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“So Long as I Can Read”: Farm Women’s Reading Experiences in Depression-Era South Dakota

LISA R. LINDELL

Abstract

During the Great Depression, with conditions grim, entertainment scarce, and educational opportunities limited, many South Dakota farm women relied on reading to fill emotional, social, and informational needs. To read to any degree, these rural women had to overcome multiple obstacles. Extensive reading (whether books, farm journals, or newspapers) was limited to those who had access to publications and could make time to read. The South Dakota Free Library Commission was valuable in circulating reading materials to the state's rural population. In the 1930s the commission collaborated with the USDA's Extension Service in a popular reading project geared toward South Dakota farm women. This "Reading in the Home" program greatly increased reading opportunities and motivations. Of particular interest to rural women were tales of pioneer life featuring strong protagonists. Through these stories, farm women found validation and encouragement to persevere. Reading also broadened horizons and challenged assumptions. For the depression-era farm woman, reading books and other materials provided recreation, instruction, and inspiration in a discouraging time.

“What do farm folks read?” This question, posed by the *Farmer* in 1935, evoked an outpouring of responses from the farm journal’s predominantly midwestern readership. South Dakota farm women were among the many respondents who sent letters detailing their reading habits and affirming the importance of reading in their lives. In letters to the *Farmer* and elsewhere, they attested to reading’s central role in providing consolation and cheer in bleak and dispiriting times. In promoting reading, they mainly focused on books, although other reading sources, including newspapers, magazines, and farm publications, were significant as well. South Dakota’s rural women read thousands of pages during the dark days of the Great Depression, and whether their

reading challenged their attitudes or reinforced them, these women clearly drew emotional satisfaction and meaning for their lives. To acquire and devour books and other reading material, farm women had to overcome time constraints, financial limitations, and geographical barriers. The enthusiastic testimonials from those who did so call for an exploration of rural women's reading in the depression era.¹

In the 1930s, the Great Depression ravaged the nation's farm states, already afflicted by a decade-long agricultural crisis. South Dakota, with a rural population exceeding 80 percent, was particularly hard hit. Relentless drought, dust storms, grasshopper plagues, plummeting farm prices, and successive crop failures drove tens of thousands of South Dakotans from their farms and the state. Those who managed to remain on their land struggled under difficult conditions and a heavy workload.²

Despite the increasing availability of labor-saving conveniences and devices, most rural households in South Dakota lacked such services as electricity, running water, central heating, and telephones during these distressed years. The farm woman's work week was arduous, averaging sixty-six hours according to a state survey in 1930. Even in households possessing modern technologies, the work week did not necessarily decrease. As South Dakota State College rural sociology professor Wendell F. Kumlien pointed out in 1941, the acquisition of home conveniences often meant that farm women were merely enabled to do a more thorough job, rather than enjoying greater leisure.³

Although each farm household was unique, with differing attitudes about work and leisure, societal and familial expectations for women were often extremely high, obliging indoor and outdoor work and perhaps even work off the farm. Household duties and the care of children were typically deemed of the highest importance, claiming women's

primary attention. One overworked South Dakota woman articulated the commonly held, and keenly felt, desire for more free time: "Believe me, I would give a lot for just one hour of leisure out of twenty-four. I have two little folks to care for, and after I spend eight or nine hours a day at my outside work and another several hours trying to crowd in a day's work at home, I have no leisure to read stories to the children, to walk through leaf-strewn woods, to call on friends, scarcely time to read a good story now and then."⁴

Despite farm women's long work hours, in fact in large measure because of them, advocates for women's welfare promoted activities like reading as essential. "Every woman, no matter how hard she must work, must pause at times for recreation, even though it may be only an occasional evening or a Sunday afternoon," prescribed Dagny Hinderaker, a women's club leader from Astoria, South Dakota, herself the mother of six children. "They will be more refreshed and have more new things to think about if they will sit down and read." Another Deuel County resident shared her growing conviction that "a mother can give too much for the good of her family," attesting to the benefits accruing from making time to relax and read.⁵

