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WOMEN AND SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURE
IN THE ARKANSAS OZARKS
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Introduction

The Ozark mountain region of the United States with its rural style of life conjures forth romantic images of women around the hearth cooking homegrown food for a family of farmers. Farm women are often pictured as the traditional homesteaders, not unlike the women of Little House on the Prairie. That is, they cooked, cleaned, raised children, and kept a home for their farming husbands. Many historians fail to note, however, that these women made other contributions to farm life. These women were an economic necessity. This was especially true for women in the Ozark mountain area of Arkansas at the beginning of this century. Women performed the domestic tasks of raising children and keeping house, but they also worked alongside their husbands in the fields, helped to butcher and prepare meat, and performed other important farm tasks. Women had a two-fold role; they had both a traditional role and a non-traditional role. The importance of their efforts in their non-traditional jobs gave women some degree of autonomy in their mountain marriages. Some historians, like Jean Friedman, have noted that such a role would exclude women from contact with other women.¹ Instead, non-traditional tasks led women to seek a female community, which they could use as an escape from the rigors of daily life.

Often overlooked, Ozark women are denied the credit due them for their participation in society. Women, because of the subsistence agricultural economy in the Ozarks, crossed gender barriers that were in place and adhered to in the northeastern United States. The subsistence economy then created an environment that caused Ozark women to adhere to different work patterns and relationships than women who lived in a market economy. To demonstrate how the subsistence agriculture could mold these womens' lives, it is important to look first at what characterizes a subsistence agricultural community. Second, it is necessary to look at the traditional work the Ozark women performed, and third, it is necessary to look at the non-traditional tasks these women performed, the work that was in fact created by the subsistence economy. It is evident that these women were a necessity in the mountain community; they strove, along with men, to survive on the soil of the Ozark mountains.

Chapter 1
The Persistence of Subsistence Agriculture
in the Ozark Mountain Region

The Ozark mountain region included parts of northwest Arkansas, south Missouri, and the eastern portion of Oklahoma. The region was characterized "by greater relief and steeper slopes than [the] surrounding areas."² But these slopes did not constitute an exceedingly steep mountain range; indeed "comparatively speaking, the Ozarks contain no mountains at all. Just folds of little green hills with occasional peaks protruding from them,"³ explained folklorist Milton D. Rafferty. An abundance of natural springs and rivers spotted the Ozarks. These natural springs encouraged settlement because they provided inhabitants with a ready and close source of water. This was important for residents since no running water was available. The Ozarks provided agriculturally pristine land suited for immigrant populations of Scotch-Irish descent. The Scotch-Irish originally inhabited the Appalachian hill country and moved into the area seeking more unclaimed farm land.⁴ These people brought with them the fear and loathing of civilization inherited from their ocean-crossing forebearers, which encouraged them to maintain an isolated

subsistence agricultural community into the twentieth century.⁵

To understand the subsistence agricultural community of the Ozarks one must first define what constitutes subsistence agriculture. Historians Michael Merrill and James A. Henretta describe the characteristics of subsistence agriculture. Merrill looks mostly at economic factors, Henretta at social factors, but together their analyses suggest subsistence agricultural communities shared four basic characteristics. First, subsistence agriculture occurs most often in areas of isolation. With the resulting "absence of an external market," Henretta argues, "there was no alternative to subsistence or semi-subsistence production."⁶ Second, an agricultural community exists at the subsistence level if a group of individual family units live directly off the products it grows. Merrill contends the:

production units in the household mode of production are self-sufficient when it comes to the products necessary to secure their production. . . . The important fact is that the amount produced for self-consumption equals the necessary product, i.e. the amount necessary to reproduce the producing unit.⁷

Third, the subsistence community usually maintains a communal exchange program. In these communities, exchange between individual households is used to replace dearth with surplus. Merrill concludes:

in the household mode of production a person can remain continually indebted to some person as long as others are indebted (to) him in an equivalent amount. This feature of exchange in the household mode of production both accounts for the 'vast tangle of debts' that historians have found in rural communities..., and explains why these debts were not a burden.⁸

Fourth, these communities use an informal system of communalized labor. Henretta notes that there were non-agrarian tasks in which the community participated:

Most of the nonfarm enterprises were sawmills, gristmills, fulling mills, and tanneries. These were profitseeking businesses, but they were also social necessities in a rural community; all were intimately connected to agricultural production..., these enterprises produced primarily for a local market and were so crucial to the welfare of the inhabitants that they were supported by communal action.⁹

The community's ability to share labor and maintain communal enterprises ensures its self-sufficiency. Therefore, a subsistence economy has four characteristics. The subsistence community has to be isolated, it has to live off the food it grew, there has to be exchange between the families, and there has to be some communal labor for the culture to survive.

