

Journal of Rural Social Sciences

Volume 22

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Education, The Power of Ideas, and the Tensions of Rural Life*

Article 7

6-30-2007

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Recommended Citation

Resor, Cynthia. 2007. "A Whistling Girl and a Crowing Hen: Changing Productivity and Gender Expectations." *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 22(1): Article 7. Available At: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss/vol22/iss1/7>

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A WHISTLING GIRL AND A CROWING HEN: CHANGING PRODUCTIVITY AND GENDER EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores two conflicts encountered by the author as she earned her Ph.D. in medieval history. First is the conflict the author feels when working on her craft—can written history be considered a credible occupation that results in something useful in contrast to the farm production of her youth? The second theme explores the tension the author encounters when challenging traditional gender roles of both farmers and historians.

For the first few weeks, I kept my chicks under a heat lamp in a box in my study, the back room of my house, behind the kitchen. The trays of seedlings I had started for my garden were also there. The room smelled of wet spring soil and warm chickens and damp straw. My friends thought it was unpleasant. It reminded me of sitting in the brooder house in May, listening to the symphony of peeps and the soft thwack, thwack of Grandma's hoe in the garden.

I was in the middle of working on my dissertation on twelfth-century crusading when I bought the chicks. My brother, who had just taken over running the family farm, had picked up a flyer from a feed and farm supply store that advertised "Chick Day." I drove 45 miles on a cool March afternoon and picked out my four. Ruckel's Feed and Supply was in a modern aluminum building, but it still had a worn wooden floor and that smell of ground feed. Fifty pound bags of pullet, fighting rooster, chick, calf, and goat feed were lined up by the window. Every time a sack was added to the stacks, a fine dust escaped and settled on the shelves of veterinary supplies, vegetable seeds, and farm tools. The dust from the feed blended with the dirt from the shoes and clothes of the farmers who came to buy supplies.

Shallow boxes were lined up along the floor, each a mass of multicolored down huddled close to a heat lamp. Distressed peeping came from the chicks wandering at the edges of the circle of warmth. The sounds and smells brought back memories of my childhood. Grandma would order 100 white leghorn chicks, straight run, every spring. I would help her prepare for their arrival. We would bleach the brooder house, cover the floor with fresh straw, and make a little pen out of straw bales to keep the chicks close to the heat lamp. When we picked them up from the

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post office, I could hear the anxious chirping, even before the clerk fetched the big, flat, waxed cardboard box from the back room.

On that spring day I did not analyze why I was driving 45 miles to buy four chickens. At the time, I only knew that I longed for my grandma and that I was searching for something to break up the monotony of long days spent at the computer, composing my dissertation. Retrospectively, I have come to understand that my sudden decision to raise chickens operated at multiple levels. Those chicks came to symbolize two tensions in my life. First, I was experiencing an inner battle between the need to be active and to produce something tangible, the goal of my former farm life, and the demand to produce intellectually, the currency of the new career upon which I was embarking.

Second, I was struggling with traditional gender expectations. I was reading and writing about medieval Crusaders, men who journeyed long distances, fought the harsh climate and the Saracens, and plundered for their rewards, taking vigorous actions to achieve their goals. My grandmother also produced real things, but 800 years later her accomplishments were either ignored or seen as mere support for the more important work of men, little different from the Middle Ages. Looking back, I suspect that she may have resented this role while doing her best to fill it. I was fighting a similar battle, searching for a role in which I felt comfortable. Was I a producer or an intellectual? Was I successfully filling the traditional role of a woman, or redefining those expectations?

My father's mother was a farm wife. In the 1930s, she and my grandfather married and then paid cash for worn out land 45 miles from his family home. They spent their lives improving that farm, making a living for themselves and their four children. Grandma was up cooking and cleaning before the men were expected to begin their work day. She started what was to be dinner and went to the barn to milk and feed. She worked in the fields or in the vegetable garden until ten in the morning, then completed the huge dinner, cleaned the dishes, and worked outside the rest of the day. Then supper, then more dishes. In the winter, when she could not garden, she mended, embroidered, quilted, and sewed.

