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Adda F. Howie: "America's Outstanding Woman Farmer"

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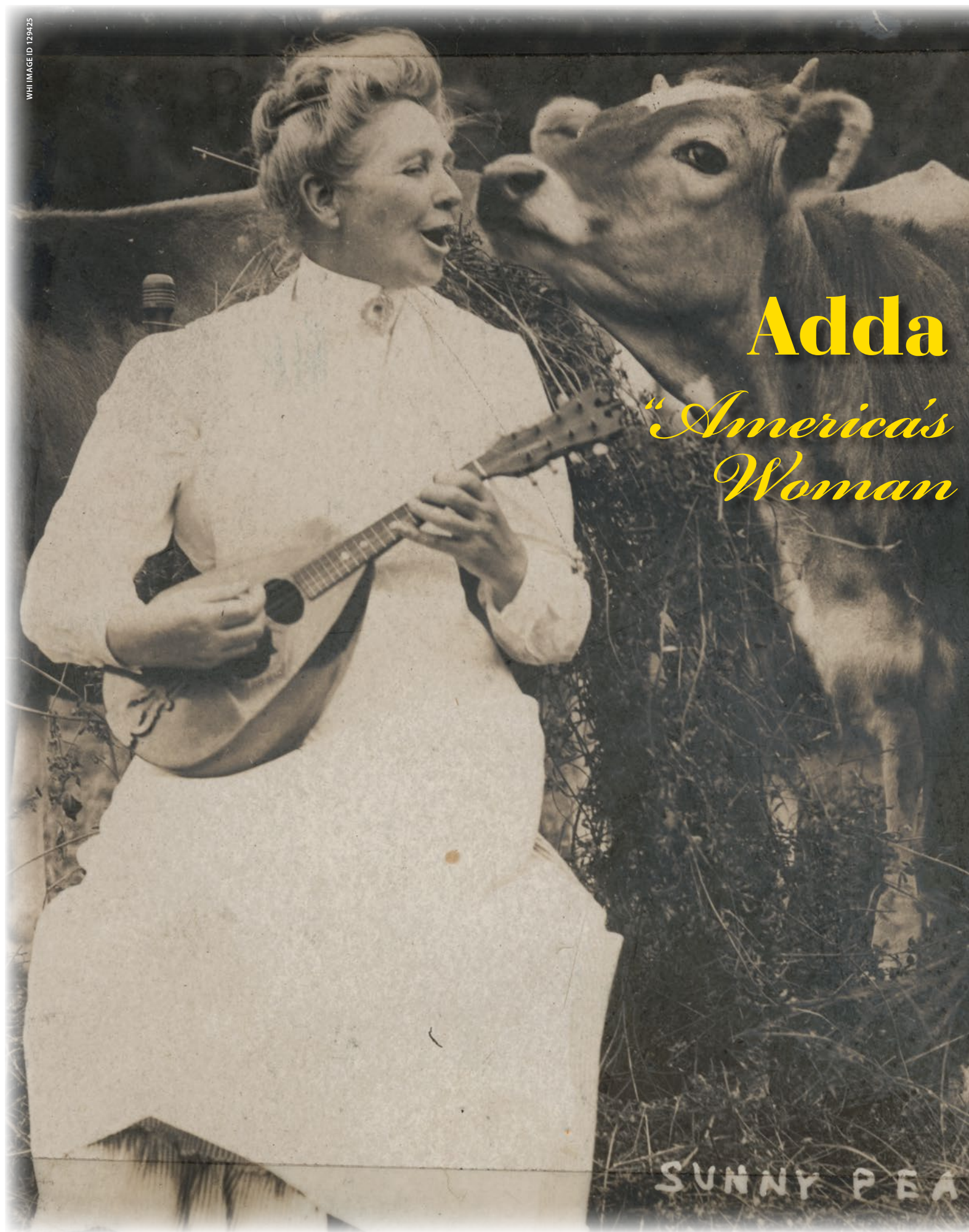
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Adda

*"America's
Woman"*

SUNNY PEA

F. Howie

Outstanding Farmer

This signature image of Adda F. Howie playing the mandolin for her cows, ca. 1909, appeared in newspapers across the United States and in England.

WHI IMAGE ID 129494



Adda Howie, ca. 1880. Long before she turned her hand to dairy farming, Howie was every inch a Milwaukee socialite.

