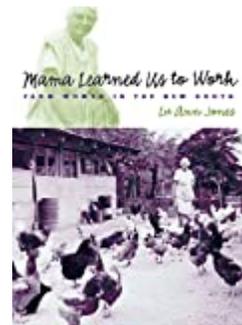


Lu Ann Jones. *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 272 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5384-9; \$60.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-8078-2716-1.



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Published on H-SAWH (February, 2003)

Always Poor, Never Hungry

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A few years ago a public historian was putting together a museum exhibit on the lives of ordinary white southerners in the first half of the twentieth century. He had planned a display on the technologies of laundry before the advent of the washing machine: fire in the back yard, iron kettle, galvanized steel wash tubs, and lye soap. The museum curator told him that the display was inappropriate, since all white southern women sent their washing out. Had the museum curator read Lu Ann Jones's excellent new book on southern farm women in the early twentieth century, he would have known better.

A skilled and experienced oral historian, Jones was one of the co-authors of *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*.^[1] Her project "An Oral History of Southern Agriculture," supported by the Smithsonian Institution, produced two hundred interviews of rural southerners and resulted in articles published in the *Journal of American History*, *Oral History Review*, and elsewhere. Jones knows a great deal about the rural world of the early-twentieth-century South, which is

now as swept away by social and economic change as ever was the Old South. She uses her knowledge to address questions of gender roles, work, race, and the intersection of the home and the market economy. As a result, this collection of interrelated essays is truly "quietly revolutionary," as Laura Edwards notes in a jacket quotation.

To explain why, I wish to be much louder, and more blunt, than Jones herself would probably care to be. Here is a book about the female half of the southern majority, those who still made their living on the land as late as 1940; a book about southern women whose lives are seen through their work, without either contempt or pity; and a book in which the difference created by race is illuminated by comparing people of the same social class, not the rich and the poor. Finally, here is a book that clearly demonstrates the enormous gap between Jim Crow-era southern gender rhetoric, which cast white women as fragile flowers in need of protection, and the actual lives lived by most women on the land. Jones's women were subordinated, not sheltered, but they were also active agents in their own lives.

Jones's introduction shows that in the period she studies—roughly turn-of-the-century to World War II—work dominated the lives of southern farm women. Whether black or white, theirs were lives of unremitting toil. The book's title comes from a woman's description of her mother: "Mama learned us to work, that's what she done. She learned us to work." When Josie St. John died, she was buried with a tombstone that said, "Mother resting from all her labor" (p. 11). W. J. Bennett's mother "would go to the field of a morning and work until time to fix dinner. Come out long enough to fix dinner and then right back until that evening.... She didn't have no time off. If she weren't in the field, she was busy at the house" (pp. 8-9).

The farm women portrayed by Jones had hard lives, but in terms of the early-twentieth-century South they were relatively well-off. They were members of what Jones calls a yeomanry, possessed of enough economic resources to be self-supporting. Small farmers and renters from the Upper South, particularly North Carolina, they exhibited a canny understanding of rural economics. Like Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's Maine frontier women, southern rural women bought, sold, and traded, but in ways that illustrated the relative place and power of men and women, as well as blacks and whites, in rural society.^[2] Jones illustrates this best in her opening chapter on country markets, peddlers, and rolling stores.

Farm men traded at country markets, or carried produce to town, and returned with the goods (sugar, flour, and coffee) requested by their wives, while women rarely went to the store. Country stores were male environments, complete with a porch gallery of spitting, whittling, joke-telling oglers guaranteed to provide any woman with a practical and uncomfortable introduction to the "masculine gaze."

The rolling store was the alternate market, preferred by women and often by black men as well, who could buy there free of white kibitzing and comment. Rolling-store salesmen were the twentieth-century equivalent of the peddlers, often Jewish, who carried packs or drove wagons into the remotest regions of the rural South well before the Civil War. In the first half of the twentieth century the rolling store, often in a panel truck and increasingly sponsored by the Watkins or Raleigh patent medicine companies, traded manufactured products, medicinals, spices, and small-scale luxury goods for cash or farm produce. Thus a woman might swap hens for embroidery floss, a paper of needles and pins, a small tin of camphor ointment, vanilla extract, and a bottle of

perfume. All of these things could be sent for from most country stores, but at the rolling store the female customer was queen. She could handle the materials and hear the news from the salesman. As one rolling-store salesman noted, "Women very seldom come to the store. Like in the rolling [store] business, it was all different. It was all women" (p. 37). For rural women, the rolling store functioned as a female space, and the best efforts of disgruntled patriarchs and landlords to deny them access to it usually failed.

