



Farmers, Flivvers, and Family Life: The Impact of Motoring on Rural Women and Their Kin

Michael L. Berger

Beaver College

FARMERS, FLIVVERS, AND FAMILY LIFE: THE IMPACT OF MOTORING ON RURAL WOMEN AND THEIR KIN¹

During the 1920s, an investigator from the U.S. Department of Agriculture happened upon a farm family that had recently purchased an automobile even though their home lacked indoor plumbing. Asked to explain why, the wife replied: “Why, you can’t go to town in a bathtub!”² As much as anything else, this farm woman’s comment attests to the tremendous significance of the motor car in transforming the nature of family life in rural America.

The central theme of this essay is that the mass adoption of the automobile in rural communities had a profound impact on the travel that rural Americans undertook, especially for women. Trips to other farmsteads and into “town” became more frequent. Formerly distant recreational sites were transformed into day trips which even the busiest farm family could undertake from time to time. And finally, the overnight, long-distance trip became so common that by 1926 a survey revealed that farmers were the single largest occupational group visiting one national park. As a result, changes were wrought in the manner in which rural Americans perceived the spatial environment in which they lived, the social and economic relationships that developed within it, and the uses to which they put the land on which they lived and worked.

The Yearbook of Agriculture for 1928 reported that while eight million farmers and their families lived within five miles of towns of 2,500 or more, fully twenty million still were even more isolated.³ A government circular entitled The Farm Woman’s Problems revealed that members of the average farm family had to travel three miles to reach the local church, five miles to market, six miles to high school and the family doctor, and fourteen miles to a hospital.⁴ “No burden”, concluded Edward R. Eastman in the late twenties, “has ever set quite as heavily on farming and upon the farm family as has the curse of isolation and loneliness.”⁵

Isolated and lonely, pre-automobile farmers were always on the lookout for new avenues of social contact. While it was true that most farm families made periodic trips into town or to relatives, such journeys were often arduous and lengthy experiences. In addition, as Warren H. Wilson observed, the farm was in constant need of attention: “The claims of domesticated animals upon the farmer are such as to chain his foot to the homestead. He can go from home only so far as will permit him to get back in time to spray his orchard trees or to cultivate his corn.”⁶

Of all the members of the farm family, it was the farm wife who felt the isolation most acutely. Her trips beyond the farm were infrequent and her tasks at home repetitious. When the farm woman did leave the farm in a horse-drawn vehicle, it was always at the expense of falling behind in her household chores. The trip itself could be an ordeal, as noted by a Michigan woman: “I am haunted now by the faces of the women I find myself looking for on the street corners, knowing they have to endure the tiresome driving in uncomfortable wagons over heavy roads behind slow and unattractive horses. I see the long list of purchases to be made in town, then the waiting for all the party to get together, the late arrival home, tired, cold, and hungry, and the extra work to do after dark on account of the half day off.”⁷

Women's Travel Issues

Proceedings from the Second National Conference

Though isolation was generally seen as a social evil, it did have the effect of making the farm home the focus of leisure time activities. With the motor car came a serious threat to the unity of the family, although this was not clearly seen at the time. "The possession of an automobile means greater frequency of visits and thereby the keeping together of family ties, not a growing apart in ever widening stretches," wrote Ernest L. Ferguson in 1912.⁸ In the same year, another country writer observed that: "The pleasure and contentment of the family which the automobile makes possible because of the evening automobile ride for diversion or the exchange of social courtesies and the attendance upon meetings of various kinds is not to be overlooked. The great distance that may be covered, at the same time the fact that the evening pleasure with the automobile does not lessen the efficiency of the farm motive power on the following day, as is the case when the farm team must be hitched onto the pleasure vehicle, is a factor which the student of farm conditions should not overlook."⁹

Yet, the time involved in getting from one place to another by horse-and-buggy had led to prolonged visits once one got there. With the automobile, there may have been less sociability. Rural sociologist James M. Williams observed that: "Instead of coming to stay the afternoon, the farmer's family is out for a long ride to some adjacent city and drives into a friend's yard for a few minutes; then away they go."¹⁰ Thus, the nuclear family may have increased the number and range of acquaintances, but these new friendships were not as strong as those that preceded the automobile.