BY NANCY C. UNGER

In 1894, forty-two-year-old Milwaukee socialite Adda F. Howie seemed a very unlikely candidate to become one of the most famous women in America. And yet by 1925, Howie, the first woman to serve on the Wisconsin State Board of Agriculture, had long been “recognized universally as the most successful woman farmer in America.”¹ Howie’s rise to fame came at a time when the widely accepted ideas about gender were divided into the “man’s world” of business, power, and money, and the “woman’s world” devoted to family and home. Yet Howie, rather than being vilified for succeeding in the male sphere, was publicly praised for her skill in bringing traditional female values into the barns and pastures of Wisconsin. Instead of facing ridicule for her unconventional, ostentatiously feminine innovations, she was heaped with praise and her methods studied and adopted on farms across the United States and beyond.

Born Adda Johnston in 1852, she grew up on Sunny Peak Farm in Elm Grove, Wisconsin, then a small village in the larger township of Brookfield, in Waukesha County. She remembered her early farm life fondly, telling a reporter, “Elm Grove is the place where my sister . . . and myself spent many happy hours in our girlhood days.”² Despite her enjoyment of farm life, Adda Johnston chose urban living as an adult, settling in Milwaukee and marrying David W. C. Howie, a Civil War veteran eleven years her senior. The Howies were prominent members of Milwaukee society. One measure of David Howie’s financial success as a wholesale and retail coal dealer for the Northwest Fuel Company came in 1886 when the family, including a son and two daughters, moved into a stunning Queen Anne–style home on Wells Street, Milwaukee’s fashionable new upper-middle-class residential neighborhood. There Adda strove to hone her craft as a writer. She composed poems

PHOTO BY SCOTT WITTE



The Howies' fine Queen Anne-style home on West Wells Street in Milwaukee has been restored and is now the Manderley Bed & Breakfast Inn.

and wrote the children's book *Modern Fairy Lore*, published in 1890.

The family's prosperous, rather conventional life took a sudden turn in 1897 when Adda inherited the farm that had brought her such joy in childhood. She claimed that it was her seventeen-year-old son's interest in dairy farming that prompted the family's decision to leave its beautifully appointed home and the many comforts and conveniences of the city for the 120 acres of Sunny Peak, which was in considerable disrepair after having been run by tenant farmers for some twenty years. In preparation for their new life, David Howie Jr. took agricultural college courses in Madison while his mother immersed herself in learning the history and characteristics of various cattle breeds. Howie Jr., however, rarely appears in the many accounts of the successes at Sunny Peak beyond the occasional recognition that he served as his mother's right hand man. Howie Sr. does not appear at all. It is Adda Howie who earns, and accepts, all the accolades due an important pioneer in dairying.

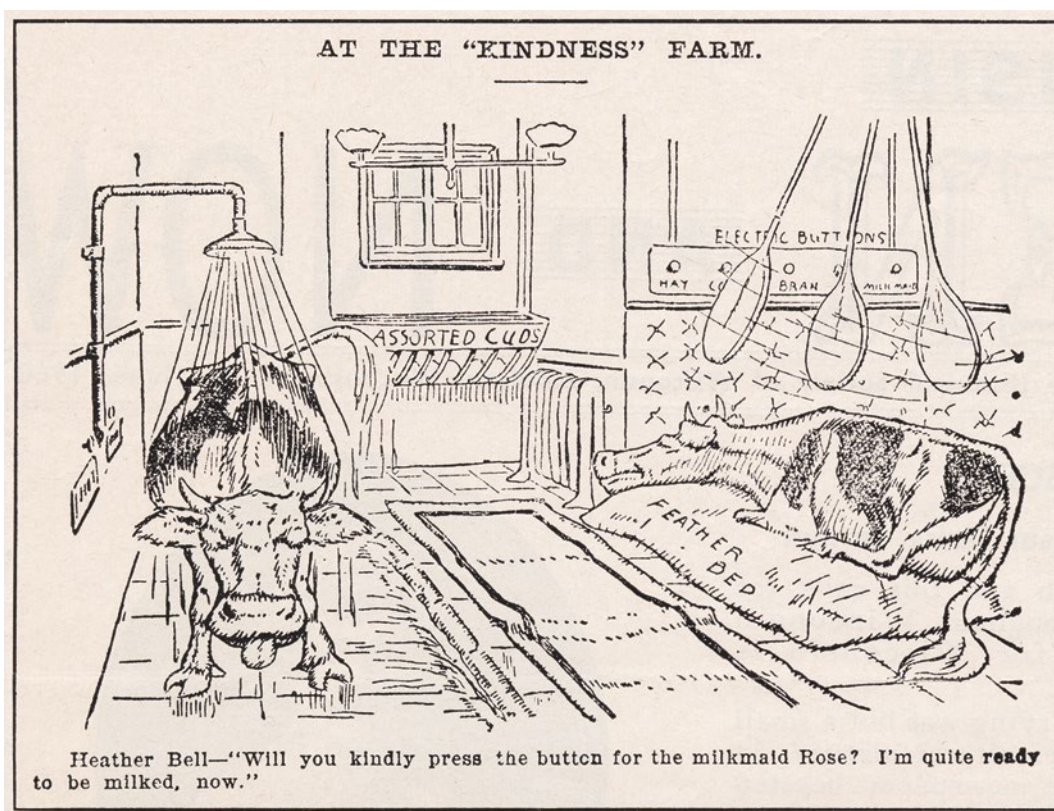
Adda Howie started small. Rather than immediately using the family's ready cash to augment the two cows already on the farm and update the buildings, she determined to expand using only profits generated on the farm. Her goal was not the kind

