

RESEARCH PAPER: OPEN FOUNDATION

SUBJECT: "LIFE ON THE LAND IN THE GLOUCESTER REGION."

INTERVIEWEE: IRENE PHILLIPS

INTERVIEWER: RAYLENE HITCHCOCK

Irene Phillips was born in a private hospital in Gloucester in 1929 at this stage her parents, who were both farmers, were living on a property on the Gloucester River, which was situated twenty miles from Gloucester.

Irene attended school until the age of nine, at which point her father took her from school to go offsidng on his bullock team, as her father was also a timber cutter. Irene found the work hard and felt that her father expected far to much from her, as she was only a child and her father expected her to work like an adult. Quite often they were away from the property for up to a week at a time. During this period Irene's mother was left to look after the property.

Irene worked with her father for five years. At the age of ^ufourteen she decided to leave as she found her father a very hard man to work with. Irene moved to Dungog in 1943 and found work in a guest house. She worked as a domestic, for twelve months. In 1944 moved to Thornton and obtained a job on a dairy farm.

The employment options open to women at this stage were extremely limited especially in the Gloucester region, there was domestic work or bar work available to women and with only a limited number of positions in these areas. A lot of young women remained on their parents property until they married.

Irene had four years schooling which she felt restricted her employment prospects as she didn't have the education that would have allowed her to train as a teacher, nurse or secretary, which she felt were the only other positions available to women.

Irene returned to the Gloucester region in 1970 when ^{she} her and her husband purchased the family property from her uncle. Irene's husband was a builder and still had contracts pending; the running of the property was left in her hands. The greatest obstacle for Irene was to prove ^{to} be the attitude of the other farmers, which came to affect her stock prices. ~~In which~~ ^{she} she rectified ~~this~~ by aiming at another market, ^{where} she was selling her stock to outside buyers not the local farmers. Irene feels the industry is changing with a lot more women now attending the sales as buyers than when she moved to the area.

As Irene's husband works away a lot she has been responsible for the maintenance on the property which involved repairing fences, calving problems with the stock; she has also turned her hand at building and built cattle bales a fowl house and recently was involved in the construction of cattle yards on the property. She will attempt anything and her independence never ceases to amaze me. At sixty years of age she is still shoeing horses, a skill which she learnt from her Grandfather in her youth. ~~Which~~ she stresses has changed considerably from her youth.

Irene feels the biggest problem she has faced with living on the land has been the isolation as she doesn't find she can take time out as there is always something to do.

We very briefly discussed the erosion on the property and the need to plant trees to try to combat the problem. ~~Which~~ some of the other farmers in the area are having problems accepting.

Irene feels the major problem for rural women are employment and male attitudes.

THIS IS AN INTERVIEW WITH IRENE PHILLIPS CONCERNING HER LIFE ON THE LAND IN THE GLOUCESTER REGION.

Q: When were you born.

A: I was born in 1929 in a private hospital in Gloucester.

Q: Where were your parents living at the time of your birth.

A: Well they were living on the Gloucester River, which would have been about 20 miles from town.

Q: What did your parents do for a living.

A: Well, they were farmer's, but dad did other work as well. He used to go fencing and timber cutting and mum would look after the farm along with us kids; he was a bullocky so he used to stay away for a week or maybe more at a time. He was also a whipmaker, he did that up until just before he died.

Q: Whipmaking, was that a skill he passed on?

A: No! he didn't pass it on to anybody, he was asked by many people but for some reason he didn't get around to it. It could have been that in his ignorance that he thought that if he passed on his whipmaking, somebody else might take his trade away from him.

Q: Did you go to school.

A: Yes.

Q: How old were you when you started school.

A: Well, I must've been five.

Q: How far was the school from the property.

A: About seven miles I'd say.

Q: How many pupils attended the school.

A: There were about twelve of us, it was pretty good actually, and I was fairly lucky I suppose because not everyone had a horse and there were only three kids who actually rode to school.

Q: Did you also ride to town.

A: Well, no we didn't, we didn't go to town that much and if we did we usually went on the cream wagon. Dad went to town if we needed stuff which wasn't that often as we had hawkers that used to bring goods to the property, we traded with them. We actually had three or four hawkers that regularly called in. One of them was an Indian his name was Bushu Sing, he'd always hand out a treat or something to us kids, it was pretty good when the hawkers came around.

