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“Well I just generally bes the president of everything”: Rural Black Women’s Empowerment through South Carolina Home Demonstration Activities

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Abstract

This article is a narrative overview of the empowerment rural African American in South Carolina women developed through their participation in home demonstration programs. It contributes to a growing body of literature that specifically focuses on the experience of African American women with the home demonstration service. The lives of these women are documented through the annual narrative reports of the state agents for Negro extension work. The reports on this segregated program show that rural Afro–South Carolinian women developed leadership skills, entrepreneurial spirit, sisterhood, and a concern for community uplift that is typically exemplified among club women of the African American middle class. Despite the privations caused by gender, race, and class, rural Afro–South Carolinian who participated in extension programs developed a positive sense of their capabilities.

In this article, I will discuss how black farm women in South Carolina found inspiration to improve their lives through participation in black home demonstration clubs with the help of home demonstration agents. I will discuss the historical foundations of home demonstration work with black women and then focus on the development and operation of clubs and their effects on their communities. There is a thriving literature on the history of rural women in the United States that documents the challenges they have faced and continue to face. In this body of scholarship, the role of home demonstration work—also known as home economics work—in transforming such rural women’s lives has received a justified emphasis. Among scholars who study the lives of Southern rural women, the difference race has made in rural African American women’s experience has received

some attention. However, there are few studies whose central focus is rural African American women.¹

To understand why the experience of African American women merits isolated examination from that of rural women generally, it is necessary to consider some historical aspects of their experience. From the earliest history of this nation, distinctions have been made between the status of rural white and African American women. Virginia colonial law discouraged the employment of white women as farm labor by taxing owners who used them “to work in the Ground” while not taxing slave women agricultural laborers (Beverly [1705] 1855). As a result, in the realm of agricultural labor, African American women as well as African American men were used as brute labor to be driven for profit. African American women’s identity as farm women has been complicated by the absence of a demarcation between field and home in the black farm world.² Long after slavery ended, black women’s place in the farm family social economy was still unsettled. As Susan Mann discusses in her work on the transition from slave to sharecropping agriculture, black women’s place in the agricultural labor force remained under male control. Black men who worked for wages as farm laborers tended to remove their wives from the fields. Sharecroppers’ wives, on the other hand, spent as much time in the fields as their husbands required. As a result, while the 1870 census reported “98.4 percent of white wives . . . ke[pt] house,” 40 percent of black women reported their occupation as field laborers. Later, nearly 90 percent of very poor sharecropping women reported field laborer as occupation (Mann 1989).

As the farm reform movement gained traction in the late nineteenth century, its impact in the African American community was limited. The greatest effort to systematically reach African American farm families was through Tuskegee’s annual farmers’ conferences. By 1894 the conference included sessions devoted specifically to women’s issues (Jones 1991). Tuskegee Institute inspired imitators—some of which were founded by its alumni—throughout the South. Schools like Vorhees in Denmark, South Carolina, and Port Royal in Beaufort, South Carolina, held their own farmers conferences for African Americans (Crosby 1977). However, institutes did not systematically attempt to reach rural African American women.

The first systematic effort to reach rural African American females was the Jeanes Supervisor teacher program. Jeanes teachers were itinerant educators whose work was funded by the philanthropy of Anna T. Jeanes, a Pennsylvania Quaker who in 1907 left an endowment to support African American education

in the South. The majority of Jeanes teachers were African American women. They provided instructional support in domestic science and agriculture to African American school teachers. Some teachers even supervised early 4-H clubs (Brawley 1930).³

In 1902, the General Education Board (GEB) began efforts to improve Southerners' lives through philanthropic support of agricultural improvement programs for men. These activities were the forerunners of what became known as extension programs. However, it was another decade before the first domestic science programs for rural women began. Men and women employed by colleges provided instruction in scientific farming, food preservation, and home improvement techniques to rural families. The participation of African American women in these programs was limited. Indeed, only two African American women, Annie Peters in Oklahoma and Lizzie Jenkins in Virginia, were employed through the GEB in Southern states before 1915, when the Smith-Lever Agricultural Extension Act was passed (Hilton 1994; True 1969). Like the majority of Southern extension services, the South Carolina extension service made no effort to hire African American women agents before the United States entered World War I.⁴ Also like the extension services in many other Southern states, the South Carolina extension service did not fully fund "Negro Extension Work." The expenditure for these programs represented only a small fraction of the funds devoted to extension work. Programs for African American women were funded at a lower level than those for African American men (Harris 2002).