It is tempting to see the rolling store as the rural equivalent of the great early-twentieth-century department stores, feminized spaces that introduced women to consumerism; however, Jones demonstrates the critical difference. The rolling store was not just a place where women consumed. It was also a market in which they sold the products of their own labor.

In chapters 2 and 3, Jones describes the multitude of ways in which southern farm women's work in the 1920s and 1930s intersected with the market economy. Women sold farm produce, wild berries, milk, butter, and, above all, chickens and eggs. Jones's evidence suggests that most women entered the marketplace because their children needed things that their husbands could not, or would not, supply, such as tuition for school. However, when women had their own money, it changed not only the household economy, but also the dynamics of family relationships.

Women who had been ignorant about money and markets learned from participation, particularly as they joined in group marketing ventures sponsored by home demonstration agents. During the Depression, agents in North Carolina made note of families being supported, and farms saved, through the money earned by farm women. Moreover, agents reported that women gained a new sense of their own importance and relative power through participation in the market, and they demonstrated this new independence in the home. On this topic, Jones's most telling anecdote demonstrates the connections between economics and reproductive rights. In a North Carolina mountain community that had been targeted for a public health experiment in various methods of birth control, the public health nurse had given away condoms for free. When the experiment ended, the nurse reported that one of the women involved was unwilling to go back to the old ways. She told the nurse (and her husband) that she would just sell a hen to get the money to buy Trojans.

By the 1930s and 1940s, women became unwitting

pioneers in the creation of the poultry industry. Jones notes that the history of the poultry agribusiness usually jumps directly from the small flocks of chickens kept by women on small farms to the giant post-World War II factory farms. She demonstrates that it was women who led the transition, building bigger and bigger flocks until finally what had been mom's trade in eggs and chickens became dad's egg factory. Southern farm men had denigrated the poultry business as women's work and beneath men's notice, until World War II when the federal government designated poultry producers "soldiers of the soil" (p. 104) and gave men patriotic cover for going into women's work. Ironically, Jones says, "As poultry raising grew in scale and required more capital investment, farm men usually assumed the position of managers while women and children performed most of the actual work" (p. 104).

In the following two chapters, Jones shifts her focus from farm women to the government bureaucrats most likely to interact with them, home demonstration agents. These chapters, on white home demonstration agents and their black counterparts respectively, effectively and subtly delineate the differences that race made in the lives of bureaucrats and their clients, while offering another variation on the theme of work.

Chapter 4, "Professional Paradoxes," opens with a quote from a female journalist describing southern white home demonstration agents as the descendents of belles who once "trod a stately minuet." These daughters of the white South, the journalist said, were now modern young women engaged in "missionary work" to uplift Dixie (p. 107). In reality, as Jones notes, home demonstration agents were not missionaries, but rather women who needed and wanted to work. Some had husbands who could not make a living, while others simply enjoyed the independence of their own income. Administrators like Jane Simpson MacKimmon enjoyed power and the opportunity to make a difference in a larger world than the private home.

Significantly, many white home demonstration agents seem to have come to the work from teaching, another stereotypically female job, but one that paid poorly and offered less autonomy and adventure than "home dem" work. An enjoyment of adventure was useful to home dem agents, particularly in the early days, when their work took them into remote rural communities, requiring them to speak tactfully with farm women about intimate matters of household management.

Pauline Smith, who joined the North Carolina exten-

sion service in 1913 and retired in 1949, stands as Jones's emblematic white home demonstration agent. Smith loved her work, although she groused about it, and mentored a tight-knit network of fellow home dem agents who served as a surrogate family. Smith needed to work to support herself and family members, but she also treasured her autonomy. Engaged in 1929, she put off her marriage to Frank O. Alford until her retirement. Her letters to Alford explain why: "You would have to do a mighty lot to take the place of the people here and my independence and salary" (p. 130).

Emma L. McDougald, North Carolina's first black home demonstration agent, said that her first question when entering a community was, "What is the greatest need of the people and how can I attack it?" In contrast to white home demonstration agents, who seem to have been more careerists than missionaries, black home demonstration agents were "Women in the Middle," according to Jones. Standing between black communities and white extension administrators, black home dem agents "built on traditions of self-help and mutual aid and a philosophy of uplift among African Americans" (p. 140). They were overworked, underpaid, denied access to resources, and denigrated as hopeless inferiors by the white supervisors to whom they reported. Nonetheless, they did what they could with what they had, earning the gratitude of black farm women.

