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Desperate Farm Wives

Gender, Activism, and Traditionalism in the Farm Crisis

The year was 1985, and the farm crisis was at its peak. Farm profits had declined by some thirty percent since the beginning of the decade, and projections indicated that as many as 250 farms would be foreclosed upon every day of the year. A number of states were well on the road to losing around one third of their total number of farms, an acceleration of the already potent postwar trends of rural depopulation and decline. Nineteen eighty-five was poised to be a make-it or break-it year for a large number of small and medium-scale farmers across the United States. The Farm Bill of 1981 was set to expire and Congress was beginning to prepare legislation to replace it. For farmers and their advocates across a swath of rural America that still stretched almost coast to coast, the 1985 Farm Bill was a legislative last stand, a final chance to save family farms through price supports and other beneficial federal policies.

Congressman Tom Daschle (D-SD), the head of the Democratic party's farm task force, was not willing to leave the fate of the Farm Bill to mere legislative chance. The savvy Democrat invited key witnesses to testify to legislators at this critical juncture. These star witnesses were Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek, and Jane Fonda. The three were not an altogether improbable choice. All three had produced and starred in movies about the stresses on farm families in the past year—Lange had a central role opposite her partner Sam Shephard in the film *Country*; Spacek produced and starred in *The River*; and Fonda developed and starred in the made for television film *The Dollmaker*. The three films, together with *Places in the Heart*, came out in 1984 and dealt—*Country* and *The River* more explicitly than the other two—with the farm crisis. In the hearing, a tearful Lange told attendees, who were

packed to standing room only, that “it is heartbreaking to witness their anguish as they watch their lives stripped away . . . as they watch their boundaries disappearing, the boundaries which describe their work, their land, their family, their faith in this country and their faith in God.”¹ Lange based her conclusions on what she described as “countless hours” speaking with farmers over the course of the past few years.

Spacek, Lange, and Fonda were the latest stars in a drama that had played out in countless venues across the country, as farmers, grassroots activists, politicians, and—with increasingly frequency—celebrities mobilized in the name of preserving the “family farm.” The three activists tread a fine line between their onscreen roles as farm wives and their lived experiences as self-appointed spokeswoman for American farmers. Their testimony and the characters they portrayed reveal the powerful dynamics, not just of political action but also of gendered mobilization, at work during these dramatic years for rural America. Their onscreen portrayals highlight a cultural consensus shared between Hollywood elites and grassroots farm advocates, an image of rural womanhood that was at once deeply traditionalist and intensely modern. This image of farmwomen was not arbitrary, but rather a powerful, deliberately crafted trope that enabled activists to dispel negative stereotypes of rural life while still appealing to deeply conservative elements that viewed women’s activism as potentially threatening. Through this lens, women’s role in the farm crisis was simultaneously contingent and entrepreneurial, a phenomenon seen over and over in cultural representations as well as in the self-presentation of women farm activists. The desperate farm wife, as portrayed by the actresses—and by their real-life counterparts—may have offered a paradoxical image of traditionalism and gendered activism, but it also provided a rhetorical claim for the legitimacy and significance of rural life—especially at a time when its very existence seemed to hang in the balance.

It was the very severity of the situation that brought the three stars to Capitol Hill. According to Mark Johnson, press spokesman for the House Democratic Committee, the idea for the all-star agriculture hearing came from Rep. Tony Coelho (D-Calif.), a friend of Jane Fonda’s. The testimony was one of a series of star-studded congressional appearances in the mid-eighties, much to the consternation of some political observers. Later in the year, John Denver, Frank Zappa, and Dee Snider—the lead singer of the heavy metal group Twisted Sister—would testify about obscenity in rock music. Actor Kirk Douglas starred in a hearing on elder abuse; *Star Trek*

legend William Shatner discussed the portrayal of drugs in movies; and Willard Scott took to the stand to discuss phobias. Other celebrities testified on subjects as broad as arthritis, aging pilots, the African famine, and the preservation of rivers. “Celebrities are big on Capitol Hill nowadays,” noted one contemporary news article. “Witness lists at committee meetings sometimes read like *Variety*, the show biz tabloid. Celebrity witnesses are making committee hearings the sideshows of the congressional circus and threatening to steal the thunder from the center rings—the Senate and House floors.”²

Few congressional appearances received quite as much attention as the three leading ladies discussing the farm crisis. Attention was, after all, the goal of such star-studded testimony—and the presence of not one but three top-billed actresses did the job. Although their Republican counterparts did not attend, Johnson described the event as a success. “Plenty of attention was paid to the farm problem,” Johnson noted, without irony, adding that when real farm wives had described their troubles to congressional committees, they attracted much less notice.³