Q: At what age did you leave school.

A: I was nine, my brother who used to work with dad got a job on a dairy and I was next in line, so dad took me from school to go offsidng on the bullock team.

Q: What did you use the bullock team for.

A; Well dad was a timber cutter among other things. The bullocks were used to snig logs out of the bush.

Q: Can you tell me a bit about where you were getting timber from.

A: We took timber from a lot of different places including this place which Grandfather Geale owned at that time, we must've been cutting cedar on here. (Twin Rivers) I hated it. It was really steep and dangerous to work.

Q: Why was that

A: Well, the tracks are in steep places and they weren't much wider than the slide, I had visions of me and the bullocks going over the side as we were taking timber from the tops and when you're a kid things seem a bit worse than when you're an adult; they always seem a bit larger than life well I used to hate it, I can tell you those hills looked like sheer drops, you know what kids fears are like.

Q: How long did you work with your father for.

A: I was fourteen when I left. I'd had enough by that time. The work was hard, what dad needed was an adult working with him not a kid, he wanted me to work like a man and mind you he also made me work like one. I got a bit fed up with it I can tell you. So I chucked it in and went to Dungog to work.

Q: What sort of work did you do in Dungog.

A: I got a job in a guest house, I cleared and served, we were called domestics in those days. I thought it was pretty good after working with dad.

Q: Why did you go to Dungog and not Gloucester.

A: Well, there was no work in Gloucester.

Q: How long did you work in Dungog for.

A: About twelve months, I moved to Thornton and got a job on a dairy farm.

Q: What employment options were open to women when you left the land.

A: Very few, employment was fairly limited in the country. Gloucester only had really two main industries, one was timber and they didn't employ women and the other was dairy farms and that and they didn't employ women. So really if you were a women you had very few options and fairly limited in what work you could do. There was really only domestic work or bar work and bar work wasn't looked upon to kindly. A lot of girls just stayed and worked on their parents farm until they married.

Q: Were women employed on dairy farms at this stage.

A: No not really, they mostly went to men. You were looked upon as a women and you did women's work, what they didn't stop to think about was that the work women did was just as hard if not harder than the men's. My mother used to run a dairy and mend fences, she also trapped rabbits as well as looked after the kids, mind you we didn't have power at this stage. I'm getting a bit off the track.

Q: Getting back to employment options, was this a result of you lack of education or do you feel it was a problem that faced all rural women.

A: Well, I suppose partly lack of education. But then again jobs just weren't available in country towns. If you were educated you could have gone to the city and trained to become a teacher or nurse or maybe an office job. I only went to school for four years and that certainly didn't give me the qualifications to go into those jobs. So I had to be a domestic and that was the way it was with most people with rural backgrounds, unless of course you came from an affluent family. Another thing was that women were bought up with the view that they would marry, therefore you didn't think about a career as girls do today. Were I grew up if you weren't married by twenty or so you were left on the shelf, a spinster. Apart from that if you wanted to stay on the land you had to marry someone from the land.

Q: When did you return to the Gloucester region.

A: I returned in 1970. Uncle Tom who had owned the family property was getting on a bit and things were getting difficult for him to manage. If the truth be known I think he was a bit lonely as he'd been living by himself for quite a few years. When we approached him about selling some of his land he realised that by selling it to me he'd be keeping it in the family. So we moved up here and bought 1000 acres off him. He still retained a portion of it that had the house on it. It was pretty natural for me to return to the area as as I've been associated with the land most of my life, the kids had been educated and the area was no where near as isolated as it used to be, the forestry had just finished putting a road over Copeland the telephone was now possible and the biggest plus was power. I'd grown up without it and there was no way I'd do it again.

Some of my kids have had a taste of it and they seemed to thrive on it but they also had a choice were we didn't.

Q: Whose been in charge of the running of the property.

A: Well, I took charge of it. My husband's a builder and when we bought the property Jim still had contracts to complete, also we were trying to establish ourselves on a new piece of land so he pretty well had to work. Jim also doesn't ride unless he is forced to and with him the mountains are a bit of a problem, he's only ever ridden in flat country and there's a bit of an art to riding in country as steep as this, as you've found out.

Q: What obstacles has the running of the property posed for you.

