SUBDUING THE WILDERNESS, establishing homes, and conditioning the land to enhance its productive capacity involved an enormous amount of wearing toil. The pioneer men of course did the arduous, backbreaking work, but it is in the record that the valiant women of that day bore an astounding share of the burden. Few today have any true conception of the scope and volume of the work that women on farms did until a generation or two ago; probably, not many would believe the story if it were related in full. There was then a great deal more truth than poetry in the couplet “Man works from rise to set of sun, but woman’s work is never done.”

With only slight diminution, resulting from rather limited improvements in living conditions, farm women continued, within the memory of many now living, to follow the long established tradition of performing numerous tasks in addition to those involving ordinary housekeeping and the care of children. Naturally, this imposed upon some burdens too great for their strength. Monuments in old cemeteries bear the names of many women who succumbed in what are now regarded as the middle years of life. Un-
questionably, overwork was responsible in many cases; but diseases took a heavy toll—men, too, died at a much earlier age than in later times. Complications incident to childbirth of course also resulted in a considerable number of untimely deaths.

In every farm home there were the familiar, unending housekeeping tasks. All involved real work, all were time-consuming, and about all had to be done with equipment that to moderns would seem very primitive. Generally, there was a sewing machine. Nearly every housewife had some kind of hand-operated washing machine with an attached wringer. But in most instances all water had to be pumped by hand and carried in pails. One of us boys was nearly always assigned to help Mother with the heavy tasks of washday. There was no way to heat water except in a wash boiler on a wood-burning stove, whose heat in summer might cause much discomfort. Sadirons had to be heated on the same stove on ironing day.

On farms about us we occasionally saw women working with their men in the fields. Often, they seemed to welcome field activity as a diversion from housework. On a few farms the women did all of the milking—often there were six or more cows. Whoever did the milking, the women attended to straining and storing the milk in crocks twice daily. They hand-skimmed it all with a dipper every day to collect the cream.

The job of churning came two or three times a week. Some used a tall woodstave churn, but the majority seemed to prefer one of earthenware. In either case there was a wooden dasher on a slender vertical handle that had to be plunged up and down, sometimes for an hour, until the butter "came." Then the fatty particles were dipped out
and worked with a wooden paddle in a wooden bowl to remove liquids. Finally, the mass was salted and shaped into rolls.

After using her dasher churn a long time, Mother got one of the barrel type, turned by a hand crank. This made the job a little easier and faster. About the same time, she bought a gravity-type separator. In this, whole milk was stored in a water-cooled tank. After the cream had all risen to the top, the milk beneath it was drawn off through a spigot at the bottom. Soon after this, owners of large herds of cows began using hand-cranked centrifugal separators. Milking machines did not appear until years later, when electricity became available.

The over-all management and care of poultry were nearly always left to the women. Yearly, each raised an average of about one hundred young chickens; often, the same number of turkeys. Some also kept a few geese or ducks. They entrusted all hatching eggs to chicken hens for incubation. When the baby birds appeared, they fed and cared for them regularly. The hens that had done the hatching gladly took on the task of brooding and protecting the young until they were able to make their own way. For a long time there were no incubators, brooders, or commercial hatcheries. The culling that was done, generally in the fall, involved only weeding out birds that were inferior in size or robustness or that were considered to have reached retirement age. Commonly, a dozen or more healthy, old hens among the culls were reserved for cooking through the winter; the remainder were sold.

Men of the family did all of the rough, heavy work. Children at times gathered the eggs and did some of the feeding; the women, however, supervised all of this work
and did much of it themselves. Nearly all of the money for
their personal use came from the sale of poultry, eggs, and
butter. Often, part of this produce was traded for needed
supplies of groceries, but cash balances received in the
course of a year, though known as “pin money,” added up
to a sum that was by no means negligible.

On most farms, women assumed principal responsibility
for the vegetable garden after the ground had been plowed
and the rougher preliminary work had been done. They
collected, dried, and stored seeds and grew their own
transplants, starting them early from seeds indoors. Seeds
that could not be grown conveniently in the home garden
were ordered from the catalogues of big seed houses. They
drafted a good deal of help, supervising the work and
doing much of it themselves.

