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THE PERILS OF RURAL WOMEN'S HISTORY

(A Note to Storytellers Who Study the West's Unsettled Past)

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I HAVE ALWAYS CONSIDERED the writing of history to be a process of crossing borders and comparing cultures. The boundaries in my work have usually been within the United States: the social borders of race, class, region, and ethnicity. Over the years I have consciously narrowed my field of interest, starting out to study European history, then refocusing on the United States to ask a question that social historians had been asking for years about Europe. How had social institutions taken form? Looking at the United States and adding questions raised by historians of gender, I found a world wonderfully complex, one that faced inward and outward. This focus began in graduate school and intensified in subsequent years as I adjusted, unlearned, and expanded my formal education. In 1963, when I received my PhD in history, there were almost no studies of social or women's history, little rural history

(as distinct from agricultural history, which then considered farming solely a male occupation), and relatively little immigration history. I was trained to write white male political history. Nevertheless, I began a history of Asian Indian immigrants which took me, eventually, across the Canadian border as I researched these men who sought work in the United States and Canada and faced similar discrimination in each. But when women's history expanded as a field, I gladly turned to the task of writing about rural women in the United States, indigenous and settler, immigrant and native-born. Rural women, the majority of women for most of U.S. history, seemed to be entirely neglected.[1]

I specifically chose rural women as my focus, but I chose the time and region almost by chance. The Regional Economic History Research Center at the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Library was offering grants on the industrializing of the mid-Atlantic region. I suggested they support my research into the question of what happened to rural women during this process. By chance, then, I used this region to explore my own questions about rural women. The result of my research was *Loosening the Bonds*, a study of rural women in southeastern Pennsylvania, an area in which a Quaker culture had been well established by 1750.[2]

That book completed, I focused westward, looking for a new group of rural women to continue my story. I chose north-central Wisconsin, an area in which German immigrants replaced the predominantly native-born Yankee settler culture after the 1850s. I began my study there, thinking I could combine this second volume of rural women's history with my own family history. My grandmother, a German Bohemian farm woman, had crossed the Atlantic to settle in this midwestern region in the 1890s. There she raised her eight children, among them my mother who, at sixteen, left for St Paul, Minnesota, where she married an urban Italian-born immigrant in 1925. My mother was one of the thousands of rural women who sought jobs in urban areas, married, and chose city life over farming.[3]

I never expected this project to stretch over a decade, or to bring me to new indigenous/settler borders, or to consider again the Canadian/United States border, over which I found that my mother's and other

families frequently crossed in the early twentieth century seeking economic opportunity. My European-born German relatives did not find the same discrimination as those born in Asia. In fact, authorities in Western Canada welcomed these European immigrants as a buffer against the need for Asian immigrant labor.

Between 1900 and 1910 there was a "Canada craze" in northern Wisconsin. German immigrants who were still arriving and the children of earlier immigrants found U.S. land prices rising and market prices depressed. Families sought less costly land in Canada. A friend of my aunt moved to Canada with his family in 1910 because he was one of five sons in the family, all of whom wanted their own land to farm. He returned to marry her and she farmed there with him for forty years. Other neighbors followed them. I myself might have been born in Canada, had my grandfather been able to convince my grandmother to move north when he caught the "Canadian craze" in 1905, two years after my mother's birth. Grandma refused to budge. Instead Grandpa traveled north to the wheat harvest in Canada each year. He liked the excitement of the harvest and perhaps played his accordion in the granary that my aunt and her husband opened each harvest for dances. Grandpa Schopp did not like the everyday life of a farmer, and Grandma eventually kicked him off the land that she had inherited from her first husband and passed it on to her first-born son. Thus my own rural family history remains rooted in northern Wisconsin instead of across the border in southern Canada.

Still, I have photographs to prove that my parents took me across the border to visit my aunt in that small town of Browning, Saskatchewan, in the summer of 1937. I was two and one half years old when my Canadian uncle perched me atop a huge work horse and steadied me while my father took the photograph. We crossed the border easily if not often. My aunt visited us in St Paul at Christmas time the next year. We thought nothing of borders except the space that would separate my mother from her sister once we moved west to southern California. The ties then seemed broken, but I still remember writing to my aunt in the 1940s, worrying that the letter with the simple address "Mary Sacher, Browning, Saskatchewan," with no street or house number, would arrive safely. I

know she got the letters, though I have none of hers to prove that she wrote back.