The late arrival of Negro Home Demonstration Work in South Carolina was a result of the state's racial policies. The state's governor, Cole L. Blease, used race as a wedge issue to inflame mill workers against those whites he considered "politically elite," and he was also on an anti-Clemson crusade. Although he was not from the working class, Blease used their race prejudice to advance his political ambitions (Harris 2002). In 1914 federal officials began negotiations with Clemson Agricultural College to cooperatively manage extension programs in agriculture and home economics in the state. Bradford Knapp, son of Seaman A. Knapp and the USDA's director of Southern extension programs, asked the college president Walter M. Riggs to accept supervision of black agents who, up until then, had reported directly to Washington. Fearing political backlash, Riggs rejected any association with black agents. From the act's passage through April 1915, Clemson officials resisted Knapp's request that the college assume supervision of black agricultural agents and proposed to fire those agents then employed. In the negotiations,

black rural women were brought up as part of Knapp's argument for continuing black extension agents. Knapp suggested to Riggs that white home economics agents could not effectively serve black families comprehensively. In a January 27, 1915, letter to Riggs, Knapp argued,

[W]hen we come to touch on the negro home. The matter of moral, sanitary and economic conditions in negro homes under the Lever bill, is something which I would not want to tackle except with persons who could go into these homes. Therefore, in the home economics extension work for negroes, I should certainly use negro employees by putting a few to work and supervising them carefully.

Knapp's arguments failed to persuade Clemson officials to assume supervision of any black extension programs. Only the direct intervention of Secretary of Agriculture David Houston saved the black agricultural agents' jobs. Still, African American women initially received no extension services under the Smith-Lever Act.

Afro-South Carolinians did not wait for their state to appropriate Smith-Lever funds to enter the realm of home demonstration work. In 1915, the all-white board of trustees of the Colored, Normal, Industrial, Agricultural, and Mechanical College (CNIAMC), the 1890 land-grant college for African Americans, approved \$300 from its meager state appropriation to hire a part-time worker to provide home demonstrations services to African American women in Orangeburg County, where the school was located. The program was conducted through a cooperative agreement with Winthrop Normal College, which provided home demonstration services to white South Carolina women. This unnamed woman organized Mother's Clubs and showed women how to prepare meals and how to develop year-round gardens. She also worked to build a spirit of community using churches and schools as foundations. This agent continued to be employed through 1918 as an at-large state worker (CNIAMC 1915, 1918).⁵ The late Joel Schor (1983), a USDA historian who studied the impact of federal policy on African Americans, identified a Mrs. Miller Earle as an organizer of tomato clubs for black girls in Sumter around 1914. Ransom Westberry, who was an early black agricultural agent for that county, also promoted organizing clubs for black women. In a speech in Anderson County, Westberry stated, "No race of people can rise above their women. They should be encouraged in their efforts to teach girls to raise tomatoes. . . . We hope the next generation will understand the arts of farming better than we do. . . . I know of no other being who is more willing to learn new things than the females" (Westberry and Wilson 1921, 79–80).

The war brought Clemson Agricultural College directly into financial administration of African American home demonstration work through a program to hire emergency agents. In February 1918, the Russell Sage Foundation published a report and recommendations compiled by Hastings Hart at the request of Governor Richard I. Manning regarding South Carolina's wartime preparedness. Hart's report, *The War Program of the State of South Carolina*, recommended that youth clubs and home demonstration agents work with white and "colored" citizens "to produce money, cotton, raw and manufactured, and foodstuffs" (Hart 1918, 14). Edith Parrott, South Carolina's supervisor of home demonstration work in 1918, wrote that while white agents had assisted black clients whenever they could, black agents had to be hired if extension work with blacks was to be done "properly." Parrott's supervisor, Winthrop College President David Johnson, wrote to Bradford Knapp on June 6, 1918, and requested \$7,500 from the USDA's war emergency funds to hire black women agents.

Thirteen black women hired were hired as emergency agents to organize clubs for food production, canning, and sanitation during the war. These women were trained by the white home demonstration specialists from Winthrop College. From 1918 through 1922, the state employed black women as summer workers, but for the remainder of the year, black rural women received no extension services. It was only after a complaint by South Carolina State College's president, Robert Shaw Wilkinson, that the work year of agents was extended to the calendar year (CNIAMC 1921). However, as a result, the number of agents was reduced by 75 percent from thirteen down to three in 1923. By the 1950s, the number of black women agents reached nearly forty. At no time did all of South Carolina's forty-six counties employ African American agents. County legislative delegations had to earmark matching funds before an agent would be placed, and in counties without significant African American populations, the legislators never designated funds for employment of African American home demonstration agents (Harris 2002). Despite the restricted geographical range of African American home demonstration work, the meager salaries the agents received (typically half, or less, of what white home demonstration agents received), they made a difference in the communities they served.