Black home dem agents paid special attention to health issues, organizing drives to destroy mosquito habitats, clean up yards, and build sanitary toilets. They found food for hungry children, taught sanitation, and encouraged people to get typhoid inoculations. Like white agents, they organized canning clubs and gardening schemes. Yet unlike white home demonstration agents, black agents had to deal with white landlords who did not support any kind of home improvement for their tenants. Lucy Hicks Toole DeLaine, a Winston-Salem State College graduate, worked as an agent in the 1930s. In 1999, at the age of 88, DeLaine remembered her long campaign to get a white landlord to patch the cracks in the walls of tenant houses, install window screens, and build outhouses. DeLaine remembered, "It's a wonder they hadn't strung me up. It was like pulling eye teeth. You just worked on them one thing at a time. You couldn't push too much.... I guess I was as tired when I left extension as though I had hammered all day. But I got some things done" (p. 167).

In the 1930s, black home demonstration agents created a new recipe for salt pork, the ubiquitous fatback

that was a staple of poor southerners' diets. Dipped in eggs, rolled in corn meal, and then fried, fatback apparently could pass for fish or oysters. But, as Jones notes, it was still fatback. Similarly, despite all the palliative efforts of black home demonstration agents, the real problems faced by black farmers remained. Jones suggests that the agents' efforts were not in vain: "By helping black women 'make the best of what they had,' they also gave them the confidence to believe that if one door was closed another might open—if they knocked loudly enough" (p. 169).

Jones's book concludes with a brief excursion into material culture, in this case the fashion in feed bags: "Today a symbol of simpler times on the farm, feed bags also represent economic and cultural changes more complex than historians have imagined" (p. 183). Feed bags, the cotton sacks in which poultry food was retailed, were themselves indicative of changes in the scale of poultry production. Moreover, feed millers and bag manufacturers came to realize that farm women paid attention to the quality of the bags in which feed was sold, and wives influenced their husbands to buy bags that had patterns they liked. Women used the fabric to make all kinds of household furnishings, as well as dresses. They traded feed bags and even sold them. As one feed dealer complained in 1948, "Years ago they used to ask for all sorts of feeds, special brands, you know. Now they come over and ask me if I have an egg mash in a flowered percale. It ain't natural" (p. 177). Trade associations distributed booklets offering tips on how to sew with feed sacks. In 1959, the National Cotton Council and Textile Bag Manufacturers Association sponsored a feed sack sewing contest, with a range of prizes, including a trip to Hollywood and lunch at Sardi's in New York.

Dining at Sardi's in a dress made of chicken feed bags is the sort of piquant picture typical of Jones's book. It illustrates her statement that change in the rural South has been more complex than has often been acknowledged, particularly by those who observe the process from the outside, as historians. Admittedly, I had a hard time maintaining my stance as historian-outsider while reading this book. I grew up in the world that Jones describes, and her work unleashed a flood of memories, as vivid as the color and smell of the King Leo peppermint candies we used to buy from the rolling store.

Yet it is my position as an insider in the rural South that leads me to wish that Jones was a little tougher with her own material. The world that she describes is basi-

cally a good place. But southern farm women left that world in droves, from the 1920s through the 1950s. During the latter decade, parts of the rural South were all but depopulated.

That great migration off the land is outside Jones's stated goals for *Mama Learned Us to Work*, but it overshadows the book just the same and raises several questions. Why did hundreds of thousands of farm women reject the world of their mothers? Is the answer simply economic—small farming ceased to "pay" as farmers say, and women left, as did men, for that reason? Or are there other reasons, related to the gendered economy of the farm home? Jones's informants offer hints, as when a daughter relates how her father drank up her mother's egg money until the daughter intervened, started a saving program, and set her mother on the road to financial independence, or when a son interrupts as his mother describes her egg business to Jones and insists that she never did much of anything on the farm. True, there are stories of egalitarian families, of husbands who share with wives, and sons who testify that their success in agribusiness derives from the support and teaching they received from their mothers. Yet, one wonders how many farm daughters would have agreed with farm agent Pauline Smith when she insisted that she would never put herself in the position of having a husband supervise her expenditures or give up her independent income? The rolling-store business may have been "all women," but farming, as I recall it, was all men and rare indeed was the farm wife who was a partner in decision making. Home demonstration agents encouraged women to participate in the market economy, a step that Jones sees as empowering. But did empowerment motivate out-migration?

These questions could best be answered by looking at the South in the second half of the twentieth century. We can hope that Jones will continue her research into southern rural life and her interviews with people whose eloquent voices need to be heard.

Notes

[1]. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

[2]. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

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Citation: Jeanette Keith. Review of Jones, Lu Ann, *Mama Learned Us to Work: Farm Women in the New South*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

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