Did Ozark society at the turn of the twentieth century demonstrate these four characteristics? Were the Ozarks isolated? Did the families of the Ozarks live off the food they produced? Was there exchange between mountain families to ensure community survival? And lastly, was there communalized labor? Evidence gathered from seven counties in northwest Arkansas--Madison, Johnson, Newton, Pope,

Searcy, and VanBuren--suggests that it did. These seven counties were very typical of the entire mountainous region.

To demonstrate this area's adherence to a subsistence agricultural community one must first define a community.

"For the vast majority of Southerners....," women's historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has written:

the ideal of community remained grounded in the reality of southern society as preeminently a network of rural-rooted households that contained within themselves relations of production as well as those of reproduction."¹⁰

Fox-Genovese's assessment of Southern community fits well with descriptions of what characterized subsistence agriculture developed by Henretta and Merrill. They argued that a subsistence community must first and foremost be isolated. One folklorist, Charles Morrow Wilson, explained that "the prolonged sparseness or absence of Ozark roads was the number-one factor in perpetuating isolation."¹¹ Swollen rivers as well as narrow valleys contributed to isolation. Poor roads plagued the Ozarks and, according to historian Janet Allured, "meant that communication with the outside world was impossible at worst and infrequent at best."¹² Even mail service proved sporadic. As historian Boyd W. Johnson has argued, the region endured a "prolonged ...frontier period."¹³

Isolation, caused by these poor and non-existent roads, and infrequent communication with the rest of the United

States, retarded Ozark economic development well into the twentieth century. Unlike the rest of the United States, the Ozarks experienced little industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century. The Twelfth Census of the United States on Manufactures documents no industrial factories in Arkansas at the turn of the century, which left the mostly rural residents to agricultural employment.¹⁴

The Ozarks were perfect for agrarian pursuits. A state guide to the Ozark mountain region, published in 1906, described the farmland of the Ozarks. "The uplands are especially adapted to fruit and live stock...."¹⁵ At the same time the "the soils of both plateau and bottom are extremely fertile, while the slopes are found to be fine for stock pasture and orchard sites."¹⁶ The quality of soil, wrote Gene Boyette, contributed to subsistence farming because the land and soil were "appropriate for small scale farming"¹⁷ not for large commercial crop production. The Ozarks, without industry or large commercial farms, were dependent on individual subsistence farm production.

Ozark families lived off of the food they grew. The Ozark people had always, of necessity, done this. Janet Allured stated: "most farmsteads contained a variety of crops and animals, [and] were family-owned and operated, and consumed the bulk of what they produced."¹⁸ Instead of cash crops, Ozark farmers diversified to grow different kinds of

food to ensure survival. The Thirteenth Census of the United States shows that in the seven counties in this study, 49 percent of improved Ozark farmland was used to grow products like corn, oats, wheat, rye, and rice as well as potatoes, peas, peanuts, sweet potatoes and other vegetables. This did not include the land that was used for the 2,016,769 fruit trees in these seven counties.¹⁹ "Corn was the largest crop, but most of it went to feed the livestock. The area grew little cotton, for neither soil nor the climate...were favorable to it,"²⁰ Allured concluded. Neither cotton nor tobacco, both marketable cash crops, were a large part of the Ozark economy.