WHI IMAGE ID 129427



Sunny Peak Farm, photographed here in 1902, was a model of cleanliness and good cheer.

WHI IMAGE ID 129426



This cartoon lampooned Howie's famously pampered cows, but her increased yields ultimately gained serious attention from dairy farmers at home and abroad.

of costly hobby farm that wealthy individuals ran for pleasure rather than income. She sought to develop instead a model farm, "one that could be patterned after by ordinary farmers . . . a living example of what an up-to-date and modern farmer with a determination to make the best of his farm can do towards making a pretty farm."³ It was a rare farmer indeed who cited prettiness as a major goal. But Howie refused to apologize for such a feminine, seemingly superfluous objective. She saw being a woman as an important asset to farm life, and she would take great pains to present her achievements as a dairy farmer as the result of conventional notions of femininity and women's work. She believed that her success came because of the fact that she was a woman, not in spite of it.

Howie's application of prescribed female values to the rural environment in Wisconsin was just one element of the large-scale progressive reform movement that swept the nation during the long Gilded Age and Progressive Era (the 1870s through the 1920s). Many middle-class women claimed that they were compelled to activism by the skewed American value system that was the result of male domination of business and technology. Profit had replaced morality, these women charged, as men focused on financial gain as the sole measure of success and progress. In the factories whose profits turned a few individuals into millionaires, working-class men, women, and children toiled long hours for low wages in unsafe conditions, only to go

home to urban squalor. Nonrenewable resources were exploited with no thought to their conservation. And farmers, often struggling financially, heedlessly exhausted soils and raised animals in filth, seeking to maximize their profits from the impure crops and stock they foisted on an unsuspecting public. In the face of so much gross injustice, women, long prescribed to be the civilizers of men, staged protests and organized reform efforts.⁴

As Jerry Apps notes in his article in this issue, "From Wheat to Dairy Farming and More," caring for milk cows had once been a farming sideline relegated to women. As milk and cheese production replaced wheat, however, women's dairying experiences were denigrated, their expertise discounted as not sufficiently professional. Howie warned that men ignored women's prowess at their own peril. She wrote a lengthy tribute to women's credentials in the history of agriculture, beginning with the Bible. She emphasized "the charms of the dairy maid [that] have been for centuries an inspiring theme for both poet and painter," praising women for their "refining instincts . . . loyally guarded as a heaven blessed gift" and their "graceful . . . and valuable characteristics," virtues that had been perpetuated through the ages. Howie criticized modern men who farmed with "reckless waste" and "hurried oversight" in their rush to make a profit. She denounced the "crudely prepared many acres" and advocated instead for the "carefully cultivated few."⁵ Howie, as reported the *Farm Sentinel* in 1902, put "a great deal

of sentiment into her work and believes that there is more pleasure in living than in the mere sake of striving after and grasping every dollar one can hoard up. She believes one can lead an ideal life on the farm with more real enjoyment and pleasure than can be obtained by city residents.”⁶

Howie earned the money to begin to buy the first of her Jersey cows from sale of the butter churned from the cream produced by one of the farm’s two original cows. Taking a path consistent with the progressive emphasis on efficiency born out of new expertise rather than reliance on time-worn tradition, Howie considered carefully the results of agricultural studies, experiments, and observations. “My early efforts,” she recalled, “were made at a time when scientific farming was held in contempt by the majority of farm people. In fact, [scientific farmers were] treated with the same spirit of ridicule that some people of the present time regard lace curtains in a cow barn.”⁷ She spurned such narrow-minded views, however, and began raising what would become the largest herd of purebred Jersey cows in Wisconsin.

