qualify statements such as that made by historian John Mack Faragher: "[M]ost of the work of the public world—establishing connections among the families and homesteads in community institutions, the work of politics of law and order—was the domain of male responsibility."<sup>19</sup> In this statement Faragher was referring to control of government, and this is certainly correct. Women like Anna could not vote, did not hold formal public office, and did not have certain other freedoms that are absolutely basic for women today. But the male-defined political system of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not offer the security that would enable frontier families even to attempt to operate as isolated units. Women's community action and the public consensus shaped

19. John Mack Faragher, "History from the Inside-out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," *American Quarterly* 33 (1981), 549.

*Anna Oleson*

by women did more to provide certain needed services and to define social claims to resources (other than land) than did the government. In finding the traditional place of women to have been within the family system we must realize that, in Iowa, family might have been traditionally qualitatively different from the isolated nuclear families of today. The family of early settlers provided a broad social role for Anna; it was larger and did more things than the family of today. Thus the family of the early settlers of Iowa may be both useful and misleading in assessing the history and tradition of women today.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.