We forget about borders until reminded by some special event. Recently, when I crossed the northern border to find my aunt's Canadian history for my Wisconsin book, I began to think about how to share part of the thirty years of writing rural women's history in a way that might be helpful to historians on both sides of this particular border. I am not sure how our comparative Canadian–United States rural women's history will develop. I know I have gained insight from reading Canadian First Nations history and theory, from studies of rural Canadian sexuality, and from articles on Canadian settlement in the west. Yet in a recent bibliography that I helped create, we only referenced four items on Canadian rural women, two of them presented at Rural Women Studies Association conferences and published by *Agricultural History*. Only one of the articles was on Western Canada. While a number of scholars contributed to that bibliography, none challenged our oversight. United States historians are still not as aware of Canadian scholarship as they should be. Conversations about comparisons have hardly begun.[4]

My reading list on Canadian rural women has lengthened considerably in the past few years. I read Joy Kogawa's moving story *Obasan*, about the lives of rural Japanese Canadians forcibly removed from urban life to rural towns and farms in the 1940s. In it Kogawa asks, "If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the Freeing word?" Kogawa writes of silence and silencing, and like her we must follow the stream to recover the voices of rural women on both sides of the border.[5]

As we go about this task, I would like historians on both sides of these national borders to be aware of what I call the six "perils" of writing rural women's history. Analyzing these perils can serve as a starting point for a dialogue on writing across the border as we search for and tell the stories of rural women. I have categorized these perils as fantasizing, romanticizing, victimizing, rationalizing, personalizing, and politicizing. I do not know if these categories apply equally in every place. I write from my own self-analysis, the urges I have had to resist as I study rural

women's history. Fantasizing is the urge to blur the rough edges, to simplify to achieve a story that pleases me, one that neatly divides rural and urban, and accepts this division as a constant in the lives of rural women. Romanticizing is often a fatal attraction for me, seeing the loss of rural life as the story of one group losing out, the world we have lost. Victimizing emphasizes that these people were defeated and did not survive culturally. Rationalizing means I impose a view that events are natural, inevitable, and universal rather than specific, nuanced, and varied, that we objectify as we recover stories. Then we risk personalizing: in our efforts to find the individual words and voices, we make public what once was private. How do we use that information in a responsible way? Many writers use novels to combine and rearrange family history into fiction. But as historians we want to leave specific information distinct and separate. Finally, in politicizing, we may impose politics, wishing that rural women had shared certain views, or chastise them for not having these views. Let me elaborate a bit on why each of these approaches presents perils.

FANTASIZING

I WRITE ABOUT THE PAST of small rural communities, mostly now obliterated by the urban technological society. In doing so, I try to resist the temptation to fantasize, while at the same time preserving what I can of their past. To me it seems that most of the cultures I study wanted technology, but wanted to use it at their own pace for their own needs and somehow lost control of it. And in the losing they also lost much of their own culture and their control over their land. But history is never as clear and cleanly cut as fantasy. I try to remember that.

Recently, I have been reading a book titled *The Telling* by Ursula Le Guin, the well-known writer of science fiction and fantasy. *The Telling* centers on Sutty, an Anglo-Indian from Vancouver, who has left Terra (earth) for the planet of Aka where she is an official Observer for Ekumen, an intergalactic federation. The Corporation State has controlled Aka for seventy years, during which time it has imposed an industrial technological mode and remade culture. Sutty, who has studied ancient scripts of Aka, is sent by Ekumen historians to find out more about Aka culture,

for they believe "a useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past." When Sutty arrives, she can find almost no trace of the old culture in the capital city, Dovea. The Corporation has destroyed the old language and pulped the old books to use as insulation in buildings. All the people who told the stories of the past are gone. Sutty's job is to look for these stories and any people who tell them. To do so, she travels up the river by boat for ten days to a provincial town called Okzat-Ozkat. There she finds "the tellers," known as the maz. The maz continue to tell the old stories and the people maintain a secret life in which they listen to the stories and practice the old culture. In this old culture, people seek a spiritual and physical satisfaction that does not serve the growth of society's material wealth and complexity as the Corporation demands. The old stories often denounce excess profit making. The people have taken what they can preserve of the old books of Aka culture up to a cave in the mountains where the people go to study and read the books. Sutty goes there and learns about the history of the Aka culture, then attempts to negotiate its preservation.[6]

I loved this book. How could I not? It portrays a rural culture where mind is memory, honor comes from truth, and storytellers are respected for sharing the past and holding no secrets about it. And that is the peril. Reading fantasy is not enough. I may use Le Guin's Asian-Canadian scholar who explores other worlds as a model, but I must find this world's details of history and not create a fantasy. As a historian, I cannot set out to find Le Guin's fantasy community. It simply does not exist. Her model of a scholar/explorer can, however, help me to see different aspects of cultures more clearly and give me the courage to continue listening for the stories.

In the area of Wisconsin that I research, many family and community stories simply are not shared. Or they are contradictory. Or incomplete. Or untrue. I wish it were not this way, but it is. And I have to find ways to ground my stories in these realities. Minnesota writer Carol Bly talks about the problem of describing a midwestern culture that has developed a way of deflecting realities. They want to talk nice. But many of the things that go on in all cultures are not nice: racism, family violence, com-

munity ostracism of those who are different. How do we reveal these without giving the impression that this is the most important part of a culture?[7]

ROMANTICIZING

BELIEVING THAT RURAL PEOPLE lost out, that a rich, simple way of life is gone forever, is another peril. I find it difficult to avoid romanticizing rural women. I do it and I think many historians of rural people do it. We identify with the subjects of our stories in reaction against their being portrayed as unimportant to urban people and their historians. I sometimes catch myself believing that because rural people had to leave their land, they did not carry their cultures into the mainstream. I sometimes think in a sort of dualism, rural vs. urban, or good vs. bad. The trick is to see rural history as multidimensional.