Capturing the history of African American rural women is a daunting task. Although almost all extant records related to extension work have been consolidated in the Special Collections of Clemson University, the institution designated by the state legislature to receive federal extension funds. The records have gaps resulting from sporadic production and preservation. For

example, county reports of individual African American home demonstration agents apparently were not systematically preserved by extension officials and therefore are not available in state archives.⁶ Plans of work from 1938 and 1940 are available, as are individual county records from 1940. The most complete source documenting the experience of rural African American women are the reports of the State Home Demonstration Supervisors. These reports from the 1920s through the late 1940s incorporate vignettes from Negro Home Demonstration county agents. They provide a rich narrative that gives form to the abilities and aspirations of rural African American women and offers a sympathetic window into their lives.⁷ These signature examples represent material successes of which the agents and the women themselves were justifiably proud. They illustrate that, despite segregation, African American farm women took an interest in self-improvement. Rural Afro–South Carolinian women who participated in these programs affirmed their abilities to alter their own lives and their communities. By reading these reports through the lens of the clients served, it is possible to suggest that a subversive psychology emerged from the programs that African American home demonstration agents offered.

The importance of the African American perspective in documenting the experience of rural African American women is made clear by the difference in the images of African American women that emerges from white and African American supervisors. In her 1920 report, the white state agent for home demonstration work, Christine South, incorporated excerpts from the report of African American emergency agent Connie Jones of Charleston. South's selections from Jones's reports reinforced racial stereotypes of African Americans as backward and willing to live in squalor. They also reveal that African American women in Charleston were skeptical of extension agents—certainly with justification after a history of white oppression. Afro–South Carolinians had been disfranchised in 1895, segregated in public accommodations and employment, victimized by racial violence, and exploited economically. The idea that there might be some ulterior motive was clearly suggested by one potential client who thought participating in her local agent's programs might result in her "canning in France!" (South Carolina Extension Service 1921).⁸ However, South's selections also show that Jones clearly recognized that she needed to show respect rather than ridicule for her clients if she wanted to reach them: "I . . . am . . . trying to get them to take time to clean up their premises and children and to take more pride in their homes. . . . It requires some common sense to be able to go into a woman's house and show her how to wash and clean up her children and surroundings and keep her pleased with you too" (South Carolina Extension Service 1921).

As African American supervisors began to compile the reports, there is evidence of respect for the obstacles that rural Afro–South Carolinian women had to overcome rather than emphasis on their shortcomings. African American agents recognized that the best way to secure the participation of African American clients was to engage them respectfully, enter their communities, and earn their trust. As this description of early community organizing shows, agents exercised patience and persuasion to convince African Americans that their programs were beneficial. However, once local people became convinced of the utility of the programs, they participated with enthusiasm.

My first visit in this community was to the school. I secured the cooperation of the teachers and preacher then after speaking and giving a demonstration to the children, we planned a meeting. I sent cards and invited everybody of that community and had it announced in church; the results were good, men, women and children came. The purpose of the meeting and work were explained and I gave a demonstration after which people were invited to effect an organization. Quite a few agreed to join and the club was organized. Many said they would wait. After several meetings we had a display of the things made by the club and invited the entire community again to see the work. After the meeting the club served refreshments and everyone went away seemingly benefited [*sic*]. We did not ask anyone to join but made it plain that they were welcome; at our next meeting those who refused to join at first and others came in, now that is one of the best clubs in the county, everybody is anxious to follow up a project and begin a new one, thus our meetings are always crowded. . . . (Fitzgerald and Boston 1923, 2).

By 1924, the agents' efforts had paid off. In 1923, State Supervisor of Negro Home Demonstration Work Dora Boston suggested that the home agents "are better understood." The next year she declared "the agents are making their way by adopting [*sic*] to their work and the actual needs of the communities and proving to farm women that they are really interested in their problems and the meeting of them" (Fitzgerald and Boston 1923, 6; Boston 1924, 13).

Boston's statements capture a central component of empowerment, focusing on the community and its problems rather than imposing an external agenda. By showing concern for what interested their clients, the agents were also able to introduce external programs that were beneficial and that received broad cooperation. In 1924, the agents created a club called the "Head to Foot Club." Boston believed that emphasizing personal appearance helped in forming "the habit of cleanliness" through which "homes would be affected." Agents taught club members how to wash and comb their hair,

how to care for their skin and teeth, how to make clothes (including underwear), and how to dress properly. Boston reported that some club members had decided to keep budgets and others were planning to buy furniture. In addition, homes and outbuildings had been painted or whitewashed, family nutrition and clothing had improved, and family incomes had increased. "The homes are more comfortable and women have broader visions, a greater income, better living and community conditions, . . . and a rural society that will produce satisfaction," she wrote. "Home Demonstration workers have as an aim an *efficient satisfied* [my emphasis] rural State and are working toward that goal" (Boston 1924, 10, 12–13). Boston's statement of aims holds a double meaning. From a white perspective, it could suggest a malleable and compliant people. However, from the African American perspective, placing personal satisfaction at the center suggests that the agents held the clients' happiness as the core of their professional purpose.