Furthermore, the introduction of the automobile may have detracted from interest in the farmstead itself. It was, after all, necessary to go away from the home to enjoy the automobile. The Lynds found that in "Middletown" [Muncie, Indiana] the motor car was "making noticeable inroads upon the traditional prestige of the family's mealtimes at certain points; it has done much to render obsolete the leisurely Sunday noon dinner of a generation ago . . . , and during half the year when 'getting out in the car' is pleasant, it often curtails the evening meal to an informal 'bite'."¹¹

The automobile also affected the rural attitude toward long distance trips. It offered a means for rapid, direct transportation at minimal cost. In addition, the car delivered you to the door and was faster than a horse-and-buggy, thus allowing longer trips in shorter time. Farmers had traditionally felt guilty about taking such trips, even when the time was available. Their frugal outlook balked at the relative time involved in "gettin' there" as compared to the amount allowed for the actual leisure-time activity. "One of the values of the automobile is that by its use many a farmer has been given a new realization of the value of recreation," wrote Dwight Sanderson in 1922.¹² Horace B. Hawthorn found that in Monona County, Iowa: "Farmers took from six to twelve longer trips a year, which carried them beyond the confines of their community into other counties. Ten to fifteen percent of the people took annual vacation tours in their cars, lasting from a few days to several months. A month's trip to the mountains would be beyond the means of the farm family if railroad fares and hotel bills had to be paid for the four or five members; but with a car and a camping outfit, the expense is greatly reduced."¹³ A Department of the Interior study of motor vehicles entering Yellowstone National Park in 1926 revealed that those engaged in "agricultural pursuits" were most numerous, over double that of any other profession.¹⁴

Such long distance touring, combined with similar activities on the part of urban people, had an homogenizing effect on the total population. Walter Burr noticed that this was true for Kansas in the 1920s: "One who has visited frequently during the past few years in farm homes and conversed with members of the farm family has become accustomed to hear them discuss their experiences in Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Miami, Detroit—at the Grand Canyon, in Yellowstone Park, in

the Yosemite Valley, in the Canadian Northwest—and wherever else there are highways which can be traveled by automobiles. They put up at the same hotels or camp at the same tourist parks used by the city people. Since the city type has dominated in the past, and has been looked up to by country people as being more highly cultured, the tendency is for country people, as they come in contact with them, to become urbanized.”¹⁵

Such travel was an education to the farmer. Professor Harvey W. Peck maintained that: “The average farmer has long been on a lower economic level than the average urban dweller. Yet this fact, since it was unknown to most farmers, was not a cause of discontent. The farmer was in the same economic condition as most of the people he met. But the newer mobility, and the resulting increase of social contacts, have enlarged the scope of his social comparison. The result is the acceptance or recognition of the higher average standard of living.”¹⁶

For example, the motor car seems to have made those who rode within more conscious of their personal appearance. Traditionally, farm families had been made conspicuous in town or city by their distinctive clothing. Such attire had often served as an object of ridicule for the urban observer, lending credence to such terms as “hayseed” and “hick.” As Edward E. Eastman observed, the real reason why the farmer had no new clothes was that he had no place to wear them: “He had little money for good clothes and with the exception of church, few places to go where ‘store clothes’ were needed. Not until recently have farm people been doing much traveling. When they did go, it usually was with a horse and caring for a horse is not particularly conducive to the wearing of good clothes. But the automobile has changed all that. The farmer has become a cosmopolitan. He takes long trips with his whole family as often as anybody else.”¹⁷ Charles M. Harger maintained that such changes in apparel signaled a new “self-respect” on the part of the farmer, brought about through the aegis of the motor car.¹⁸

Not only did travel in the automobile seem to demand different clothing, it also provided a means for securing such goods. As a result, “country stores were no longer scenes of long Saturday purchasing expeditions when fathers and mothers picked out clothes for their children and made them like it,” notes Thomas D. Clark. The piece-good trade was on the wane, as ready-made clothes were bought because they were up-to-date, even if they were of inferior quality.¹⁹ It became increasingly difficult to tell farm families from their town and city counterparts by what they wore.