To further demonstrate the Ozark tendency to subsistence agriculture we can use data from the Twelfth and Thirteenth census of the United States and compare statistics on Ozark agriculture to those of an area like the Georgia upcountry, described by Steven Hahn, which in the late nineteenth century did progress from a subsistence economy to one based on a marketable cash crop, cotton. The Georgia upcountry was comparable to the Ozarks in its mountainous topography, but, following a burst of railroad construction after the Civil War, it was not plagued by isolation from markets. The Georgia upcountry economy epitomized the market based agricultural economy that was typical of the time. A comparison between it and the Ozarks

reveals how much the Ozarks remained a subsistence economy. A primary measure of market orientation is the cotton to corn ratio. In an area based on cotton as a marketable cash crop, Hahn found the ratio of cotton to corn was 126 percent. The seven counties studied here, based on census information, had a cotton to corn ratio on the average of 48 percent, or 21,063 average acres of cotton and 36,920 average acres of corn for these seven counties. The Ozark's ratio was markedly lower than Hahn's for upcountry Georgia. Also, Hahn documents the percentage of acres used to grow cotton on upcountry farms at 33 percent. In the Arkansas Ozarks, it was only 19.6 percent of improved acres.²¹ In sum, without industry or a cash crop at the beginning of the twentieth century, the residents of the Ozarks were confined to subsistence agriculture for survival.

Without a local market or store the subsistence families of the Ozarks had to produce all they needed to survive. Families were able to alleviate some of the hardships of home production through community and intra-family exchange. In the Ozarks, a community exchange program ensured that each family survived. For example, Nannie Stillwell Jackson describes in her diary, "I let Mrs. Chandler have 7 pounds of meat to day, she is to pay it back Wednesday."²² Nannie's diary tells of many such exchanges,

instances when she borrowed as well as lent. This ability to exchange between households was essential to the community's long term survival. No family would suffer as long as the whole community was stable.

In this isolated environment, the Ozarkers also employed a degree of communalized labor. Otto Ernest Rayburn an Ozark folklorist and historian, explained that, "log-rolling was one of the best examples of fraternal assistance and economic interdependence."²³ But it was not just log-rollings. Corn huskings, quilting bees, barn- and house-raisings or any other project that needed the help of more than one family often became a communal effort.²⁴ At other times, two or three families cooperated. Butchering, for example, was a job often shared by two or three families, allowing each to eat the meat before it spoiled.²⁵ Thus, communalized agrarian and other forms of labor were common in the Ozark mountains and helped ensure the survival of the community as a whole.

Rayburn goes on to explain that, "certain activities of the hill country...are managed in a way to reduce the [individual] cost to the minimum. . . . It is an old mountain custom to work together in enterprises [that] require mass labor to get the thing done."²⁶ The use of communal labor extended to activities outside of farming; not all Ozark folks were only farmers. Nonfarm enterprises

were supported by the community as a whole because they were necessary to mountain survival. Such industries as fulling mills, sawmills and gristmills were an economic necessity. The Twelfth Census of the United States documents the communal aspects of mills in the Arkansas economy. Although no information can be attained on individual counties, the state as a whole had 410 mills. Of those 337 were used as customer exchange only, 55 of which were merchant and customer and 18 that were merchant only.²⁷ Customer exchange mills were run by families who received payment in the form of agricultural products. For the most part, milling was a secondary occupation for farmers, or the mill was maintained through communal labor. Milling was of community concern because Ozark residents needed to grind the grain that was a staple in hillfolk's diet. Thus, in this secluded region, even non-farming business encouraged a subsistence style of life that was aided by communal labor to ensure the survival of the unit as a whole.

In sum, the Ozarks in the early twentieth century met all four characteristics of a subsistence agricultural community. First, the region was isolated from the industrialization and expanding market economy of the rest of the United States at the turn of the century. Second, the Ozark inhabitants lived off the food they grew. Third, residents performed community and intra-family exchange when

needed. And, fourth, the residents of the Ozarks communalized some labor and large farm tasks. These four characteristics created a life for the mountain inhabitants that was different from that of the newly industrialized regions of the rest of the United States.

Chapter Two

Ozark Mountain Women

The persistence into the twentieth century of a subsistence agricultural economy in the Ozark region had a major influence on the lives of its mountain inhabitants at the turn of the century. This was especially so for the women of these communities. The "community," stated Friedman, is "a powerful factor in integrating southern women's identity and in preserving their traditional role."²⁸ The term "traditional role" a somewhat abstract and may even be an inappropriate term when used to describe Ozark mountain women. United States historians developed their conceptions of a traditional female role primarily to describe the life of women in the northeastern United States when it began to industrialize during the mid-nineteenth century. Explained by historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, women's history from pre-industrial to an industrial age was marked by decline.²⁹ Before that period of industrialization, cottage production, with its base in the home, was the center of production. These cottage industries supplemented the income of a farm family. With the advent of industrialization the work place moved out of the home and was assumed to be a male world. Meanwhile, women became more bound to the home, especially because of

