

History of Illinois Agriculture:  
Women Shaping the Future  
of Agriculture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Calyssa Richie  
University of Illinois

It was declared that history was made at the 2018 Illinois State National FFA Convention when the very first all-female Illinois State FFA officer team was elected. With the help of new technology and media, the news spread quickly across Illinois. This supports that over the past decade, publicity focusing on women in agriculture has become more prominent. There has been an growth in articles, magazines and news shows that have increased public awareness on how just recently women have been playing a significant role in developing and shaping agriculture. However, I argue that the movement of women in agriculture started back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Women in agriculture would not be where they are today without the impact of the way female pioneers paved their way through agriculture during the 1900s. Women's capability of being able to pursue multiple responsibilities in agriculture has developed, accelerated and strengthened the agricultural community today because of the female pioneers. They strongly influenced, shaped and advanced the way for females in America today through many different agricultural organizations and businesses such as Home Economics, FFA, 4-H and WCFA.

Women in the early 1900s were stereotyped as a "housewives." Most females on the farm performed routine tasks such as cooking, cleaning, laundry and other chores on the farm. They were often responsible for raising the chickens, selling the eggs, and managing the cash income. Even back to the early 1900s, women were interested in more than just household duties, their crusade to do more became a crucial factor to the rural economy through their jobs as laborers, entrepreneurs, educators, and farmers. They were working towards mutuality. Both men and women understood the success of the farm relied on both mutuality and cooperation of the men and women in the family. This paper is going to focus on the invaluable importance of the

contribution's women had on leadership of farming, rural communities and agriculture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

When Illinois became a state in 1818, pioneers and settlers had to provide all their own needs. "Farmers" were considered "laborers". Farming in the 1800s was focused on the male and the labor that the male performed on the farm. At first, it was difficult for women to help shape agriculture off the farm because it was often transportation that limited whether a woman could go to a meeting or be involved outside the neighborhood. Not all farm families had automobiles, if they did, they only had one (Mies, J. 2019). They were isolated due to the gravel roads. During this time women tried finding other opportunities to work closer to agriculture by working alongside their male farmer (Devine, 2). Women were interested in more than household duties. Women or "housewives" of the time were increasingly gaining knowledge of agricultural technology and business.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries women in agriculture found their opportunity to utilize social networks, clubs and organizations to change rural communities. *Farmers Wife* was a magazine published from 1909-1939 that was published by *The Farm Journal* to help recognize what women were accomplishing in agriculture. During 1910 and 1920s, Women's Farm Programs developed to focus on family and home improvement. However, the focus started to change after women activists began exploring beyond the family farm home. Throughout this time women started taking an early leadership role in agriculture by being involved and developing skills that would help pave the way for the future women in agriculture. Agricultural leadership opportunities developed to those who were once limited by the past role of a "Farm Wife" (*Farmers Wife*, 1939).

Some of the first leadership positions in Illinois were leaders in Home Economics. In 1915, Kankakee County hired Eva Benefiel as the first Illinois home adviser to develop a Home Improvement Association. This was followed by Mercer County in 1917. This led to Home Economic and Home Demonstration Clubs. These clubs started in 1910 as Home Bureau and Home Advisory Groups. The advisers, also known as agents, were guided to have a bachelor's degree in Home Economics (Frysinger, 1933). In 1914, the Smith Lever Act, an act that provided for cooperative agricultural extension work between the agricultural colleges in different states, allocated funds for Home Economics including Home Demonstration Agents. This was one of the first paid positions in Illinois for a female in the Department of Agriculture (Wilson).

There was a progressive era of activism and reform in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These organizations wanted to improve life for women in rural America by teaching and discussing their roles in the community and family living conditions. By 1922, there was a goal to have a Home Demonstration Agent in every Illinois county. These demonstration agents were assigned to be the local representative on the State County Extension Service (Frysinger, 1933).

In the 1920's, as Americans began moving off farms and into cities, many people began to worry about a rural drain (people leaving rural communities). Several counteractive actions were proposed in what became known generally as the Country Life Movement. The Virginia Agricultural Education Department then wanted to work together to create a group for students interested in agricultural fields. The goal for this group would be to develop leadership skills and learn about the self-importance of agriculture. Others agreed, and in 1929 the National FFA Organization was created in Illinois to offer to students in higher grades with a strive to have a purpose in agriculture (FFA New Horizons, 2017).

One year later, at a 1930 FFA convention, the delegates clarified membership by voting to exclude young women. Some females were enrolled in agricultural education classes but were not allowed to become FFA members. Some women, like Dorothy Gilson-Baker, were added to rosters using initials that didn't reveal their gender. While other females were identified as "social ambassadors" for the chapter and others received the coveted 'Sweetheart Jacket' (Flatt, 2019).

Another pioneer for women in agriculture is Jessie Field Schambaugh, a female from Iowa, who started boys and girls clubs in 1901. Initially called 3-H (head, heart and hands), Jessie designed the 3-leaf clover pin to reward 3-H project winners and wrote the Country Girls Creed. Because of Jessie's vision and spirit, she pioneered 4-H clubs nationwide (Iowa 4H Foundation, 2011).