The coming of the automobile affected the activities of the unified family, but it also wrought changes among its different component parts. Although women in general often expressed an interest in driving their own cars, thus giving them the freedom to leave home when they wished, they were often stymied by the necessity of hand-cranking the motor to start it. Although as late as 1924 self-starters were still not standard equipment on the Model T Ford, the car owned by most of the rural population, this did not pose much of a problem for farm women who were used to physical labor and could not rely on men to provide transportation for trips away from the farmstead.

The motor car provided farm women for the first time with a means for independent mobility and they quickly and extensively took advantage of it. As a result, trips to visit with children and family who had moved out of the area or to shop in the larger towns became commonplace.²⁰ In addition, farm women’s clubs were given an impetus by the automobile. It was possible to attend in the afternoon and still be home in time to prepare supper, something which would have been impossible using a horse-and-buggy.²¹ Finally, not only could women use the car for social activities and shopping, it also could be employed to widen the range of jobs available to them. For instance, in

Women's Travel Issues

Proceedings from the Second National Conference

increasing numbers they became home demonstration agents traveling from farm to farm on their educational mission for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.²²

The introduction of the motor car also widened the range of possible contact for rural youth and this soon became a parental challenge. A New York State Commission reported that: "A good many of the (rural) boys as young as 16 either have automobiles of their own or are allowed the privilege of taking out their parents' car whenever they wish and take girls regularly to country dances."²³ Such activities became so common that rural sociologist Newell L. Sims noted: "The complaint is widespread that the younger farmers and country youth are seriously neglecting business on this account,"²⁴ an echo of earlier attitudes toward the motorized farm wife.²⁵ Teenagers were more than ever exposed to town and city life, a fact which many rural mothers found troubling: "The farm woman knows well enough that many of these influences are not what she wishes for her children, and yet, as an individual, she is powerless to change them."²⁶

While it affected teenage lifestyles in a number of ways, the car's impact on courting behavior was that which most caught the public's fancy. The automobile often replaced the home as the site for serious "spooning." While there were sometimes gender differences as to what was to transpire in the "parlor on wheels," there can be little question that the car had a tremendously liberating effect on youth by allowing them to engage in activities beyond the prying eyes of the local community. Unfortunately, few statistics are, or will ever be, available to document any change in sexual mores brought on by the motor car.

Nevertheless, there can be little question that to many rural residents the automobile represented a threat to the sanctity of the family. No longer need the individual members be dependent on each other for most of their social satisfaction. For instance, the Lynds found that approximately forty percent of the time boys and girls went riding without their parents.²⁷ According to Professor Jesse F. Steiner, the automobile tended to multiply friendships based upon age, sex, and/or common interests, rather than upon kinship and geographical proximity as was formerly true.²⁸

"This change," as Charles R. Hoffer observed, "has increased family responsibility, for somehow the children must be taught to evaluate and interpret the contacts that they have."²⁹ This new responsibility was not always willingly undertaken. As a team of experienced social workers noted: "The average community considers itself apart from its young people, is quite often ashamed of them, does not understand them, and lays the blame for young people's restlessness to the jazz band and automobile instead of facing the charge of negligence and lack of sympathetic understanding in its own scheme of living."³⁰ Not surprisingly, a study of girls in Pender County, North Carolina found that in almost one-third of the rural homes there were fights over the use of the car.³¹

We tend to think of travel in terms of movement from a fixed residence to some nearby or distant location and back again. It is also possible to conceive of this in reverse, wherein the ability of people—especially sales people and service providers—to access another's home becomes a "travel issue." For example, while it was true that farm women could now easily journey into town to visit the new Carnegie library, the car also made possible the advent of the "book wagon," which brought more and better reading material than would have been otherwise available to the isolated farmstead.

