

# The Changing Role of Women on the Farm

Eleanor Arnold

## Introduction

The role women have played in the farm family has changed many times over the years, but one thing has remained constant —women have always been an essential part of the team.

Pioneer women came into the forest and the plains, bringing with them one or two cherished pieces of furniture and “starts” of flowers from their previous homes. They moved into their log cabins and sod houses and began the long hard work ahead of them. They often worked side-by-side with their husbands, making the land ready for farming, while at the same time raising their families, cooking and preserving food, spinning and weaving cloth, and making a home in the wilderness.

Their daughters and granddaughters in the late 1800s and the early 1900s had their spheres of responsibility on the busy, self-sufficient farms of the era. As always, the family was the first concern of a homemaker, as she did the housework and child care. In addition, however, she would be responsible for the poultry, the dairy cows, the care of the milk and butter, the garden and the preserving of food for winter. Laundry, ironing, cooking, baking, sewing and mending took much of her waking hours. She also might be called on for occasional light work in the fields, but the mores of the era argued that women didn't do field work. This was just as well, since she was busy from morning to night with her own work, in addition to being pregnant or nursing through most of her work years.

The decades surrounding World War II were a watershed. The advent of electricity and gasoline engines lightened many back-breaking and time-consuming chores and created some discretionary time in women's lives. The wartime call to the nation's factories and businesses made working outside the home a possibility for women.

Also during the war, women and girls worked in the fields to keep farm land in production, taking up the slack left by rural men who were in the services.

Peacetime found farm women with more work options than ever before. Their responsibility for homemaking and child rearing did not change, but some continued to help with the farm work outside, as larger equipment and other technology made it possible for a single family to farm larger acreage. Other farm women continued their traditional “around the house” roles but took on further responsibility for bookkeeping, marketing and other paper-work functions. Some farm women took full- or part-time employment off the farm. These trends continue to the present.

Unlike urban families, whose daytime interests may vary widely, a farm family has always been involved in the family business together. They live in the midst of it; they are at their work site from the time they awaken. Family members work as a unit, sharing the work, the worries and the benefits of their lifestyle.

This is especially true for the farm woman. She has always been essential to farm life. Her love of her family and the energy she expends to make life good for them are the central part of her life, just as they are for urban women. But the farm woman is also vital to the financial success of the family business — their farm. Her work, and sometimes her salary, help to make the farm economically viable. Her homemaking and mothering make the home a warm, welcoming center for the whole enterprise.

Methods of farming and the part the women play in the intricacies of farm and family life have changed through the years, but woman's vital role — as an essential component of the farm family team — has never changed.

# Interview

*Note: Eleanor and Clarence “Jake” Arnold and their family own and operate a 1,200 acre grain and livestock farm in Rush County, Indiana, which has been continuously farmed for over 170 years by six generations of Arnolds. The following is excerpted from an interview with Eleanor and Jake Arnold conducted by folklorist Marjorie Hunt.*

**Marjorie:** *When you were growing up, what type of work did women do on the farm?*

**Eleanor:** When I was young, women nearly always took care of all the poultry. If you had turkeys or chickens — then that was women’s work. My mother always did all the gardening — that was traditionally a farm woman’s thing. You put out about as much as you were going to eat because that’s where food came from. We were raised in the ’30s — the late ’20s and ’30s — and that was very hard times on the farm. And essentially you didn’t want to buy anything at the grocery store if you could manage it at home. I’ve seen many a time my mother would sit down at a table like this and say, “Everything on here except the sugar — I grew.” My mother tried to preserve everything that she grew. She even canned meat because she didn’t have any other way to preserve it except curing; and so she canned all her beef. Because if she didn’t have it put away, we just didn’t have it!

**Marjorie:** *What other things would women of your mother’s generation do?*

**Eleanor:** Well, mother mowed the lawn, and she always went down and helped with milking in the evening. In the morning she didn’t, because she was busy getting breakfast. Now, mother didn’t do field work. A lot of people thought it was terrible when women did field work at that time. In fact, there were a couple of sisters who helped their brother in the field, and it was the talk of the neighborhood! That just wasn’t done when we were growing up — it was a shame to a man.