And also multicultural. I also have a tendency to want to write about the majority, or only one group. I think it is important for people to write their own stories, but I also believe that people do not have to write only their own stories. To write only about one group seems to me to deny the reality of a huge and very diverse group of people interacting in complex ways. If I write only about settlers and not Indigenous people, native born and not immigrant, white and not people of color, I miss the vital edges where people come together, mix, and clash or cooperate. And if I write about the United States and not Mexico, the United States and not Canada, I miss the vital edges where national borders meet and people cross them.

One of the reasons my Wisconsin book has taken so many years to complete is that I have moved away from the center to the margins. When large numbers of German families arrived in the 1890s, earlier Yankee settlers did not welcome this new minority. Land agents and lumber companies wanted to sell their land to these new immigrants. One contemporary wrote that the purchase of land and settlement of communities by these new immigrants lowered land values of the already settled farmers. The saga of struggling European-based frontier immigrant folk seems an easy story to tell. Yet if we ignore conflict among

European immigrants, we miss an important part of their story. Polish immigrants resisted attempts by German immigrants to dominate. Polish immigrants arrived later than the Germans, most from areas of German-occupied Poland. Conflicts ran deep, even separating Polish nuns from German nuns and causing schism in northern Wisconsin: Polish nuns wanted to learn to teach, while the German nuns relegated them to tasks in the kitchen.[8]

So now I had early French and Irish Canadians, Yankees, Germans, and Poles on this bit of Wisconsin land. I kept reading about the "disappearance" of Native people in this region. Yet Native American writers testify to the survival of their ancestors in these regions. The story of Native removal, if romanticized, can also mask or remove conflict from the settler story and eliminate the story of how indigenous people responded to settlers.

When settlers intruded into Native lands in the woodlands area, one response was the creation of the Dream Dance, which spread throughout Wisconsin, other north-central states, and into the Canadian province of Manitoba in the 1880s. The Dream Dance paralleled the pan-Indian movement of the Ghost Dance of the Plains. Yet it is seldom discussed in historical accounts. This religious revival was started by the Sioux woman Red Feather Woman, who preached cooperation among Native tribes. Red Cloud Woman, the Menominee who recounted Red Feather Woman's story to anthropologist Leonard Bloomfield in 1920, said the Spirit was quite explicit in giving instructions: "You will tell your men-folk to go slay the creature [a deer] that you are to use on this drum, so that you may make a drum. Let them hurry about it. Then when they have completed the drum, they will dance together." The purpose of the Dream Dance ceremony, Red Cloud Woman went on, was to encourage Indians to "deal kindly with each other, that they may never fight each other, exchanging things by way of reciprocal gifts." Native people were also to share the Dream Dance by making a second drum to pass on to a new group along with instructions for the dance. In 1910 anthropologist Frances Densmore had witnessed such a passing on of a Dream Dance drum from the Lac du Flambeau Ojibwa to the Menominee. Other drums passed north among the Plains Ojibwa in Manitoba.[9]

Native peoples belong to Nations that still oppose the arbitrary Canadian-U.S. boundaries that cut through their homelands. The Tuscarora, for example, celebrate Border Crossing Day every July to honor their right to trade and cross the United States border unhindered by government officials. Settlers, too, once ignored abstract national boundaries and crossed freely from one nation to the other. Their loyalties to one or another were not firmly established. They had left their native lands and were raising Canadians and Americans, often of mixed ethnic and racial heritage—their languages, customs, and loyalties still in a wonderfully complex flux. Native-born children, of all ethnic and racial groups, were a new generation with experiences different from those of their parents and grandparents.[10]

It is true that I risk distortion and omission with inclusion. Yet if I identify only the majority, it is easier to ignore the parts of the community that might be the most critical of it and from whom I can learn much. Studying different parts of a community helps keep me from romanticizing one part of it. Including cross-border conversations can lead to important insights. A case in point is the cross-border historical discussion that has developed around the history of mixed-heritage women in Canada and the United States. These discussions began in earnest with the 1980 publication of Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties* and Jennifer Brown's *Strangers in the Blood*. Since these early attempts to describe women's roles in an economy and culture that crossed borders, more recent accounts have broadened, deepened, and become more complex as the descendants of these women have joined the discussion about how best to write about how their ancestors developed trade and founded bicultural communities. The Métisse, as scholars sometimes refer to these earlier mixed-heritage women, continued to influence women's history through their female descendants long after Canada and the United States divided up the fur-trade territory. My analysis of mixed-heritage twentieth-century women has been clarified by listening to these dialogues and by entering into discussion and debate.[11]

One of the hardest things for me is to accept criticism and to risk criticism from one group or another, and to learn how to use that criticism. Almost always, I instinctively want to avoid drawing connections between

categories and populations because these invite controversy, not only between cross-border elements, but between rural–urban, good–bad, white and non-white. I find it difficult to pursue questions of how choices are made and who passes into one culture or the other, how people maintain bicultural or multicultural heritages. Yet these are the very questions that keep us honest, keep us from suppressing the parts we do not want to deal with—the prejudice, the mistreatment, the scorn, the indifference that exists in small rural communities just as it does in cities.