But “real farm wives” were not absent from the public relations circus engendered by the appearance of three stars on Capitol Hill, and their presence casts critical light on their position during the farm crisis. A delegation of some twenty members of Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE), the foremost women’s farm advocacy group to emerge during the crisis years, sat two rows behind the Hollywood stars. According to a number of accounts, the “real farm wives” punctuated the starlets’ testimony with intervals of enthusiastic applause. The *Orlando Sentinel* reported that “among those who packed the ornate hearing room were several dozen members of WIFE, Women Involved in Farm Economics. During testimony they stood on chairs, crowded the front rows and applauded loudly.”⁴ WIFE activists also reiterated their support for the actresses’ testimony in more intimate forums. Before the hearing, WIFE had sponsored a reception for the actresses and high profile guests from the farm advocacy community, including Montana governor Ted Schwinden, who was also in town to advocate for farmers. But the thought that there might be tension between the actresses who purported to give voice to farmwomen, and the farmwomen themselves, was not far from the minds of some during the festive day. WIFE activist Annabelle Fouhy explained that the women of WIFE were asked “if we didn’t resent rich stars that know nothing of our industry talking about agriculture. . . . We told them if they ate, they were

involved in agriculture,” offering a response on point with one of WIFE’s key national messages during that crucial year.⁵

Despite the enthusiastic response of the real farmwomen to their Hollywood doubles, the testimony offered a striking example of the reality gap between the rural women’s lives and the actresses’. Most of the farmwomen who filled the two rows behind the stars were significantly older than any of the three who portrayed their cause. Most of the women at the heart of WIFE and other farm organizations were in their forties and older, indicative of the greying population throughout rural America as younger generations left farms and small towns for greater opportunity in swelling suburbs. Age also availed more freedom to participate in organizational activities, as the time demands of older children were less constraining than for women who balanced farm work, pregnancy, small children and off-farm wage earning. But when Hollywood sought to portray women on the farm in the 1980s, all four films rejected the possible alternate model of Ma Joad—the all-knowing, all-nurturing matriarch—in favor of younger, nubile, blonde stars. In fact, older women are notably absent as main characters in each four of the films, with the exception of a meek, victimized woman in a secondary plot in *Country*.

Age aside, the difference in physical appearance between the stars and the farmwomen was striking, pointing to distinctions in privilege and values between the two groups. The Hollywood farmwomen’s hair was layered, tinted, free-flowing and long—elaborately crafted haircuts that framed their faces like Eastern Orthodox halos in contrast to the “sensible” haircuts of the farmwomen. The women who packed the rows behind the stars had hair that could be maintained at home, mostly featuring grey hair cropped close enough to the head that it would not be uncomfortable in hot work and would not pose any danger of entanglement in heavy machinery. It was perhaps a verdict on the most “sensible” hairstyle among the actresses, Sissy Spacek’s straight-cut bangs and blunt-cut shoulder-length hair, that WIFE member Fouhy noted that Spacek had “the fresh scrubbed look,” a compliment implying simplicity and even a sort of moral virtue in traditional rural American society.⁶ Clothing choices also pointed to a gap between portrayal and perception, and, in critical analysis, further reinforces the uneven power dynamics evident in the actresses’ testimony. The women of WIFE were dressed purposefully, many wearing red blazers—marking at once an emphasis on collective identification (WIFE’s colors were red and white) as well as a sensibility that farmwomen on Capitol Hill

must dress in such a way as to show that they are no ignorant countryfolk come to the city, but rather legislatively savvy actors. The actresses were not clad in “legislative” wear, and if anything they offered a glammed-up version of countrified clothing: Spacek in a white oxford shirt and vest and Fonda in a checkered flannel shirt. This distinction points to uneven and unquestioned dynamics of privilege; rural women felt the need to “dress to impress,” or at least to convey a specific impression of professionalism, while the actresses enjoyed the privilege of glamour, youth, and stardom, allowing their dress to remain unconstrained by concerns that dressing “rurally” would belittle them in the eyes of their observers.