the growing belief in the idea of Republican motherhood. Republican motherhood had its basis in the belief that women served as moral educators of their children. Therefore, men's sphere moved more and more out of the home while women became more closely identified with it. Republican motherhood emphasized women's education so they could be prepared to raise good, civic-minded children. This gave women some degree of autonomy within the domestic sphere but none in the public realm. So the home became the gender specific area of women, and through their domestic role they were to educate their children and be the companions of their husbands.³⁰ It was through the role as their husband's companions that women were to achieve some degree of autonomy within their marriages but, in fact, women's role in society declined because of their removal from a public sphere.

Ozark mountain women, because of the region's persistence subsistence economy, faced very different social realities than those on which the new ideal rested in the northeastern United States. At times the stereotypical domestic sphere ruled the Ozark women's lives. Women raised children and made a home for the men. At other times, the demanding life of the frontier and subsistence agriculture brought a different shape to women's role in society. Because women were such an economic necessity there was a

certain amount of autonomy within mountain marriages. This autonomy, however, was not caused by the infiltration of ideas like that of the Republican motherhood. Rather, it reflected the persistence of older ways. Author and former Arkansas resident Shirley Abbott explained: "the frontier is one place where a woman is an absolute necessity, a full partner in earning a living."³¹ Historian Joanna L. Stratton reinforced Abbott's comment when she described the pioneer family as:

a self-sufficient unit that took pride in its ability to provide for itself and persevere in the face of hardships. Men and women worked together as partners, combining their strengths and talents to provide food and clothing for themselves and their children. As a result, women found themselves on a far more equal footing with their spouses.³²

Although Stratton discussed western pioneers her analyses held true for isolated areas like the Ozarks as well. Women were forced to work outside of the home, thus crossing traditional gender barriers into a male sphere.

Jean E. Friedman, historian and author of the Enclosed Garden stated that:

traditional rural society experiences no structural changes and adheres to time-bound methods of agrarian production that do not require specialization of role. . . . A woman's culture does not necessarily develop in traditional society because work roles cross over; females are not rigidly segregated in farm economies. Group consciousness therefore tends to identify with family and community rather than with sex.³³

Friedman's analysis is not entirely correct for Ozark society. Whereas women tended to cross gender barriers in

work, it was very unlikely for men to cross over into the domestic sphere. Female specialization in the domestic sphere created a purely feminine working environment controlled by a woman's network, which was a very important part of these women's lives. For, as Shirley Abbott explained, "It has been a zealously guarded secret among Southern women for years. Next to motherhood, sisterhood is what they value most, taking an endless pleasure in the daily, commonplace, society of one another that they never experience in male company."³⁴ Ozark women, then, fulfilled a traditional domestic role in which other women participated to make a female community; they also performed secondary non-traditional farming tasks that crossed gender barriers to ensure the families' survival within the mountain communities.

The traditional role of women in the Ozarks centered around the domestic sphere because full-time motherhood was a reality for a population of women who had no reliable birth control and needed the children as farmhands. Realistically, women could look for one child to be born every two years from the day they married, although mothers expected one or more to die in childhood. Almeda Riddle, an Ozark resident, describes the common infant death problem when recalling her own family. "There were two that died

before I was born. I only had one sister older than I and two younger than I that lived. . . . There were four of us girls that lived."³⁵ In Almeda's experience, death was a constant concern for mothers.

In an environment as harsh as this one, mothers were still fiercely attached to their children. Ella Dunn, an Ozark resident, remembers, "my Mother said, 'I gave my life for my children.' I felt the same way. If it was to do over, I'd spend more time with them than I did. I taught them to work."³⁶ Children went along on the daily tasks with the mother, since the work of subsistence farm women did not enable them to take time out for individual child-care. Despite childbirth, women still had to maintain the farm house. When children became old enough, they became their mother's assistants. Describing her own childhood in the Ozarks, Ella Dunn explained that, "We always found something to do when we ran out of work around the house."³⁷ Children, in other words, worked alongside and under the supervision of mothers to help the struggling subsistence farm family. Young children were nevertheless another chore, although an often adored chore, of the mountain women.

