

Fall 2006

The 'We Say What We Think' Club: Rural Wisconsin Women and the Development of Environmental Ethics

Nancy Unger
Santa Clara University, nunger@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/history>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Social Justice Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Unger, N. (2006). The 'We Say What We Think' Club: Rural Wisconsin Women and the Development of Environmental Ethics. *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 16-27. (Cover feature)
<http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/wmh/id/43506/show/43463/rec/12>

Copyright © 2006 Wisconsin Historical Society. Reprinted with permission.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rschroggin@scu.edu.



WHI Image ID 40689

The women of the We Say What We Think Club gather around a microphone to discuss the benefits of rural life from a woman's point of view. Members of the club (left to right): Selma Sorenson, Isabel Baumann, Sibylle Mitchell, Ruth King, and Grace Langer.

The We Say What We Think Club

by Nancy C. Unger

May 25, 1937, marked the premier of the *We Say What We Think Club*, a program produced exclusively for women on Madison, Wisconsin's WIBA radio. Unlike many other "talk radio" programs of that time that targeted "ladies," it did not feature professionals offering women lessons in refinement, or advice on relationships, or homemaking tips. It featured instead five Wisconsin homemakers who, as the program's title suggests, were determined to speak their minds. And speak they did. Originally a run of six months was anticipated; however, what began in the final years of the Great Depression—cast members broadcasting their thoughts for fifteen minutes each month—continued through World War II and culminated in 1957: a total of twenty years. Topics centered on current issues and ranged from world affairs to rural education, including the need for recreation, the dangers of marijuana, the importance of reli-

gion, the value of women's clubs, wartime taxation and rationing, gardening, rural mail delivery services, and much, much more.

This club was hardly exclusive—there was no formal membership. Any woman within the listening radius reached by the station's 100 watts of power was encouraged by the five women's easy-going banter and conversational style to feel that she, too, was a part of the discussion and that these women were not just her equals but her friends.¹ The five featured cast members proved so popular that they, with their listeners, created a virtual club. Listeners, as unofficial members, were invited to mail in their comments and suggestions and share what *they* thought. The scripts of their monthly "meetings" provide an unprecedented window into the thoughts of rural Wisconsin women over a twenty-year period.

Radio Comes to the Farm

In the early twentieth century a variety of technological advancements revolutionized work and home life on the farm. Wisconsin was a leader in the broadcasting industry, establishing one of the nation's first radio stations in 1917 on the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison, which broadcast both voice and music. "[A]t the University of Wisconsin-Madison, special transmitting tubes were manually built as needed to keep radio station 9XM, which later became WHA, on the air. The tubes were designed, constructed and tested by Professor E. M. Terry and a group of his students in the University laboratories. Some of the tubes were also used in wireless telephonic experiments conducted with the Great Lakes Naval Training Station during 1918, when a war-time ban was imposed on wireless broadcasts."²

Although the advent of radio transformed America, radio ownership was hardly universal. Radio remained a luxury of the urban middle- and upper-classes well into the 1920s. Nearly 90 percent of all urban dwellers had electricity by the 1930s, but for a variety of economic, legal, and technological reasons, rural areas lagged behind. Although only one in six Wisconsin farms had electricity by 1930,³ the state fared better than the national average of ten percent for rural residents, it was in the mid-1930s before rural electrification increased nationwide.⁴ On newly electrified American farms a radio was the most popular appliance purchase.⁵ For most Wisconsin farming families in 1937, radio quickly became the prime source of news, information, and entertainment.

The We Say What We Think (WSWWT) Club Takes to the Airwaves

In 1937 the Dane County agent's office, a government agency serving as a consultant and adviser to the rural community, began plans for *The Dane County Farm Program*. The broadcast provided advice and information on matters including agriculture, education, and home economics. Before long, the office received requests for a "ladies" program to be broadcast monthly.⁶ Assistant County Agent Bill Clark explained, "When we started planning a women's program all of a sudden it came to me—We men can't advise women! Being a married man myself, I knew women didn't think the same way as men do." Rather than hold auditions, the county agent's staff invited "five outstanding rural women to try their hand."⁷ Sibylle Mitchell, one of the five, recalled the selection process: "Back in the years when the Dane County Rural Federation was a very active organization made up of federated rural clubs, at one time over sixty in number, we five who had all been ranking officers in the Fed[eration] [four as Federation president] were asked by the Dane county agent and the Dane county nurses to put on a program of interest to women over the radio."⁸

