

Future Role of Farm Women

By Dr. Helen Abell

Editor's Note: In the last three issues of Home and Country we have had progress reports of the findings of the Survey of Farm Homes and Homemakers conducted by Home Economics Service under the direction of Dr. Helen Abell, Head of the Rural Sociology Unit, Economics Division, Canada Department of Agriculture. The material in this article is taken from an address "The Role of Farm Women in the Next Ten Years" by Dr. Abell to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. Further reports from the survey will appear in coming issues.

AN ATTEMPT to predict the role of farm women in the next ten short years would be meaningless without an awareness of both the figurative and real association throughout history between femininity and agriculture.

The Romans worshipped Ceres as goddess of the growing vegetation. The Greeks worshipped Demeter not only as the Goddess of the fruitful soil of agriculture but also as the guardian of marriage.

Who raised the maize in North America while the mighty hunter pursued wild animals or smoked his peace pipe? Who hoes the sugar beets and other crops on thousands of pocket-handkerchief sized farms in Europe and Asia today? How many of you in this audience made arrangements for someone else to clean the milking equipment and gather or clean the eggs while you were here in Toronto for a day or two?

The part played in the past and being played now by women in helping their husbands with farm work is so well known to you, or is it? Maybe some of you no longer perform any work around the farm, but from our studies I would not hesitate to say you are in the minority.

Just about a year ago 352 Ontario farm homemakers were asked, "Do you do more or less work around the farm than was the case since you first became a farmer's wife?" These women ranged in age from 21 to 81 years (average 44). They had been farmers' wives for about 16 years on the average, ranging from less than 4 to over 40 years. They live in each and every county and district of the Province of Ontario.

Nearly all (98 out of 100) said they perform some work around the farm other than homemaking. What farm work do they do? 89 of every 100 do gardening; 61 per cent either clean milkers or pails or help with the milking or feeding of cattle; 53 per cent feed poultry and/or clean eggs; 42 per cent keep the farm accounts; 26 per cent do some field work and 13 per cent do some other type of farm work such as driving a tractor or some other machine, market some produce, etc. These figures relate to Ontario farm women. I could show you almost identical findings from studies we have done in other provinces of Canada.

Today farm women are a very real labour factor on our Canadian family farms. Much of

this work such as keeping farm accounts, operating farm machinery, handling eggs and feeding of livestock would have to be performed by the farmer or hired help if farm women confined their activities to homemaking.

Now to the question of whether the amount of farm work has changed over the years for these Ontario women: About half of these 352 women (53 per cent) said they now do less work than when they first became farmers' wives, a quarter of them (25 per cent) said they do just as much now as formerly and almost as many (22 per cent) said they now do even more farm work.

What were the reasons underlying these answers? There were five major types of reasons all of which reflect economic or social adjustments which these farm families have made and which will continue to face farm families far into the future.

1. The first reason which was given by over 1/3 of the women, relates to the availability of the supply of farm labour. When the required manpower is not available the more the homemaker helps out with farm work; where an adequate labour force (either husband, children or hired) is available, the wives do less farm work.

2. Almost 1/3 of the women mentioned that the changes in the nature and size of farm operations affected the extent of their share of farm work. Shifts from dairy cattle to beef and vice versa show this clearly.

3. Personal factors relating to the homemaker, her health, age and in some cases her interest in farm work affect her share in it.

4. Changes in the family situation affected about 19 of 100 farm wives. These changes concerned the age, sex and presence or absence of children on the farm.

5. Although only 5 per cent of the women specified economic pressures as reasons for their doing more or less farm work, it is significant that several of those women who now do less farm work than formerly said that this was because they had taken on paid jobs in order to help out with the family income.

What can we predict about the role of farm women in the future after considering these and other factors? Knowing full well that "a prophet is not without honour save in his own country" I venture to suggest that several things will happen:

1. In order to maintain or to expand the size of farm business on many family farms more farm women will help their husbands and families by either sharing more and more in the farm work and the keeping of business records or by taking paid employment if and when available within commuting distance of their homes.

2. Farm women will increasingly realize the extent to which they and their husbands are jointly involved in decision-making concerning both the home and the farm and particularly the plan of farm finance. With this realization they will seek knowledge and understanding of such matters as the principles of farm management, the