A: Probably the biggest hurdle I had to overcome was the attitude of the other farmers. It was a bit like stepping back in time actually, we'd moved over here from Gunnedah and I'd been involved in farming over there. It's funny really because problems I'd faced probably ten years ago were the same things I came up against in Gloucester.

Q: What were they.

A: Well the attitude of the men at the cattle sales, its a pretty male dominated area and always has been and being a woman places a few barriers there as they really don't believe that you know what your doing and if they can they'll try and put it over you. On one occasion one of the agents tried to talk me into buying a yard full of cattle that were just rubbish, I very quickly let him know that I wasn't interested he got a bit of a shock, he really thought I'd buy them, the men also tried to push me aside when it came time to bid, I just dug my heels in and pushed back, intimidation I think you'd call it. Then there was one of the auctioneers who had a habit of overlooking my bids, I ended up having a word to him. There was another occasion where I was bidding against another farmer and in the end he let his prejudice get the better of him and said give it to her; I've had enough, give it to the women, what he didn't know was I'd reached my limit I was about to stop bidding, I had a good laugh over that one.

Q: Has the attitude of the men affected your stock prices.

A: Well of course it did, I was a woman farming. Its also an industry were you establish yourself by the line and breed of your cattle and it takes time to establish your name as well. Anyway I did all the right things, bought good breeders and so forth, but the name wasn't there so my first weaners were about fifty dollars under what the others were getting for their's, this actually happened at a couple of sales. So I decided to beat them at their own game, I aimed at another market were I'd be selling to outside buyers, not farmers. It worked, I got good prices for my cattle and even topped the market a few times; anyway my name became known, well established and in the last couple of years I've reverted back to the weaner market, which has worked. I suppose that in some respects I was fairly lucky as I'd been in the industry for a long time, so I knew what to do. If you were green those losses on cattle prices could ruin you. Anyway the attitudes are changing. There's a lot more women in at the yards these days, not only as observers but as buyers.

Q: Who is responsible for the maintenance of the property.

A: Well I do most of it. I'd better put that another way, I do the urgent jobs, like if a fence needs mending I do it or if the cows have problems calving I deal with it. I also turn my hand at a bit of building, I built the bales up the flat and me and the daughters built the fowl house, and at the moment, well until the accident Jim and I were building new yards, I'm pretty good with a crowbar you know and I shoe the horses too.

Q: Who taught you how to shoe.

A: My Grandfather, I don't know whether I should thank him or curse him for that one.

Q: How old would you have been.

A: Well ten I think, no maybe eleven. Back then if you had horse's and you intended to ride you had to be able to shoe, well at least in my family. its a bit easier today than what it used to be, now you can walk into a store and buy a set of shoe's, in those days you had a forge an anvil and a piece of steel that you made your shoe's from. I suspect I made a pretty horrible job of some of the shoes I put on. Today it's all cut and dried. It's funny though out of five kids I've only been able to get one of them to take it on, she's pretty good at it too. I suppose I'll be shoeing for a while yet though.

Q: Do you see aging as posing a problem for you.

A: Well I try not to think about that one. But the way I see it Jim and I have two options, one is to sell up and move to town, something I don't feel I could do, the other is to hope that some of the family may consider moving up here, it hasn't been discussed so I really don't know. Anyway I got a few good years left yet.

Q: What is the biggest problem you've faced living on the land.

A: Probably the isolation, with Jim being away so much, and I find that I don't get that much time away from the place as there is always something to do. The family are pretty good though, the grandkids spend most holidays up here and my son and his wife try to spend a fair bit of time with me, then there's my daughter who always helps out in an emergency. I don't suppose that it's really that much of a problem though, as at least I drive.

Q: Do you have much to do with the other farmers in the area.

A; I don't socialise very much with the neighbours but in the country we've got a bit of a code and if you want something done or need a hand you give them a ring and they'll make themselves available and vice versa the other day I needed a tractor so I rang up Pat and she came over.

Q: I notice that there is a lot of erosion on the property, do you see this as a problem.

A: Yes, it is a bit of a problem it's been created by too much clearing. I'm sure my forefathers didn't realise the problems they were creating in their need for grazing land. They overcleared and as a consequence we now find ourselves with erosion gullies and this being steep country we have to start to plant tree's to cut out the erosion.

Q: Is that a common view held by other farmers in the area.