Mitchell believed strongly in the power of organization to

spread influence: "We cannot accomplish too much if we go about it all alone, but by uniting with others we are working for the same thing and [in] pooling our ideas and energy we may accomplish more sometimes than appears on the surface." She attributed the WSWWT Club's longevity and effectiveness to hard work, knowledge of the subjects at hand, and the power of personality. She noted that she and her colleagues had been active in church as well as farm organizations. Her organizational experience prior to WSWWT Club taught her to "preside at a meeting properly, study and search for material to be adequately informed on the subject at hand, [and] enlarged and often changed [her] ideas and viewpoint for the better."⁹ A listener, who was also a farmer, attested to her abilities—and the wide range of the WSWWT Club audience—when he told County Agent Clark, "You tell those women they sure as hell know what they are talking about."¹⁰

Along with Mitchell, who was from Cottage Grove, the cast consisted of Ruth King of Madison, Isabel Baumann of Sun Prairie, Grace Langer of Marshall, and Selma Sorenson of Klevenville (later Mt. Horeb).¹¹ They had much in common: in addition to their involvement in church activities and farm organizations, all five of these "outstanding farm women" were married, some were mothers. All five had rural backgrounds, most lived on farms, and had worked at paid careers before marriage.

The shows strictly adhered to the format established in the very first broadcast. There was a topic-of-the-day on a wide



WHS Museum 1878.364.2, Photo by Joel Heiman

Although this radio looks like wood, it was made of plastic by Emerson Radio Phonograph of New York, ca. 1940. On newly electrified farms a radio was the most popular appliance purchase.

WHA, advertised at a Milwaukee radio show in 1922, was one of the first radio stations to target a rural audience.



WHi Image ID 23506



WHi Image ID 41459

Club members perceived urban gender spheres as almost totally separate, with women exclusively in the home all day while the men worked their desk jobs in the city. Farm couples had a lifestyle that still mandated sharing chores, which resulted in a type of partnership different from that of urban couples.

range of subjects, like "Better Clubs for Women" or "Feeding the Family in War Time." Once the topic was introduced, the women explored it through homey conversation among the

five women. At the suggestion of WIBA management, they would frequently end the broadcasts by sharing a recipe, thus the station gauged the size of its audience by how many listeners wrote in requesting copies. In-studio guests were rare, but letters from listeners were sometimes read aloud during broadcasts. Although most of the cast members were merely acquaintances with the others before the first broadcast, every effort was made to present the five regulars as old friends enjoying an unscripted conversation concerning issues to females of all ages and fostering community by sharing common interests and helping to solve common problems.

A tribute to the show during its thirteenth year of production mistakenly reported that episodes were "usually unrehearsed and adlibbed." In truth, for at least the first ten years, the seemingly unplanned discussions were carefully orchestrated. On the Sunday before each show, the cast members and their husbands met for a potluck supper, after which the men played the popular card game, euchre, and the women worked up a formal script. The cast members attended practice sessions and continually modified their lines, crossing out the typescript and inserting handwritten changes. To ensure the semblance of spontaneity, they peppered the scripts with directions such as "all talking together," "butting in quickly," "talking over the others," and "laugh." Over the years, their confidence grew, and they became close friends. As a result, the scripts were shorter, and they ultimately worked from more informal notes and outlines.¹²



WHI Image ID 18295

The hosts of the We Say What We Think Club were all prominent members of rural women's clubs like this one.

Why A Women's Program?

Why was it that, in the words of Bill Clark, that "women [didn't] think the same way as men"? The need for a "women only" approach reflected the increasing separation of the gender spheres that emerged on farms as their standard of living improved. As in pioneer days, farm men and women on farms still worked together at various seasonal tasks when all hands were needed. However, even as they continued to share the burdens of farming, the two sexes occupied progressively separate spheres. Women were occupied primarily in the house, where they cleaned, cooked, canned, and sewed, and also in the immediate yard, where they raised flowers, fruits, vegetables and chickens. Some tasks traditionally relegated to women, such as milking cows, were becoming more and more a part of the male sphere of field crops and livestock. Although childrearing tasks continued to be shared by both parents, the day-to-day supervision of babies, toddlers, young children, and older daughters was almost exclusively the mothers' domain. Fathers spent more time with sons who were old enough to perform significant tasks in the world of male chores and responsibilities. The rural leaders of the WSWWT Club viewed these separate spheres as both sensible and natural, noting on air, "[I]n the division of labor (and this has never been written into the law, but it is true just the same), between man and woman it has been woman's function to feed, to prepare food, and to do the other things necessary for the maintenance of the family unit."¹³

Their views were influenced by the belief that women, more than men, were concerned with moral issues: a belief that had been heavily propagated for more than a century. By the 1850s, "true womanhood," or woman's proper sphere, referred to an idealized domestic environment of home upheld by four pillars: piety, purity, submissiveness and



WHI Image ID 41462



WHI Image ID 16991

Wisconsin was well-known for its advanced radio technology throughout the first half of the twentieth century. WIBA's radio transmitter and tower are pictured here in the 1930s, when the We Say What We Think Club was first broadcast.

WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY



WHi Image ID 41458

The We Say What We Think Club broadcasts presented the importance of resource conservation and cultivated the perception of rural women as particularly attuned to nature.



WHi Image ID 25029

One of the benefits of farm life emphasized by the We Say What We Think Club members was the unique companionship available to farm couples such as this one, photographed in 1920, who both worked and lived together in Cross Plains.

WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY



WHI Image ID 6849

A husband and wife work together to can corn, exemplifying the mutual effort required of a married couple to run a successful farm. Although it was more common for women to help with the farm chores, their husbands also helped with some of the domestic duties usually categorized as women's work.

A FARM WOMAN'S CREED

I am a farm woman

I live in the country and love it.

As a farm woman I can have more complete companionship and partnership with my husband than I could anywhere else.

In the country my family can live in closer fellowship than is possible elsewhere.

In the country each one of us is important to the community life instead of being lost in the crowd.

On the farm our work, both inside and outside, is creative and I, as a farm woman, have a share in the great task of putting agriculture on a sounder basis and in making rural life all that we want it and expect

MSS 195 box 2 folder 8

The We Say What We Think Club members were fervent supporters of the rural lifestyle, and encouraged farm women to recognize their own importance in the larger world.

Their viewpoint was affirmed in The Farm Woman's Creed at a time when many felt left behind by the increasing popularity of urban life.

domesticity. Within the home, women were described as innately dependent, affectionate, gentle, nurturing, benevolent, and sacrificing. Morally and spiritually superior to men, women (mothers, ideally) within this sphere maintained a high level of purity in all things and bore the complete responsibility for inspiring and cultivating purity within all of the home's inhabitants.¹⁴

During the progressive era (circa 1890–1917), many middle-class female reformers—primarily but not exclusively white—used their established “innate” moral authority to claim that male domination of business and technology had resulted in a skewed value system. Profit had replaced morality, they charged, as men focused on financial gain as the sole measurement of success and progress. In the factories where profits turned a few individuals into millionaires, workers toiled long hours for low wages in unsafe conditions only to go home to urban ghettos rife with poverty, crime, and disease. Additionally, precious, non-renewable resources were ripped from the earth with no thought to their conservation, let alone preservation.¹⁵

Environmental activist Lydia Adams-Williams, Forestry Chairwoman of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, spoke for many women when she charged in 1908, “Man has been too busy building railroads, constructing ships, engineering great projects, and exploiting vast commercial enterprises” to consider the future. It fell to woman, Adams-Williams concluded, “in her power to educate public sentiment, to save from rapacious waste and complete exhaustion, the resources upon which depend the welfare of the home, the children, and the children's children.”¹⁶ In the face of so much gross injustice, women, long prescribed to be the civilizers of men, staged protests and organized reform efforts.

The cast of the *We Say What We Think Club*, like women all across the country, grew up in a culture steeped in the belief that the masculine drive caused men to focus more on the short term—to support their families by exploiting nature in order to acquire profits.¹⁷ Women, on the other hand, were perceived as naturally driven by altruism and the desire to ensure and protect future generations. When examined from an environmental history perspective, the Club's program revealed that the cast believed their own lives, and the lives of their listeners, were shaped by the environmental forces of rural living and what they perceived women's roles should be in protecting that environment.

Radio as Powerful Moral Tool

Especially for women lacking nearby neighbors, radio brought much-needed adult companionship as they performed chores that consumed more than sixty-five hours of their time each week.¹⁸ At the time the WSWWT Club was formed, its members tuned in their radios to hear dramas, soap operas, music, news, and advice. Many programs provided local news as well as farm and weather reports. Others were national broadcasts, enjoyed by rural and urban audiences across the country. A particular favorite

was *One Man's Family*, which was characterized by Ruth King as “merely present[ing] the daily happenings of a real life honest to goodness family,” and praised because “all of us like something which is natural to us and which we do ourselves.” Nationally broadcast comedy programs like *Fibber McGee and Molly* brought laughter and variety shows including *The Fred Allen Show* and *The Jack Benny Program* showcased a range of talented performers. *Let's Pretend* and *Jack Armstrong: All American Boy* offered wholesome entertainment for children. Radio opened the world to previously isolated Americans, spurring rural imaginations and offering unprecedented opportunities. Club leader Sibylle Mitchell pointed out in 1937, “A few years back a lot of us had never heard an opera—probably thought we never could hear one. Now we have opera brought right into our kitchens.”¹⁹