While she acknowledged that a cow’s breed was a key indicator of its productivity, she was also convinced that nurture as well as nature played a role. The secret to Howie’s success was her conviction that a dairy barn “should be as clean as a champion kitchen.” Thirty years before legislation required the sanitary production of milk, Howie’s “feminine dairy wisdom” demanded that the interior of the barn and other outbuildings at Sunny Peak Farm be whitewashed, then scrubbed once a week with soapsuds and boiling water.⁸ The barn’s windows were not only regularly cleaned, but outfitted with curtains. Although she eschewed lace, her installation of curtains in a cow barn might still be dismissed by many as silly, but as with all of Howie’s innovations, there was practicality behind the seemingly frivolous. After the stalls had been “well aired” in summer and “purified by the sun’s rays,” the curtains could be used to keep out flies.⁹ Cows were not tied to upright posts, but separated by hinged partitions that allowed each animal comfortable standing room and ample space for lying down. To lower the possibility of spreading disease, milkers were required to wash their hands before milking each cow.

Howie’s cattle were “brushed and petted and everything done to make the barn as sanitary and attractive as possible.”¹⁰ She made no effort to hide her emotional attachment to her cattle: “I love the cows on my farm as one would love a person and I do not believe the people generally have an appreciation of the worthy and noble animals commensurate with their true worth.”¹¹ “Cows make the best of friends,” she once told a reporter, “and they never go back on you.”¹² But more than



Howie, ca. 1923, once hailed as the most successful woman farmer in America, in her later years

sentiment ruled her actions. Howie’s contention that cattle “tenderly cared for” would produce higher and better yields was borne out when many of her prize cows regularly set production records. In 1902, when most cows might produce as much as three pounds of butter a week, some of the independently tested cows in Howie’s herd were producing five times that amount.¹³

Howie’s application of the domestic sphere’s standards of cleanliness and comfort to the farm environment was ultimately so successful that her innovations became widely studied. In her words, “In that period my methods were considered so unusual that a number of prominent publishers thought that the sanitary barn, tenderly cared for cattle and other innovations might be worthy of general interest and the consequence was that Sunny Peak Farm, the gentle cattle and its happy owner were given a world-wide range of publicity.”¹⁴

Some of that publicity expressed more whimsical amusement than advocacy, especially when it came to Howie’s practice of playing music for her animals. A photograph of Howie playing the mandolin to her cows features the animals clustered around her. Their apparent appreciation of her playing so captured the public’s imagination that a painting made from the image was reproduced “in all the leading magazines and papers in England and America.”¹⁵ Australia’s *West Gippsland Gazette* featured Howie in a 1910 story headlined “The Dairy—Music for Cows—Increase in Milk Flow,” noting that “Mrs. Howie always plays soft, low harmonies. . . . Every cow hears at least one tune at milking time” with “In the Gloaming” a special favorite. Many of the younger cows showed “a liking for eccentric, but graceful compositions.” Rather than presenting Howie as simply colorful, if not a bit peculiar, the reporter explained that “there is common sense as well as sentiment” in Howie’s playing to her animals, noting that “it has long been recognized that anything which frightens the cow, as thunder and lightning or harsh noises and actions, injures the quality and flow of the milk.” Howie assumed that the reverse might also be true, that “soothing the animal by agreeable sounds” would increase the milk’s quality and quantity, and claimed that the yield from one of her cows calmed by music increased by a third.¹⁶ As with many of her unconventional practices, results trumped or at least blunted ready scorn.

Howie’s talents as a speaker are highlighted in a newspaper account headlined “Where Jersey Cattle Joyfully Thrive,” with the subheading, “Feminine Dairy Wisdom Demonstrated”: “Many an audience has been satisfied by her earnestness of expression and convincing arguments that she is a thoroughly

experienced and practical dairywoman. She is a forcible speaker, and, withal, has a personality—a magnetism—that commands her listeners' attention, and leaves no doubt in their minds that she knows of what she is talking."¹⁷

Wisconsin farmers were particularly attentive. For eight years, Howie was a regular speaker at the Wisconsin Farmers' Institutes (held annually in different locations throughout the state), delivering what she termed "practical talks on different topics for farm life, such as cattle raising, dairying, poultry, and homemaking."¹⁸ Sixty thousand copies were issued of the transcript of the eighteenth annual Farmers' Institute in 1904, held in Kaukauna, featuring Howie's talks followed by lengthy discussions with a variety of experts, including agriculture professors.¹⁹ In her typical style, she answers confidently and in great detail their probing questions about her methods, including the crops she raised to feed her cattle. She made lecture tours on behalf of International Harvester as well.

Howie's fame spread. She spoke on dairying and home-making to agricultural experts across the country, as well as in Canada. She traveled to Europe in 1906 to give a talk in Paris on poultry. The British king, Edward VII, granted her a special permit to visit his dairy barns. The Japanese government sent a delegate to Wisconsin to purchase cows from Howie's herd to improve its nation's dairy stock.