But it was precisely this privilege—fame, fortune, and beauty—that makes the story of the actresses’ testimony both so powerful and so alarming. Women, real and imaginary, were very much in the public eye during the farm crisis—as protesters, victims, and advocates—but it was Lange and Spacek who became the iconic faces of the farm crisis for the millions of Americans who watched their films. All of the parties involved in the testimony were aware that fake farm wives who happened to be beautiful and famous could accomplish a task that had eluded them. “We in *WIFE* have made the same remarks many times, but hearing it spoken about in such a moving way caused more than one or two tears,” Fouhy wrote days after the testimony.⁷ Daschle was perhaps even more explicit, if also dismissive, when he explained that nobody expected the actresses to provide answers to the farm crisis, but that their skill set was their ability to draw attention to the problem.⁸ This expression of a specific group of women’s political power in contradistinction to *WIFE*’s less audible voice is striking in its assertion that it was the very objectification of female stars that allowed them to serve as successful activists. These films produced an image of farmwomen for consumption. The image does not reflect the reality of farm life, but rather a cultural consensus that emerged among farm advocates, an image that simultaneously sought to defy stereotypes about the backwardness and parochialism of rural womanhood but also cast rural life as a panacea to the dangers of modernity.

The films in which the actresses starred were themselves largely conceived of, and received, as political texts, and as such they exemplify an apparent dissonance between emphasizing strong female protagonists who assume “masculine” roles and reinforcing “traditional” gender roles. *The River and Country* both condemned modern corporate and banking practices and offered political commentary on the efficacy of federal

farm policy. The messaging was not lost on Roger Ebert, who wrote in his review of *Country*:

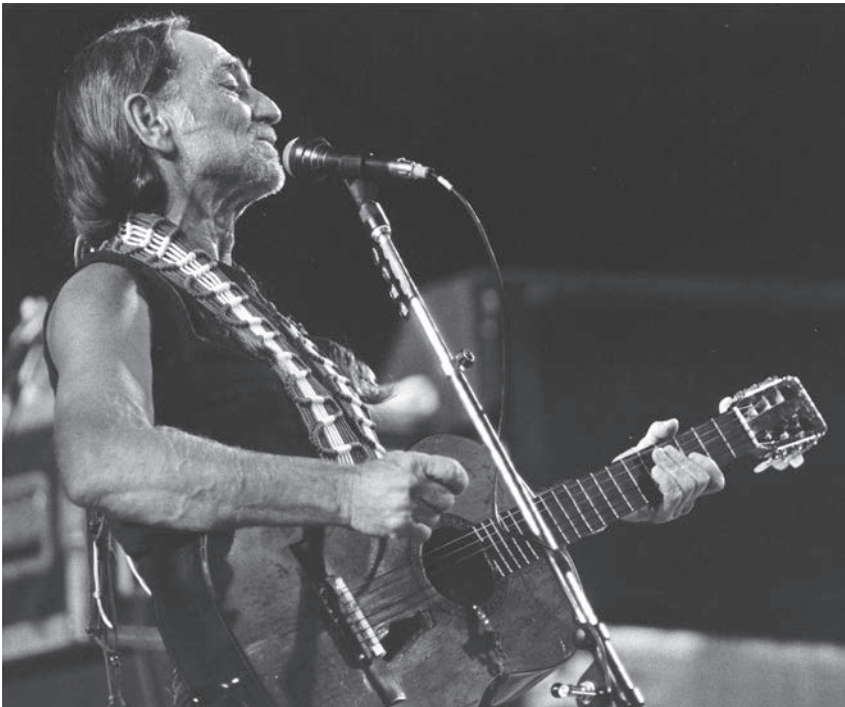
This movie observes ordinary American lives carefully, and passionately. The family lives on a farm in Iowa. Times are hard, and times are now. This isn't a movie about symbolic farmers living in some colorful American past. It is about the farm policies of the Carter and Reagan administrations, and how the movie believes that those policies are resulting in the destruction of family farms. It has been so long since I've seen a Hollywood film with specific political beliefs that a funny thing happened: The movie's anger moved me as much as its story.⁹

Ebert went on to compliment *Country*'s work in demonstrating "how abstract economic policies cause specific human suffering, cause lives to be interrupted, and families to be torn apart, all in the name of the balance sheet." The film, Ebert proclaimed, was "as political, as unforgiving, as *The Grapes of Wrath*."¹⁰ The actresses involved in these films—Spacek, Fonda, and Lange—were all also deeply involved in their production and planning. Spacek produced *The River*; Fonda developed the character she played in *The Dollmaker*; and Jessica Lange coproduced *Country*. The last featured an ironically placed portrait of a benignly smiling President Ronald Reagan in the office of the loan officer who attempts to foreclose on Lange's farm. The moment was not lost on the president himself, who saw the film at Camp David and later in the day remarked in his diary that the film "was a blatant propaganda message against our agri programs."¹¹ Beyond the pro-farmer activism of the four starring actresses (the fourth, Sally Fields, was unable to attend the hearing and wrote a letter instead), *Country*'s screenwriter William Wittliff went on less than a year later to help organize Farm Aid, the largest show of support for family farmers in the course of the farm crisis.