The movement by women continued in the early 1900s to support 4-H. This club, that started around 1910, was an organized boys and girls club that increased education on agriculture and life through different activities to enrich country living. In 1934, an all-women's 4-H House was founded at the University of Illinois (Mies, J. 2019). The 4-H House is a cooperative sorority that houses women from freshman to seniors with an interest and background in agriculture and 4-H. My great grandmother, Geraldine Anderson, was one of the 16 founding pearls of the 4-H House. She graduated from the University of Illinois in 1938 with a degree in Home Economics (Mies, J. 2019).

The 4-H House was not the only part at the University of Illinois with women in agriculture. During 20<sup>th</sup> century, Professor Isabel Bevier was hired to establish a program for young women. She ended up creating a nationally recognized program in Home Economics (Miller, 10). This then allowed thousands of young women to explore and grow through agriculture and home

economic skills. The program also provided the study of family economics, children development and nutrition. It was her goal to provide this education to women to obtain a college degree. In recognition of her achievement, today on the University of Illinois campus stands Bevier Hall where students continue their ambitions in agriculture.

When the American Farm Bureau Foundation (AFBF) was created in 1919, there were three women in attendance at the first annual AFBF organizational convention meeting. It became one of the first modern organizations. At this first meeting a member of AFBF, Edna Sewell spoke to the members, "There is not a man here this evening, no matter how good a farmer he may be, or how capable a manager he may be, who is capable enough to manage and direct all the affairs of his farm and his homestead unless he has in close partnership and cooperation with him an up-to-date woman to help him" (Truelsen, 278). This was a vital outlet for women's activism. Farm Bureau also started offering day visits and trips for women to learn about the different businesses in the state of Illinois. In 1921, independent women organizations formed aside the Farm Bureau and became known as "Home Bureaus".

Edna Sewell was then appointed to the director of the Associated Women and was a speaker to address farm women. In Chicago, Illinois in 1935 the first Associated Women convention was held with the American Farm Bureau Foundation (Truelsen, 284). After this annual convention, the Associated Women then joined the Associated Country Women of the World to connect with other women organizations supporting women in agriculture. At the national women's conference in 1937, the Chicago Tribune sponsored the meeting to help increase attention in women's activities (Truelsen, 285). It encouraged participation by women in their community and helped educate women regarding farm safety, financial planning, marketing, and potential advisory roles.

Although there was a movement in the 1930s for females in agriculture, the majority of women in the 1950s still did not serve on agricultural boards or advisory councils, and as a number of farms were declining, keeping a family farm together became a main concern for the women of agriculture. After WWII, women learned that they should be concerned on agriculture prices, soil conservation and legislation (Devine, 3). Earlier in the 1950s, labor saving equipment like washing machines, devalued women's work on the farm. Between 1950's and 1980's, there was a movement for women to join agricultural organizations to voice their concern in an organization that was traditionally dominated by men.

This is when a part of women's activism was transforming. By the late 1950s, rural women's clubs were standard across the countryside. Women took their informal neighborhood networks and created local chapters of state and national organizations. As the decades rolled on the presence of communication, transportation and other developments helped with the prosperity of women's roles in agriculture. After 1950, technology started to change the way women performed, but it did not lessen their interest in agriculture.

In 1955 the NFO, National Farmers Organization, was created and thought of as a radical group. The NFO reporter, rarely reported on women activities unless it was a major event. It reported one event in 1957 and did not report another event regarding farm women until 1963 when women of Macoupin County, Illinois NFO Auxiliary started holding their own meetings after regular county meetings (Devine, 23).

As time passed, political and legal environments evolved and became more accepting to the idea of females in agriculture. This is when the National FFA Organization decided to seek for legal responsibility to agree to allow females to become members at the national level. Bev Flatt, (author at National FFA Organization) said, "At that time, approximately 3,300 females were

enrolled in vocational agricultural classes nationwide and an increasing number of states accepted women as members” (Flatt, 2019). The climate and culture toward women’s rights throughout America continued to shift, as well, and in 1967, the Affirmative Action Policy was expanded to cover discrimination based on gender.

Finally, women were accepted as members of the National FFA Organization in 1969. Since the formal acceptance of female membership, 50 years ago, women have been an integral part of the organization. In 1970, Christie Carter of Carrolton was the first female to receive the Illinois state FFA degree. Shirley Pierce of Flora became the first female Section President the following year representing Section 23. There has been more than 80 women that have served on the National FFA Officer Team since. In 1977, Michele Birkner was the first female in Illinois to receive the Star award in Agribusiness (Illinois Association FFA).

During the 1970s women’s movement, there was a second wave of feminism with the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963. As the number of farms declined in the mid-20th century, keeping a family farm together became a main concern for the women of agriculture. However, by 1970 women gained greater confidence and became more accepted in agricultural fields. There was a radical movement from the 1930s-1970s of women in agricultural leadership that changed the face of agriculture.