In many ways, my grandmother's existence paralleled the peasant life. Like the medieval wife, her place depended on her husband's access to land. My grandmother was needed to provide manual labor, as was the peasant woman (Labarge 1986:157). Both worked in the fields—plowing, sowing, reaping, and making hay. Similarly, like the medieval peasant, her work was determined by her gender. Both were expected to do female work: take care of the home, garden, and children. They made, mended, and washed the clothes. Both tended the milk cow and the poultry

that provided food for the family as well as additional income. My grandmother traded eggs for goods at the community store. An illustrated medieval manuscript included a painting of a woman selling chickens, increasing the income of her family through her extra labor (Labarge 1986:155).

Grandma worked because she had no choice; she worked because, like the medieval peasant, not to work was to face failure and famine. I had quit a teaching job to go to graduate school. I spent hours laboring—reading and writing—but I never knew if I had worked enough. I sat in my study, facing failure. Like my grandmother, it always seemed that success ultimately depended on something out of my hands. What if I was asked a question I could not answer, what if I missed the point that my professor thought was the most important, what if I failed to understand the key idea in the text, what if I had not read the foremost books in my field? I worked and I worked, but at the time, it seemed like academic success was ultimately out of my control, just as the fate of the farmer depends on the weather.

The 6th century Bishop Gregory of Tours often described the “signs and wonders” of unusual weather in his chronicle of the Merovingian kings. The strength of the warrior kings that descended from Clovis depended upon production of the peasants that depended on the weather.

This year (587) it rained very heavily throughout the Spring, and then, when the trees and the vines were already in leaf, a fall of snow buried everything. There followed such a frost that the vine-shoots were withered, together with any fruit which was already showing. (Gregory of Tours 1974:500)

Such weather led to starvation. More than 500 years later, a similar catastrophe occurred in Flanders. According to the medieval chronicler, Galbert of Bruges (1998), God sent the devastating weather and subsequent famine as a punishment for both lords and serfs.

Grandma always worried about the weather. When would it rain or would it rain too much? What would become of the tobacco if there was a frost this late in May? Did the storm flatten the wheat? The lives of my chicks were also determined by the whims of nature. Every day I watched the forecasts to see how cold it would be during those April nights. My chicks outgrew the box in my study and needed to be moved to a bigger nursery. However, the only place in my house for the refrigerator box that I hauled home was in the unheated upstairs. Every evening I

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had to decide how many lamps to use to heat the cardboard enclosure. Every morning I went upstairs, afraid that I had misjudged the weather.

I doubted that written history could produce anything. The fruits of Grandma's labor were tangible evidence. Her basement shelves were lined with jars of vegetables, jams, and pickles. The kitchen table was covered daily with food she prepared. She sewed scraps left over from the work dresses and aprons into quilts, both beautiful and utilitarian. When she read, it was to prepare for the Sunday school lesson she taught. When she wrote, it was a recipe for later use.

I wanted my work to count for something. Those days in front of a computer seemed wasted. I spent hours writing passages that would be read by only a few people that seemed to me to have no effect whatsoever in the end. As I sat, reading and toiling, I sensed that the crusaders did things; they had decided, taken action, traveled, fought, and died. My words about them 800 years later struck me as inconsequential in comparison.

When I told family and friends that I was studying medieval history, I'm sure they wondered why. *I* wondered why. What worth could I produce from archaic traditions, captured in the words of the few men who were literate? The premier journal of medieval history is named *Speculum*. Latin for "mirror," this was a popular title in the Middle Ages. Oddly enough, when the leading medieval historians, all male, created this academic journal in the 1920s, they apparently did not consider the fact that a speculum was a widely used gynecological instrument. In the Middle Ages, this title evoked the concepts *reflection* and *perspective* (Bennett 1993:309, 311). I now realize that a mirror is a symbol that encompasses the most valuable aspects of history, no matter how remote in time and place. When we study the culture, religion, politics, or motivations of others, we are really reflecting on those same characteristics in ourselves or our society. Through consideration we gain perspective, which is valuable but so elusive, unlike the quantifiable yield of the farm.