Like much of the discourse surrounding Farm Aid, the conversation surrounding the films focused on the immediate challenges posed by the farm crisis, a series of shocks that rocked agricultural America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cinematic dramas of family farmers struggling against foreclosures did not reflect overly much on the long narrative of postwar agriculture that led to crisis in the Carter and Reagan presidencies. Concepts like overexpansion and overproduction—policies essentially advocated by the Department of Agriculture in the years



On Labor Day weekend 1987, Willie Nelson held a concert at Kansas State University to bring attention to the 1980s farm crisis and to raise donations for Farm Aid. Courtesy of the *Royal Purple Yearbook*, Collegian Media Group, Kansas State University, Manhattan.



leading up to the crisis—were not broached. The underlying crisis of credit—a phenomenon by which, in the Reagan years, farm debt soared while the values of the land against which the debt was borrowed collapsed—was explored in both *The River* and *Country*, but the narratives did little to explain how farmers found themselves quite so deep in debt to begin with. In a reflection of the stereotypical melodramatic trope, the real villains in both of the contemporary portrayals of farm foreclosure were banks, lenders, and businessmen. As much as Reagan may have taken *Country*'s critique personally, both films stopped short of assigning blame to the longstanding Department of Agriculture policies or on actions taken by farmers themselves. In focusing on lenders and farmers, the narratives—like the testimony by Spacek, Lange, and Fonda—focused on the impact of the crisis rather than its underlying causes. Neither the testimony nor the films addressed perhaps the most difficult question posed by the farm crisis—whether the family farms which were disappearing from the American landscape were simply vestiges of an obsolete agrarian economy, doomed to fail by the intense efficiency of production that was considered a key virtue of American agriculture. As political texts on the farm crisis, the films followed a similar narrative and line of argument as many other farmers' advocates would adopt by the mid-1980s: family farming was a struggling, moral enterprise that had fallen victim to the nefarious interests of money-lenders and big business.

By 1985, film critics would assign *Country*, *The River*, and *Places in the Heart* the moniker the “Dust Bowl trilogy.” The title is somewhat disingenuous: of the three, only the last was set during the greatest farm crisis that Americans had heretofore known. But all three, *Places in the Heart* included, shared common themes of an endangered rural life marked by family, tradition, and agriculture that was quickly vanishing. These themes had particular resonance at the peak of the 1980s farm crisis. The strong farm wife working to save the farm was a central and compelling image in all three—in fact, the *New York Times* noted that “the leading actresses in the three movies Hollywood has called the Dust Bowl Trilogy all won nominations.”¹²

Although the films were motivated by a shared desire to draw attention to the growing crisis in America's farmland, even at the time it was noted that they reflected a particular commodification and romanticization of agriculture for public consumption. Covering *Country*'s New York City premiere, *People* magazine noted that “the crowd hovers around the

glamour couple, while Shepard keeps ducking questions that don't concern hunting and Lange, the daughter of a Minnesota traveling salesman, holds forth on the plight of the modern farmer. Few of the guests bother to interrogate Jane Knebel and her son—a real life Iowa teen who played Lange and Shepard's son in the film—"who know more about that subject simply because it has been a part of their lives for as long as either of them can remember."¹³ From the outset, *Country* substituted Lange as a political spokeswoman for the dispossessed, who stood in her shadow. It was part of a larger image—both Lange and Spacek presented themselves as rural girls-gone-to-Hollywood, distancing themselves from the glitzy southern California scene, setting up home and family in rural areas.¹⁴ In their personal lives as well as their onscreen personalities, Lange and Spacek particularly performed a balancing act—onscreen between empowerment and gender traditionalism and offscreen between Hollywood star and middle American girl next door.

Unlike Fonda's *Dollmaker* and Fields's *Places in the Heart*, the films in which Spacek and Lange starred that year both dealt with the drama of the contemporary farm crisis. They followed nearly identical plotlines: natural disaster contributes to impending bankruptcy and loan default; the husbands' convenient disappearances allow the female protagonists' leadership and farming skills to shine through; the woman then rallies the local community to defy adversity and improbably "beat" loan officers; husband and wife are reunited; and a key symbolic turncoat is converted back to the farm family's side. There is a small chronological flip between the last two stages, but largely the plots are parallel.