This is further suggested by the development of programs that focused not only on material well-being but also on community building. Extension clubs became building blocks of an associational life in rural South Carolina. Women and girls alike enjoyed giving "club yells" and singing "club songs" (Fitzgerald 1922). Members of the 1924 "Head to Foot" club made 2,978 pieces of underwear and over 2,600 dresses and coats. Frances Thomas, the agent in Richland County, employed community-based contests through which the members "unconsciously . . . learn[ed] the necessity of a community center." In Marion County, Gertrude Johnson held a county club day that brought all "club members together to meet and learn what each club was doing, [compete] and see the value of rural social life" (Bostons 1924).

Developing leaders was also an early objective of extension workers. Mattie Mae Fitzgerald reported that agents gave club members instructions in parliamentary procedures and that clubs elected their own officers. Her 1922 supervisors' report noted the "zeal and great willingness" of women club members, which "demonstrat[ed] the fact that the one great necessity is leaders" (Fitzgerald 1922).

The clubs these women formed created a sisterhood for rural women. The most comprehensive source on rural African American women's clubs in South Carolina is the annual narrative reports of the Negro Home Demonstration agents. Marian B. Paul was the state agent for Negro Home Demonstration Work longer than any other woman in the state's history, from 1930 to 1959. Her reports reveal that the emphasis on local leadership in club work provided African American women with the opportunity to learn to

become leaders in their communities and to develop community-building activities. Leaders in extension work had to be able to lead the masses by example. Having extension leaders learn by doing and then pass that knowledge along was one of the most significant features of extension work. Local leaders were invited to participate in agents' demonstrations and to develop and present their own demonstrations. The leaders were also encouraged to visit rival clubs to develop a spirit of competitiveness. For example, in one year forty-two meetings were held for local leaders of women's clubs and 103 meetings were held for 4-H club leaders (Paul 1937–1938).

Some women enthusiastically sought leadership roles in the extension program. The title of this article pays homage to an enthusiastic club member's response to the opening of the floor for officer elections by Orangeburg County Negro Home Demonstration Agent Marie Blakemon. As Blakemon reported, "Hattie Jones got up and said 'Well I just generally bes [am] the president of everything, my sister Kate, over there the vice president, my daughter here the Secretary so that[']s that'" (Paul 1937–1938). Despite untutored vernacular and disregard of parliamentary procedure, women took the responsibilities of leadership seriously. Although she questioned the intellectual abilities of some of her leaders, Paul stated that they became "more interested as their responsibilities increase[d] and as opportunities occur[red] for them to display their abilities." According to Paul, clubs brought women and girls together "in a social as well as a business assembly." The agents selected women and girls whom they believed could be effective local leaders to serve as officers, but the final election of officeholders was up to the members. A Mrs. Atkins was asked to serve as chairman of better homes in her community and she declined believing "that she would have to begin at home to do home-improvement work before she [could] be eligible to encourage others." Her home, which had been knocked off its foundation by a storm six years earlier, was reset; the windows, roof, and porch were repaired; and the yard was cleaned. She removed an old car and used its windshield for glass in her front door and its seats to make sofas for her living room (Paul 1936).

Black farm women embraced the opportunities that extension clubs provided them to do good for their communities. When a Sumter County community began a campaign to build a school, because the school's teacher was also a local leader in home extension work, the extension agent helped with fund-raising activities that netted \$62.30. In another Sumter community, the agent and club members presented programs that raised \$36.15 that was split evenly between three churches that needed repairs. In Georgetown County,

a 4-H club prepared a Thanksgiving dinner for the needy that included a program and games. "Everyone left feeling thankful for everything, but more especially for Extension Work" (Paul 1932–1933). A club member in Newberry County taught a blind woman how to bottom chairs, and the woman became self-supporting as a result. In Marlboro County, members of a club spent eight years caring for a man who was bedridden because of a stroke, cleaning his home, preparing his meals, and even planning to make a cotton mattress for him. Club members also made a mattress for one of their members who had been ill and sent canned foods to her as well (Paul 1938–1939).

At mattress centers that were established across the state, African American women showed the spirit of cooperation, as documented in Paul's 1939–1940 report:

More importantly, this activity, like so many others, created greater community cohesion. Each work day at the center took the form of a day of pleasure, enlightenment and friendly companionship (sometimes interracial in nature). Often there was a person who was physically unable to make a mattress. Those able would gladly spend their time in making it. In many instances the small fee charged for equipment was found difficult to secure. A group of women would sell vegetables or eggs and donate the amount to such cases. (31–32)

Paul noted "the unselfish cooperation and interest manifested by the people and volunteer leaders." Women sometimes traded labor. For example, a one-armed woman from Newberry County made mattresses for her family. In describing this event, the agent wrote: "I was somewhat doubtful about her ability to make a mattress and so offered to do as much as I could to help her. She accepted but assured me that she could make it—and she did. With one hand and the nub of an arm, she turned out a product better in many instances than some made by people with two hands. When it was time to tie the tufts, she did not ask anyone to tie them while she stood idly by, but instead, she exchanged service with someone else" (Paul 1940–1941).