VICTIMIZING

WHY IS IT that I always believe losing control of land is bad and that people who lose it are victims? I often write with the assumption that leaving the land is a sort of defeat. I hate policies of the United States government that have assumed some people should be moved off the land, either to have others take their place, such as replacing Indigenous peoples with settlers, or replacing settlers with agribusiness or suburbs. And yet I know that many of the people who left, especially women, including my mother, have felt they prospered by leaving rural areas.

And perceptions change. I have been going back through a number of books written about Native Americans, and the feeling of victimization is present in almost all of them. Recent Native American writers, while careful to tell the story of occupation and conquest, frequently choose not to dwell on their losses but to emphasize survival. I am trying to learn from them to counter-balance the loss of land and the sense of victimization by looking at how people survived and what they wanted.

People can be both victims and victimizers. I learned from my study of Native history that settlers were not innocent, but they also became victims of government policies that controlled and neglected their health and welfare. In northern Wisconsin, lumber companies sought German immigrants to sell them cutover land. They sold the land cheaply, with easy credit, but the settlers received a piece of stumpy land. These early settlers worked incredibly hard for very little. Most had escaped countries where they had no access to the land at all. They often had to accept

difficult and dangerous factory or mine work in America. Property values did increase in parts of northern Wisconsin, but in much of the cutover the settlers simply lost their land in the economic depression of the 1930s and had to abandon all the money and effort they had invested.[12]

I began my current research into family history because my mother had seemingly passed on so little to me. She said little about growing up poor in a log house in Wisconsin. Other family members seemed equally reluctant to share memories. Two of my aunts, including the one who migrated to Canada, had no children who might have helped me recreate the family's past. Only my uncle Frank, who had lived on in that log house on the family farm, had a fund of stories to tell me about my grandmother and mother. His daughter Mary Ann had listened to these stories and others as she cared for him in old age. Much of my family had abandoned stories of place and ethnicity when they left for the city. Two wars with Germany undoubtedly made these descendants of late nineteenth-century German immigrants reluctant to discuss their heritage with their second-generation children. I have found convincing evidence that the German oral culture that survived into the twentieth century was already deeply embedded in and adapted to a larger midwestern culture before these wars, and I believe it survives there yet. But it did not survive as a distinct culture transmitted among descendants who scattered off the land. Probably more is being done to recover this culture by the third and fourth generations than by those who left the land.

Other cultures have survived within families even when they have left their homelands. The Diné photographer Hulleah Tsinhnahjinne once told me about a visit to New Zealand and the contact she made there with a Maori woman from Tasmania. They were looking over photographs in the archives and the woman showed Hulleah one identified as "The Last of the Tasmanians." Hulleah said she was ready to get sad after looking at the photograph. But her friend laughed and said, "We're not gone." And that mental image has stayed with me, as it did with Hulleah. My job is to trace the movement and transformation of rural people, not to proclaim them victims and announce that they are "gone" when they leave the land. Colonialist attitudes not only erased the continuing

presence of Indigenous women, but they erased the white settler women who also had to leave the land. The people have survived and changed, but their cultures have lived on in their descendants.[13]

RATIONALIZING

IF I RATIONALIZE rather than sympathize, I also run the risk of distortion and oversimplification. I can explain away all policies and all treatment by providing a universal context, by making the decisions of government and dominant settler communities seem rational. There may be alternative histories that avoid both victimization and rationalization of events, a way to show both the effects of colonization on rural communities and how some survived. A recent PBS program, *Ancestors in the Americas*, contained one part titled "Chinese in the Frontier West: An American Story." This part traced Asian immigrants in the Americas and dealt with the treatment of Chinese in the American West. It discussed the optimistic men leaving for the Gold Fields and the discrimination and violence faced once they arrived. Then it asked what might have been if Chinese men had been joined by their wives and families and led more normal lives. Scholars had discovered a community of Chinese families living at Point Alones, near Monterey in California, and the descendants of some of its members. One was a physicist. Her grandparents had settled in this small fishing community and prospered until 1906. Then a fire had wiped out the community. The railroad, which controlled the land, kept the community from rebuilding its town and remaining on the land. But for the many years before the fire they had settled there; these Chinese families lived as an intact community, maintained many of their cultural traits, and adopted whatever they wished from the host culture. Dispersed families had then continued the process of maintenance and adoption after leaving the land. By emphasizing this type of survival, the documentary avoided both victimizing and rationalizing. It took the viewer into a community constructed in one physical space that had escaped much violence and persecution directed at Asians by the dominant culture and had survived intact longer than other Asian communities of the time. Then it showed the lives of individuals who had formed the culture of the next generations.[14]

When I applied that technique to my own work, I began to look more carefully for ways in which communities and families survived and to find their descendants. The Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians found ways to preserve old and new. I interviewed Dorothy Thoms, who traced her lineage back to her grandmother Isabella Wolfe St Germain. Isabella arrived in Lac du Flambeau in the 1890s to work as the nurse at the government boarding school during a brief period when the Indian Agent there was hiring educated Native women for jobs as nurses, teachers, and matrons. Isabella had grown up in North Carolina, her father a proud Cherokee, her mother a white woman who joined his community and saw that Isabella learned traditional Cherokee culture. Isabella received a good education at the local Cherokee school and worked there for several years before going on to receive formal training as a nurse.