Similarities between the two films do not, however, end with the wholesome midwesternness of the leading ladies and the overlapping plotlines; the films are also similar in weaving together the personalities of strong women who fit within the post-Title IX cultural milieu yet also adhere to highly traditional gender roles. The opening moments of *Country* show Jessica Lange's character Jewell Ivy frying hamburgers, wrapping them up, and sending them out to her men working outdoors. The scene establishes the kitchen as Ivy's natural space, while her husband and son belong in the fields. In fact, both Ivy and Mae Garvey—Spacek's character—are frequently shown in the kitchen and in nurturing capacities, protecting children from losses of innocence as well as from physical threats. Both women are portrayed as capable of filling their husbands' shoes on the farm and are also shown doing farm work. Despite the "women can do men's

work” message conveyed by these images of Lange and Spacek in the barns and fields, it is striking that for both, there is something “unnatural” about it in both cases. Even as their labor on the farm is portrayed as routine, both Spacek’s and Lange’s characters are nearly crushed under heavy pieces of male-valenced farm machinery—heavily symbolic, and perhaps even subconscious, reminders that their place is in the house, away from the fields. At no point in either film is the viewer allowed to lose focus of the fact that even while these are strong women who can mobilize communities and perform every aspect of farm labor that their husbands can, they are first and foremost wives and mothers, cooks and caregivers. Even in Lange’s showstopper scene, in which she threatens the loan officer who has come to auction off her farm equipment with an implication of physical violence—a male-valenced action—she does so while holding her infant daughter, swathed in a pink snowsuit, in one arm. Even at her most outspoken and assertive, Lange’s image of the independent woman asserting masculine power is tempered by the baby girl she holds.

This dualistic image of farm wives, tailored for public consumption in accordance with the social sensibilities of the 1980s, was not limited to imaginary characters and the actresses who portrayed them, but was also apparent among some of the most high profile women deployed as representatives of farmers’ interests during the farm crisis. One such woman was farm broadcaster Mitzi Ayala, whom DuPont Agrichemicals decided to appoint as “Ambassador for American Agriculture” in 1983. Concerned that the growing farm crisis would hurt their prospective farm clients, DuPont launched what was described as a “major non-product campaign” that was “aimed at the non-farm adult population whose knowledge of agriculture is just about a notch beyond the supermarket counter.” In the year that it launched the campaign, DuPont claimed that it reached over forty-five percent of U.S. households through an information-based television show informing the public about American agriculture. E. Norris Tolson, worldwide director of marketing for DuPont Agrichemicals said that his goal was “to support the industry that sells and uses DuPont agrichemicals.” Tolson expressed confidence that “telling agriculture’s story in the cities will create a positive reaction for farmers and the crops they produce.”¹⁵

DuPont deployed television spots, TV and radio appearances, and live speaking engagements—and a woman, Ayala, was at the center of it all. *Farm and Ranch Forum* said that Ayala’s credentials “read like the pedigree of the first-place calf at the state fair—rice farmer, mother, author, newspaper

columnist and television hostess.” The description went on to point out that Ayala has “the golden hair and smile of the farmer’s daughter, coupled with degrees from Harvard and George Washington Universities.”¹⁶ Ayala’s virtue, at least in the eyes of *Farm and Ranch Forum*, was her complex, yet highly traditional, mediation of gender roles. She met the critical objective criteria also seen in the actresses testifying before Congress: blond, white, and family-oriented. As a testament to the importance of traditional gender roles, the title “mother” was prioritized as the second criterion in her “pedigree,” preceded only by “farmer” and followed by the more professionally relevant qualifications of “author, newspaper columnist and television hostess.”

