

Farmers on the Illinois Frontier

Imagine if you will, a farmer standing in a partially plowed field, a mile or two from the small village of Sugar Creek in Sangamon County, Illinois.

It is the early evening during the spring of 1833. You approach a farmer who is plowing a field to ask directions. Despite the cool evening air, the farmer is sweating profusely. The farmer's hair is long and not terribly clean and the farmer's face is smudged with dirt. Grime is imbedded in the farmer's hands, which have dirty and broken fingernails. The farmer's linen over shirt and pants are frayed and patched, obviously not having been washed for sometime, but, then plowing is both hard and dirty work and it would make little sense to wash them too often. Sunburned, the farmer is lean but muscled, though at the end of the long afternoon the farmer is obviously exhausted. Several kids are in view towards the homestead, about 100 yards away. The youngest approaches the farmer and asks her mother when supper will be ready.

Why is it that even after a generation of rethinking the role of women and men in society we still can only think of men as being farmers, whether speaking of the historic frontier or even in contemporary America? The term "farmer" itself suggests a man to such a degree that we find it impossible to use the term for a "woman who farms." Come to think of it, how might we indicate that a farmer is a woman without somehow specifying her gender? We assume—to this day—that farmers were and are men.

We know better, however, Women did farm, when they were widowed or when their husbands or sons were off to war and, occasionally, on their own. What is more difficult to appreciate is that even when a husband and sons were at hand women still farmed, though their gender did to a great extent determine what they did and how they were perceived.

Could women plow? Though plowing was a physically demanding task women certainly did have the physical strength to control a team. Women also seeded and typically played a significant role in harvesting, but women generally worked within and around the home. Though relegated to the home, women were nevertheless an integral component of the farm economy, particularly on the frontier. The farm on the Illinois frontier was not yet part of the market economy. Though some wheat was grown as a cash crop, farms were essentially subsistence enterprises, with farm families growing corn for food and feed, flax for clothing, and tobacco for pleasure. Swine were left to roam through nearby woods only to be rounded up and butchered late each fall Cattle grazed upon the prairie grass. Cash was scarce, but families could rely upon their own hard work and initiative to supply most of their wants, visiting towns only occasionally for lead and gunpowder, needles, perhaps ink and paper and such other items that they could not manufacture themselves.

What little cash that families needed came only in part from the sale of cash crops but not only crops. The cloth that women spun, the butter that they churned and the eggs that they collected provided a key source of revenue. Women were, in short, full partners in the enterprise of the subsistence farm, even if they were typically viewed as being but helpmates to their husbands. Men may have played the greater role in the raising of crops but women tended the gardens, and if men herded the cattle, women butchered the swine

and rendered the fat into soap. And they bore and raised the kids, whose labor also was critical to the farm's survival.

But to argue that the economy of the frontier homestead is best viewed as a partnership in which both women and men participated is to beg the underlying question of why men and women's role on the farm did tend to be defined by gender. If women could plow why did they instead largely confine themselves to work within and around the home?

Certainly, children did much to define the role that women played on the farm. On the Illinois frontier raising children represented no small chore. Women commonly gave birth to ten or more children and—assuming that a woman lived through the rigors of childbirth—she would assume primary responsibility for the raising of the eight or nine children who survived infancy. The extraordinarily high birthrate was not the result of carelessness but of need. Infant mortality was high on the frontier and children—once they reached seven or eight—played an increasingly significant role in the farm economy. Their labor was essential to the farm's success. Obviously, the brood, which would range in age from an infant, to toddlers, to full-grown adults, demanded care and supervision, which the mother (and the older daughters) would provide, but why was it the wife who fulfilled that role and not the man?

One could, of course, argue that it was the mother's natural role to care for the children but just the same if women had the strength to plow, a father should have been able to nurture and discipline a child as well as a mother. So, why were the man in the field and women in the home? Did, in fact, biology play a role? It may have, though in a surprising fashion.

One can only wonder what role nursing played in the assignment of roles. At the age of eighteen or nineteen, sometimes even earlier a woman would bear her first child and she would bear an additional child every twenty-four months or so until she reached menopause, hopefully as early as her mid-forties. The birthing process alone aged these women, assuming they were fortunate enough to survive labor, but their exhaustion could have only been deepened by the strain that nursing placed upon women. Since children were not typically weaned until they reached their third year, mothers could be nursing perhaps two or even three children simultaneously. Think about it. That young woman who married at eighteen would be nursing children almost continuously from then until she could no longer bear children, for perhaps thirty straight years.

Years before bottles, rubber nipples and formula could free women from nursing mothers on the frontier may have been effectively bound to within a few hundred feet or so of the home. Attending church was a production but services were attended; trips to town, however, were a chore and visits even to neighbors were infrequent. Men had their taverns but women were isolated to a degree that it difficult to understand today.

Be that as it may, nursing may have relegated women to a restricted role on the frontier farm but that role was nonetheless a critical role. Though she may have seldom plowed, a

woman on the Illinois frontier was just as much a farmer as a man, no matter what the connotations of the word was then and how it remains even to this day.

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