Due to the advances in communication and technology by the 1970s, political lobbying organizations such as the Women In Farm Economics (WIFE) were founded and prospering. By the 1970s, journalists and reporters of farm magazines and periodicals were approaching their articles for the women readers. In 1970, the first issue of *Farm Wife News* was released. By 1980, this number reached 2.3 million (Devine, 23)! This magazine is now known as *Country*

*Women*. It highlighted trends in agriculture as well as recipes and information for livestock farming.

In July 1975, an article featured the story of Dick and Colleen Burns, a couple that managed a cattle operation near Brimfield, Illinois. Colleen was a farm radio director and Dick supported the idea that husbands and wives should be partners on the farm. He said, “A farm wife in my mind is one of the decision making-team” (Devine, 58). Although this concept was being performed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it took until the 1970s for it to be publicly recognized.

Gender and gender roles were at the forefront during another movement of women in agriculture. According to the 1978 Census of Agriculture, about five percent of the Nation’s farms were owned and operated by female farmers. This was a giant step for women in agriculture. Most of these women had a deep connection to the farm as a daughter, inheritance, spouse of inheritance or a farm partner. Looking at the Farm Finance Survey in 1979, women inherited a greater proportion of the family farmland than most men did (Kalbacher). Female farm managers a minority in agriculture. However, unlike other minority farmers, they kept increasing in number.

By 1980, 74% of American farm women were involved in a farm community organization as the female’s role in agriculture prospered and became more recognized. This was almost equal to the 79% of men that were involved in a farm group (Rosenfeld). These statistics demonstrate the shift from the 1930s to the 1980s. No longer was there a need for gender role organizations. Women gained public advances in Agriculture in the 1991 as Illinois Governor Jim Edgar named a female for the director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture, Becky Doyle. Becky instantly became a publicly visible farm woman. She is the first woman director in the department’s history and one of the only two in the US history (Orr, 2018).

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century more women were taking political roles. Colleen Burns- Callahan became an agribusiness news reporter and Illinois Director of USDA Rural Development. She was the Democratic nominee for Illinois' 18th congressional district in 2008 (Ranker, 2019). Callahan was raised on a family farm near a small town near Milford, Illinois. As salutatorian, she graduated from Milford Township High School in 1969. After graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1973, she moved to Peoria to work for WMBD until 2005. She was also the agribusiness reporter for WMBD-TV and WCIA from 1974 to 1997 (Mies, E. 2019).

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century continued, more organizations were being created to help support the success of women in agriculture. In 2010, the very first event was held by a new program called Women Changing the Face of Agriculture, also known as WCFA. This conference became an annual event held for young women in high school and college who are in collegiate organizations such as FFA and 4-H (Illinois Agri-Women, 2019). The women attending WCFA are aspiring to help shape the path of agriculture through their future. It became a great place for young females to learn more about what roles women play in agriculture, what careers are in the industry, and what connections one can form with women across the country in agriculture. WCFA was designed to also show that women across the nation need to come together to show their purpose in agriculture. Through these small lessons, the young women leave with the mentality to excitedly help make a difference in the future of agriculture.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Illinois State FFA president, Sophia Hortin, was elected in 2009. In 2018, history was made at the Illinois State FFA convention as the first all-female Illinois State FFA officer team was elected (Branch, 2018). These women would not have achieved these titles without females like Dorothy Gilson-Baker using her initials to exclude her gender back in the mid-1900s. That

same year, I was completing my third year of FFA and was just accepted to the college of ACES at the University of Illinois.

From growing up in on a family farm in central Illinois, I have been surrounded by so many inspiring women in agriculture. From friends to neighbors to family, almost every woman in my life has made a significant mark in the history of agriculture. My great grandma was a member of the Home Economic and Demonstration Clubs and had to attend meetings in Springfield, Illinois to learn lessons to teach to her community. As stated previously, my other great grandma was one of the 16 pearls at the 4-H Sorority House at the University of Illinois. As most of the women in my family graduated from U of I with a degree from the college of ACES, it inspired me to continue the tradition and help pave the future of agriculture.

Like the artist Helen Reddy said, "I am women, so hear me roar". Today, I am continuing that path at the University of Illinois majoring in Agricultural Communications. With all my classes being in Bevier Hall, I cannot help but think of all the inspiring women who got me to where I am today. It is my goal to achieve to make my mark in the history of agriculture. I hope that with my degree I can help continue to shape and develop a pathway for the future women of agriculture.

Overall, women farmers have been the silent heroes of everyday life for the past century. For the last 100 years we have seen a significant change in women in agriculture. These were the women that became activists. This movement continues today as more female officers are being elected to public positions in agriculture. As we enter the 21st century, it appears the trend for women in agriculture is turning towards sustainability, organic agriculture, with a modern farms and female managed farms. Over the past century, women continually and constantly want to be taken seriously in agriculture. Although recently more recognition has been given to the growth

of female leaders in agriculture, these leaders could not have been elected without the early female pioneers known as “housewives” who were really the face of the female agricultural revolution. This impact of women in Agriculture today would not be possible without the significant female leadership through the 1900s.

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