The imagery deployed in the article reinforced some of the most insidious characterizations of women on the farm, namely that their value was as a material asset rather than as an individual human being. If referring to Ayala’s “pedigree” and comparing her to a prize calf was insufficient in communicating this message, the illustration to the *Farm and Ranch Forum* article drove the point home. The image depicted the blond Ayala as a smiling, blond forelocked cow named “Bossy,” smiling winsomely at her door to television stardom. It was not a talking animal, but in fact a farmwoman, chosen by DuPont to serve as “Ambassador for American Agriculture”—and the choice was far from coincidental. In addition to emphasizing an image of farmwomen that encouraged objectification and the reaffirmation of particular gender roles, Ayala also was cited for traits considered womanly on air, with the article complimenting her “warm conversational deportment” which “invites the adult non-farm-viewer to become an instant expert on whatever topic she discusses.” As a woman, the subtext suggests, Ayala is not an “expert” or a “radical,” disarming the viewer in order to ensure a more open reception. Ayala’s mandate was safely apolitical; she described it as “to bring farmers and urban people closer together,” an apolitical message of unity that reinforced the changing political dynamics of farm belt politics. In noting that “agriculture’s success in the future requires the understanding of the non-farm people . . . the 97% of the population who don’t grow the food and fiber needed to live,” Ayala acknowledged a growing awareness among farmers’ activists that any advocacy for agrarian interests at the national level would ultimately rely on a coalition of support from non-farmers.¹⁷ Farmers were completely outnumbered, if perhaps somewhat overrepresented congressionally, and a general campaign to shore up outside empathy was a good investment in

agriculture's political future. The dualistic image of rural women as empowered fundamentalists emerged from this milieu.

Even at the grassroots level, farmwomen portrayed themselves in much the same dualistic light, participating in highly gendered demonstrations of political activism. Some actively embraced their commodified role on the farm as a badge of honor; in 1977, Frank LeRoux received ringing applause from WIFE's first annual convention when he told the women that "farmers have three assets: land, food, and women."¹⁸ Generally speaking, female farm activists during the farm crisis clustered in women-based groups: WIFE, Agri-Women, CowBelles, and Porkettes, among others, and whereas male farm activists self-identified as farmers, female activists emphasized their gender identity in the framework of their activism. All four of the aforementioned groups underscored the salience of gender identity in the names of their organizations, with both WIFE and CowBelles also reifying "family values." Rather than transcending gender, or reshaping it, this activism leveraged—as did Spacek, Fonda, Fields and Lange—traditional gender roles to accentuate the virtuousness of farm family life.

One WIFE member, Lois Kimmet of Montana, described her membership in WIFE as taking the place of womanly pastimes. "Before I was a WIFE I . . . Read *Cosmopolitan* and the *Ladies Home Journal*; now I read livestock papers and the *Farm Journal*," she wrote in a poem published in the Montana WIFE newsletter.¹⁹ "It has been challenging and rewarding for many of us to learn that . . . we can be wives, mothers, grandmothers, and . . . still be Women Involved in Farm Economics," she concluded.²⁰ For Kimmet as well as others, modern women's activism existed alongside, and certainly not as a threat to, their prescribed roles within the family.

This combination of empowered activism with a highly orthodox sensibility toward gender roles was seen among women activists in the way that they presented themselves as activists and cast their activism through gendered lenses. Women's farm advocacy groups frequently accepted women's "logical" place in the kitchen as a means for activism. Groups like AgriWomen, WIFE, and the CowBelles all produced cookbooks as fundraisers and to generate support and awareness for a specific commodity or for the agricultural sector as a whole. The women of WIFE and the CowBelles brought featured commodities to Washington, where they used them to prepare everything from wheat-and-beef chili to cinnamon rolls for lawmakers and, in some cases, D.C.'s poor.

Even in cases when the form of protest was not gendered, the emphasis

and rhetoric frequently was. For the landmark 1979 tractorcade on Washington, Beverly Snyder Anderson helped drive a tractor over one thousand miles from Kansas to the nation's capital, handling the farm machinery in record snows. Although she later remarked that by 1979, she was "no longer teaching . . . and was just working on the farm with my husband," the sign that Anderson hung on the green tractor she drove in Washington read "beware—mad farmer's WIFE."²¹ Anderson's own rhetoric reduced her role on the farm to her diminutive responsibility to her husband, the farmer. The role that Anderson imagined for herself was one of gendered obligation, dismissing her own competency as a farm laborer—a competency to which she attested when she recalled, "I had a long history of growing up on a farm and driving tractors. Of course, that's why my husband said he married me—because I could drive a tractor."²²

In family farmers' activism throughout the farm crisis, women frequently chose to identify themselves by their contingent spousal relations ("farm wives") while the husbands were defined by their labor ("farmers," "ranchers")—even when in reality as on film, women played a critical role as farmers and farm laborers in family enterprises. This contingent role in the farm economy was articulated not only through rhetoric, but also through federal policy. Even in the post-Title IX world of barrier breaking for women and amidst calls for equal status under the law, the farm wives of WIFE had to lobby in 1979 for a simple provision allowing a spouse to be "recognized as a full partner in the farm operation."²³