Club leaders agreed that “the farm woman—the woman in the home, appreciates all the valuable information she gets over the radio.” Because they took the power of radio so seriously, they were offended by programs they found condescending, dull, larded with commercials, sloppily edited, or too farcical (Ruth King termed *Amos and Andy*, a once enormously popular comedy

program based on racist stereotypes of African Americans, “rather broad and superficial,” adding “a little goes a long way”). They also disdained programming too heavy on the “gooey, lovey-dovey stuff.” They believed themselves to be, by virtue of their domestic sphere, especially well qualified to offer such critiques: “Since the woman's work confines her to the home more than any other member of the family, she hears more radio programs and is in a better position to analyze and criticize them than a man.”²⁰

Noting in their very first broadcast that “radio has become the most powerful educational weapon for good or for evil in this country,” the Club's cast members took their mission



UW Archives

The University of Wisconsin's annual Farm and Home Week Program offered farm women the opportunity to get off the farm, socialize, and attend banquets, plays, round table discussions, demonstrations, exhibits and speeches by leading farmers.

seriously, perceiving themselves as a positive moral influence, and thus, strove to educate their female listeners for good. They emphasized the importance of mothers in monitoring their children's listening habits, stressing that, even more than newspapers and movies, radio had become such an intimate part of rural lives "that every woman should be alert to the kind of things her children and family listen to."²¹ "We're just here to say what we think," said Selma Sorenson in an early broadcast, "and maybe what we say will get other folks . . . to think themselves."²²

Advantages of the Rural Environment

In "Do I Want My Daughter to Marry a Farmer?", one of the Club's first broadcasts, the five read portions of letters elicited from country mothers and daughters. Rural life was seldom discussed on its own merits but presented in contrast to urban living. Between 1860 and 1910 the number of people living in American cities increased sevenfold, while the rural population hadn't even doubled.²³ By 1920, the majority of Americans no longer lived on farms but in cities, which were celebrated for their skyscrapers, vibrant immigrant populations, and cultural and entertainment opportunities. Farmers were no longer celebrated in popular culture as living out the Jeffersonian ideal, but often denigrated in jokes, songs, and literature as "backward," "yokels," and "hicks from the sticks." In Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel *Babbalanja*, for example, a city dweller speaks condescendingly of "these small town boobs, with nobody but each other to talk to, [it's] no wonder they get so sloppy and uncultured in their speech and so balled up in their thinking." His companion agrees: "No sense excusing the rube burbs . . . easily. [It's a] fellow's own fault if he doesn't show the initiative to up and beat it to the city . . . they're jealous as the devil of the city man." Confirms a third companion, "What I mind is their lack of culture and appreciation of the beautiful."²⁴ Clearly stung by such assumptions that farm life was inferior, the comments by the Club leaders and their listeners fairly bristled with righteous indignation. Rejecting the stereotype of farm women as worn out drudges who envied urban women's lives of convenience and sophistication, they firmly established the superior features of their rural lives, claiming their rightful place as participants in the national scene, not wishful onlookers.²⁵ Club members—listeners at home as well as the women in the studio—agreed that "[t]he girl who marries a farmer . . . will know and love nature . . . will know the joy of labor and tasks well done," and "will live a full, well rounded life." While they acknowledged that no lifestyle guaranteed happiness, they were confident that rural women had many advantages over their sisters of the same socioeconomic class in the city, a superiority wrought by environmental differences. With running water, electricity, and other conveniences all available on Wisconsin farms, the farm wife "has more

opportunities to enjoy life in her work than the city wife who has to coop herself up in some small, hot stuffy apartment in a large city."²⁶

City life came under particularly harsh criticism when the subject turned to childrearing. "The farm," the Club members agreed, "surely is a far healthier place to rear children," with "wide open spaces . . . in preference to the dusty, busy city streets." Heavy street traffic was a menace that "almost drives mothers insane," but "one can't expect to keep a child cooped up in a wee little apartment most of the day." Even mothers fortunate enough to find urban housing with a yard or garden had to worry about potential damage to plants, shrubs, and lawns that would alienate the rare landlord willing to rent to families with small children in the first place. By contrast, "there is no better place to raise children than in the country," they asserted repeatedly. They scoffed at the notion that farm children lacked educational opportunities. The one-room schoolhouse of yore had been replaced by a consolidated system guaranteeing all Wisconsin students the same high standards of education: "School advantages are so much improved now that no one has to fear disadvantages in the country."²⁷