I wrote about the motivations of crusaders. They had been inspired by epic heroes like Charlemagne, Roland, and William of Orange who sought wealth and glory in foreign lands. The traditions of his ancestral houses of Anjou, Normandy, Poitou, and Toulouse inspired the great king Richard I. Many of his forebearers had gone on pilgrimages or crusades to fight the Muslim in Spain or the Holy Land. He grew up in a land dotted with shrines to the great epic pagan-fighting heroes such as Roland and Oliver. Thousands of pilgrims passed through Richard's Aquitaine on the great roads to the Shrine of St. James, the Moor-Slayer, in Spain. Crusaders like Richard were a product of the physical and mental landscape of the 12th century.

Richard was supported throughout his life by a woman. Eleanor of Aquitaine—the powerful medieval ruler of Aquitaine, queen of France, crusader, queen of England—bequeathed to Richard his core territory. Still, even a female as powerful as Eleanor struggled to fulfill the public expectations of her role as a woman while having the intelligence, wealth, and responsibilities of male contemporaries. During her life and after her death, Eleanor's image continually suffered at the hands of male chroniclers and historians.

I, like Richard, am a product of my upbringing. Crusaders fought, just as their ancestors had; farmers produced, just as the farmers before them. The farms of my youth generated hogs, cattle, tobacco, corn, wheat. However, crusaders and farmers are supposed to be men. Like Richard, my childhood was dominated by strong women whose success was defined by community tradition. In a rural area, choices made by men and women are often invoked to insure the success of the farm. My father and uncle continued to farm when my grandfather died. I am sure they considered other careers, but the land made the choice for them. My father married and built his home within sight of the house where he was raised. My mother worked full-time in a secretarial position in town. Her labor was of a different nature than my grandma's, but the object was the same—support for her husband's chosen profession as steward of the land.

Since my mother worked away from the farm, I spent summers, afternoons, and snow days when school was cancelled helping Grandma in the kitchen, in the garden, in the fields. I do not remember my grandfather; he died when I was very young. By the time I was around, my grandma's life was a little easier. Two of her sons farmed and they did not want her to work as hard. She still went to the barn every morning to milk the cow and feed the little pigs. I can still smell the grimy denim jacket she wore every morning in the hog house. Yet she refused to slow down. She would change from her faded cotton everyday dress and apron, put on her work pants, and hop on the tractor to rake hay. Although her back was stiff with arthritis, she pulled tobacco plants for hours. She still made dinner every day for my father, uncle, cousins, brother and me and had it on the table at 10:30 because she never knew when they would be ready to eat. Sometimes they had an early break, sometimes very late, but dinner was always ready.

Grandma used to say that she worked like a man. This statement shocked some of her friends. My grandma worked more than any man; but a farm woman is expected to stand back and never demand attention and praise for her accomplishments. In my traditional farm community, a woman is not supposed to brag. I first consciously realized this when I read *A Midwife's Tale* by Laurel

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Thatcher Ulrich (1990). The book was assigned reading for one of my history seminars. The diaries of a colonial woman, Martha Ballard, had been overlooked by previous historians because a farm woman's life did not seem to count for much. The book had little impact on my fellow graduate students who had never known a Martha Ballard. They laughed when I admitted that I cried as I read the closing chapters, describing her last years. Martha Ballard had defined herself by her labor and what she produced. With advancing age, her utility decreased. Upon the death of her husband, her role in their economic partnership dissolved. Responsibility shifted to her sons. Her accomplishments had been taken for granted, just as historians had dismissed her diaries. My grandfather was considered a successful farmer; little thought was given to crediting my grandmother.