Beneath the cinnamon rolls and the Hollywood stars, women's activism during the farm crisis reflected a harsh reality for many American farmers: agrarianist claims—the economic necessity of keeping all of America's farmers viable—lost traction in the economic milieu of the 1970s and '80s. Economic pragmatism, the belief that the American economy relied upon the presence of millions of family farms, yielded declining returns, particularly after a farm strike generated no measurable impact on the American economy or on food prices. The comments made by Ayala, DuPont's ambassador for agriculture, spoke to that very reality: the selling point, by 1984, was not about the economic necessity of farming, but rather about the cultural capital of agriculture. When the Western Governors' Association launched a parallel project to examine and correct America's image of agriculture, extensive polling data induced the governors to underline "not just economic contributions, but the additions to our social and cultural fabric made by American farmers."²⁴ This message was brought to

Washington by Montana governor Ted Schwinden, who spearheaded the Image of Agriculture project and not at all coincidentally came to Washington at the same time as Fonda, Lange, and Spacek as part of the same push. Like the actresses, Schwinden promoted a message calling on Americans to look beyond questions of economic viability and to view the farm crisis as something that transcended economics; saving the family farm was not simply important because of economic necessity but in order to preserve cultural values.

The mixed rhetoric, both spoken and performative, of rural womanhood was central to these values. While gendered activism was firmly within the historical framework of the post-Title XI eighties, the somewhat incongruous emphasis on traditionalism was deeply grounded in anxieties of the late seventies and early eighties. Rural values were associated with a return to a fictive agrarianism that stood in contradistinction to the liberalizing trends that had characterized the postwar social milieu.²⁵ In 1976, President Gerald Ford told Illinois farm leaders that “the time has come for all Americans to join you farmers in cultivating America’s old and cherished values including our rededication to the highest moral and spiritual values.” Ford’s remarks, which were echoed by a number of public figures in myriad forms, were conservative in the deepest sense, calling for a return to past practices and belief, and viewing farmers as the last bearers of the near-vanished legacy. What those values were, specifically, Ford left open for interpretation. But portrayals of farmwomen help indicate the dimensions of that rural ideal in the popular imagination. The past, as seen in the films, was a mostly white one, with people of color relegated to, at best, subordinate and, at worst, completely invisible status. Lange’s testimony before Congress helped delineate some of the terms of the farmers’ values under attack by the farm crisis: “their work, their land, their family, their faith in this country and their faith in God.” In fact, all four of the films highlighted the religiosity of the rural families they portrayed. Scenes depict both Spacek and Lange’s families reciting grace before they eat, and Fonda’s character is deeply motivated by her religious sensibilities. Ultimately, despite the feminist sensibilities of the leading ladies testifying before Congress, the imagined rural world was one in which even assertive feminist womanhood never triumphed over, or came at the expense of, women’s traditional gender roles.

On the ground, activists adopted similar narratives of deep traditionalism in order to support their various political claims. In support of a water

use treaty between the US and Canada, WIFE activist Marlys Farver warned that “farming communities around the US are being encroached upon by the expansion of large cities, the expansion of super highways and factories. There are very few places left in the US where one can be proud of their farming community and their way of life.”²⁶ The women of WIFE, Farver explained, saw farming itself as a positive virtue. Testifying before the International Joint Commission of the International Poplar River Water Quality Study, Farver affirmed, “We in WIFE feel that our way of farming and the life style of a farming community is best for ourselves, for our children, and future generations.”²⁷ In her poem “Before I was a WIFE,” Lois Kimmet described her pro-farm activism as “working to preserve our American way of life.”²⁸ Under threat by economic conditions or by encroaching urbanism with its many implications, farmwomen activists saw themselves as fighting to preserve a national vision inseparable from values of family, community, and rigid gender prescriptions.

Together with this rhetoric, women activists also demonstrated familiarity with the discourses of midcentury feminism. This easy familiarity extended beyond the implicit embrace of an image of the powerful, independent farm wives of the Hollywood imagination to also encompass the use of rhetorical styles exhibited by the feminist theorists who clung to America’s coastal regions. WIFE member Yvonne Snyder expressed this idea in a toast written to WIFE members’ husbands in late 1978:

No chauvinist husbands these—
They help us all they can
By sacrificing apple pie
While they subsidize our plans²⁹

Snyder’s denial of the husbands’ “chauvinism” demonstrated her familiarity with critiques of patriarchy—and perhaps served as a denial that rural masculinity was any more retrograde than its non-rural equivalent. But at the same time Snyder’s explanation as to *why* the husbands were not chauvinists reflected the gendered assumptions of a patriarchal society. The men’s “sacrifice” was in giving up on the wife’s additional and unpaid labor as the family baker. At the same time, Snyder’s toast reflected the notion that even while wives may have provided both agricultural and domestic labor to the family farming enterprise, the profits were all the property of the husband—such that the husbands were “subsidizing” their activist wives rather than acknowledging a relationship of mutual income and spending.