Isabella worked at the Lac du Flambeau boarding school for almost two years before resigning to marry into the St Germain family. Evidence in government records revealed her excellent performance as a nurse and awards she received later at annual fairs for canning, sewing, creating basketry and beadwork. In addition to maintaining Cherokee traditions (her baskets were probably Cherokee), Isabella learned beading and other traditions from her Chippewa mother-in-law. Isabella continued to practice nursing and traveled on snow shoes all over the community to deliver babies using both traditional Native and settler healing techniques. Known simply as "Grandma St Germain," Isabella was a woman renowned in the community for her healing skills. Her granddaughter showed me a photograph of Isabella standing proudly in front of her huge lilac bush. Then she took me to Isabella's land where the lilac bush still stood. Isabella's family, which had moved from North Carolina to Tennessee, had sent the lilac cuttings. In turn, Isabella gave cuttings of her lilacs to the many neighbors who admired them. Every May, her lilacs still bloom all over the community.[15]

I realize now that this is the type of story that I should be looking for. It gave me a context for what was a short-lived but potentially positive government policy that was not pursued because the government decided Native women should not be employed in most positions of respon-

sibility. It also showed me that the community provided for most of its own health needs. The government had contracts with physicians to attend seriously ill people in the community. A number of them were well regarded by the people at Lac du Flambeau. But for most of their health care needs they turned to Grandma St Germain—to birth their children, to diagnose their illnesses, to advise them on how to restore good health. A rational view might have told only the story left by the government documents. An oral history might have floated alone as only a family story. Together they led me to the rich texture created by the concrete and specific details of a woman's life that Isabella's family offered me. I am continuing to share my research with her family, which hopes there will be a place for Isabella's story in both her community and in my history.

PERSONALIZING

I HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY to the families who share their private histories with me. I have to present that material as accurately as I can, allow family informants to remain anonymous if they would like, and to accept their role as keepers of family history who share only the information they wish me to have. Historians of women are still working out ways to tell more about women's personal lives so we can better understand how these lives affect women's public lives. Often this effort takes us into sensitive areas, into personal lives that families wished to keep private because of the ways in which family and community enforced, or tried to enforce, limits on the activities of women. Courts and administrative agencies impose privacy restrictions. Beyond these legal restrictions, we face ethnical questions regarding what we have access to and how we use this material in our work. How far does the right of privacy extend into personal lives for which we have no legal guidelines or restrictions? Many of us wish to open these areas of women's lives, whether historical or contemporary, to the light of analysis and possibly change. We try to develop new language with which to describe women's lives that is more neutral than popular language. We try to avoid the pejorative terms that have been used to control women's lives

in the past. We try to expand the limits of what may be safely discussed publicly because many of us feel that secrets and silences are often the result of socially sanctioned constraints that make it more difficult for women to live full, creative, and satisfying lives, lives that are not crippled because of events both within and outside their control.

When I wrote my book on mid-Atlantic women, I had only a few documents that discussed women's sexual activities. I chose to discuss the activities, without pseudonyms or entire names, either surnames or family names. I used the initial of their first name, and a full citation to the document, assuming any historian trying to locate the information for further research could easily find it and that using an initial was enough for my readers to know. In my current work, I have in many instances tried to use the full name of the woman, and the first name and last initials in others, even though these events are closer in time. Most events took place over one hundred years ago, and I have set my own ethical limits tighter than most legal limits of privacy. I have documented considerable violence toward women in the rural areas I have been studying: incest, sexual abuse of young women by neighbors and kin, improper abortions. I have tried to discuss these "personal" issues with a combination of objectivity and concern for the women who went through these experiences.[16]

Lately, I have been looking more closely at my own family's history. Like most rural families, mine has become urban. Using family history as I am in my current work makes it difficult in new ways. How much family history belongs to me? Just because I experience it, do I have a right to these family stories? Of course. But where do I end the stories? An aunt talked to me one afternoon about her experiences in the city of Milwaukee in the 1910s and 1920s. There was nothing I felt uncomfortable writing about. Yet she worried that I might write about her life and was reluctant to discuss it at all. She was a very private person. She died a few years ago and I want to use parts of that conversation in my work, in this case to discuss violence toward women in the city.

