

## RURAL WOMEN OF LATAH COUNTY:

## Life and work with the harvest and logging crews

by Mary E. Reed and Carol Young

The tasks of creating a farm and home in the Palouse country in the late 1800s and early 1900s demanded continuous hard work from both men and women. With the quantity of work to do and the narrow margin between profit and survival, everyone on the farm did what had to be done, working long hours in the house and fields. Women, however, had the added duties of raising children and nursing sick members of the family. The fashions of those days, long skirts and sleeves, high necklines, and numerous petticoats, restricted their movements and made farm chores even more difficult. Unlike men, the farm women could not easily let down their hair--either figuratively or literally. As they were supposed to be models of decorum, in the early years they could not travel unescorted or appear too prominently in public places.

Perhaps this social prejudice gave rural women an advantage for they developed a supportive network of neighbors that eased the loneliness of farm life. Tasks such as sewing, and picking and preserving fruits and vegetables were combined with visiting. The social network was extremely important during critical times of childbirth and family sickness.

In the rural family girls often undertook adult responsibility for the household and cared for younger brothers and sisters at a relatively early age. Often a girl would be sent to help the mother of a new baby by cooking and cleaning for the family. At home, girls and women took care of livestock and garden, preserved food, kept the house in good order, sewed and laundered the family's clothing, and raised large families.

At a time when money was scarce, farm women often worked outside the home either to supplement the family's income or to make their own way. Careers for women were usually limited to teaching, nursing, or home industries such as sewing or selling eggs and butter. Many young women in Latah County worked as cooks and housekeepers for town women. As most rural women could not afford to go to college or had the responsibility of their own families, part-time work provided the way for these women to make some money. A common occupation was working for threshing crews during harvest or in logging camps. The wages earned--small by today's standards--were important additions to the family's cash resources and, in addition, gave women a sense of independence and a chance to meet new people.

The oral history collection of the Latah County Historical Society contains many examples of women working as cooks for threshing and logging crews. These oral histories recount the demanding and difficult task of cooking, especially during the hot summer months when the hours were long and the facilities primitive. Nonetheless, there was satisfaction with a job well done and some time for fun.

The cookhouse for harvest crews was a small structure set on wheels and pulled by a team of horses. The cook prepared three meals a day which meant working from sunrise to sunset, baking and cooking, setting tables, clearing and washing dishes, and packing for the next move. The work had to be done quickly, but it was the type of work that women had been used to doing since they were girls.





Hilda Olson and Anna Frantzich on steps on cookwagon. (LCHS photo.)

PALMA HANSON HOVE. Palma was the daughter of immigrants who first moved to their parents' homestead in Troy, and then took over an uncle's farm in Genesee Valley. As a young girl, Palma learned many home-making skills from her mother.

"My mother was a very good seamstress so she made all our dresses and carded wool and knitted our stockings. . . . Baked all our own bread. Of course, after I was married, too, I did the churning and bread baking and all that, you know. But we learned all that from home so it wasn't hard."

When Palma was 17, she and her 19-year-old sister worked for her uncle's threshing outfit. "We cooked for the men in this cookwagon. It had five tables that you could seat four men. We could seat twenty men at that time. And we got up at three thirty in the morning, and we had to give them lunch in the forenoon, sandwiches and

either cookies or cake and coffee. And then we cooked dinner. And at about three thirty or four in the afternoon, there was another lunch. And then in the evening they never ate 'til about seven thirty or eight in the evening. And we baked all the bread and cooked, all the baking we did. And we did that for probably six weeks. . . . They'd move from one farm to the next, sometimes you'd move probably as far as ten miles. So then you'd get there just before supper in the evening. And, boy, was that a scramble then to get supper ready for all these men. But you had to plan ahead, you see, and have all this prepared so that it wouldn't take too long. . . . I don't know how in the world we did it. . . . We always had meals ready on time, believe you me. We baked bread twice a day, eight loaves of bread, twice a day . . . and we baked pies. For every dinner we had pie or pudding. And we had cookies. We baked cookies, probably . . . every day if not twice a day.





Ida Olson and Ida Johnson (LCHS Photo)

"We usually averaged about maybe four and a half hours of sleep, sometimes five. [We] slept right on the floor between the benches in the cookhouse. So it wasn't an extra good bed either, you know, but it worked pretty good. I think we had an old mattress that we rolled up and slept in if I remember right.

"But you see you had to have everything ready to go for breakfast again in the morning. [On Sunday] we didn't go anywhere, we just stayed there on Sunday . . . a lot of men would go home on Sunday. Maybe we wouldn't have that many for dinner, probably half a crew.

"They had what they called a roustabout. And he was the man that did all the rousting for us. He bought all the meat and vegetables and everything. So often the farmers where we would be stationed would give us vegetables, fresh vegetables. But we really bought most of it in tin cans, though, because it was quicker to prepare.

"[When they moved the cookhouse] you had to tie everything down. You had cupboards for the dishes and you just had to wire the cupboard door shut so they wouldn't fall out. You couldn't cook or anything while you were moving. . . . If you wanted to cook a roast so you'd have it for your supper that night, you couldn't do it because you couldn't keep the fire going when you were moving. We had to pack everything off the tables so that it didn't shake off.