Despite the time-consuming task of raising children, women had to preserve, prepare, and cook all the food grown on the farm, as part of their domestic duties. The

subsistence community had to live off the food it grew. Food storage and preservation therefore became important jobs for Ozark women since they had to ensure that the fall harvest would last until the spring! Different methods of preservation and types of storage were used for different vegetables and fruits. Potatoes, apples, and turnips, for example, were stored in makeshift cellars or, more often, a hole dug in the yard and covered with straw.³⁸ Some Ozark homes were located near a cave spring. Mountain springs maintained a temperature of about fifty-two degrees. Often, these springs poured out of a cave on the side of a hill. Because of the chilly temperature of the water, these small caves maintained a temperature much like a modern day refrigerator and could be built up with shelves where food could be kept. Also, during the wintertime:

people made use of the natural cold temperature. Food was sometimes covered and put in outdoor window boxes, and porches also served as winter refrigerators if the food was carefully covered so there would be no danger of animals eating it.³⁹

Women also sundried fruits and vegetables and stored them in jars. The preservation of food ensured that the subsistence farm family would make it through the winter.

When hogs and cows were slaughtered it was often a multi-family affair and an all-day task. Shared labor was important to the maintenance of the subsistence community. Ellen Gray Massey, an Ozark folklorist, explained that pork

was often "cured and stored...in the smokehouse," by women as well as men.⁴⁰ Cows, on the other hand, were only butchered in winter because their meat would keep in cold weather. Furthermore, stated Massey "two or three families would get together to butcher a steer so that all the beef was consumed before it spoiled."⁴¹ There were many ways to prepare beef once the cows had been butchered. Charles Morrow Wilson, who grew up in the Ozarks recalled, "we pickled beef, smoked it into jerky, corned it in vinegar water, canned it in glass fruit jars or 'tallowed it down,' precooked, in earthen crocks."⁴² The preservation of food in this manner was the task of all subsistence farm women since the food grown had to feed the family all year long, not just during harvest and butchering times.

The women were not only responsible for food preservation but also for the daily cooking for the family. Cooking in the Ozarks was done in a skillet or a kettle over coals. At the turn of the twentieth century wooden cook stoves did begin to appear, which greatly improved cooking conditions.⁴³ The most important cooking task was the preparation of daily bread, usually in the form of biscuits and corn bread. Women would get up before dawn to stoke the fire in preparation for a large breakfast complete with biscuits, eggs and bacon.

In addition to enduring the rigors of childcare and food preparation, women had to convert primary crops into usable goods such as clothing. Otto Ernest Rayburn explains that the subsistence farmers of the Ozarks:

were solving their economic problems in a satisfactory manner without outside aid. The farmer made his land supply not only food for the table, but material for making shoes, clothing, and various other household and farm necessities. He usually raised a few sheep and cultivated a patch of cotton, hemp, or flax. This supplied necessary raw materials for the women who were expert in making various kinds of cloth.⁴⁴

As Rayburn indicates, it was the job of women to convert the home grown raw materials into usable household foods and products. Roy Webster, an Ozark resident, remembered, "in those days about everything we needed was homegrown, homemade, or we did without."⁴⁵ Cloth and clothes making became the most time consuming of women's work. Women either deseeded raw cotton at home, or more often at the turn of the century, took it to a community gin and had it ginned. From this raw cotton women used a homemade wheel to spin, "which produced a coarse yarn for the loom."⁴⁶ In addition to cotton, mountain women used wool to make winter clothing.⁴⁷ Women dyed both cotton and wool with the help of natural products like coppera or alum for brown, sumac for black, and peach leaves for yellow.⁴⁸ Women also dyed yarns and placed them on large handmade looms. Woven into fabric, the cloth was used to dress and cover every member of the family. The farm women's ability to transform cotton

and wool into clothing ensured the families' survival in a subsistence economy.