The issue is how much violence did rural women encounter in cities? It is not the kind of material that is easy to come by means other

than legal documents. One historian uncovered a memoir in which a Swedish immigrant woman discussed her concern about walking alone on city streets. How much danger did city streets present to young rural women who went there to work? My aunt seemed to think there was relatively little in Milwaukee in the 1920s. She went everywhere, on foot and by streetcars, by day and by evening, seemingly without concern about possible violence to herself. My aunt did usually go out with a female friend, but they thought nothing of going to dances, meeting young male strangers, and accepting rides home from them. Several of my aunts met their future husbands at dances, one at a roller rink. This contrasts with the concern of middle-class reformers about the welfare of young rural women coming to the city, particularly from 1900 and through the 1920s, during the height of progressive reform. How much concern was about real violence, and how much about the freedom that these young women assumed for their own activities? Progressive reformers sometimes called them "women adrift" because they had no families. Some did seek help from city agencies. Violence toward women existed to some extent in all places. The young, the poor, the racially or culturally different, those without adult protectors, have always been especially at risk for this violence. But the women I have talked to, who came from poor rural families, seemed perfectly comfortable in the city and able to care for themselves without help from reformers. They seemed more interested in getting help to obtain better working conditions and wages than help with their private lives.[17]

Because I felt that the issue of violence toward women and how they felt about it was important, I decided to use my aunt's comments about safety in the city. I still hear her voice asking for privacy even though she is no longer living. I choose to compromise with her. I did include her experiences in my analysis because I think it will contribute to a historical discussion of violence toward women in the cities. I did not, however, use her name.

What rights do kin have to privacy about other events in their family history? I have an uncle who was Native American. I have found in public records that he was probably married and had a child before marrying

another of my aunts. They were married by a Lutheran minister rather than Catholic clergy, who performed the ceremony for my mother and her other sisters. This aunt had died long before I began this study and we never discussed it. I discovered this information through public documents. Do I use that information as part of my family's story when I have not been close enough to that family to know how they would feel? In this case, I also used the information, but without identifying her explicitly.

A few years ago I shocked some of my aunts (now all dead) by showing how my grandmother, their mother, practiced bridal pregnancy. Grandma Tillie was a German immigrant and I explained that bridal pregnancy was a German cultural custom at that time, marrying only after a woman *kne*w she was pregnant. I saw nothing wrong with the practice. My nieces and nephews thought the custom similar to today's practice. My aunts thought it contradicted their conception of their mother as very religious and therefore at odds with the conventions that they had learned as second-generation immigrants of German heritage. No sex before marriage. No premarital pregnancy without shame.

My mother's family was very poor. It was incredibly difficult for my grandmother to care for eight children when her husband, a bad second choice after her first husband died, refused to farm or to bring home money from any other work. Neither the state nor the church provided assistance for such poor families in the early twentieth century. Families have been taught to conceal such poverty in their past. Yet as a historian I think it important to reveal the lack of support that women had in caring for their children, whether married or unmarried. I have used my own family history, in part, because so much of rural women's history is invisible, because there are fewer documents than for urban women, and because family history can uncover issues that do not appear in the documents that do exist. Family history took me beyond the women who did not enter the public record, but it did not make my life as a historian easier. It forced me to come to terms with family history that some members wanted to keep private.

Where do my needs and interests end and those of others in the family begin? This is, perhaps, yet another borderland to be negotiated.

My family story crosses national and state borders, rural and urban cultural borders, and the borders between public and private. Each border shifts in importance with time and circumstance. Consciousness of these shifts for me and my readers, be they kin or colleague, helps me to make decisions about what I include and how I present it in my narrative.

POLITICIZING

I WAS TRAINED to write white male political history. I was also trained to be critical of government policies and to analyze them. I knew when I decided to write about rural women that I was abandoning most of the women's political history as I had known it. By this I mean the type of political history that I had written emphasized women's activities in demanding the right to campaign for peace, expanded rights for women workers, and for access to full citizenship rights. When researching my book *Loosening the Bonds*, I was fortunate to find Quaker women in the region who participated in the women's rights movement of the early nineteenth century. These women formed organizations to obtain those rights and described in writing their thoughts and actions.

I suppose I thought I would somehow discover similar political women in Wisconsin, despite the fact that my mother never showed much interest in formal politics beyond voting. In her personal life, she resisted a very authoritarian husband and negotiated a lifestyle that met her needs and wants perhaps as much as his. Still my mother never talked politics the way my father did when he was with his brothers. I opened a file called "politics" for my Wisconsin book and waited for it to fill. It did, eventually. But it had very little of the ordinary type of women's political history—labor activism, middle-class reform, suffrage.

I did, however, find some very important political activities by women. School superintendent Mary Bradford developed tactics to achieve reform in the schools. Nellie Kedzie Jones wrote about strategies for women to join together in clubs and to assume a greater role in family farm business decisions. Ho-Chunk administrator Mary Ann Paquette, employed by the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, worked to achieve the best

possible environment for Native children to learn, despite an authoritarian government boarding school that forced their attendance.

