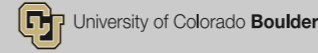


Women's Labor and the Rise of Commercial Dairy Farming in 19th-Century Upstate New York

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Introduction

The nature of women's labor during the rise of commercial dairy farming in the late 19th-century northern U.S. is debated. Most agree that prior, women were heavily involved; however, questions persist about their role after it became profitable. Periodicals and personal journals contradict one another, suggesting the societal ideal and actual practice differed and/or roles varied across farms and communities. For a different approach, we examine farms in the Town of Fenner, NY—a primarily Euro-American and European immigrant community—from 1850-1880 through quantitative analyses of census data. Our results suggest women's labor contributed significantly to increasing dairy production in Fenner, and more broadly to this area becoming one of the foremost dairy industries in the country. However, changes did occur with the advent of industrialized farming and cheese production.

Background

This is community-based research, with the first author having grown up in the Town of Fenner on a third-generation dairy farm. Questions about the history of women's labor were generated by current residents and us.

Fenner is located in Madison County, NY. Haudenosaunee lands were illegally opened for settlement in the 1790s, and white settlers from New England quickly flooded in. This was followed by immigrants, primarily from Ireland and Wales. Black residents, both those escaping enslavement in the South and those formerly enslaved in the North, lived in the county from the early 1800s on. All farms in Fenner during this period were owned by white people, almost all of them domestic born. Thus, all the women in this study were white Euro-Americans or Europeans. There were 3-6 Black families in the town over this period, but none were listed as farm owners in the census, and no Black women were recorded as living in white households as hired labor.

By 1830, Fenner was almost all farms, ranging from 5-150 acres. They engaged in a wide range of activities and were largely subsistence-based until 1840. Farmers moved toward commercial production in the 1840s. However, 1855-1870 was a period of economic instability, distinct from successes in other areas. Fenner farmers remained generalist to deal with this risk. This changed with the building of cheese factories in the town from 1865-70, which facilitated commercial dairy farming (Jones et al. 2023).

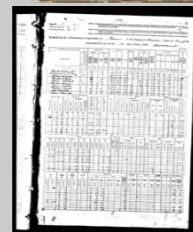
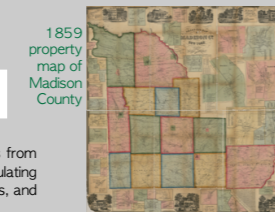
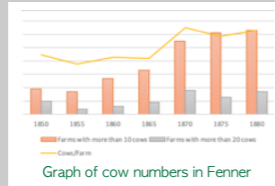
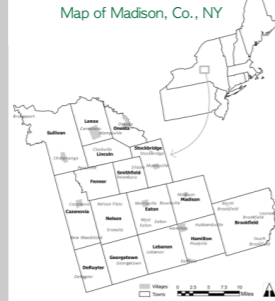
Women were the primary caretakers of cows and producers of dairy products prior to 1850. After the shift to commercial production, findings vary greatly regarding how much women's labor contributed to the production of this new cash "crop" (McMurry 1995; Osterud 1991). Much of this results from the invisibility of women's labor and few written accounts.

Methods

We first compiled agricultural data from Federal and NY State census records from 1850-1880 (an example from 1880 can be seen to the right), and then calculating farm surplus, using an equation adding products and subtracting feed, seed costs, and human consumption. We next combined these with household demographics.

We then created graphs of overall surplus, number of cows, and milk, butter, and cheese production by the number of adults, adult women, and adult men in farm households. At this early stage of the project, we did not separate people by race, nativity, or being family or hired labor. Nor did we try to connect independent laborer households to specific farms. Censuses did not record milk produced prior to 1870, so we calculated it based on an average of 17 lbs of milk a day per cow and subtracted the milk needed to make the cheese and butter reported.

Our next analysis was a discriminant function analysis of farms, comparing them by the number of adult women and adult men in the household to see what characteristics most distinguished them.



Page from the 1880 agricultural census

Results

Census Trend Analysis

The following description comes from the graphs to the right. In 1850, production increases with more adults in general. It peaks with 2 women and 2 men in the household (except for one farm with 7 men). Cheese production spikes at 4 women in the household, and continues to increase with more men. It seems households with 2 women and/or 2 men were focused on producing and selling milk. With more adult labor, women or men, they turned more of that milk into cheese and butter themselves.

From 1855-65, the production of milk, cheese, and butter generally rises with more women and men in the household. 1855 is a low point for production. It appears men and women were both contributing to dairy production. Butter and cheese production on the farm falls in 1865, when cheese factories were built in the town.

From this point on, milk production rises and then falls off with more than 3 women in the household. A similar pattern occurs for men, but with a fall-off at 4 men. In general, 1-3 women in the household correlates with more milk production than 1-3 men. 4 or more men correlates with more production than 4 or more women. However, households with more than 4 women or men are rare, usually numbering less than 10 total out of 220-250 farms.