"So often when we would come to a farm . . . they always visited the cooks in the cookhouse. So we had company quite a bit of the time, just for the afternoon. A lot of times we'd ask the lady to come and eat dinner with us or something if the man was working with the crew. So it wasn't lonesome at all.

"And of course they'd always start way down on the rim, what they'd call the rimrock because the crops were much



earlier there. So they sort of started down there, and then they would follow up until they got up into the valley. . . . And it went on for weeks and weeks. And then, of course, if there was a rain, why then they'd have to stop and that was always a terrible thing. . . . They'd have to feed their horses . . . and we'd have to feed the men because a lot of them couldn't go home.

"I think lots of times [the harvest] started in, oh probably even the last of July, and then usually it was through August and probably all of September. But then in the year that my husband and I were married he was still working with a threshing outfit and had to lay off to get married because of rain.

"But they were good days. We were young and happy and strong. We could take it."

ELLA OLSON OLSON. Ella was the daughter of Swedish immigrants who still spoke Swedish at home when Ella was a school girl. As many girls did, Ella worked as a housekeeper after one year in high school; then she worked as a cook for the sawmills, in a logging camp, and for a threshing crew with a friend and then with her sister. The first money they made was sent home to pay for a new barn; after that they used their wages to buy a piano for the family.

The Olson girls worked for the threshing crew in the summer and fall, and then moved to the logging camps. In 1920 Ella worked an unusually long period of time, fifty days, for the threshing crew because summer rains had delayed the harvest.

"Then the bundles were out in the fields and it rained, and by the time they had turned those bundles and got 'em dry in the sun for two, three days, then it was ready to start threshing, then it started to rain again. . . . And he didn't want to lay us off, he just kept us there. And in that cookhouse. You know what that cookhouse looked like? [It had] little

square tables, four on each side. . . . It was an aisle in the middle . . . and they come in. The cookhouse stood in the field. And it rained and they come in, and you can imagine the mud that come in. We had to shovel out that mud before we could do anything. . . . Then at night, they'd thresh 'til dark, and then they'd come and eat their supper, and we'd clean up the dishes and get things ready for morning, and then we'd have to clean out the floor and get our bedding from under the house and make the bed on the floor. And then about four o'clock in the morning we'd have to get up and roll that bed up and start in again. I don't think we needed much sleep.

"We baked all our bread, all our cookies, and they had lunch in the afternoon. And they'd come in right after breakfast, probably say, 'We're going to move before dinner.' And then I'd hurry and set bread 'cause when we was moving, it kept shaking, you know, and that bread just raised, you could see it raise. . . . And then we took our peeling, we peeled our spuds, and peeled everything that we were going to have. Did that while we were moving. So then when we got to the place, why then it was to hurry and fix 'cause then probably it was time they wanted to have dinner pretty quick. And it was just a rush. And then in the afternoon we had to have fresh cake or something baked and have coffee and send out to them in the afternoon. And then it was to have supper at night. See, it was hard work. I don't see how we could do it.

"Well, so then in the 1920's when I got married after this harvest, the thirteenth of November. They sent us home in October, and then they finished threshing in November. . . . The shocks, everything was black. But they finished it. [My husband] was working in the woods, in the camps in the logging. We went together for about four years, pretty near five years. We didn't have time to get married, there was too much work. I wanted to get some more of that cooking done and some more money. And then we





Interior of a dining hall in a Potlatch logging camp. (LCHS photo.)

only got a dollar a day. And that last year when we had all those fifty days, we got a dollar and a half. We sent [the money] home. That's how that barn was built. Dad had to have a new barn, and so we cooked, my sister and I then, and sent the money up and paid for all the stuff they built the barn out of. So we didn't get any of it. We just figured that we should have that barn paid for, and that we wanted to have that done, help him to get that barn paid. Didn't bother us, we was just going to work."

Ella Olson remembered that cooking in the lumber camps was different from that done in the cookwagons that followed the threshing crews.

"It was just like [cooking] in the house. They had a dining room and a kitchen. The dining room [had] long tables, and we'd set them tables and we fixed the meals, fixed roasts and whatever meat we got ahold of. They butchered right up

there and hung it up, and we'd have to go out there and whack it off ourselves. And I got scars all over where I chopped the knife . . . into my hand. The meat was frozen part of the time. And it'd slip. If we was gonna have steak, why it was to cut off so we could get steak, whatever, roasts. We'd have to go out there and saw. And then we just cooked great big kettles of spuds, vegetables. We'd bake bread and just kept agoin'.

"These [loggers] were all just local people and it wasn't rough. It was just like being home and everybody was clean. And they cleaned the bunkhouses, and we'd scrub the dining room floor and the kitchen floor, and it was clean. I don't remember that we were ever awfully tired. [The work] couldn't have been [too hard] or we were terribly strong. . . . We just kept on again.