Among settler women in Wisconsin, I found the formal suffrage movement did very little to promote their participation in public affairs. The Royal Neighbors of America (RNA) encouraged them to organize as women and to engage in public displays of their unity. The RNA began as an auxiliary to the Modern Workmen of America (MWA) in the 1890s. It soon took on a life of its own with the goal of providing life insurance for rural women who were prohibited by insurance companies from insuring their own lives. Its social component brought women out into the streets in drill teams and on floats for community picnics and Fourth of July celebrations. Such street performance had been reserved for men previously. Benefits included those long available to men through fraternal lodges—not only payments on death, but financial support and sisterly aid in times of illness and injury, and a lively social agenda that included frequent suppers for members and their families. RNA was still selling insurance as of 2002 and some women still met, although membership was aging in most rural areas as the population aged. It would be good to know if similar groups were formed across the border in Canada.[18]

The American Society of Equity (ASE) offered even more opportunities for rural women to organize. The ASE was the largest farmers' movement in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and other midwestern states between 1900 and 1920. It was dedicated to developing a cooperative union for producing and consuming. Like the RNA, women formed as an auxiliary, but the ASE women continued to function only as an auxiliary. While it lasted, the Women's Auxiliary of the ASE (often called simply the WA) offered a public venue to work on public political and economic issues with male family members. Women had to be related to male members to form their own auxiliaries, which meant both wives and husbands and fathers and daughters might belong.

The women of the ASE also had their own convention where they raised issues of equity within the ASE. Because the texts of these women's addresses were preserved, both in the columns of the *Equity News* and in typescript records, we can get some sense of their political interests.

Wisconsin farmer Caroline Emmerton, who worked on the family farm and with her father in the ASE, wrote to *Equity News* in 1913: "Women who share the burdens of producing wealth upon the farms, should be admitted to full fellowship in the co-operative movement." ASE women never achieved that full fellowship, but they passed resolutions opposing discrimination against women in banking and in citizenship (the Cable Act of 1922, for example, reversed earlier laws that had stripped citizenship from United States women who married aliens ineligible for citizenship). Women members claimed the right to leave their never-ending work routines to meet and discuss the "welfare of the home and the Nation." Leaders urged women to speak up in the ASE and elsewhere. Adelaine Junger, the state president of the Minnesota WA, whose husband headed their local ASE, told delegates in 1917, "You are always telling us that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. Now, how do you account for the fact that if we are rocking the cradle and ruling the world, women have nothing to say."[19]

Canadian historians were among the first to point out this type of grass-roots organizing among rural women. In 1976 the Toronto Women's Press published *A Harvest Yet to Reap*, in which the authors pointed out that Women's Institutes had organized in all three prairie provinces by 1910. Formed first in 1897 by the Canadian government, it expected this women's auxiliary to be passive and concern itself with educating women as homemakers. Women refused to be controlled by officials at the top and moved toward what historians have called "social feminism." They assumed the right to speak out on national issues because these issues affected conditions in their homes. Canadian women also joined the United Farm Women of Alberta and the Women Grain Growers' Association of Saskatchewan, which were women's sections of the farm protest movement there. These women did not think of themselves as a women's auxiliary but as partners in protest who preferred to work together in reforming the economic and legal conditions affecting them as rural women. The United Farm Women of Alberta also took an active part in debates on women's legal status.[20]

Rural women along with urban women organized during World War I to support reforms and tried to obtain changes in health and welfare

policies at the local level. These women claimed the right to meet to exchange information on the farm economy, to discuss the politics of farm life, to organize public activities, as well as to support each other when in need. In Wisconsin, the government sponsored no rural women's groups until agricultural extension began to organize rural women into clubs in 1918. The American government expected Home Demonstration Agents to keep women focused on homemaking skills, but at least some early agents assumed these rural women's clubs would operate much as urban clubs had done, taking an interest in a wide range of social and legal reforms. When the United States extension service organized animal breeders' clubs in the 1920s, women also insisted on joining. They claimed the right to share responsibility with men for the good health of their farm animals and the economic welfare of their farms. These women saw to it that their daughters were admitted to mixed youth groups, not just to those that encouraged them to improve domestic skills. Their daughters raised and exhibited calves with the young boys, won prizes for their skill in breeding animals, and shared public recognition.[21]

I admit that I am still struggling to understand the roles of Native women in matters of political activity. Like settler communities, Native communities had a division between formal power and personal or familial power. Many Native women worked within their families and communities to see that young people would be prepared to go off reservation to obtain education if they wished. They cultivated a sense of mutuality that allowed them to influence tribal policy even if the U.S. government would not acknowledge Native women publicly as leaders and reinforced the idea that only men should participate in public debate over policy. In the end I found a kind of political bedrock provided by women despite attempts by the government and many of their kin to weaken their influence on public policies. They could not be ignored in the making of public policy even if they were, in theory, to have no influence.

CONCLUSION

WHERE IS THE PERIL? Trying to force issues upon past rural women and expecting them to respond as I would wish is futile. I have to accept the possibility that I may be wrong, that these women may, in fact, have had less influence than I think or wish they had. I tell myself that what I am doing must not be only wishful thinking, but true understanding of how women within rural communities worked for change and for continuity of cultural values and practices they considered important. Sometimes these women had little influence over activities they felt were truly important in their cultures. In this they must have felt as I often still do.