A: Probably not a common view but the attitude is definitely changing, well you've only got to look out the window to realise why that would be so. Some are still having trouble coming to grips with it, you know what it's like, old attitudes die hard it's a bit like people using super they don't know when to stop and anyway now we have got to a situation where we've got to plant trees it'll be a long time though before we see any improvements.

Q: What do you see as the major problem to be faced by women in the rural industry in the future.

A: Well employment is still a problem for women and men's attitudes has still got a long way to go.

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Signed G Phillips

Date 29-9-89

Interviewer R. Hitchcock

Raylene Mitchell

Irene Phillips

Summary York summary summary of
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with what.
3 1/2 / 5

Transcript An excellent interview with a
woman of spirit! Interesting insights into the
last time returned by some in rural areas
your mother's account of her small town. get
with your grandfather, her name as a doctor
& nurse in the last 1/2 century of her service
for women are splendid. Her account of her
experience running her property reveal her
as a woman of courage & ingenuity - a woman
of many skills & talent. I might wish the
problems facing people in the land - women -
isolation, the sun making intimidation.
But it's obvious that she has done a
lot to break the barrier down - and she
is optimistic that attitudes are changing.
2/2

Take excellent questioning - revealing your
background in the land. Narrative questioning
about 'one challenge' early life & problems facing
women in rural life. Would you go back to
have a further interview or what the recall of her
mother's role - the land & the health and
any formative influence from the time she
moves to 1970 when she returned to the
land she also met in the land where family
relates, for example? good questions.
4/5

After an excellent paper Raylene - well-
researched and written clearly & well
structured. An interesting & thought provoking
of the reasons for more feminism in the
rural economy, a recognition of the importance
of the role of women, the lack of recognition of
women's role in the economy, the
obstacles facing women in rural areas, the
lack of employment opportunities. Also a
focus on the role of women in the
upcoming changes & attitudes. Also a
very well written while feminist. I hope
as making a well your stories

Reasons for male
dominance -

Imp^{ce} of women's role
Effect of war

Lack of reciprocity
Obstacles facing women

Will be needed

Problems of emp^{ty} in
rural communities

Change:

Research Paper : Rural Women.

Margaret Henry

Open Foundation - Australian History

Thursday, 10 a.m - 12.

Raylene Hitchcock

Women have always been involved in farming, especially small scale farming in Australia. Historically though farming has been perceived to be the province of men and as such women's involvement has been seen as insignificant and their participation severely limited. As women have not been accepted as owners or equal partners with their husbands and were excluded from the business side of farming. Although women contributed a great deal of labour particularly in small scale farming. Rural women have also faced limited education and employment prospects which has led to a higher number of women leaving rural areas than men.

Before the free settler schemes of the mid-nineteenth century men vastly outnumbered women on the land. While small grants of crown land had been available to men very few women received the same entitlement. Government regulations had set to exclude women from obtaining land grants. Though a few women did receive land the vast majority of landholders were male,² therefore farming in Australia has taken on a predominately male image.³

With the free settler schemes came the opening up of great tracts of Australian wilderness. The majority of early settlers lived in appalling conditions in their quest to eke out an existence of the land. Father, mother and children worked side by side slaving amid ignorance.

1. Kerri James, Women In Rural Australia, Maryborough, 1989, p.2.
2. Katrina Alford, Production or Reproduction? An Economic History of Women in Australia, 1788-1850, Melbourne, 1984, p.77.
3. James, Ibid, p.2.

and superstition in their efforts to make a living of the land.⁴

Life on the land was to prove physically demanding for women. In the late 1800's most rural women raised large families in which they became responsible for providing for the material needs of both husband and children.⁵ The work was heavy, arduous and highly labour intensive in an era before hospitalised births and labour saving appliances. Not only did women provide for the material needs of the family; they were heavily ^{involved} in the outdoor work.⁶ Women played a vital role in the rural expansion of the country.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century men were often involved in seasonal work on other farms such as fencing, droving and the clearing of land. This meant that quite often women and children were left to care for the property. Women produced as much as possible from the land on a subsistence basis. Women and children became responsible for milking, looking after pigs, growing fruit and vegetables, preserving, making bread, and clothes for the family.⁷ Small scale farming was based heavily on a subsistence lifestyle and women's input was vitally important to the economic survival of the family.

4. Manning Clark,

A Short History of Australia,
New York, 1987, p. 144.

5. Susan Hunt,

Spinifex and Hessian Women's
Lives in North-Western Australia
1860-1900, Neelands, 1986, p. 7.

