

H-Net Reviews

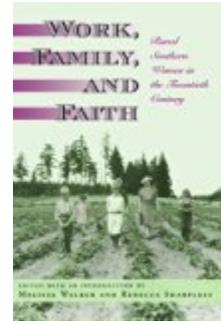
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rebecca Sharpless. *Work, Family, and Faith: Rural Southern Women in the Twentieth Century*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. 296 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1629-8.

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Rural Women's History as American History

This new set of essays provides an excellent example of the vibrancy and complexity of the field of rural women's history. Drawing upon rich and often underutilized sources in oral history, the rural press, government agencies, and secular and religious organizations, the authors engage with a variety of important themes in the histories of agriculture, education, labor, religion, and reform. The wide-ranging significance of their work stems in part from the interdisciplinary roots of rural women's history. As editors Melissa Walker and Rebecca Sharpless explain in their introduction, rural women's historians owe a great debt to the path-breaking work of sociologists and anthropologists, as well as to historians of rural life. The authors within this collection build on these diverse foundations while also adding new insights into the distinctiveness of rural women's experiences in the southern United States.

While much of the extant literature on rural women focuses on the Northeast and Midwest, southern women faced a particular set of circumstances related to the cultural and economic heritage of slavery. As the editors note, rural women tended to be poorer, more divided by race, and more constrained by gender than their counterparts in other regions. This volume's regional focus is critical, therefore, to our ability to understand the factors that united and divided rural women.

The essays are organized into three sections based on the main categories of research in the field. The first section looks at the nature of life on the farm, the second

examines varieties of rural reform, and the third focuses on the rural-urban interface. In section 1, Lu Ann Jones's oral history of Nellie Stancil Langley and an essay on women's field work by Sharpless and Walker show much common ground between southern farm women and rural women elsewhere. Mechanization of farm work was a mixed blessing for women, in that it eased the heaviest burdens of labor but diminished the need for mutual aid, the work-sharing routines that served as the foundation of community and alleviated the isolation of farm life.

Like other farm women, southern women contributed to household support through petty commodity production and performed tasks determined by the main farm enterprise and individual family needs. Not surprisingly, however, race emerged as a distinctive factor when it came to women's field work. Although midwestern immigrant farmers had differences of opinion about the appropriateness of female field labor, in the South its association with slavery and the blurring of black gender roles gave the issue more intense and emotionally charged meaning. On the other hand, the findings of all three authors caution against treating race as a monolithic force that overwhelmed all other considerations. Langley's discussion of her relationship with black tenants during the Depression era suggests that common interests and common needs could nurture an interracial sense of community. And like midwestern farm women, some southern white women took field labor in stride, or even took pride in it, and expressed attitudes shaped by personal preference and their own interpretations of the

separate-spheres ideology that dictated a sharp separation between men's work and women's domestic world.

Three of the five essays that comprise the second section of the book look at the significance of women's farm labor in the context of discussions about rural reform. These essays intersect with the larger literature on rural women that examines how reformers tended to undervalue women's role as producer. Evan Bennett's essay provides a thorough overview of Virginia women's productive labor on tobacco farms but then shows how the tobacco growers' cooperatives that appealed to women for support treated them as housewives and organized them into separate auxiliaries.

Essays by Ann McCleary and Lynne Rieff provide detailed pictures of the benefits and limitations of the Home Demonstration program during and after the Great Depression. In times of economic hardship such as the 1930s, Cooperative Extension Service agents recognized and encouraged women's petty commodity production. McCleary shows how Home Demonstration curb markets revived women's productive labor after decades of decline due to competition with large-scale commercial production. The successful curb markets actually brought about a reversal of gender roles in which women became the breadwinners and men the "helpers."

Both McCleary and Rieff observe, however, that Home Demonstration agents' appeal to women as producers did not signal a permanent shift from the usual policy of viewing them primarily as homemakers. It was a temporary measure born of necessity, and as increasing numbers of women engaged in off-farm labor during and after World War II, agents shifted their focus back to consumption. Rieff's essay also shows how the prevalence of tenancy in the South limited the success of Home Demonstration work of any kind, as agents had to deal with hostile landlords (who did not necessarily want self-sufficient tenants) and demoralized farm folk.

The last two essays in section 2 provide intriguing accounts of the role of religious women in rural reform. An extraordinary essay by Lois Myers on Southern Methodist deaconesses in the rural South brings to light the activities of a group of women whose role in rural reform has been largely overlooked by their church and historians. Motivated by the belief that rural uplift was a Christian duty, the deaconesses engaged in an astounding range of activities aimed at community improvement. These activities targeted not just the white population but diverse other groups as well. For example, deaconesses provided recreational and social services for Japanese,

Mexican, and French workers in Texas, and after being encouraged by the Woman's Missionary Council to work for improved race relations, they launched new efforts at interracial understanding among women.

Connie Park Rice's essay examines the mountain ministry of Cecil Brown, who established the Salvation Army's first Appalachian mission and the only one in a rural area. Brown was not the typical "outsider" reformer; she established the mission in her community of origin, adapted Salvation Army policies to fit with mountain traditions, and respected mountain culture rather than treating it as something to reform. While her local connections helped to overcome opposition to female ministers, they did not help her bridge the racial divide, as the Salvation Army alienated black members by acquiescing to white demands for segregated meetings.

In the third and last section of the book, essays by Karen Utz and Michelle Haberland look at how opportunities for industrial employment changed the lives of rural women and their families. Utz uses oral histories to examine how black women who migrated with their husbands to Birmingham, Alabama, worked to maintain the customs and traditions of the rural lives they left behind. Just as they had in the country, women living in the company housing provided by Sloss Furnaces worked to create community by organizing and participating in neighborhood social events such as parties and quilting bees. The women also continued to contribute to their families' support by keeping gardens and livestock, and many took advantage of new opportunities for cash income through domestic and laundry work. Utz's essay provides an interesting contrast to studies of white mill workers, showing that black industrial workers also found town life to be in many ways a marked improvement over the life they had left behind as sharecroppers. However much the women of Sloss Quarters may have missed the social networks they left behind, they clearly valued new opportunities for shopping and socializing and the better quality of education available to their children in town.

Haberland's essay on women's work in the apparel industry of southern Alabama qualifies this picture of the benefits of industrial work by showing their transient nature. The first generation of women employed at Vanity Fair's factories tended to have a positive experience, as they found the work "clean and cool" in comparison to farm labor and were able to use rural work-sharing traditions to meet production quotas (p. 266). Job satisfaction declined in subsequent generations, however, as the pressures of international competition led Vanity Fair to

steadily raise production quotas. Integration of the work force facilitated a successful drive for unionization, but the victory was short-lived and could not stave off the eventual shift of production abroad.

Although these nine essays are wide-ranging in focus, they all illustrate the centrality of rural women's labor to household and community economies, and in that sense they show how rural women's history is American history. Women's status as a surplus labor force originated on family farms, where they moved from house to

barnyard to field as necessary to meet immediate needs. Whether rural women remained on farms or moved to towns, many eventually shifted to off-farm labor, once again giving their families the flexibility they needed to survive and thrive. The authors in *Work, Family, and Faith* remind us that this flexibility involved both costs and benefits for women. Rural women's sacrifices and contributions sometimes were invisible and their victories temporary, but this does not lessen the social and economic significance of their efforts to help families and communities successfully adapt to changing conditions.

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