In the afternoons, after the dishes were washed, Grandma would take a break and sit in the front porch swing. That is the only time I remember Grandma sitting and doing nothing. Any other time, she had needlework. For about 30 minutes in the afternoon, we would just sit and swing. Then we would go back to work. Grandma's life was driven by the need to produce. My chicks became my 30 minutes in the swing with Grandma. I could sit and watch them peck and cheep and forget pressing deadlines. Yet like Grandma, the break was short-lived; my need to write, to finish the dissertation and get a paying job, beckoned.

Grandma had been a teacher in a one-room school before she married. I have a picture from the 1930s of her with her class of 20 children dressed in their best faded cotton dresses and overalls. More than once she told me the story of how she had to borrow money from her small town's doctor for the few semesters of college required to get a teaching certificate. She boarded with an old maid and attended classes, but she almost flunked algebra. The math teacher was really the music teacher; he hated algebra, hated his students. Grandma did not know how she would pay back the loan if she failed and could not get a teaching job. She finally passed with a D, received her certificate, and reimbursed the doctor with her first paychecks. I do not think Grandma wanted to quit teaching when she married, but it was expected. Grandma's teaching career was controlled by men: the doctor's loan, the teacher's grade, her husband's farm. I think she subconsciously resented that her life had been so determined by the whims of the dominant males of her era. I also believe that she longed to return to the intellectual work of teaching. I suspect she tired of the continual drudgery of the farm and longed for the recognition she should have received. She would have been proud to see me graduate with a Ph.D. She would have tried to read my lengthy, obscure dissertation, although she had no interest in the complexities of medieval history.

She would have wanted a bound copy to put on her bookshelf with her Sunday school commentaries.

I wanted each of my chicks to be a different color because chickens also reminded me of my Other Grandma, on my mother's side. Red and black Rhode Island Reds and gray speckled Domineckers and various other mixes made up her flock. I do not remember any white chickens scratching around her garden and flowerbeds. She would let a few of her hens set their eggs in the spring and they would produce a little brood of chicks, each a vibrant canvas of color. I did not know Other Grandma as well; the farm she and my grandfather owned was 40 miles away. After Grandpa died, she rented out the farm, but kept her vegetable garden and flowers. My father's mother never had time for flowers. Other Grandma had huge clumps of hibiscus, climbing roses, and a snowball bush that covered nearly half her small white house. Along her gravel driveway was a bank of orange daylilies. There were zinnias and marigolds and tall clumps of snow-on-the-mountain that glowed in the back yard at night. I had turned my backyard into a blaze of color like Other Grandma's. Her chickens wandered among her flowerbeds, scratching and clucking. I let my chickens have the run of my flower garden. My mother said they would ruin the beds, "Wait until they start pecking holes in your ripe tomatoes." I did not care; I had plenty of tomatoes.

I had picked out my chicks from the fuzzy mass huddled in the box at the feed and supply store. Each was dubbed with the name of a renowned crusader—Godfrey the Golden after Duke Godfrey of Lorraine who became the first king of Jerusalem; Baldwin the Brown after Godfrey's crusader brother; Fulk the Black after the notorious Angevin who bit out a piece of the Holy Sepulcher as a relic to take home from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem; Richard the Red after the crusading English king, Richard I, who was the main character in my dissertation. My flock was like a history book that dwelled on the achievement of men. My dad asked, "What are you going to do if they are all roosters? Are you going to kill and eat them?" I hoped for three hens and a rooster, despite their masculine names.

When Grandma's straight run chicks were "teenagers" and the roosters and pullets were distinguishable, she would begin killing, dressing, and freezing the roosters. Each morning she entered the chicken house with a long wire hook. She would snag a rooster, take him outside and chop off his head with the butcher knife, like a "crusader" wielding her sword. In a few minutes, headless roosters would be flopping around the field, squirting blood. The words that Fulcher of Chartres used to describe the slaughter when Jerusalem fell to the first Crusaders are fit to describe the scene.

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Within this Temple about ten thousand were beheaded. If you had been there, your feet would have been stained up to the ankles with the blood of the slain. What more shall I tell? Not one of them was allowed to live. (Fulcher of Chartres 1969:121)

I helped her gather the dead birds, still warm and limp. She would scald, pluck, dress, cut up, and freeze them. I never minded helping; I liked cleaning the gizzard best.