Marriages too, they asserted, fared better in the country. Although rural gender spheres were increasingly separate, and Club members acknowledged that women spent most of their time in the home away from the outdoor world of men, they emphasized the overlap that remained. As a result of a lifestyle that still mandated the occasional sharing of chores and afforded the opportunity to share meals and interactions at various times throughout the day, country couples enjoyed "a spirit of comradeship that never seemed to exist in town." Club members perceived urban gender spheres as nearly



WHI Image ID 25029

The necessary collaboration between husband and wife on the farm is demonstrated by this couple using a two-person saw to clear land in Marinette County, ca. 1905.

totally separate, with the women exclusively in the home all day while the men worked their desk jobs in the city. "On the farm," they bragged, "the woman works hand in hand—side by side with her husband." They agreed that such comradeship was spiritual in nature, for "nothing binds people so close together as common interests and common work."²⁸

Club members emphasized that "farm people have a better outlook on life" because they were in tune with the rhythms of nature rather than consumed by the artificiality of urban living. "We love to watch things grow, little calves, pigs, lambs, baby chicks—to say nothing of enjoying fragrant spring flowers, the garden, the sun, the song of the birds, the hum of the mower and binder. We would feel so cramped up in the city," Selma Sorenson approvingly quoted from a letter by a listener who had lived in town for eighteen years before moving to the country: "I feel now as if I never actually lived before I moved on the farm." Rural living, they agreed, imbued a spirituality unique to farming families because "they are closer to nature, their religion seems to mean more to them, and there is a genuine spirit of friendliness and helpfulness between most neighbors in farm communities."²⁹ In support of the contention that "the farm woman has an opportunity to put more into life than the average city woman," Isabel Baumann noted the balm for the soul supplied by the act of gardening, concluding, "[A] garden—and I say this in utter reverence—is an ambassador of God, and can do miracles."³⁰

During World War II, the Club pointed out some decidedly practical advantages of rural life. City women could buy only what their local stores were able to stock and were further restricted by the point system attached to rationed items. Farm women, on the other hand, as long as "the weather man is at all cooperative," could plan for the year ahead at planting time. Because of the ability of farm women to raise and preserve their own food, WSWWT Club listeners were reminded in 1943, "You won't need to spend sixteen of those precious [ration] points for a No. 2 can of tomatoes."³¹

Education Programs for Rural Women

Like their sisters throughout Wisconsin, the Club's cast and listeners actively sought to broaden their intellectual, social, cultural, and scientific horizons. A variety of programs and clubs supplied learning opportunities for rural women that went beyond the formal curriculum offered by the state's colleges and universities. Participation in such learning opportunities was appealing for a variety of reasons.

The one drawback to rural life that the Club's cast reluctantly acknowledged was that the farm was no respecter of the need for time away. The demands of rural living did not cease on holidays or birthdays and made vacationing virtually impossible. The Club did not intimate that farm women pined for lengthy family vacations, but rather that they wel-



WHi Image ID 10210

A woman from Marinette County holds a farm-grown squash, ca. 1920. Self-sufficiency was a significant benefit of farm life as families did not need to rely on local stores or ration points in order to feed themselves.

comed more modest, shorter breaks in which they could temporarily escape from the demands of farm and family. Selma Sorenson staunchly defended rural superiority even on this topic, wondering aloud "if vacations are all they're supposed to be," and arguing that "what one needs on a vacation is not a change of places so much as a change of mind." Retorted Sibylle Mitchell, "Maybe you're right, but I'll still take my vacations away from home if you please." Vacations brought more than a break from the endless round of chores: "My family appreciates me more and I'll like them better after we have been separated for a time."³²

The desire for intellectual stimulation, self-improvement, and a refreshing break from routine chores and faces rendered farm women eager to attend events like the University of Wisconsin's Farm and Home Week Program, which offered banquets, plays, round table discussions demonstrations, exhibits, and speeches by leading farmers. Noting how happy her colleagues looked as all five WSWWT Club cast members prepared to leave for Madison in 1938, Ruth King noted, "I don't think there's a farm woman anywhere who doesn't look bright and cheerful when she takes a day or two off from the [here the word "drudgery" is crossed out of the typewritten script and "routine" written by hand above] of household chores and gives herself a treat to something like the Farm and Home Week Program." The cast, and many of the listener members, of the WSWWT Club seldom missed Farm and Home Week. It was during such programs, as well as at conferences, meetings, and in adult education classes, that rural women learned of and shared concerns about rural

WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

problems, environmental and otherwise. Additionally, they sought to be part of the solution and to learn about broader issues as well. Grace Langer endorsed University of Wisconsin School of Agriculture head Dean Christiansen's philosophy and quoted him in a 1938 WSWWT Club broadcast, "These days, perhaps more than ever, we need to know what is going on beyond our own fence lines."³³ Isabel Baumann praised women's clubs for giving their members "something creative and worthwhile" and making them aware of their role in the larger scheme of things. A strong advocate for rural women, she resented the general societal devaluation of women's work and was concerned that even women themselves did not sufficiently appreciate their own contributions to the community and beyond.³⁴ Baumann had long been active in the Farm Bureau Women's Committee, an organization designed to promote and protect the business, educational, and social interests of the farm family. She would ultimately become its chair in 1959 and the first woman to be seated on the Wisconsin Farm Bureau board of directors.³⁵

What Women Should Know About Soil Conservation

In 1943, WSWWT Club devoted two broadcasts to "What Women Should Know About Soil Conservation." "After all," observed Sibylle Mitchell wryly, "we women do know something about dirt." The women's claim to authority on the subject of soil conservation was, in fact, quite sound. It was borne out of their experiences, but also based in sophisticated analyses of the results of past and current farm practices. The Club's broadcasts reflected a growing appreciation for the importance of resource conservation fostered by the perception of rural women as especially attuned to nature, morality, and spirituality. Cast members were careful to point out that the dirt they and their listeners cleaned out of their houses and turned over while tending to their flower and vegetable gardens was not the same as the dirt in the fields cultivated by their husbands. Women's gardens tended to be heavily fertilized, consisting of relatively small plots of level land. As such, the plots were less likely to be subjected to erosion and soil exhaustion. "Perhaps," worried Isabel Baumann, "the very fact that we [women] are working in gardens blinds us to some of the things which are taking place in the fields which are devoted to crops."³⁶

Baumann, who had just completed teaching a unit on Dane County soils at her local rural school, led the Club's first discussion on soil erosion. She noted that there were thirty-six different kinds of soil in Dane County alone, but emphasized that the character of the soil, whether sandy, loamy, or otherwise, was not the farmer's only important consideration. Astonished that in less than one hundred years of farming, "between 25% and 75% of [the original topsoil] the Good Lord gave us is gone," Baumann detailed how tra-

ditional farming methods had led to such devastating erosion. "[W]e Americans," Selma Sorenson put it succinctly, "haven't used soil wisely."³⁷

The problem, chimed in Ruth King, was that twenty-five years ago "most farmers thought all they had to do to get good crops was to keep a herd of dairy cows and put the manure back on the land." As a result, explained Baumann, "Today we have to use lime and . . . commercial fertilizer and . . . plow under crops for green manure and . . . a lot of things that farmers didn't have to do 25 years ago" in order to get good crops. The biggest problem, according to Baumann, which she carefully explained in terms the Club's listeners would understand, was soil erosion: "[O]ur forefathers who came to Wisconsin started farming in a climate which was unfamiliar to them. Ours is a violent climate. The rains which fall in this climate are sometimes hard torrential rains. When these rains fall, the soil can't soak them up so they runoff the land and carry dirt with them. This process is known as erosion."³⁸

"Surely we can't stop the rains," exclaimed Grace Langer. "No, we can't," agreed Baumann, "but as farmers and farmers' wives, we can do something about the erosion."³⁹ In their next broadcast, Selma Sorenson explained in greater detail why erosion was a relatively new problem, emphasizing that it was a result of modern farming techniques, not the state's natural flora. "[W]hen our fore fathers took this land away from the Indians," she began, "trees and grass provided the land with a protective coating. Leaf mold, in particular, readily absorbed ground water, keeping the soils moist and secure. Clearing the trees and leaf mold and plowing the grass removed that protective cover."⁴⁰

Like their husbands, the Club women were concerned about the short-term repercussions of soil loss: the high labor



WHI Image ID 40679

Members of the We Say What We Think Club celebrate the thirteenth anniversary of the show.

5 Women Have Won Thousands of Radio Friends

By HELEN MATHESON
(State Journal Sunday Editor)

If a friend sticks with you for 13 years, that's a pretty good friendship.

And if you and your friend have never had a chance to visit . . . never even seen each other . . . that's really something.

This week five Dane county women with hundreds of friends like that got together to talk over an adventure 13 years ago.

Know Them?

Probably you know them on first-names terms, or feel you do.

They are Selma, Sybil, Grace and Ruth — rural housewives whose chatty observations on everything from world affairs to candy recipes have kept their monthly radio roundtable going far beyond the six-month "run" originally planned back in 1937.

The women whose conversation has run on cheerfully for these 13 years are Mrs. Cornelius Sorenson (Selma), Mt. Horeb; Mrs. George Mitchell (Sybil), Cottage Grove; Mrs. August Baumann (Isabel), Sun Prairie; Mrs. John Langer (Grace), Marshall, and Mrs. Howard King (Ruth), Madison.