Indeed, farm women did read. For women wary of neglecting household responsibilities, the pastime was more satisfactory for the whole family than recreational activities pursued away from the farm. Through farm women's pursuit of reading, children could be motivated to read as well. As one rural woman declared, it was good for a child "to grow up in . . . an atmosphere of contentment and times of relaxation when he can sit or lie down and read . . . with a mother handy to ask questions of if the reading gets deep." A number of farm women reported reading aloud to their children or with their husbands after the children had gone to bed. One woman related how her

family had studied the Bible together the previous winter, while other farm women described the family practice of taking turns reading a book aloud and then discussing it together.⁶

Reading was especially vital in periods of adversity and depression, avowed a committed South Dakota reader in 1934. Books, she asserted, had the power to lift disheartened spirits and enable them to endure more bravely. In a 1930 survey, a group of South Dakota rural women identifying themselves as regular readers reported reading an average of six hours and thirty-two minutes a week. The words used to describe what they gained from this activity--"delight," "joy," and "inspiration"--were exceptional in a dismal time. "Those whose lives are the most humdrum may feel themselves lifted out of the ordinary into a more joyous phase of living," avowed one reader. A fellow farm woman from Minnesota reveled in the sense of enrichment and intellectual stimulation she received from reading. "Let's begin right now cultivating our brains," she urged in a letter to the *Farmer's Wife*, sister publication to the *Farmer*. "Let the floor go unswept if necessary; simplify your meals; but make time for reading, studying and thinking."⁷

Potential competition to reading came with the radio and the movies, sparking debate over their impact on the quantity and quality of reading. For many South Dakota farm women, however, these increasingly popular diversions were out of reach. Almost half of farm families lacked a radio, and small town theaters were hard pressed to remain open during the depression years. "Too bad in a way," allowed a *Farmer* columnist. "But," he hastened to affirm, "you can see the world in the pages of a good book."⁸

For Rose Tomsik Van Schaack, unable to afford a radio or other “luxuries,” reading was a cherished means of escape and recreation. Through reading, the Mellette County farm woman found respite from the monotony and sense of hopelessness. Van Schaack eagerly looked forward to the biweekly meetings of her literary society and relished evenings spent reading books and magazines, including *McCall’s* and the spine-tingling pulp magazine *The Shadow*, rotating these and other publications among family members.⁹

The amount of time dedicated to reading and other recreational activities was of course dependent on many factors, including age, education, and personal circumstances. In a 1930s study of leisure-time activities of farm women in the North Central states, including South Dakota, Lucile Winifred Reynolds included only women thirty-five years and over on the assumption that free time of women with young children would be quite limited. The women Reynolds studied were also a rather select group in that they were seeking recognition as “Master Farm Homemakers” by *The Farmer’s Wife*. Almost all the women reported reading, making it the most common leisure-time pursuit. Looking at the reading choices of farm women with varying educational levels, Reynolds found no great differences in the number of newspapers or magazines they subscribed to or the fiction they read. She noted, however, that the farm women who had attended college read twice as many books of nonfiction than those who had attended through eighth grade or less. Illiteracy was evidently not a significant factor among South Dakota farm women. Although perhaps over-reported, the 1935 South Dakota census showed a literary rate of over 99 percent.¹⁰

Beyond limitations of time, age, or education, a key impact on reading for many rural South Dakotans was accessibility. Getting books and other reading materials to the

thinly settled and remote reaches of South Dakota had always posed a challenge. By the 1920s and 1930s, ease of access had increased considerably, but the efforts required to obtain reading material were still appreciable. In a 1926 survey, farm families in Lake County, South Dakota, identified limited availability as the most important factor precluding their reading. In the survey, rural sociologist Kumlien found that just 38 percent of adults reported reading any books in the previous year, citing lack of access to libraries as the principal reason, followed by time constraints and the high cost of books. Many of these rural dwellers did read newspapers, farm journals, and magazines. Kumlien recorded that 84 percent subscribed to daily papers, 83 percent received farm journals, 65 percent took country weeklies, and 61 percent subscribed to women's magazines. In a study of Brookings County farmers conducted eight years later, though, Kumlien found 20 percent fewer newspaper subscriptions, 52 percent fewer women's magazine subscriptions, and 2 percent fewer farm journal subscriptions. He attributed the lower numbers to the privations of the depression.¹¹