6. James,

Women, p. 7.

7. Jill Julius Matthews

Good and Mad Women The Historical
Construction of femininity in Twentieth
Century Australia, Sydney 1984, p. 57

Over the next few decades farming changed considerably. Farming went from a subsistence lifestyle to concentrating on specialised crops and stock.⁸ This placed much more emphasis on market fluctuations for the land-holder. The war brought about a boom in agricultural produce. This led to a change in the rural industry with the introduction of high-tech machines which enabled the rural sector to increase productivity.⁹ It also enabled some of the smaller farmers to be able to afford some of the "... comforts of civilisation such as sinks in the kitchen and board flooring, and so to begin to relieve wives and children from the sun-up to sundown drudgery."¹⁰

Rural women were heavily involved in the war effort and in a number of cases women were left in charge of the farm, while the men went off to participate in the war. Women coped with both the physical and planning work on the farm during this time. However once the men returned from the war women's involvement in agriculture was overlooked. "Tradition had firmly entrenched in both men and women that a woman's role was a supportive one, with them only helping or assisting on the farm."

Women have been a permanent part of the rural economy though their work has not been recognised. Women were not accepted as owners or equal partners with their husbands in agricultural enterprises.¹³ The wider community

8. Matthews

Good and Mad Women, p.

9. James

Women, p. 7.

10. Clark

A Short History, p. 145

11.

A Decade of Change in New South Wales 1976-86, Sydney, 1987, p. 13

12. *Ibid*

p. 135.

13. *Ibid*

p. 134.

looked upon women as farmer's wives who only helped or assisted on the farm. Bank managers, stock and station agents and producer organisations were the most resistant to dealing with women and became known for "... doing business only with the boss."¹⁴

Agriculture has been seen as a male domain and strong traditional rules of inheritance have set to exclude women from farming. It is unusual for a farm to pass from father to daughter. Properties are usually not sold on the death of the parents but are passed on to one or more of the sons.¹⁵ Even though daughters have usually contributed to the work on the farm they are excluded from inheriting an equal share or portion of the property.

Women also faced other injustices in the wider community. Women have never shared an equitable portion of employment opportunities in rural areas. Their employment has been concentrated into a narrow range of "feminine" occupations.¹⁶ Because of the limited number of positions available in these areas girls virtually had to stay on the family property, or leave the area if they hoped to gain employment.¹⁷ "The disadvantaged position of rural women in many respects parallels that of women in Australian society at large."¹⁸

Rural women have tended to withdraw permanently from the workforce once they married.¹⁹ There is

14. James

Women, p. 10.

15. *Ibid.*,

p. 92.

16. *Ibid.*,

p. 71.

17. *Ibid.*,

p. 69.

18. *Ibid.*,

p. 91.

19.

A Decade of change, p. 135.

considerable resistance to married women working when school leavers could not get jobs.²⁰ The view also prevailed that a woman should only take paid employment if it was absolutely necessary to the well-being of the family and other than that men should be the primary breadwinner of the family.²¹ So even if a married woman decided to take on paid employment she would have little chance of finding work in the area.²²

In rural communities women have been denied administrative or trade positions within the workforce. The Department of Agriculture had no women in professional positions before 1970 and in 1976 there ~~was~~ ^{were} still no women employed in advisory or veterinary positions within the department.²³ Some rural based tertiary institutions had policies that discriminated against women by denying women access to tertiary studies before 1974.²⁴

The greatest changes for rural women have taken place since 1977 when the Government instituted its anti-discrimination legislation.²⁵ Women are now entering non-traditional occupations in the workforce. There has also been an increase in the numbers of rural women in partnerships and companies over recent years. This may be no more than a legal move by male farmers to try and reduce their income tax.²⁶ But at least

20. James,

Women, p.45

21. Ibid.,

p. 46.

22. Ibid.,

p. 45.

23.

A Decade of change, p.

24. Ibid.,

p. 139.

25. Ibid.,

p. 34.

26. James

Ibid., p.

it is a recognition of women's involvement in the rural sector with over one third of women now seeing themselves as farmers.²⁷ While laws might prevent discrimination they cannot change firmly held beliefs and traditional attitudes ^{which} are still widespread in rural communities.²⁸

27.

A Decade of Change, p. 134

28. James

Women, p. 46.

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