The agents and their clients also created institutions for rural African Americans that paralleled those of white women. Paul and her agents established a state council of African American farm women in 1936. The council's purpose was "to bring about closer friendship, to exchange ideas, to learn State and National policies and to receive renewed inspiration for larger service." The council consisted of forty-four women in 1936 but had expanded to sixty-three by 1947. In addition to the state council, there were 258 women serving on eight county advisory boards and fourteen county councils with a

membership of 628. When the Newberry County Council was formed, forty women were expected to attend the meeting and eighty-nine showed up to discuss their projects (Paul 1936; Paul 1940–1941).

At their 1936 conference held in Columbia, state council members considered means of raising standards for home demonstration work, women's role in new farm programs, and their role in establishing a model community. The women received information on tuberculosis prevention from a state tuberculosis agent. Black home demonstration agents gave demonstrations to the group, such as how to make kitchen sinks from automobile gas tanks. The women went on a tour of the sites of the capital city and spent the night at Camp Dickson, a 4-H club for African American children (Paul 1936). They took up a \$6.60 collection "so that they might have the honor of being the first to buy equipment for the Camp," and they pledged \$120 more. The money pledged by the council of farm women bought "kitchen utensils, dishes, silver ware, table covers, wash basins, pails, clock, vases, brooms and mops. At the next year's meeting, held over three days at Camp Dickson, the council women engaged in an interesting discussion. A Mrs. Roper, the new director of women's projects for the Works Progress Administration, spoke to the group. According to Paul, Roper "gave a very inspiring talk in which she expressed the desire to have the farm women go back to their homes and train their children not to feel inferior to anyone, regardless of race, creed or color." At the end of the meeting, the women pledged \$5 per county for the upkeep of the camp and another \$5 per county to establish a student loan fund that could be drawn upon by home economics majors at South Carolina State College who needed financial assistance during their junior or senior years (Paul 1937–1938). Local women's clubs participated in the promotion of education as well. The Marlboro County farm women's council paid the tuition for one of their county's residents to attend South Carolina State College (Paul 1938–1939). They also engaged in charity work. The Greenville County women's club adopted two underweight children. In 1937, Sumter County held a contest for 4-H girls to make rag dolls that were given to underprivileged children along with other toys (Paul 1937–1938).

Black farm wives also learned how to do good for themselves by improving their surroundings through club projects. Club members demonstrated the possibility for improving the home environment without great expense. For example, women exhibited "a model bed room, dining room, kitchen and pantry" at a 1933 fair. Club women made "all furniture, labor saving devices and furnishings" at a cost of about \$7.85. The kitchen was stocked with sufficient home produce to feed a family for nearly six months. According to Paul,

the display “caused much comment” (Paul 1932–1933). Club meetings were held in farm homes, and, according to Paul, women competed to improve the appearance of their homes to host the meetings. A tangible outcome of these activities was that four black women in South Carolina were recognized in 1933 in a national better homes campaign sponsored by Better Homes in America. Mrs. J. E. Blanton, the wife of a former agent, received a “high merit”; Willie Mabel Price, a home agent, won a “merit”; home agent Ophelia C. Williams and Mrs. Susie Lawson received “honorable mention” (Paul 1932–1933).⁹ The Better Homes program received significant discussion in Paul’s report. Most of the projects undertaken were renovations that greatly improved the livability of the homes. One woman made over a room in her house into a model for her community. In Spartanburg, seventy-three-year-old Mrs. Angie Coleman used \$2.25 she earned working for the superintendent of the Arcadia Mill to buy paint and linoleum to refurbish a room in her home. Mrs. Alma Gilmore, another Arcadia resident, remodeled a room in her home for \$3.25. These results led “white friends” from Arcadia Mill to visit the demonstration and offer the black community the use of the Arcadia community house for another year (Paul 1932–1933).

Clubs used the project approach to inspire rural Afro–South Carolinian women to take pride in their surroundings. Club members would select one or more homes in the community for improvement. The usual approach was to pick one room as a theme. In the late 1930s, twenty-eight women in Greenville County remodeled their kitchens for a competition. Sixty-eight persons toured the kitchens and enjoyed the picnic that followed. One man expressed gratitude that the contest was over: “now I might be able to receive some attention from my wife,” he said. Others were inspired to improve their homes. A woman on the tour remarked as she entered one home, “This kitchen used to be as black and dirty as mine” (Paul 1937–1938). The improvements that women made to their homes brought them immense pride. Paul wrote, “It would be pathetic to you, the readers of this report, if you could witness with me the pride and joy these club women manifest in showing the improvements they have made in their humble huts. They possess the same desire and love for beauty, even as you and I” (Paul 1939–1940).