Wish me luck. The movie heroine whose perils kept me enthralled as a child seemed to end each episode strapped to the rails facing an oncoming train. Unfortunately, she had to wait for some male hero to rescue her from these perils. I've been more fortunate. As a teenager I had Nancy Drew who always solved her mysteries. And now I also have Sutty, Ursula Le Guin's intrepid Anglo-Indian observer who has reminded me of the importance of research into a culture's past. Learning the stories of western women and being an audience that asks the storytellers to retell those stories is surely worth the risks.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

1. Joan M. Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).
2. Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750–1850* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).
3. I have used family and archival history to recreate this rural-urban migration in Joan M. Jensen, "Out of Wisconsin: Country Daughters in the City, 1910–1925," *Minnesota History* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 48–61.

4. Joan M. Jensen and Anne B.W. Effland, "Introduction," in "Rural Women," special issue, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 1 (2001): 1–20; Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880–1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Terry Crowley, "Experience and Representation: Southern Ontario Farm Women and Agricultural Change, 1870–1914," *Agricultural History* 73, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 238–51; Linda M. Ambrose and Margaret Kechnie, "Social Control or Social Feminism: Two Views of the Ontario Women's Institutes," *Agricultural History* 73, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 222–37; and Catherine A. Cavanaugh, "No Place for a Woman: Engendering Western Canadian Settlement," *Western Historical Quarterly* 28 (1997): 493–518.
5. Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (New York: Godine, 1982; New York: Anchor Books, 1994).
6. Ursula Le Guin, *The Telling* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).
7. Carol Bly, *Letters from the Country* (New York: Harper & Row, 1991).
8. The conflict between Polish and German nuns is recounted in Michael J. Goc, *Native Realm: The Polish American Community in Portage County, 1857–1992* (Stevens Point, WI: Worzall Publishing; Friendship, WI: New Past Press, 1992), 83–88.
9. Red Cloud's story is in Leonard Bloomfield, *Menominee Texts*, vol. 12, *Publications of the American Ethnological Society*, ed. Franz Boas (New York: Stechert, 1928), 107. Densmore's observations are in her Diary of 1910, Densmore Papers, American Ethnological Society Records, National Anthropological Archives, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.. The reference to Manitoba is in Thomas Vennum, *The Ojibwa Dance Drum: Its History and Construction* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 70.
10. Lindi Schrecengost, "Tuscarora," in *The Gale Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes*, 4 vols., ed. Sharon Malinowski and Ann Sheets (Detroit, MI: Gale, 1998), 1:308.
11. Among the early published sources of this debate are Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg, MB: Watson & Dwyer Publishing; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers In Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, *New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Sarah Carter, "Categories and Terrains of Exclusion: Constructing the 'Indian Woman' in the Early Settlement Era in Western Canada," *Great Plains Quarterly* 13 (Summer 1993): 147–61; Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1996); and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, "Public Mothers: Native American and Métis Women as Creole Mediators in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 141–66, continued the discussions. Heather Devine and I joined Murphy to review some of this cross-border research at the "Women's and Gender Historians of the Midwest Conference" in Chicago, Illinois, during the summer of 2004 in a session titled "Re-thinking Métis Women's Experiences."
12. Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900–1940* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997).
13. Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, interview by author, 29 May 1999, Rough Rock, Diné Nation.

14. "Chinese in the Frontier West: An American Story," *Ancestors in the Americas*. Dir. Loni Ding. 3 Programs. PBS. KRWG-TV, Las Cruces, NM, 28 May 2002.
15. Dorothy Thoms, interview by author, 10 July 2003, Lac du Flambeau, WI.
16. Joan M. Jensen, "The Death of Rosa: Sexuality in Rural America," *Agricultural History* 67, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 1–12; "'I'd Rather be Dancing': Wisconsin Women Moving On," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 1 (2001): 1–20; and "Sexuality on a Northern Frontier: The Gendering and Disciplining of Rural Wisconsin Women, 1850–1920," *Agricultural History* 73, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 136–67.
17. See Jensen, "Out of Wisconsin," for a more detailed discussion of urban reformers.
18. The Royal Neighbors are still going strong. See their webpage. They have an extensive archive at their headquarters in Rock Island, Illinois.
19. *Equity News* 6, no. 5 (10 July 1913): 85. American Society of Equity, Wisconsin State Union Records, 1916–1934, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives Division, Madison, WI.
20. Linda Rasmussen, et al., *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1976), 88, 122; Ambrose and Kechnie, "Social Control or Social Feminism: Two Views of the Ontario Women's Institutes," 222–37; and Cavanaugh, "No Place for a Woman," 507–12.
21. Home Demonstration Agent Mary Brady's Annual Reports of 1 December 1918 and 11 December 1919 for Marathon County, Wisconsin, explain these organizing plans. College of Agriculture, Agricultural Extension, County Agricultural Agents, Annual Reports, 1914–1952, Series 9/4/3, Steenbock Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI. See the same series for the reports about the activities of women and girls in these clubs.