Between feminist rhetoric and apple pie, the seemingly paradoxical image of the desperate farm wife as a pillar of traditionalism and a beacon for women's liberation transcended the ground between cultural metaphor and individual practice during the farm crisis. With so much at stake, women's role in embodying the cultural capital argument for rural traditionalism was hardly a fleeting moment during the May 1985 testimony. These farmwomen, clutching babies and blinking back tears as their tractors and combines were auctioned off at myriad farm bankruptcy proceedings across the country, proved to be one of the most resonant images of the crisis. Six months later it seemed perfectly natural that at the first Farm Aid concert, perpetual cynic Neil Young offered a gendered dedication to his screaming admirers. "Here's a song for all of you mommas out there, and all of you farmers' wives doin' your best," he intoned in an unusual departure from his trademark drawling monotone. Young then launched into his wildly popular song "Heart of Gold." From their Hollywood stand-ins, to the women of WIFE neglecting apple pie to run emergency intervention hotlines and driving tractors to Washington, the women of the farm crisis tread a precarious line, navigating between the activism necessary to preserve their family farms and the orthodoxy that justified that preservation.

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NOTES

1. Anne Groer, "3 Actresses Cry for Farmers Before Panel," *Orlando Sentinel* (Fla.), May 7, 1985.
2. Cox News Service, "Capitol Hill Celebrities—They're Starring At A Hearing Near You" *Orlando Sentinel* (Fla.), Nov. 3, 1985.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Groer, "3 Actresses Cry for Farmers Before Panel." It is notable—especially given the purpose of the testimony in calling attention to the farm crisis beyond people close to rural areas—that coverage of the hearing reached audiences in areas far removed from the traditional farm belt.
5. Annabelle Fouhy, "The Other Side of the Washington DC Story," *Montana Wife News* 7, no. 4 (June 1985), Montana State Historical Society, Helena.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Jim Drinkard, "Farm Actresses Lange, Fonda, Spacek Testify for Congressional Democrats," *Gainesville Sun* (Fla.), May 8, 1985, 8B.
9. Roger Ebert, review, *Country*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jan. 1, 1984.
10. *Ibid.*

11. Ronald Reagan, diary entry, Oct. 5, 1984, in *Reagan's Country: The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation Member Newsletter*.
12. Aljean Harmetz, "Two Films Top Oscar Nominations," *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1985.
13. David Hutchings, "Country Boy," *People* 22, no. 17, Oct. 22, 1984.
14. William Brown, "Jessica Lange and Sissy Spacek: Country Girls," in *Acting for America: Movie Stars of the 1980s*, ed. Robert Eberwein (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 58.
15. "They Try to Explain Farms to City Folks," *Farm and Ranch Forum*, c. 1983, box 297, Ted Schwinden Papers, Montana State Historical Society, Helena.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. "Montanans Attend Convention," *Montana WIFE News*, Oct./Nov. 1977, 6.
19. Lois Kimmert, "Before I was a WIFE," *Montana WIFE News*, Nov. 1978, 2.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Image, photographer unknown. "Beverly Snyder Anderson in snowstorm en route to Washington, D.C." Jan. 1979, Tractorcade to DC Oral History Project, Kinsley Public Library, Kinsley, Kan.
22. Beverly Snyder Anderson, oral history interview, Nov. 3, 2012, by Joan Weaver and Rosetta Graff, 3, Kinsley Public Library, tmp.kinsleylibrary.info/TractorcadePhotos/Interviews/AndersonBfinal.pdf.
23. "Now's the Time—Bend Legislators' Ears," *Montana WIFE News*, Dec. 1978, 4.
24. Groer, "3 Actresses Cry for Farmers Before Panel."
25. See especially Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
26. Meeting of the International Joint Commission on the International Poplar River Water Quality Study, Sept. 10, 1979, Scobey, Mont.
27. Statement, Marlys Farver, Daniels County WIFE member, in *The Montana Wife*, Oct. 1979, 3.
28. Kimmert, "Before I was a WIFE."
29. "A Toast," *Montana WIFE News*, Dec. 1978, 6.