Agents also encouraged their clients to manage their finances. African American women developed roadside markets, with “high standards of production” for goods sold, improved advertising, and record-keeping to track net profits (Paul 1932–1933). Fourteen communities established thrift clubs in 1936, through which members saved money to buy farm animals, clothing, or other consumer items; to improve their homes; and to pay property taxes or

rent. The sense of accomplishment that women felt when they achieved their goal is evident in the example of an Allendale County woman who saved to purchase a new coat. "I needed a coat for two years and was not able to get one, so I decided at the end of the year I would have enough by putting all my little pennies, nickels and dimes in a bank and I was one proud soul when I drew out my \$15.00. I went right on and got my coat" (Paul, 1936, 1937).

In Charleston County, a family of twelve pooled its resources: the mother had inherited two acres of land, a daughter earned \$16 per month at a National Youth Administration job, and the father gave his labor, to become independent. Their annual rent for a two-room house on two acres was \$16 per year. The daughter contributed half her monthly income to a house fund. The family built a two-room home on their own land with rooms in the rafters for the children. "The thrill of ownership is becoming intense and from all evidences the outlook for the future is bright. All are working together. They realize how much easier it is to pay \$4.75 a year in taxes, than to pay \$16.00 for a poorly built house, plus the taxes" (Paul 1937–1938). By 1949, slightly over 500 families had fully remodeled their homes, over 6,300 rooms were improved, nearly 4,500 yards were improved, and over 4,700 pieces of furniture were prepared. "Every club member has become 'House Conscious,' and takes pride in improvements—both exterior and interior. There is a decided increase in home ownership" (Paul 1949).

Participation in extension clubs also enabled rural women and girls to improve the appearance of their families. Women were encouraged to build wardrobes and closets and to refurbish old clothes to fill them. The 210 members of one girls' 4-H club decided that they needed closets and raised the money for materials; boys in the vocational agriculture program built the closets (Paul 1932–1933). In Charleston County, the agent "found that many children were almost nude," using "crocus" (burlap) sacks, "with holes cut for arms and head." The agent dyed some of the sacks and made an attractive dress. "Now the native islanders are making the sacks into garments." A 4-H girl who could not afford cloth used flour, meal, and sugar sacks to make "3 hats, 5 dresses, 3 slips, 10 towels, 27 handkerchiefs, 5 brassieres, 3 aprons, 5 pairs of pillow cases, 3 spreads, 3 sheets, 3 luncheon sets, 5 runners, 1 shoe back, 2 pairs of curtains and 3 pairs of bloomers." Many women were taught to create clothing ensembles for literally pennies (for example, the sacks purchased by the 4-H girl cost 2.5¢ each). In one community, the women held a five-day clothing clinic "at which all worn out 'dejected' garments would be rejuvenated. Club members and friends gathered and brought every imaginable kind of clothing and hats. The doctor (agent) and nurses (local leaders) examined

these garments and prescribed the necessary treatment.” The women made “101 boys suits . . . from men’s old clothing, 337 dresses were remodeled, 122 [were] dyed or tinted, 19 hats remodeled, 141 slips made from old night gowns or thin dresses” (Paul 1932–1933).

The clothing programs also benefited men as well. In her 1940 report, Paul noted that women not only had made clothes for themselves but also were making them for their husbands and sons. “Many men are able to have sufficient changes of underwear and socks in particular, and shirts and ties in general, not only to look better and possess a higher personal morale, but to be, by far, more desirable under all conditions of neatness and temperatures” (Paul 1940–1941). Later reports show that clothing programs evolved as rural women gained access to mechanical sewing machines. Agents held machine clinics to teach the proper care of the machines. In one community where there was only one sewing machine, a woman offered a room in her home to set up the machine for community use “day or night” (Paul 1947). The agents wove their program’s objective of increasing family income into their goal of providing better clothing. Increased family income would mean that money would be available for “careful purchasing” of clothes (Paul 1932–1933).

Extension clubs also gave women the opportunity to expand their monetary resources as well as enlarge their vision of their futures. A club member named Hattie Levister used the skills she had learned in her extension club to increase her income. The white lady for whom she cooked told her,

“Hattie, I really like the way you save my food and the way you prepare it.” Levister thanked her employer and told her employer that the Home Demonstration Agent taught her to always measure accurately and follow the recipe and success would always be [hers]. The lady was paying her \$3.50 per week. Levister did not ask for more that day. She waited about two weeks and asked her employer for a raise. The employer told her she had never paid more than what she currently was for her help and she was not able to pay Levister what she was worth, but she would give her 50¢ more. (Paul 1937–1938)

During World War II, rural Afro–South Carolinian women and girls’ programs emphasized “Triple-E’s, Education, Energy, Effort.” Over 17,500 women and girls participated in food production and conservation projects. Home agents and local leaders enrolled 16,387 rural and 3,138 urban families in home garden projects. The focus of women’s work was primarily to produce food for their families, but they produced for market as well. Farm women’s poultry and egg sales were valued at \$92,459; dairy projects were valued \$32,424. Black

club women and club girls sold \$118,812 worth of farm products and invested \$45,000 of the proceeds in war bonds (Mitchell 1946).