"I trusted everybody that was there. I was there alone, down at Standard mill



. . . alone a whole summer with a bunch of 'em there. And in the evening, they'd sit down by the mill and play cards. And I'd go down there, and I'd sit there with 'em.

"And another time I went out on the pond. There was boys walked on them logs and they never moved. And I thought, 'Well, I don't see any reason why I can't do it.' So one Sunday morning I went out there on the pond, and I was going to walk on those logs like they did. And the logs started to going, you know, and you jump on another one and that'll keep ago'in'. . . . And they come running from the bunkhouse and got me out of that mess."

FRANCES VAUGHAN FRY. Frances lived on a farm in Cedar Creek from the time she was three until her own children were grown. She helped with the farm work, raised the children, and took care of the house and livestock in addition to working at various jobs to make extra money for the family. Besides cooking for a lumber camp, Frances worked as a nurse, traveling with a doctor to childbirth cases in the country. Because she had three children of her own, Frances took them with her to the logging camps located near Clarkia. Frances remembered that she was paid less than the men.

"I got the women's wages, whatever they were paying their women. They always paid a man cook a lot more than they ever paid a woman cook. And why? It always was that way. I didn't get paid as much as the lowest man in the crew got. . . . And I was up anywhere from four o'clock in the morning 'til after nine at night, getting my things straightened so I could cook. I got my board along with it, and I considered that quite a little bit with my three kids.

"In the one up at Breakfast Creek that I cooked for up here, had thirty [men]. But I did have a helper there. There the mis-sus, the man's wife, she come up a lot. She had children just the same as mine, and she used to come up and help me, too,

in the summer. But I was there a lot of times, just by myself. Now, I baked my own bread and I made all of my sweets. And we had to have hotcakes. . . . We had all kinds of cold cereals. Then if there was some of 'em in the crew had to have some hot cereal, I made hot cereal. We fried three and four dozen eggs every morning.

"I had a helper right at meal time, and they called him a flunky. He worked out on the roads when he wasn't helping me. If I needed him, I called him. . . . He'd peel potatoes and he always fried the eggs of a morning. And then I'd do the rest of it.

"Then we had hams and bacon and shoulders and every kind of meat we could get. We got fresh meat whenever we could, but when we were away up there in the timber, he would come to town maybe twice a week and get groceries, and he'd always get fresh meat when he came. . . . It was quite a job to make bread for all of them. In later years we bought bread. For a lot of years you had to make the bread for the sandwiches and everything, and it took a lot of bread.

"I lived in the back end of their cookhouse. We had a big cookhouse and big long tables. There was two big long tables in the cookhouse, and I cooked right up in the corners. . . . We had beds back in there. Or some of the boys put up a tent, they put a platform back of the cookhouse and had an extra tent on that, and if we had extra, why they'd go back there and sleep. And [the crew] had big bunkhouses and all that.

"The men took their lunch, you see, I didn't have to fix dinner. But I did have to have breakfast and supper. But, let's see, they come in around, oh, six o'clock, I guess at night, something like that, so it wasn't too bad. I don't know how I done it, but I done it. I couldn't do it now. I couldn't even think about it, but I sure could do it then."



KATE PRICE GRANNIS. Besides working as cooks for logging camps and threshing crews, some women from Latah County also worked as cooks in mining camps. Kate, daughter of a homesteading family in Avon, learned at an early age that she and other family members had to work hard. Because she was needed at home, Kate left school in the eighth grade to help her mother with a new baby. When she was eighteen, Kate worked as a cook at the Luella Mica Mine near Avon with a friend, Monica Peterson, who trimmed and cut the large pieces of mica. Kitchen facilities were shared with some of the cutting operations, as Kate recalled.

"At first I cooked right out under just a roof, a shed that had been a kind of a building. But it was just a roof over it and a post here that held it up until they got a cookhouse built. They built a house then that had three rooms. The dining room and the kitchen was all together, but there's a room for where [Monica] cut the mica, and then here and my bedroom. The mica that was just mined out wasn't solid. . . . It came out just in pieces and [had] ragged edges. And she just had a knife, and she just cut off those ragged edges and laid out the good mica, you see. That was just the mica dust that had to be cleaned up everyday. But she worked in the dining room and did that. . . . Then we were the only two women up there."

"I think we had about six men, maybe. . . . Oh, I've done lots of cooking like that. . . . I was at the Luella mine, and then the one above it, several miles, up the hill father with the Moscovite. I remember one time, one evening we . . . all walked up the hill and had a dance in their dining room there. . . . Our music was a mouth organ. We walked up that hill, climbed up that hill, and slid back down cause you couldn't hardly keep your footing."

The women who cooked for harvest crews and loggers made an important economic contribution to the area as well as to their own families. The ability to attract and keep a good crew often depended on the reputation of the cook. Conversely, the wages helped young women get started in life or assisted women with families increase the family's income. The young women who saved to build their dad's barn or buy a piano, or to put money aside for their own homes are part of a complex and overlapping pattern of family and community interdependency.

The oral history collection of the Latah County Historical Society contains valuable material that can help us understand the total picture of work, family life, friendships, and physical resources that shaped the history of our county.