Similarly, rural health care also felt the impact of the motor car, witnessed by the speed with which doctors could reach patients on farms and in small towns and motorized ambulances could bring the very ill from their homes to the new consolidated hospitals, with the resulting saving of lives and

limbs. The latter is not just a phrase. Amputation, which had been a common practice to avoid infection and gangrene in bad accidents, became much less necessary as patients could be whisked by motorized transportation to a neighboring hospital in time to avoid complications.

These developments in recreation, education, and health care, together with similar ones in religion such as this traveling church, all contributed to the centralization and urbanization of rural America. The larger towns and small cities, not the local neighborhood, became the center of rural social and economic life. Increasingly, the farm family set out from its home to visit not the crossroads country store, village church, or local grange, but to go down the road a piece to the nearest filling station for gasoline and “free air,” and then on into a large rural town, which might even have a motion picture house for their amusement.

CONCLUSIONS

Caution is always advisable when assigning fundamental social and economic changes to one technological artifact. After all, the coming of the automobile coincided with the advent of rural electrification, the radio, and motion pictures. Nonetheless, one can still ascertain trends which were accelerated by the motorization of the rural family. For one, the isolation and loneliness cited at the beginning of this essay all but disappeared. For the most part, the farmstead was accordingly transformed into a more enjoyable and worthwhile place in which to live. Leisure-time pursuits, the church, and education were all brought closer, time-wise, to the rural family. The geographic boundaries of the family’s interaction beyond the farm were expanded from an area defined by the “team-haul” to one of almost unlimited range and multiplicity. It could also be argued that the quality of these activities was higher than before due to improvements and economies made possible through consolidation of the previously atomized and/or duplicative units.

However, most of these new contacts were of an impersonal nature and involved urban people and institutions. As this interaction increased in intensity, it posed a threat to the nature of the rural family. More and more, the inputs into their lives came from sources over which rural residents had little control and which tended to view the meaning of life in terms different from their own. In addition, since the motor car gave individual family members the opportunity to split off from the whole, the type and degree of these contacts differed from person to person. These were experienced *selectively* by members of the farm family, as the car allowed each one to undertake activities in which he or she alone participated.

Hence, while there was the possibility of a better life, it was different from the traditional farm one, with the locus of control no longer solely within the family and/or the local community. Instead, these traditional institutions found themselves in competition with a more amorphous and potentially more influential urban and national lifestyle. The very breakdown of isolation fostered by the automobile made it increasingly difficult to control actions by bringing familial and/or community pressure to bear. The wider became the effective unit of living, the easier it became to adopt the anonymity of the large town or city.

Finally, the increased mobility that accompanied automobiles and good roads meant that friends, recreation, and even doctors, no longer were determined solely by proximity. Interest, rather than location, became the key factor in associations that were formed by family members and services that were partaken by them. With time no longer the barrier that it once was, decisions in almost

Women's Travel Issues

Proceedings from the Second National Conference

every aspect of life became more complex as the functional rural community became ever larger. The new associations included people from geographically separate units, with differing social, political, and economic viewpoints. Time-honored traditions no longer seemed operative. The rural family was forced to accommodate itself to a new world of uncertainty, caused in large part by the enlargement of their sphere of travel.

ENDNOTES

¹Portions of this essay first appeared in the author's The Devil Wagon in God's Country: The Automobile and Social Change in Rural America, 1893-1929 (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1979), pp. 55-74.

² Cited in Franklin M. Reck, A Car Traveling People: How the Automobile Has Changed the Life of Americans—A Study of Social Effects (Detroit: Automobile Manufacturers Association, 1945), p. 8.

³ Cited in George Soule, Prosperity Decade: From War to Depression, 1917-1919, Vol. VIII of The Economic History of the United States, ed. By Henry David et al. (9 vols.; New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1946-47), p. 250.

⁴ U.S., Department of Agriculture, The Farm Woman's Problems, by Florence E. Ward, Department Circular No. 148 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), p. 12.