As soon as frost was out of the ground in early spring,
Mother began bringing in for table use parsnips grown
in the garden the previous summer—it was commonly be­
lieved that these vegetables were unfit for use until they
had gone through the winter frozen in the ground where
they grew. At the same time freshly grated horseradish,
from roots that grew in garden clumps, would appear upon
the table. Soon afterward came tender rhubarb shoots to be
stewed or baked in pies; rhubarb was an infallible har­
binger of spring.

Bushels of tomatoes and tree-grown fruits were canned.
Numerous kinds of pickles and relishes were made and
stored. Quantities of sweet corn, peaches, and apples were
spread out in the sun to dry day after day, protected from
insects by mosquito netting. A quantity of sauerkraut was
turned out each fall. This tended to be a family project,
some cutting and chopping cabbages while a muscular
individual, with a big wooden "stomper," pounded the shredded and salted vegetable in a big earthen jar until it became a pulpy, juicy mass. In early winter about a bushel of shelled corn was converted into hominy. In the process the grains were treated with lye from wood ashes, then stirred and rubbed with a wooden paddle until the tough skins were removed from the kernels. Finally, all traces of lye were removed by thorough soaking and washing.

Most housewives did a great deal of work at butchering time in connection with sausage-making and the preservation and storage of meat products. As matters of course, they tackled the tasks of soap-making in spring and turning out a big batch of apple butter in the fall. Much time and effort were involved in these projects, for the best equipment they had was primitive and clumsy.

For soap, waste fats were collected throughout the year. Wood ashes from stoves were stored in barrels, protected from rain. When mild spring weather came, water was poured into the barrels, blocked up on wide boards so arranged that lye from the ashes would run into crocks beneath the boards. Lye was poured over the grease in a large iron kettle. The mixture was boiled gently and stirred from time to time until saponified. The finished product, of about the consistency of vaseline, was used for scrubbing, laundry work, and dish washing. Commercial products for cleaning and scouring were limited both in quantity and quality. Many housekeepers used brick dust for rough scouring. They prepared it by crushing and powdering bricks with a hammer.

According to a family story, my father's grandmother, wife of an early settler on the Ridge, was one day making
soap over an outdoor fire when a group of Indians stopped at the cabin to beg something to eat. Approaching the kettle, they noted its bubbling brown contents. With happy cries of “Lasses! Lasses!” each cautiously dipped in a finger, then licked the finger. The taste was such a profound surprise that a dour, angry look came over their faces. A moment later, apparently struck by the humor of the situation, their expressions changed and they stalked haughtily away.

Many farm women grew flowers in big beds about the house and in the lawn, giving countless hours to sowing seeds, transplanting, weeding, and watering. They took considerable pleasure in showing off their finest blossoms to friends and in swapping seeds, bulbs, and cuttings. When fall came they moved their finest specimens into the house, placing them in pots on special shelves and on tables before sunny windows. Throughout the winter they tended them with loving care, reveling in the color and fragrance of the blossoms.

With the exception of their best coats and dresses, many women made almost all of their own clothing. They also made most of the clothing the children wore. Somehow, they found time to keep the youngsters' garments mended—in spite of rough wear, their clothes were nearly always clean and in good repair. It was a common practice in farm homes to buy yards of unbleached linen toweling and cut and hem the material into suitable lengths to replenish the family towel supply. The new material was stiff, and woody fibers entwined in the woven threads made it a little harsh. The towels improved with use, however, in time becoming snow white and quite soft. Washcloths, for those not addicted to the use of a natural sponge, were
ordinarily cut from sound parts of discarded cotton under-
wear.

In farm homes much time was given to making quilts
and comforters with interlinings of cotton or wool batting.
Outer faces were usually "pieced" from scraps of cloth to
form various designs. The best parts of the family's worn-
out or outgrown clothing went eventually into rugs and
carpets. At our house Mother dyed much of the cloth for
this use. Unlike women of earlier generations, who had to
go to the woods and swamps for dyestuffs, she enjoyed the
advantage of commercial dyes. The material was torn or
cut into strips that were sewed end to end and wound
into large balls.

In this connection comes to mind one of my very earliest
recollections. My maternal grandmother, a guest in our
home, busied herself one day at sewing carpet rags. After
watching the work with the fascinated interest of a small
child, I expressed the desire to do some sewing too. There
was no blunt refusal, no argument, no effort to shunt my
interest to something else. Grandma simply tied a thread
to the head of a pin and passed it to me. I went blissfully
to work, "sewing" away in perfect content. In more mature
years this has impressed me as a classic example of prac-
tical psychology applied to dealing with a child's harmless
whim or fancy.