There were a lot of things I saw as a child that my mother knew, like making soap and things like that. Those were women’s skills: what to do with your meat after it was butchered, how to cut it up, how to cure it, how to make the different sausages. These were real skills, women’s skills; and they’re no longer necessary, so they’re gone.

Well, you know the old saying, “A man works from sun to sun, but a woman’s work is never done.” It definitely came from the time of an agrarian society, because men couldn’t do much

after dark. There were no lights on the horses, you know, and they had to come in. But a woman kept right on working.

**Marjorie:** *When you were growing up, what were your responsibilities on the farm?*

**Eleanor:** There were two boys and two girls in my family. The boys helped dad, and my sis and I helped mother. The boys had to feed the horses, feed the cows, and we fed the chickens and gathered the eggs, brought in the corn, brought in the wood, pumped the water and brought it in. There were all sorts of chores that were done daily — sometimes two or three times daily.

Of course there was plenty to do in the house, too. We had kerosene lamps, and every morning we washed the chimneys because they got sooty. And so that was part of the morning chores: we used to wash them, clean them up, refill them and have them ready for when night came because, of course, all your light was from kerosene. It wasn’t that you were looking for something to do. Especially before electricity, everything was physically hard to do in the home.

**Marjorie:** *How did changes in technology — like electricity — affect your family?*

**Eleanor:** Oh, electricity! That was the watershed — because before that everything was done by somebody’s muscle, either your muscle or a horse’s muscle. We didn’t get electricity until I was nine years old, which would have been 1938. After that, you had all sorts of help in all sorts of different directions.

Like ironing — we had these big black irons. You put them on the old coal range. And when you thought they were warm, you held them up, and put your finger [out], and licked it, and touched it. And if it went *ssst!* it was warm enough. You ironed with it. And then when it got cool you had two or three other ones waiting on the stove. Most women, when they got electricity — the first thing they got was an electric iron. They weren’t very expensive, and they did save so much work.

Another big change was plumbing. Jake and I didn’t have water in the house until 1955 — after three children! We had a privy in the back and a well with a pump. When I was going to [do a] wash, I went out to pump the water, and put it on the stove, and heated it, and then carried it





*Four generations of Arnold women — Jake's great-grandmother, Sarah Arnold, her granddaughter, Sarah, great-granddaughter, Flora and her great-great-granddaughter, Leona — pose for a picture taken in the early 1900s. Photo courtesy Arnold family*

back out and put it in a conventional washing machine. It was so much work. And it was even more so when my mother had to wash clothes by rubbing on the board. Back then, laundry was a real skill. Now anybody can go and open up the door and put in laundry. But a white wash was something a woman was really proud of — “She puts out a good white wash” — that’s what you’d hear.

No one wants to go back to washing on a board who’s ever done it. No one wants to go out to privies at night who’s ever had to. There were lots of nice things about the good old days, but no one who has ever done both ways would want to give up the technology.

**Marjorie:** *After you got married, how did you and Jake divide the work on your farm?*

**Eleanor:** We’ve always worked as a team. But, you know, you divide things up. It’s more effi-

cient that way . . . and a lot of it falls along traditional lines. At first Jake was so busy on the farm, and I had the little children at home, so I couldn’t get out and help very much. So I ended up doing what was traditionally thought of as women’s work on the farm. He would come in and help a little with the children. But he was tired. He was out all the time, so he didn’t participate a lot in child care.

**Jake:** After they got a little older I’d take them with me out on the tractor. In fact, I can even remember John . . . I’d actually take him on the cultivator. He’d crawl in between the frame and sit up there and ride back and forth across the field. And I remember one field had raspberries at one end that was ripe at that time. And he’d get off and eat some raspberries. And then he’d get back on and go around. And then he’d crawl underneath the truck and go to sleep. That’s where he took his nap.

**Eleanor:** He wanted me to have little red jackets for them to wear because he said he could see them all over the field that way. He was always worried — the safety factor, you know.