⁵ Edward R. Eastman, These Changing Times: A Story of Farm Progress during the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century, with a Foreword by L.H. Bailey (New York: Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 7.

⁶ Warren H. Wilson, The Evolution of the Country Community (2nd ed., rev.; Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1923), p. 117.

⁷ Cited in U.S., Department of Agriculture, Office of the Secretary, Social and Labor Needs of Farm Women, Report No. 103 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915), p. 40.

⁸ Ernest L. Ferguson, "The Rural Motor Vehicle: What Gasoline Means in Agriculture," Scientific American, CVI (February 10, 1912), 133.

⁹ H.V. Van Norman, "Rural Conveniences," in "Country Life," ed. by J.P. Lichtenberger, Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, XL (March, 1912), 166.

¹⁰ James M. Williams, The Expansion of Rural Life: The Social Psychology of Rural Development (New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1931), p. 154.

¹¹ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture, A Harvest Book (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1929), p. 153n. While Muncie, Indiana was clearly a small city at the time of the Lynds' study, there is little reason to doubt that such conditions existed in rural localities as well.

¹² Dwight Sanderson, The Farmer and His Community, The Farmer's Bookshelf (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1922), p. 157.

¹³ Horace B. Hawthorn, The Sociology of Rural Life (New York: Century Co., 1926), pp. 187-88.

¹⁴ Cited in Frank E. Brimmer, "The Nickel-and-Dime Stores of Nomadic America," Magazine of Business, LII (August, 1927), 152.

¹⁵ Walter Burr, Small Towns: An Estimate of Their Trade and Culture (New York: Macmillan Company, 1929), pp. 42-43.

¹⁶ Harvey W. Peck, "The Influence of Agricultural Machinery and the Automobile on Farming Operations," Quarterly Journal of Economics, XLI (May, 1927), 540.

¹⁷ Eastman, These Changing Times, p. 196.

¹⁸ Charles M. Harger, "Automobiles for Country Use," Independent, LXX (June 1, 1911), 1208.

¹⁹ Thomas D. Clark, Pills, Petticoats, and Plows: The Southern Country Store (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. 170-71.

²⁰ See, for example, L.B. Pierce, "The Ohio Farm Woman's Car," Rural New Yorker, LXXVIII (December 6, 1919), 1804.

²¹ H.L. Barber, Story of the Automobile: Its History and Development from 1760 to 1917, With An Analysis of the Standing and Prospects of the Automobile Industry (Chicago: A.J. Munson & Co., 1917), p. 160.

Women's Travel Issues

Proceedings from the Second National Conference

²² Virginia Scharff, Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pp. 143-44.

²³ State of New York, Crime Commission, Sub-Commission on Causes and Effects of Crime, A Study of Delinquency in Two Rural Counties, Legislative Document No. 94 (Albany, N.Y.: J.B. Lyon Company, Printers, 1927), p. 410.

²⁴ Newell L. Sims, Elements of Rural Sociology, Crowell's Social Science Series (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Publishers, 1928), p. 382.

²⁵ See, for example, "Is this Eggsactly [sic] Right?," Motor Age, XXX (December 28, 1916), 15.

²⁶ Mary Meek Atkeson, The Woman on the Farm (New York: Century Co., 1924), p. 13.

²⁷ Lynd and Lynd, Middletown, p. 257.

²⁸ Jesse F. Steiner, "Recreation and Leisure Time Activities," in President's Research Committee on Social Trends, Report of the Committee, Recent Social Trends in the United States (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1933), p. 944.

²⁹ Charles R. Hoffer, Introduction to Rural Sociology (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1930), pp. 198-99.

³⁰ Cited by Edmund deS. Brunner, Gwendolyn S. Hughes, and Marjorie Patten, American Agricultural Villages, American Village Studies of the Institute of Social and Religious Research (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), p. 214.

³¹ Carl C. Taylor, Rural Sociology: In Its Economic, Historical, and Psychological Aspects (Rev. ed.; New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1933), p. 299.