Mother took her carpet-rag balls to a neighbor who had
a carpet loom. The sewed rags formed the woof of the
fabric; commercial cotton yarn, known as "carpet chain,"
was used for the warp. Nearly all of our carpets and rugs
were hand-loomed from these materials. Ordinarily, the
size of the loom limited the width of the fabric to about
thirty-six inches; strips of the required length were cut
from the roll as it came from the weaver and sewed edge to edge to form carpets. Clean cloth remnants not suitable for piecing quilts or for use as carpet rags went into a rag bag to be finally sold to a ragpicker.

Few women ever shirked any phase of the work involved in seasonal housecleaning. They went over all rooms from top to bottom, dusting, scrubbing, scouring, washing, and polishing. At our house we boys helped with the carpets (all rooms except the kitchen had carpets). We pulled out the tacks that held them in place, carried them outdoors, and beat them. We took out the old straw that underlaid all but the best "store" carpets, then swept and dusted the floors. After the floor boards had been scrubbed, we brought in fresh, clean straw, spread it evenly, and then relaid the carpets.

For luxurious comfort in winter everybody had featherbeds—ticks filled with choice duck or goose feathers. Soft and warm, they took much of the discomfort out of sleeping in icy bedrooms. In severely cold weather some coldblooded people slept between two feather-filled ticks. Collecting and processing the feathers were tasks that fell to the lot of the housewife. Many of the beds were passed along as heirlooms from mothers to daughters. All those in regular use had to be exposed to air and sunlight at times throughout winter and spring, no trivial chore for the housekeeper.

One summer a man driving a van went from door to door soliciting business as a "feather renovator." Contents of featherbeds entrusted to him, he explained, would be run through a machine in which live steam would clean and sterilize the feathers. They would finally be returned in their owners' ticks, he promised, thoroughly clean and
extraordinarily fluffy. No complaints were heard from any of the fellow's numerous customers. It is possible, however, that all had been roundly cheated, for in some cases the business appears to have been operated as a thieving racket—the operator stole and marketed several pounds of good feathers from each tick. The customer would suspect nothing because the ticks, filled with fluffy feathers, came back much plumper and firmer than when they were taken away.

When summer came, ticks filled with straw were substituted for featherbeds. Soon after the threshing was done, the crushed, broken straw was discarded, and the washed ticks were stuffed with new, clean straw. One fall as we shucked the corn, we collected clean husks to be used instead of straw. This turned out to be a long, tedious job, for each tick required a lot of husks, and several had to be filled. The husks wore well; they didn't crush and break as straw always did.

Whether for feathers, straw, or other filling, ticks were simply flat, bed-size bags made of ticking, without through-ties or other fastenings for holding contents as a flat pad of uniform thickness. Therefore, bedmaking was likely to involve at times considerable effort to smooth out and level wads and lumps that had formed.

Housewives baked bread and rolls once or twice each week; baker's bread rarely appeared on any farm table. Like most of her neighbors, Mother made her own yeast. Each summer she gathered hops from vines in the garden and dried and stored enough for a year of baking. About twice a week she baked a batch of half a dozen or more pies. Cake was available for at least one meal each day; cookies and doughnuts, or crullers, were always at hand.
There were scores of top-flight cooks among the women. Quite naturally, no doubt, I have always believed that my mother stood near the top of the list. Some of the most expert seemed rarely to follow any written recipe; it appeared that an unfailing instinct told them just the right quantity of each ingredient to use, just the proper time to add it, and just how much heat and how much time were required for perfect final results. With no reservations whatever, competent judges would have awarded blue ribbons to some of the meals, prepared without benefit of any but the simplest of kitchen equipment.

“Company” at our house and in a good many other farm homes was almost commonplace. Company meant deluxe meals, with ham or chicken—often both—and a bewildering array of vegetables, fruits, relishes, and desserts. Sunday family dinners were nearly always special meals, with an unusual variety of foods in unstinted quantities. All this, of course, required an enormous amount of time and effort.

Girls in farm homes were able and willing assistants at most of the tasks their mothers had to do. If there were no daughters, the farmer’s wife generally had to depend on a hired girl or go it alone. It seemed rarely to occur to males of the average farm family that they could or should lend a hand.