No Holds Barred

Their program, pointedly entitled the "We Say What We Think Club," is broadcast at 11:45 a. m. the last Wednesday of each month over WIBA.

(This week the ladies surrender.)

Wisconsin State Journal, June 4, 1950.

This article, from the Wisconsin State Journal June 4, 1950, documents the appeal of the We Say What We Think Club to their audience of thousands.

and material costs of extensive fertilization. But the women, in keeping with their role as the civilizers of society and as mothers in tune with generational concerns, also emphasized more long-term and ethical considerations. They called for a "return [of] some of our land to its natural condition . . . which Nature originally provided." They warned that if such calls were not heeded because of men's relentless quest for immediate profit, lesser crop yields would lower the standard of living for future farming families. Club leaders took the long view, asserting that every farm woman was obligated to recognize the dangers of soil erosion, as well as the strategies to combat it, for the sake of "our children and our children's children on the farms."⁴¹

Farm women, the Club broadcast urged, should make every effort to learn more about soil conservation. Grace King stressed the shared power and authority in farm marriages: "Where changes in farming practices are to be made, it is just as necessary to get the cooperation and approval of farm wives as it is the husbands . . . [because] we farm women . . . generally have as much to say about our husband's business as he does."⁴² Accordingly, the Club leaders offered their listeners remedies for soil erosion. They described and advocated each remedy in considerable detail: the cover principle, which involved keeping steep land in grass and trees to avoid runoff; the contour principle, which involved planting crops in stripes on intensively farmed sloping land; and the principle of diversions, which involved constructing terrace ridges to divert surplus water in fields during hard rains. "MAN MUST WORK WITH NATURE," they concluded, "NOT AGAINST HER."⁴³

Conclusion

In 1957, after twenty years, the cast of the *We Say What We Think Club* decided "enough is enough" and ended the show of their own accord, but their legacy remains.⁴⁴ The scripts reflecting the thoughts of the cast and listener members give insight into the way rural women perceived their lives as shaped by their environment as well as by their gender. For two decades Sibylle Mitchell, Ruth King, Isabel Baumann, Grace Langer, and Selma Sorenson encouraged rural women to take themselves seriously, especially in their role as a moralizing influence. They urged their listeners to recognize that environmental problems concerned not just the men in the fields, but also their wives and daughters in the home—women who, by virtue of their gender, had a unique and important role to play in resource conservation and preservation. Because the cast "said what they thought," rural women were encouraged to see themselves not just as support staff for their husbands and children, but as independent and valuable individuals taking their rightful place as reformers in the larger world. *WMH*