New wives often lacked a loom and in these instances would take advantage of the resources of kin or neighbors. Furthermore, sewing and quilting parties would be held to quickly complete, through communal labor, large tasks like quilts, suits, and dresses.⁴⁹ Cloth and clothing were time consuming to make and thus were precious commodities. For this reason Ozark women patched old clothing and handed it down until even the smallest member of the family could not wear it anymore. From these remnants of clothing, patch quilts and rag carpets were made. "My grandmother," remembered another Ozark resident at the turn of the century, "used to save the basting threads from a finished garment...she would use scraps of threads to piece quilts or to patch torn garments."⁵⁰ Ozark residents made precious use of all resources to maintain their subsistence communities. Women's traditional role was defined by transforming the family's resources into the food and clothes needed for survival. With those chores geared to full-time motherhood, women were constantly busy within the domestic or woman's sphere.

Women of the Ozarks were not bound entirely by the domestic realm, however. Women's sphere extended from the home through women's roles as the family and community

nurse. Untrained except for family lore, these women used old-fashioned techniques and "herbal brews" to cure the sick.⁵¹ The techniques were handed down from generation to generation; herbal lore became an important part of the education of mountain women. Furthermore, when death came to the Ozarks, the women took exclusive care of preparing the body and dressing it in burial clothing.

Care for the sick and needy, however, were not the only non-domestic chores in which women participated. Many performed other community services such as midwiving. Both Almeda Riddle and Ella Dunn were respected midwives. Both learned traditional herbal techniques for healing the sick as well as birthing techniques from their mothers. "I had alot of experiences while I was a midwife." Ella Dunn recalled, "I didn't start because I wanted to. I was really pushed into it. See, my mother had been a midwife for forty years, so I guess I was born to be. . . ."⁵² These women were a respected part of the community, because all families needed someone to assist in birthing. There was no doctor around.

Community midwifery did not exclude a woman from domestic work, however. Women, of necessity, took part in another form of non-traditional labor; farm labor and maintenance. Almeda Riddle remembered: "I plowed and I took care of the horses and broke the colts. I did everything

but milkin' cows. . . . My younger sister Verdie learned to milk and she did the milkin'."⁵³ Almeda was no exception, as Ellen Gray Massey commented: "farming and housework were both hard, always needed to be done, and left little time for pleasure." In fact, one Ozark native Ila Lamkins recalled, "'Just about most of the time was work and no play. We had to work if we ate. And everybody wanted to eat.'"⁵⁴

In addition to the work of animal care, women often found themselves performing field labor. Because of the Ozark's pioneer status, women helped clear new ground. "When I was a child we quilted, and crocheted and knitted, and plowed," Almeda Riddle recalled.⁵⁵ Shirley Abbott also commented that women "plowed and planted and gathered in the wood. They looked after the barnyard animals, fished, and hunted if necessary."⁵⁶ Women did more than perform associated farming tasks. Women's farm tasks took them out of the domestic sphere, but so did the need for communal exchange in the mountain economy.

Subsistence agriculture meant that at all times a family had to create out of raw materials all goods needed for survival. Within mountain communities families ensured communal survival by loaning food products and services to those in need. The exchange was then returned in kind or by supplement. Author Margaret Jones Bolsterli documents this

exchange in her introduction to Nannie Stillwell Jackson's diary. Nannie's diary demonstrated, as Bolsterli explained, "a highly developed sense of community responsibility" where "individuals step forward to care for each other during a crisis."⁵⁷ For example, Nannie Stillwell Jackson noted in her diary, "I let Mrs. Chandler have 7 pounds of meat to day, she is to pay it back Wednesday...I sent the coffee to Pete Willis in return for the tea Mr Jackson got last thursday."⁵⁸ Women exchanged with neighbors, friends, and kin when products were needed. Most importantly, women took a large role in recording as well as participating in the trade, as Nannie's diary demonstrates. Although these women were trading for the whole family, and often as representatives of their husbands, their participation brought them outside of the domestic sphere into economic relationships within the community. The exchange thus gave women a more equal footing with men than their more urban counterparts whose husbands went to stores to purchase needed goods. By the exchange of goods with neighbors and friends, women also came into contact with other women, which helped to create a women's support network and thus a separate women's community.