Despite the limited scope of 4-H activities for African American children, the programs offered to them elevated their educational aspirations. Many African American girls put the knowledge they acquired to use for themselves and their families. Sarah Williams of Graham Community in Dorchester County raised chickens to earn money. "I am looking forward to my education," she wrote. "I will need to go to high school and college and I am doing what I can to make the best of poultry. I live on a small farm with few advantages, but we are striving to make our farm count" (Paul 1937–1938).

The agents put on a 4-H queen contest. Each county crowned a queen, and the state queen was selected from the county that raised the most money for the state 4-H camp. Such activities, Paul asserted, were of great benefit to the extension program. The program had a profound effect on some young women, as their mothers attested. At a Florence County women's club meeting of 106 women where they discussed their children,

twenty-three mothers stated that since their daughters had been in 4-H work, their attitude towards life has been greatly changed. 67 stated that through faith and confidence in the agent, their daughters have been able to remain in school. One of this number stated that with 4-H work as a foundation, her daughter, Wilmur Bristow, had made an "A" average in high school after leaving the rural school and has now entered college with the hopes of becoming an agent some day. Madie Staten's mother stated that her daughter, encouraged by the agent, was able to find little odd jobs to keep herself in school for her first college year. Vernitta Robinson's mother stated that her daughter was able to attend high school without room or board charges through the arrangements of the agent. This Clubster maintains [a] "B" average. (Paul 1939–1940)

Club members also received public accolades for their accomplishments. Clyde Bristow, a 4-H club girl from Florence County, was selected to read an essay she wrote about her accomplishments in 4-H on the National Farm and Home Hour in Washington, DC. Her talk centered on the activities she had undertaken as a club girl and how she had used her knowledge: planning, budgeting, and food-preparation skills to help her family. She had no money to make the trip. Her accomplishments were so significant that even local whites came to her aid. The local Sears, Roebuck, and Company store and several local organizations gave her financial assistance (Paul 1940–1941). Although club work had become an important institution in South Carolina's

African American communities, there was still some reticence among some women as expressed by a woman in Dorchester County:

We had organized in our community the Home Demonstration club work four years, but I did not join until two years ago. I wanted to learn to sew. I have 9 in [my] family; 7 children, my husband and myself. . . . I visited one of the Council meetings and saw where some one had made dish towels from flour sacks. . . . I joined the club and the agent showed me how to make many articles. Now I can make all of my clothes and those for my children. I am very proud to be connected with Home Demonstration work. I never miss a club meeting. Through my influence, 6 women have joined. I send two of my children to the 4-H club meetings. (Paul 1939–1940, 96)

Because of gaps in the historical record, it is difficult to discern the impact of World War II on rural African American women's lives. As the Civil Rights Movement took center stage, African American women continued their efforts to improve their communities. However, the record of their activities is not as comprehensive as that of the 1930s. The turmoil of the civil rights years and new extension policies regarding the content of the annual reports resulted in less-comprehensive reviews of club activities and therefore prevents the depth of insight into the lives of clients that is available from the reports of earlier years. However, it remains clear that Afro–South Carolinian women continued to strive for better and more comfortable lives. Marian Paul noted that African Americans had become ambitious, and this is evident in the lives of rural African American women. Vesta Harris of Cherokee County began a floral business selling live plants and floral funeral arrangements. The success of her business allowed her to remodel her home and send her daughter to college. Harris received the “South Carolina Negro Farm Woman of the Year” award in 1957 (Paul 1957, 32). A Colleton County woman whose husband refused to finance home improvements was so intent on remodeling that she had her house included on a tour of homes. When a visitor nearly fell through the front steps, he agreed to make the improvements (Paul 1952).

The most enduring example of Afro–South Carolinian women's empowerment was their continuing commitment to local leadership even as the rural population declined. In 1936, 2,552 local leaders contributed 7,539 days of service. By 1951, there were only 1,769 African American women serving as local leaders. In 1952, over 5,000 people turned out at Camp Harry Daniels to see 138 women receive certificates for ten or more years of leadership service. In 1956, 52 leaders were given certificates for twenty-five years of service. The next year, 317 women received certificates for ten years of service

(Paul 1952, 15; 1956, 21; 1957). Rural African American women also became politicized during the 1950s and early 1960s. They petitioned state legislators for appropriations to support Negro Home Demonstration programs. Women's councils established subcommittees on education, community development, and citizenship, and some councils took attendance by having their members show voter registration cards. Marian Paul's successor, Sara Waymer, reported in 1961 that 688 women's council members statewide had voter registration certificates (Paul 1952, 1954, 1957; Waymer 1961).