Our kids have always helped. John, you just had to scrape him out of the [tractor] seat. He's always wanted to farm, and always was fascinated by machinery, and was always right there to help. When the kids were growing up — we were sort of in that transition period — we didn't have as many actual chores that had to be done. We had quit the chickens and the milk cows, so hog feeding was about the only thing that they really had to do.

The kids always helped me in the garden. They enjoyed it, and we always had a lot of fun.

As far as household chores, the girls always helped me. They shelled peas, and snapped beans, and helped me can, and helped clean the house. They just helped. Whatever I was doing, they were helping, too. We just all kind of worked together. Everyone pitched in.

**Marjorie:** *Did you work in the fields?*

**Eleanor:** Oh yes, I went out to the fields in the spring and the fall. I usually plowed and disked. I was one of the first ones who actually started working in the fields around here, but everybody admired it — “Oh, that's wonderful, you know, you're helping.”

I never planted because that's a very crucial part of it, and I never combined. I used to drive the tractors and the wagons or the trucks away from the combines. I'd take the seed corn into town because you had to sit there and wait. And Jake's so antsy, and sitting and waiting in harvest season was just . . . he couldn't do it.

Jake always was good, when I was working out in the fields, to come in and help me with what had gotten behind in the house. But with people our age, I think there's a lot more separation of men's work and women's work than there is with kids nowadays — the young farming couples. My son just comes in and does everything. I mean he cooks, he does whatever needs to be done.

**Marjorie:** *What are some of the other changes you see in your children's generation?*

**Eleanor:** So many women now work off the farm. I think a common pattern is to work until you have your children, stay home until the children are in school, and then go back to working

at least part-time; and, maybe when the children are older, working full-time. I think that's a very common pattern now in farm housewives.

Well, coming out of the home was definitely begun during the Second World War. There was just very little of anything. Women were not employed outside except as teachers, perhaps nurses, sometimes social work, and as sort of an informal thing, the hired girl. Those were the things that were open. But in the Second World War, it was a patriotic duty to come out of the home and be “Rosie the Riveter,” and you got

lots of acclaim for doing that sort of thing.

Once they had found that they could earn money and that they could work outside the home, they felt freer — financially freer — because they didn't feel as dependent on the father, husband, brother, whatever. And also, the fact that their work had value meant something to them — like it or not, we do value by the dollar; if you're paid for it, the work means more — and I think this was a profound change with women. When the war was over, it never was unthinkable again to work outside the home. It wasn't an option in my mother's time and my sister's time, but in my time, it was an option.

Just in our community, if you go around, you'll find very few farms that are absolutely 100% farmers. I mean either the husband or the wife works outside extra, too.

**Marjorie:** *What sort of support groups did farm women have?*

**Eleanor:** Women's club work was, many times, the real salvation for women. Farm women, they stayed so close to home, and they had only a few things that were socially acceptable that took them out. That's why extension homemakers and



*Mary Arnold pretends to help with the ironing by imitating her mother, Eleanor.*

Photo courtesy Arnold family



church groups were popular — because they gave women sociability.

**Marjorie:** *How has that changed over the years?*

**Eleanor:** It's changed a lot. The isolated country woman image is done for. You know, people look to find time to be home now, because they're on the go so much. There are so many demands on their time that a night at home, I think, is treasured now; where before, my mother went to her ladies aid, and she went to her home ec[onomics club] — and those were her two times out. She went to church on Sunday morning, and every two weeks she went to town to cash the milk check — and, literally, mother might not be off the place other than that. And so her home ec club and her ladies aid — the support of women, the talking with women, the being with women — meant a great deal to her. They meant a very great deal to her. Now, you might have visiting back and forth on Sunday afternoon, but I tell you: the rural woman's life was isolated.

**Marjorie:** *Getting back to your own family farm, what made you decide to go into farming?*

**Eleanor:** It's a choice we made together when we were still down at school. We were two farm kids, and we knew what life was like on the farm, the good and the bad. And we stood at a crossroads, you might say. "Shall we go on with our education and do something else that will probably make us more money — more spendable income — or shall we go back to the life we know?" And we both together decided we wanted to go back to the life we knew. Because we felt there's so many values there that we wanted to have for ourselves, that we'd had in our own lives. And we wanted our children to have them, too.

