

Women of the Grange: Mutuality and Sisterhood in Rural America, 1866-1920

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1992 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"Women of the Grange: Mutuality and Sisterhood in Rural America, 1866-1920." *The Annals of Iowa* 51 (1992), 533-534.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9670>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

ship and theoretical sophistication. It stands as an indispensable work in the history of the Grange.

Women of the Grange: Mutuality and Sisterhood in Rural America, 1866-1920, by Donald B. Marti. Contributions in Women's Studies, No. 124. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991. viii, 157 pp. Notes, index. \$39.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DOROTHY SCHWIEDER, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

With the present interest in American rural women, it seems essential for someone to focus on women in the Grange. Founded in 1867, the Grange, or the Patrons of Husbandry, provided one of the few rural organizations open to both farm men and women. Using primarily institutional records such as minutes and proceedings of Grange meetings and histories of both local and state Granges, Donald Marti gives an insightful view of the interests, activities, and contributions of Grange women primarily from the 1860s through the 1920s. Limited material is also included on Grange women through the 1950s and 1960s. Marti's emphasis reflects the Grange's greater strength in the Northeast than in the Middle West. Throughout, he highlights individual women and their accomplishments.

Marti's subtitle includes the words *mutuality* and *sisterhood*; in effect, these two words provide the framework for his study. The sisters, as he refers to female Grange members, continually worked to share mutual interests and projects with their Grange brothers. But at the same time, the sisters cooperated with each other in promoting issues such as woman suffrage and home economics. Marti describes the typical Grange woman as an Anglo-Protestant who possessed a good education (often a high school graduate), had taught school before marriage, and belonged to a higher income group than did most farm families.

Within the Grange, women's activities were first viewed as ceremonial, but officials soon organized women's committees that provided females with specific responsibilities. Women also began to share general offices, such as lecturer, with male members. The latter responsibility meant women traveled widely to speak before different Grange locals. Gradually women came to fill a greater number of positions, some even serving as Master, the top position within each Grange organization. Grange women also did a great deal of writing for Grange publications, including poetry, essays, and general articles.

While Grange men and women shared economic goals to improve farm life, Grange women were always most interested in top-

ics related to domesticity, child rearing, and, eventually, home economics. Some Grange women worked almost unceasingly to promote the establishment of home economics committees in each Grange local. Believing that the greatest problem facing farm women was a crushing work load, Grange females put total faith in the ability of home economics to bring about a better life for farm women.

Grange women also took part in many reform movements. Most of these women, and most Grange men, strongly supported woman suffrage, particularly after the 1880s. Most Grange women were active in the WCTU and other prohibition societies while some women worked hard to improve the moral character of their communities. Individual members such as Mary Mayo worked, mostly unsuccessfully, to bring city children to Grange farm homes for the summer. Grange women also advocated kindergartens as a way of improving education. They also worked for the beautification of rural areas. Beginning in the 1950s, Grange women focused their energies on household crafts, often through competition.

While Marti gives an excellent view of the background, interests, and activities of Grange women, I wish he had made more comparisons with other farm women. With the exception of a brief perspective at the beginning, Marti's study provides little sense of how Grange women differed from their non-Grange counterparts. From the view presented, the typical Grange female lived a rather privileged life, often viewing the drudgery experienced by other farm women from a distance, rather than firsthand. Many Grange women found time to keep diaries, write for Grange publications, and travel as lecturers. For farm women in general, these actions were uncharacteristic. A comparison with rural women in the wider society would perhaps allow even better understanding of these apparently unusual Grange women.

Regardless of the limited perspective, however, Marti's book is a fine, focused study of one specific group of rural women. At a time when most farm women were anonymous, Grange women played distinctive, influential roles within their local, state, and sometimes even national organizations. Grange activities certainly made a difference in the lives of women members, while those same women made major contributions to the Grange.

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.