Although rural Afro-South Carolinian women welcomed the opportunities the Civil Rights Movement opened to them, some objected to racial integration that threatened the institutions they had created and in which their leadership skills had been nurtured. In 1965, the Palmetto Council of Farm Women voted not to disband and join the white women's farm council. However, some county councils, like that of Georgetown, objected to segregated meetings. As late as 1967, there were a significant number of councils, sixty-two white and fifty-eight African American, operating on a segregated basis although the extension agent program had been nominally integrated for three years (Odum, Pough, and Waymer; Craven 1964; Craven to Nutt, November 6, 1967).

Although the institutions that African American farm women had created gradually disappeared, during their existence they had a tremendously positive effect on Afro-South Carolinian farm women's lives. An observation Marian Paul made in the late 1930s aptly reflects the empowerment that these women—most of whom lived lives of poverty and deprivation—acquired.

Women became proud to be connected with the Extension program and have done much to spread the work in their counties. A superior type of leadership was developed. . . . No longer do the women hesitate to contribute their mites to the State Camp, nor appear reluctant to allow their children to attend the camp. The contact with persons from the various parts of the State gave each one a broader view on life. (Paul 1937–1938)

Rural African American women in South Carolina were not unlike rural women across America. They shared a desire for female association and economic empowerment, as well as a desire to contribute to the material well-being and comfort of their families and to uplift their communities. These aspirations have been documented in the scholarship of pioneers of women's rural history.¹⁰ However, race and region make a significant difference in African American women's paths to empowerment. Access to home demonstration services was not assured—especially in counties with-

out majority or near-majority African American populations. Even when agents were available, the need for services outstripped the available time of agents. The dire poverty of most clients meant that African American agents and rural women had to develop creative strategies to actualize the benefits of home demonstration club programs.

However, most significant for women who had been schooled in submission because of their gender *and* their race, developing the confidence to lead in their community marks a significant psychological shift. Local leadership and club participation became significant not because they fundamentally transformed the economic status of rural Afro–South Carolinian women; they did not. They were significant because they laid the foundation for the development of communities of common interest that used new knowledge to reshape their worlds.

Endnotes

1. On African American women, see Glave (2003); Harris (1997); Hilton (1994); L. A. Jones (1998); S. L. Smith (1997); Waalkes (1998); Walker (1996).

2. This contrasts with the experience of white women where there was a fictionalized demarcation that gave way to economic necessity.

3. See also Carol Sears Botsch, “The Jeanes Supervisors,” <http://www.usca.edu/aasc/jeanes.htm> (accessed October 5, 2008). Woodfaulk (1992). Other works on the Jeanes teachers include Brawley (1930); L. G. E. Jones (1937); A. B. Smith (1997); Pincham (2005); Clarke (1995).

4. This was not atypical. Only seven of fifteen Southern states had hired African American home demonstration agents before June 30, 1918.

5. See further references to the work of this agent in R. S. Wilkinson to W. M. Riggs, May 24, 1915; Folder 117, Riggs Presidential Records; Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina, The Extension Division, *Annual Report of the Demonstration and Extension Work in the State of South Carolina for Calendar Year 1916* (n. p., n. d.), 131; CNIAMC (1917); CNIAMC (1918).

6. The records are likely available on microfilm at the National Archives.

7. See finding aid, Cooperative Extension Service Field Operations, 1909–1985, Series 33, <http://www.lib.clemson.edu/SpCol/findingaids/archives/index.htm> (accessed October 5, 2008).

8. These works examine African American life in South Carolina during the Jim Crow era: Hemmingway (1976); Newby (1973); Tindall (1952).

9. Katherine F. Liston, Better Homes in America, to Mrs. Marian B. Paul, August 22, 1933. The text of the award letter was reproduced in Paul’s report. She had also served as the state chairman for better homes (it is likely that Paul was the chair only for African Americans). Liston praised Paul and the committee she chaired for “the excellent progress in home Improvement [*sic*] inspiration and guidance which have been made available to the County and local chairman through your untiring efforts.”

10. There is a voluminous literature on home demonstration work. See Moore (1991); Chaudhuri (1986); Gunn (1992); Hoffschwelle (1993, 2001); Jensen (1982, 1986); L. A. Jones (2002); McCleary (1996); Minor (2005); Rieff (1995); Ross (1998); Sharpless (1999); Walker (2000); Walker and Sharpless (2006).

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