
Jenny Barker Devine’s On Behalf of the Family Farm offers succinct organizational histories of four groups: the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation Women’s Committee (IFBFWC), Iowa Farmers Union (IFU), the National Farm Organization (NFO), and the Porkettes. Devine embraces capacious definitions of feminism and emphasizes the importance of subtle changes in gendered understandings of women’s roles in agricultural activism. She contends that women’s activism in the first two organizations reflected varieties of “social feminisms” because they reified maternalism and domesticity as the source of women’s special interest in improving standards in their farm homes and communities, while the latter groups demonstrated agrarian feminisms based on “the politics of dependence” that recognized dependent roles but emphasized women’s partnerships with husbands as agricultural producers and their right to be public leaders (2).

The contrasts between these ideologies are illustrated by comparing Devine’s histories of IFBFWC and the Porkettes. The IFBFWC, founded in 1922, offered programming for farm women through the Farm Bureau’s close alliance with the extension service. A training-school system spread home demonstration lessons on new techniques and technologies for improving living standards and encouraged women’s activism on behalf of community issues like rural education and health. Over the decades, IFBFWC leaders sought to expand members’ focus from home and community life to larger social, political and economic issues affecting agriculture, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of developing local leaders. The latter became especially critical after 1954 when legislation severed ties between cooperative extension and the Farm Bureau. Empowering women to determine their own needs as club members enabled the clubs to endure the disruptions of the thirties and forties and to thrive in the decade after the war. Local clubs demonstrated their version of social feminism by concentrating on activities to maintain friendships and social networks to sustain neighborhoods and communities. In the face of rural depopulation, Devine recognizes the value of this mutual support.

The Porkettes, founded in the mid-sixties, represented a more specialized form of organization and one not premised on geographic proximity or women’s roles within the home. Initially an auxiliary of the Iowa Pork Pro-
ducers Association (IPPA), the Porkettes incorporated in 1976 as a non-profit, the same year that the National Porkettes affiliated with American Agri-Women, a coalition of women’s farm and agribusiness groups that promoted female-led organizations. The Porkettes, like other rural women activists, “sought more self-determination and equal access to economic and political structures, while also supporting the continuation of those structures” (128). The Porkettes enjoyed considerable success in public relations and marketing campaigns that legitimized their voices as knowledgeable pork producers. Over time, they served on joint committees with IPPA, and some members questioned continuing as a separate organization. Debates over separatism or a merger with the IPPA were resolved by the decline in the pork industry and the necessity of working together. Devine concedes these activists “did not resolve questions of gender and gendered division of labor” but offered a model for women in agricultural organizations gaining recognition as producers (135).

Devine challenges readers to expand conceptions of feminisms to encompass the diverse endeavors by Iowa women farm activists throughout the twentieth century. The complexities and contradictions of “agrarian feminisms” in particular suggest an area that scholars of rural women’s history must continue to explore.

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