After her husband's death in 1911, Howie continued to work the farm with her son and daughter-in-law. In 1914 the *Arizona Prescott Journal-Miner*, reporting on one of the countless honors awarded to her, noted, "Mrs. Adda F. Howie is one of the most famous women in the United States—one about whom more has been written and printed in this and foreign countries than about any other woman now living and who is engaged in an industrial pursuit for the benefit of the country and humanity in general."²⁰ The following year, she headed the Wisconsin exhibit at the San Francisco World's Fair. She sold much of her herd in 1916, handing control of the farm to her son. Although she moved to Milwaukee to live with one of her daughters and turned much of her attention to writing poetry, she did not lose her interest in cattle. In 1921, she traveled to the United Kingdom's Isle of Jersey to study local methods of dairying. Results of her findings continued to appear in various books on cattle breeding, and in 1924 the University of Wisconsin honored her pioneering work to improve rural life and its products by hanging her portrait in Agricultural Hall, generating a new round of extensive press coverage.

Adda Howie died in her daughter's Milwaukee home in 1936. Her humane and sanitary "feminine" approach to dairying, one requiring no expensive tools or equipment, continued to be so widely adopted that it markedly transformed the farm environment. She was an important pioneer whose winning combination of science and emotion produced cleaner, healthier, and better farms and farm products. According to a tribute by humorist and poet Walt Mason:

She ranks with the thinkers and readers who never do
farming by guess;
She studies the eminent breeders, and follows their
path to success.
She wants to see farm life improving, to cast off the
outworn and dead;
"And so," she remarks, "it's behooving the farmer to
work with his head."
She teaches the bright side of farming, the profit, the
glory, the fun
And makes the vocation seem charming as no one
before her had done.²¹ ❧

Notes

1. George H. Dacy, "America's Outstanding Woman Farmer," *Forecast*, April 1925 clipping, folder 3, Adda Howie Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin (hereafter AHC). See also Larry F. Graber, "America's Outstanding Woman Farmer," 1932, Folder 3, AHC.
2. Unidentified clipping beginning, "Of all the Jersey cows in Japan," Folder 3, AHC.
3. "Mrs. Howie's Dairy Farm," *Farm Sentinel*, August 14, 1902, Folder 3, AHC.
4. See Nancy C. Unger, *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
5. Adda F. Howie, typescript, "Women in Agriculture," 2–3, 8, Folder 1, AHC.
6. "Mrs. Howie's Dairy Farm."
7. Adda Howie, undated handwritten statement beginning, "My farm was an inheritance," Folder 1, AHC.
8. Dacy, "America's Outstanding Woman Farmer."
9. "Where Jersey Cattle Joyfully Thrive—The Practicabilities of Sunny Peak Farm as Conducted by Mrs. Adda F. Howie, Near Elm Grove, Wis.—Feminine Dairy Wisdom Demonstrated," undated clipping, Folder 3, AHC.
10. Howie, "My farm was an inheritance."
11. "Of all the Jersey cows in Japan."
12. Quoted in "On the Firing Line: Things of Interest to Creamery and Dairymen," *Orchard and Farm* XXVII, no. 11 (November 1915): 21.
13. "Mrs. Howie's Dairy Farm."
14. Howie, "My farm was an inheritance."
15. "Of all the Jersey cows in Japan."
16. "The Dairy—Music for Cows—Increase in Milk Flow," *West Gippsland Gazette*, January 11, 1910, 4. Scientific studies confirm that certain types of music help cows to relax and produce more milk, although only by about three percent. See "Sweet Music for Milking," BBC News, June 26, 2001, accessed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/1408434.stm>.
17. "Where Jersey Cattle Joyfully Thrive."
18. Howie, "My farm was an inheritance."
19. George McKerrow, ed., *Farmers' Institutes: A Hand Book of Agriculture*, Bulletin no. 18, 1904.
20. Quoted in Thomas Ramstack, *Brookfield and Elm Grove* (Charleston: Arcadia): 109.
21. Quoted in Dacy, "America's Outstanding Woman Farmer."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy C. Unger, professor and chair of the history department at Santa Clara University, is the author of the award-winning biographies *Belle La Follette: Progressive Era Reformer* (Routledge, 2015), and *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, revised paperback, 2008). Nancy has also

published dozens of scholarly articles and essays as well as the books *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History* (Oxford, 2013) and *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (Wiley Blackwell, 2017), edited with Christopher McKnight Nichols.