Today, butchering and dressing poultry would shock most people who are used to buying boneless frozen breasts in a sealed plastic bag. For a while I worked as a historical interpreter in the 19th century Shaker village at Pleasant Hill. When the tom turkeys began to fight in front of the tourists and roost on the restaurant steps, it was decided that at least two would sacrifice their lives for an outdoor cooking demonstration—turkey and herb dumplings. Chosen as executioners, a fellow Shaker interpreter and I had to come to work early and perform the unseen task behind the closed door of a stable. We stuffed the head, feet, innards, and feathers in black plastic bags: no blood-fest for these modern tourists who saw only the tom turkeys' pale carcasses in the big black pot on the fire.

Butchering and dressing poultry would have been common knowledge in the Middle Ages. Medieval cookbooks have recipes for roasted, braised, and fricasseed hens and capons. The cooks of the wealthy prepared chicken in rich sauces of almonds and rose petals, cumin, elderflower, onions, oranges, or yogurt. They stuffed chicken with grapes and packed pastry with chicken. They even used the “garbage” of the chicken—heads, livers, hearts, and gizzards—to make a thick, seasoned stew (Hieatt, Bulter, and Hosington 1996). Meanwhile, the peasants, whose labor supported the gentry, dreamed of Cockaigne, a perfect world in which food and wine were plentiful and free. This utopia was the focus of numerous medieval and early modern poems, songs, and paintings.

To satisfy your strongest craving.
There you cannot help but thrive:
The geese, they roast themselves alive.
Meat, fish, fat capons, it's no ordeal,
Cook themselves for the midday meal. (Pleij 2001:38)

The 16th century artist Peter the Elder Brueghel imagined the Land of Cockaigne. In his painting, a headless and roasted chicken jumps onto a peasant's

plate and an egg, already cooked, cracked and holding a spoon, ready to be eaten, has sprouted little legs to take it to its destiny.

The lady at the feed store, experienced in the ways of chickens, thought my questions were a little silly. "How much feed should I buy for four chicks?" I knew a 50-pound bag was too much. "Will they get too cold on the drive home?" I knew I had to keep them at around 90 degrees for the first few days, but I was worried about the long car ride home. I could tell she thought I was a town girl and that my chicks would not live through the night. She mistook my concerns as naiveté rather than details informed by my farm background. My chicks were going to survive! They flourished under the heat lamp in the attic. When the weather was warm enough to move them outside, I built a pen behind a shed in my back yard. I cut a hole in the back wall of the shed and made a little ramp so they could go in and out. I brought straw from my father's farm for bedding and purchased a long narrow galvanized tin chicken feeder and special galvanized water bucket that did not have to be filled every day. I read about chicken diseases and chicken parasites and hoped mine did not come down with anything. I bought chicken vitamins to put in the water. I read about chicken mating habits, and speculated on when they would start laying and wondered if any of my hens would set eggs.

My fellow graduate students thought I was a little crazy when I told them about my chickens. They had never understood why I enjoyed those long tedious books on medieval peasants and medieval farming. Marc Bloch's *French Rural History* was required reading. In the final paragraphs, Bloch (1966) depicted the present state of the modern French peasants, engaged in a struggle for survival in the modern economy, just as the medieval peasants constantly struggled to defend their rights from the nobility. Most of my fellow students were the products of suburban households who grew up playing on manicured lawns that only a few years before had been producing corn, wheat, or tobacco. They bought their chicken in plastic bags and did not want much needed rain to spoil their weekend plans.

