

## Women in Agriculture: Professionalizing Rural Life in North America and Europe, 1880–1965

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*Women in Agriculture: Professionalizing Rural Life in North America and Europe, 1880–1965*, edited by Linda M. Ambrose and Joan M. Jensen. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xii, 258 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$65.00 paperback.

Reviewer Jenny Barker-Devine is associate professor of history at Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois. She is the author of *On Behalf of the Family Farm: Iowa Farm Women's Activism since 1945* (2013).

With *Women in Agriculture*, editors Linda Ambrose and Joan Jensen present an ambitious collection of ten skillfully crafted essays that shift central conversations in rural women's studies toward the issues of food security and women's professional lives. For nearly 40 years, historians have explored the experiences of rural women within the context of the home and local community, grappling with the assumption that country folks negotiated traditional practices with urban-based reforms in agricultural science and home economics. The essays in *Women in Agriculture* reveal a more complex story, showing that rural women in North America and Europe played significant roles as reformers, scientists, economists, and producers in shaping the technological revolutions of the last century.

By focusing on the years between 1880 and 1965, *Women in Agriculture* captures the emergence of agricultural science, agricultural economics, rural sociology, and home economics as distinct professional fields. During those years, women enjoyed access to higher education in greater numbers, the development of new technologies such as automobiles and radios enhanced communication, and members of marginalized groups, including African Americans and indigenous populations, continued efforts to realign dynamics of power. At the outset of these rapid changes, gendered spaces within the professions had not been clearly delineated, allowing some room for women to quietly contest patriarchal attitudes and institutions.

Within this context, Ambrose and Jensen argue that the women featured in the book's essays, many of whom came from rural backgrounds, challenged understandings of the New Woman as a purely urban phenomenon. Rural women also "sought more independence, visibility, and participation in public life" as they asserted that educated, middle-class women should pursue careers in agriculture (36). Their aspirations materialized in myriad ways: women organized women's institutes (in the case of Canada and the United Kingdom) and educational clubs (in the case of the Netherlands); they also oversaw cooperatives, worked as home demonstration agents, produced radio shows, and conducted crucial scholarly research that set standards in the fields of agricultural economics, anthropology, and rural sociology.

The essays in *Women in Agriculture* focus primarily on women's efforts in the fields of food production and security and are arranged into three categories: education, experts, and extension. The first section on education reveals how reformers created opportunities for women to enter agricultural professions, from cultivation to rural sociology and agricultural economics. The second section on experts presents three biographical essays on women who initiated research projects or organizations that defined and supported women as agricultural producers and professionals. Finally, in the third section on extension work, readers learn about how educated experts imparted information to women in their local communities, and then how those women interpreted and applied that information.

The essays demonstrate that women prioritized food-related issues across time and throughout North America and Europe, and they approached the issue of food security with diverse strategies. The authors and editors made a conscious effort to link essays that might otherwise seem unrelated, and readers can move easily from wealthy female reformers in urban London to poultry operations in Montana and then from women's educational programs in The Netherlands to African American home demonstration agents in rural Arkansas. Striking commonalities emerge from these varied experiences. Women's strategies were shaped not so much by geography as by economic class, race, and patriarchy. Regardless of their location in place or time, female professionals encountered complicated, hierarchical relationships with male leaders in male-dominated spaces. Their success often hinged on the approval of male superiors or women's willingness to act primarily within all-female spaces. At the same time, these professional women grappled with conflicting professional priorities and local women's priorities.

*Women in Agriculture* unifies diverse voices that set a welcome new tone in the field of rural women's studies. As Ambrose notes in her essay on women's institutes in Canada and the United Kingdom, popular discourse and scholarly research have minimized the influence of rural women's organizations and expertise. Labeling such organizations as conservative, limited, "inconsequential 'tea parties,'" scholars have largely overlooked the power of women's professional work in agricultural fields (120). There is much to be gained from comparative studies that reveal how regional and temporal factors shaped women's lives. *Women in Agriculture* opens rich new conversations that will allow scholars of rural women to situate their work in broader frameworks of professionalization, the New Woman, and food and food security studies.