**Marjorie:** *What do you value most about your way of life?*

**Eleanor:** Well, the fact that we're together. We're working together, and we have common and

shared aims. It's not just the man and the wife, it's the children also. I think [the farm] is the finest place there is to raise a family. For one thing, you don't have as many worries because the children are always there with you. They're sharing and working, and they're talking to you about

what's going on. They see what daddy does, and he's right there. He's in and he's out, and they're in and out with him. I think it's fairer to the male. Because I think [in urban life] when the male goes away early in the morning and comes back home tired, and the woman has to do all the discipline and so forth — I think it's unfair to the male.

**Jake:** I'll agree with that. You've got to realize, when I walk out the door I'm at my workplace. No commuting time! It's great, you know. I come in, and — we've always had a noonday meal — we see

the kids. Actually, you're really getting down to the basis of farm life. We chose it and we enjoy it.

**Marjorie:** *Eleanor, what do you consider your most important contribution to your family farm?*

**Eleanor:** Well I undoubtedly think my children are my greatest accomplishment. And I think that most women would say that. Because whether a farmer or otherwise, we're very happy that we've raised three good children and feel that we've made a contribution to the community. And that's my greatest accomplishment.

Now, if you're wanting to think about — as a farmer or as a farm woman, what's the best thing I've done? I don't know . . . The work I did on the farm for years. I worked for about 20 years on the tractor, and that helped us economically. But another thing I did that helped economically was that I was a very thrifty person. I always canned, I always froze, I sewed. I tried to use our funds wisely and tried to look ahead and see that we needed to save. I think that's a good deal of my contribution — spending the money wisely.

There's an old country saying — "She can throw it out the front door with a teaspoon faster than he can scoop it in the backdoor with a



*John Arnold pretends to drive his father's tractor.*

Photo courtesy Arnold family



*The Arnold family in 1991. Photo by Marjorie Hunt*

scoop shovel" — for a woman who isn't thrifty. Because there's only a certain amount of money that comes in from the farm, and how you use that limited amount makes a good deal of difference.

**Marjorie:** *Are you still canning?*

**Eleanor:** Oh yes! I can and freeze. I can green beans. I can applesauce. I can peaches. I can pickles. I can tomatoes, and I do jellies and preserves with whatever we have that year. . . . And I freeze peas and peaches and all the fruits — cherries, raspberries, blueberries. Everything is grist to my mill — whatever comes that we can't eat fresh, why, I freeze it.

**Marjorie:** *Who does the books in your family?*

**Eleanor:** He was an accounting major — I have nothing to do with them! I'm the world's worst with books.

**Marjorie:** *I understand that in some farm families women have that responsibility.*

**Eleanor:** Many, many times. I would say we're an exception. An awful lot of women do it.

**Jake:** A lot of women do marketing. Quite a few of them, they're quite good at it. They're not as emotional as a man. I think they look at it more objectively. They're better traders than a man in some cases.

**Marjorie:** *You mentioned to me that there used to be a farm on every 80 acres?*

**Eleanor:** That's so very true. You can look up and down this road and see where there are

homesites — the homes are no longer there. Because as the people who were living on the 80s got older and died or moved into town, the person next to them bought the land. He wanted to farm it. . . . So you have all these old homesites where maybe the daffodils still come up or there's still a lilac bush blooming, but the homesites are gone. This is not just here, it's happening everywhere. The technological advances, the larger equipment, means a farmer's able to farm more land.

**Marjorie:** *You once told me that there's no money in farming, you have to love farming to farm.*

**Jake:** You asked me if I could tell a successful farmer driving down the road. And then I got to thinking, "What is a successful farmer?" And I came to the conclusion that if he's kept half way financially secure, and raised a good family with decent kids, and put a little something else back into the community, he was a success — whether he had 10,000 acres or just five. That's the truth. I feel that.

**Eleanor:** We could sell all our land, and we could put the money in the bank, and we could live off the interest better than we do now. We want to live like this.

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*Marjorie Hunt is a folklorist and research associate with the Office of Folklife Programs. Her interest in family farming stems from her own family's roots on a farm in southwestern Missouri.*

#### *Further Readings*

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