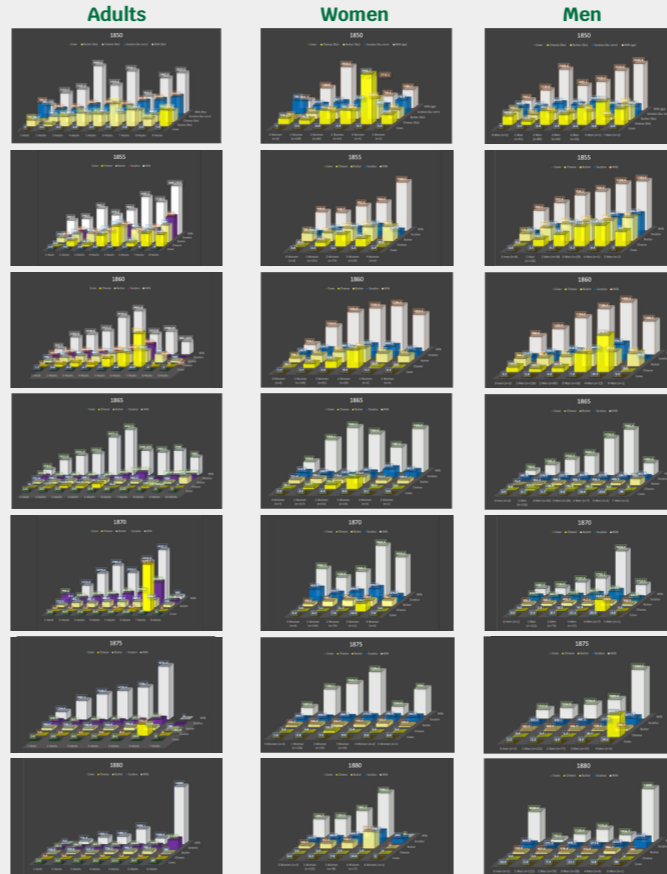
Across all years, except 1865 and 1870, farms with no men produce more milk than farms with no women.

Discriminant Function Analysis

The discriminant function results are summarized in the table below. Marked boxes show variables that distinguish farms with more women or men in the household.

Dairy-related factors distinguish farms with more men and women in every case except men in 1855. Patterns shift from 1865-1875, with farms with more men being distinguished almost exclusively by dairy-related factors.

	1850		1855		1860		1865		1870		1875		1880	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Dairy (cows, milk, butter, cheese)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Livestock (pigs, horses, sheep, chickens)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Size of farm (acres)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cash crops (corn, hay, oats, wheat, barley)			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
Other products (hops, maple sugar, honey, potatoes)			✓						✓		✓			
Value (farm, implements)			✓		✓	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓
Home manufactures									✓	✓				



Discussion

Fully acknowledging correlation does not equal causation, we find these results difficult to interpret as women being pushed out of dairying activities after 1865. Small changes did occur, though. After 1865, farms with 3 women and those with 4 men were peak milk producers. There were also a very small number of farms that went all-in on cheese or milk production using male labor. This is supported by the DFA results, showing farms with more men were distinguished almost solely by dairy production from 1865-75. For a small number of farms engaging in industrialized milk and cheese, they seem to have considered this to be men's work.

A majority of farms shifted their time and energy toward milk production, but still engaged in a wide range of activities. For these farms, it is difficult to see a pattern in which women were not significantly contributing to milking cows, particularly given the DFA results showing dairy factors distinguish farms with more women. The plateauing at 3 women and 4 men after 1865 may reflect a need for less labor now that only milking was needed, as cheese- and buttermaking moved off the farm.

It's almost impossible to know what tasks individuals performed without personal journals. Periodicals, written mainly by men in nearby cities, claimed women were pushed into more domestic activities (McMurry 1995). However, the fact that 1870 was the only year home manufactures distinguished farms with more women and dairy products still did as well suggests this move was not happening in Fenner, despite Victorian gender ideologies taking hold at this time. Perhaps the influence urban populations had on American gender ideology did not reach more remote rural communities, like Fenner (Gibb et al. 2009). Or, perhaps the economic and labor needs of the household superceded new ideologies about women, their bodies, and their capabilities (Osterud 1991, 1993; Neth 1994). While both were likely factors, we lean more toward the latter as being more influential.

Conclusions

There seem to be two constants with regard to women and family farms in the U.S.: their labor is critical to the success of the farm (whether it is on the farm or in supplying income from outside work (Weersink et al. 1998)), and their labor is rarely publicly acknowledged. McMurry (1995) provided a detailed description of the role farm women played in constructing and maintaining social networks in dispersed rural settings. While many hours of labor were and are spent on farmwork, women were and are also often maintaining critical social ties that allow for labor sharing, community building, and advocacy for rural dwellers in an increasingly urban-focused society. The correlation of increased production with increasing number of both men and women in the household suggests that the fluidity in gendered labor patterns witnessed by the first author in late 20th century farming may have arisen with the earliest commercial farms in Fenner.

In future work, we want to explore variations by race, nativity, and family vs. hired labor. We also want to explore how ideology around women's bodies was changing and the impact, or lack thereof, this had on women in rural communities. Women continue to engage in invisible labor on farms and ranches across the U.S., and understanding the roots of the invisibility of their labor and how it impacts women's lives and bodies is critical to understanding American agriculture.

Acknowledgements

Undergraduate and graduate student research was funded by the Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of South Carolina, and faculty and graduate student research by the Department of Anthropology and the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Colorado Boulder. We must thank the following farm families in Fenner for their partnership over the last five years: the Joneses, Codys, Yoders, and Troyers. In particular, this project would not have been possible for many reasons without Dave, Lynne, and Jeanne Jones. Conversations with Sharon DeWitte, Terry Weik, Jordan Davis, and K. Pierce Wright have greatly improved this work. Thank you to a number of students that helped on related projects that contributed to this work, including Gabby Cruz, Catherine Livingston, and Wyatt Fleming. Larkin Poe and Tyler Childers provided musical inspiration while compiling this work into poster form.

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