Lo
Ru
Isa
20
Lit
to
Th
Sel
Sy
Si
Lu
R

WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

Notes

1. Helen Matheson, "We Say What We Think Club is 13 Years Old: 5 Women Have Won Thousands of Radio Friends," *Wisconsin State Journal* June 4, 1950, sec. 2, p. 1, "We Say What We Think Club" (WSWWTC), Box 1, Folder 13, Isabel Baumann Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).
2. "The History of Radio," *TVHandbook.com* Technical Press, 2004, http://www.tvhandbook.com/History/History_radio.htm and Harold A. Engel, "The Wisconsin Idea—in Broadcasting," *Wisconsin Academy Review* 6 (1959): 16–19, <http://www.library.wisc.edu/etext/WIReader/WER1102.html>.
3. Forrest McDonald, *Let There Be Light* (Madison, WI: The American History Research Center, 1957), 294–295.
4. "The Introduction of Electrical Power," Wisconsin Historical Society <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-041/?action=moreEssay>.
5. Rose Dudley Scarce, "What REA Service Means to our Farm Family," *Rural Electrification News*, (Rural Electrification Administration: March 1939) <http://newdeal.feri.org/rea/rea23.htm>.
6. The broadcast day and time varied during the program's long run.
7. Matheson, "We Say What We Think Club is 13 Years Old," *Wisconsin State Journal* June 4, 1950, sec. 2, p. 1, WSWWTC, Box 1, Folder 14, Baumann Papers, WHS.
8. Undated script, WSWWTC, Box 1, Folder 1, Baumann Papers, WHS.
9. Ibid.
10. Isabel Baumann interview, November 19, 1992, Wisconsin Women During World War II Oral History Project, WHS.
11. Widowed in 1942, Isabel McCarthy entered into her second marriage in 1952. In early scripts she is identified as McCarthy, changing later to Baumann.
12. Isabel Baumann interview, November 19, 1992, WHS.
13. Script, WSWWTC, June 25, 1941, p. 1, Box 1, Folder 5, Baumann Papers, WHS.
14. See Paul Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society," *The American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 629–647; Carolyn Merchant, "Women of the Conservation Movement," *Environmental Review* 8 (1984): 57–85; Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (Routledge, 1995); Nancy C. Unger, "Gendered Approaches to Environmental Justice," *Echoes from the Poisoned Well: Global Memories of Environmental Injustice* (Lexington Books, 2006): 17–34.
15. Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 86–87.
16. Lydia Adams-Williams, "Conservation—Women's Work," *Forestry and Irrigation* 14 (1908): 350–351.
17. See Merchant, "Women of the Conservation Movement"; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper 1990 reprint ed.); Unger, "Gendered Approaches to Environmental Justice."
18. Wisconsin Development Authority, "Wisconsin Gets a Power Program" (Madison: WDA, 1938), p. 7, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/search.asp?id=1007>.
19. Script, WSWWTC, May 25, 1937, p. 4, Box 1, Folder 1, Baumann Papers, WHS.
20. Ibid., 7.
21. Ibid., 2.
22. Script, WSWWTC, July 26, 1937, p. 1, Box 1, Folder 1, Baumann Papers, WHS.
23. Robert A. Divine, et. al, *America: Past and Present*, 3rd ed. (HarperCollins, 1991), 556.
24. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbalanza* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1922, Signet Classic reprint 1961), 98–99.
25. Perhaps the greatest purveyor of this negative perception of rural women's lives was Betty MacDonald's best-selling humorous depiction of country life in the 1920s, *The Egg and I*. Published in 1945, it was made into a film in 1947, which in turn spawned the enormously popular *Ma and Pa Kettle* film series of the 1950s.
26. Script, WSWWTC, September 6, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, Baumann Papers, WHS.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 6; Script, WSWWTC, April 25, 1938, p. 4, Box 1, Folder 2, Baumann Papers, WHS.
31. Script, WSWWTC, March 31, 1943, p. 4, Box 1, Folder 7, Baumann Papers, WHS.
32. Script, WSWWTC, July 26, 1937, p. 5, Box 1, Folder 1, Baumann Papers, WHS.
33. Script, WSWWTC, January 31, 1938, p. 2, Box 1, Folder 2, Baumann Papers, WHS.
34. Mary Neth, "Building the Base: Farm Women, the Rural Community, and Farm Organizations in the Midwest, 1900–1940" in Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder: West View Press, 1988), 342–345.
35. "Wisconsin FB Women Celebrate 75 Years," *Farm Bureau News*, April 14, 1997, http://www.fb.org/news/fbn/97/04_14/html/wisconsin.html.
36. Script, WSWWTC, June 30, 1943, 1, Box 1, Folder 7, Baumann Papers, WHS.
37. Ibid., 3.
38. Ibid., 4.
39. Script, WSWWTC, June 30, 1943, 5, Box 1, Folder 7, Baumann Papers, WHS.
40. Script, WSWWTC, July 13, 1943, 2, Box 1, Folder 7, Baumann Papers, WHS.
41. Ibid., 2; 5.
42. Script, WSWWTC, June 30, 1943, 6, Box 1, Folder 7, Baumann Papers, WHS.
43. Ibid. 3, 5. [emphasis in original] [9]
44. Isabel Baumann interview, November 19, 1992, WHS.

By the end of their twenty-year run, the We Say What We Think Club scripts consisted of simple handwritten outlines to guide their conversations (such as this one, from their final broadcast).

MSS 195 box 2 folder 8

April 27, 1957.
Last Broadcast of 20 years.
Ruth: — Introduction.
Isabel: — Doesn't seem like
20 yrs.
Libby: — He never expected
to have a prog. for all
these years — yes that it only
for one time —
Selma — Gray hair + picture
Grace: — not changed —
Ruth: — Just looking for distinction
Libby: — only grandmother
Grace — Federation —
Ruth — friendship — husbands

This essay was generously supported by a
Santa Clara University Hackworth Grant for
Faculty Research in Applied Ethics.

About the Author

Nancy C. Unger is Associate Professor of History at Santa Clara University. Her work on Wisconsin's La Follette family includes *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), winner of the 2001 Wisconsin Historical Society Book of Merit Award, and "When Women Condemn the Whole Race": Belle Case La Follette Attacks the Color Line," in *Women in Print*, James P. Danky and Wayne Wiegand eds., (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008). She writes the series "What Would Fighting Bob Do?" for the website FightingBob.com. Her current book project is *Beyond "Nature's Housekeepers": American Women in Environmental History*.