Political matters or intellectual history were much more interesting to the other graduate students. Yet the health of the entire medieval society depended upon the labor of the peasants. My fellow students ignored production in favor of more "important" concerns, such as the tactics of war and political intrigue. I heard a historian at a conference speak about the 19th century eastern Kentucky farmer. Although this man was an expert on the rural Appalachian economy before and after the arrival of the coal-mining industry, he did not seem to know the correct name for the farm tools. It was as if he was ignoring the lives lived, the things produced. His presentation resurrected the conflicts within me. I wanted to see

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history and my new life as an academic should—a world in which ideas were as important as things. Still, the values of youth die hard: I was tied to “producing” what could be perceived as something useful. It turns out that my instincts were consistent with a major theoretical movement in history and anthropology. Harris (1979) noted that the evolution of culture is driven by the means of production—how technology interacts with ecology to meet society’s needs for food, energy and housing. Likewise, the Annales school of French historians noted that the production for everyday human needs ultimately takes primacy over grand theories of political and intellectual ideas (Burke 1990).

I worked as a teaching assistant for a young, pompous professor from urban New England. One day, in his presence, I wove a long yarn in my best hillbilly accent about how I was raising fighting roosters. After all, I had given them crusading warrior names. I elaborated on the details of a cock fight, though I had never really attended one. I speculated on the bets that would be laid and on the audience that would attend. He may have believed my tale. I did not care—his presumptions about my background made me mad. The only cockfight that ever really occurred was when my rooster, Godfrey, attacked my miniature dachshund. The rooster won.

I pointed out that a favorite pastime of university students in medieval Oxford was cockfighting. Sometimes I feel as if I am in a cockfight, trying to demonstrate my mental superiority over my colleagues. Raising fighting roosters is still common in Kentucky. Little tin huts are constructed for each rooster. I have a friend who lives a half mile from a farmer who raises these fighting birds. The crowing is loud and almost continuous: sometimes energizing; often annoying. I feel like I am in the middle of a bunch of these roosters when I go to a history conference. All the cocks are crowing: sometimes inspiring, often discouraging.

I made my fellow graduate students laugh by pointing out how often we refer to chickens. I often tried to fit chicken phrases into the conversation. “Don’t count your chickens until they hatch,” “acting cocky,” “madder than a wet hen,” “running around like a chicken with your head cut off,” and my favorite, “A whistling girl and a crowing hen will always come to the same sad end.” My grandmother often repeated this adage to me when she heard me whistling, although I really do not believe she cared if I whistled or not. I often felt as out of place as a crowing hen. A farm woman does not brag or point out the failings of others. Beyond that, there is the unstated silencing of the female voice. Still, academic culture demands being heard. In my very first year of graduate school when I was pursuing a master’s degree, I had been awarded a graduate assistantship. However, no one seemed to

know where to place the only female graduate assistant in the male-dominated department. I became the assistant to the secretary. I just did what I was expected to do. When I was a kid, my male cousin drove the tractor for the most important tasks. I did not mind too much. I had been taught not to be a crowing hen. I finished my master's degree and worked for eight years in my home community, a life still dominated by traditional values. I crowed a few times, generally with disastrous results. When I returned to graduate school to earn my Ph.D., I was expected to crow. It was difficult. My crowing was weak, like my little rooster Godfrey's first efforts.

My hens started laying in late September. Godfrey the Golden was the only rooster, an incredibly proud Rhode Island Red. The crusading kings' names of the other three were changed to Matilda, Eleanor, and Ann Lee: two strong medieval queens and the woman who founded the uniquely feminine Shaker faith. Ann Lee laid the first brown egg. My hens were soon laying three eggs a day. I prepared deviled eggs for every event. I gave eggs to my friends and neighbors. The next spring, Eleanor hatched four chicks. That same spring I produced the last chapter of my dissertation and prepared to defend.

In the subsequent years, I have achieved a more satisfying balance between the extremes of production versus intellectual pursuits. A university professor's job encompasses the challenge of meshing both. Through teaching, I contribute to the "production" of thoughtful students that are well-prepared for life after college. Intellectual pursuits can produce new ideas (basic research) or transform those insights into useful products (applied research). And I have discovered another similarity between university and farm life. Distinct responsibilities are associated with each season. Fortunately for me, the relaxed pace of the university summer allows me to pursue my farming. I am still crusading for a better balance between the expectations associated with gender. Still, I am proud to have become a crowing hen.

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