Through participation in the community, women were able to create an independent female network. For example, Bolsterli observed that Nannie Stillwell Jackson's diary

documents "a support system among women which reveals a woman's culture that coexisted with both a men's culture and another shared by men and women."⁵⁹ Women developed a community then, exclusive from men, in which they found friendship and escape from the rigors of their lives. Women helped each other in crises and in day-to-day living. Almeda Riddle expressed this when she recalled assisting a neighbor. "There was another old neighbor lady...that I just loved, Aunt Sally Bittle. She lived alone...and she got lonely, and I'd invite her over to spend the night."⁶⁰ Furthermore, because beds were scarce, Almeda explained, she and Aunt Sally would share one.⁶¹ Also, women would travel miles to spend time together and help and care for each other. Lois Beard recalled the help a friend gave her in preparing her wedding dress: "Mother didn't want to make it. She was not too good a hand to sew, she didn't think, so I rode horseback with my material down to my good friends Jim and Frances Davis. Frances was a good hand to sew. I stayed all day and she made my wedding dress."⁶² The women's community was a haven from their endless domestic and non-domestic duties. Exchange of goods and services brought women together to enjoy a separate female community. As Shirley Abbott explains, "next to motherhood, sisterhood is what they value most, taking an endless pleasure in the daily, commonplace society of one another that they never

experience in male company."⁶³ The women's community, that sense of sisterhood, resulted in part from women's movement into the community through the exchange of goods and services. This exchange was an extension of the domestic sphere, but it created a community awareness and a sense of autonomy for these women in their mountain marriages.

Women like Nannie were able to keep a community of women friends, like Fannie, secluded from the rest of mountain society. This sisterhood was described by Shirley Abbott as well. In her description of her mother, a former Ozark resident, Abbott recalled, "I gradually realized that my mother and her sister were not awed by men in the least, that they preferred each other's company to that of their respective husbands. . . . I could not have voiced the idea, but I knew that the part of their lives they liked most was here, with each other."⁶⁴ This independence provided women with emotional as well as material support. This female community gave them some degree of autonomy within their marriages. In her essay titled "Ozark Women and the Companionate family in the Arkansas Hills, 1870-1910", Janet Allured argued that an increase in women's autonomy occurred because of mountain women's all important role in the modern family as "wives and mothers." "Females were the guardians of morality," she continued, "the saviours of civilization itself."⁶⁵ This is not entirely

true. The notion of Republican motherhood had little to do with Ozark mountain women's autonomy. Even if the ideas of Republican motherhood moved into the area with the arrival of new immigrants from other parts of the United States, they never became as important as the autonomy created by the familial need of shared labor for survival, which maintained a pre-industrial, pre-modern community. Women were an economic necessity. Women's economic importance permitted them to create a female support network, an exclusive women's culture that helped them deal with the rigors of pioneer life.

Conclusion

The persistence of a subsistence economy in the Ozarks made the lives of Ozark women different from the lives of the women in the northeastern United States. The isolation that helped maintain a subsistence economy created an environment in which women did a variety of tasks, crossing gender barriers in their work. The women worked in two different spheres, the domestic, which was considered traditional and mimicked those of their northeastern contemporaries and the non-traditional or non-domestic world, of very different rules. In the domestic sphere Ozark women played an important role in the maintenance of home and the rearing of children. But, mountain women did perform important non-domestic tasks like nursing, midwiving, tending animals, and farming. Survival in a subsistence community was assured by women's system of bartering or exchanging food and other goods when needed. Women shared goods with friends and neighbors strengthening each family's chance of survival. This again distinguished the mountain women from the northeastern domestic model. This community of exchange enabled the women of the Ozark mountains to interact with women in an environment separate from men. Women found in their association with other women the friendship and companionship that all people desire.

Women like Nannie Stillwell Jackson, Shirley Abbott's mother, Lois Beard, and Almeda Riddle relied on their female friends and relatives for support and friendship. With the support of their women friends, the Ozark mountain women were able to enjoy a partnership with their husbands as well as to maintain the family in a subsistence agricultural community.

The Ozark mountain women had a way of life very different from their northeastern contemporaries. The subsistence economy and all the work that goes along with it shaped their lives and gave them an autonomy that women in the industrial north did not have. It was the subsistence economy that created a way of life so different for these women.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jean E. Friedman, The Enclosed Garden: Women and the Evangelical South 1830-1900 (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1985) 7.
- ² Milton D. Rafferty, The Ozarks: Land and Life (Norman: Oklahoma UP, 1980) 3.
- ³ Rafferty, Land and Life 3.
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