Rural residents committed to reading strove to overcome barriers to access. One South Dakota woman recounted how neighbors dealt with prohibitive newspaper costs by subscribing to the local paper as a group and gathering at one of their homes once a week to read it. Reading enthusiast Stella Page Day of Butte County, South Dakota, shared reading materials from her farmhouse on the Belle Fourche Irrigation Project. She described how a women's club in the town of Lead sent her old magazines to distribute: "Some of [the magazines] go almost 100 miles out, some here on the project. I use every opportunity to learn whether someone who comes (perhaps about sheep or some other errand) would like some," she reported, noting that her husband was likewise interested in circulating the magazines, sometimes taking them to a nearby

filling station for distribution. "And so they get around without expense," Day wrote with satisfaction. "I wish you could have seen the faces of one man and woman light up this week when given some. It's all quite a trick to learn who wants to read and needs something."¹²

Of great value for disadvantaged rural readers was the state-financed South Dakota Free Library Commission. The commission, created in 1913 and headquartered in the state capitol building in Pierre, worked to serve those without access to libraries. Through traveling libraries, local and county library development, and individualized loan services--and despite inadequate funding and continual challenges--the commission managed to provide reading materials to many rural South Dakotans.¹³

Under its traveling library program, the South Dakota Free Library Commission sent collections of books and magazines to any small town or group of families living in the country. The book collections varied in size from twenty to seventy volumes, and were tailored to the interests of the recipients. The libraries were loaned for a period of up to six months. Although in many states, the presence of local libraries and bookmobiles had obviated the need for traveling library services by the 1930s, South Dakota's rural population continued to depend on them throughout the decade. Also during the 1930s, the commission's individualized loan service surged in popularity.¹⁴

Public libraries in South Dakota were either largely unavailable to or unvisited by the farm population. In 1934 there were seventy town libraries in the state, fifty-two supported by taxation and eighteen privately funded. Twenty-five library buildings in South Dakota were funded by the Carnegie Library Building Program from 1901 to 1917. Most libraries in the state lacked a separate building, however, or a trained librarian, and

many were poorly financed and open for quite limited hours. Rural families constituted only 7.8 percent of the total borrowers.¹⁵

In order to serve these rural residents, the commission actively endorsed and helped establish county libraries. These libraries operated not as separate, self-contained institutions but as library systems distributing books throughout the entire county. In the 1930s county libraries operated in four of South Dakota's sixty-nine counties: Tripp, Hyde, Potter, and Buffalo. In these counties, books were available at many branches and stations, including schools, post offices, farmhouses, creameries, and even a hotel. The county libraries also lent books by mail to individual South Dakotans as requested.¹⁶

In advocating county libraries, the commission emphasized the greatly heightened access for farm populations and the economic benefits for all. It enthusiastically reported that in those counties with county libraries, farm borrowers made up at least half of the total borrowers. In Tripp County, for example, 3,605 of its 5,150 registered borrowers in 1931 lived in the country. The county library had seventeen branches and stations, 14,950 total books, and 85,644 total loans, with only \$5,224 in total operating costs for the year.¹⁷

Vera Hiller of Hyde County frequently visited the county library station set up at the H. P. Richardson farmhouse, twenty miles from the nearest town. Asked if she and her family got any benefit from the county's library system, she replied promptly: "My stars, I guess so. . . . Our children bring books home by the armful, and three or four of us read them all before they go back. We read thirty to fifty books a year, but probably wouldn't have had any if it hadn't been for the county library. They would cost money to buy, and there is no place near by to get good ones."¹⁸

In 1930, in a paean to the South Dakota Free Library Commission and to county library services, Myrna Lyman of Potter County contrasted current conditions with her family's experience two decades earlier. Living twenty-five miles from town with no automobile, few neighbors, and mail days often three or four weeks apart, Lyman described her careful budgeting and the substantial efforts required to purchase books, magazines, and newspapers. She credited the dedicated efforts of the state library service, along with the arrival of graded roads and mail routes, for the increased accessibility to reading material. The establishment of a county library system was further cause for celebration. "It is [now] an easy matter to send in to the library on mail day, have a number of books sent out the following mail day, or brought by an accommodating neighbor, if one isn't going in," she exulted. "No matter what we need, we will find it at the library."¹⁹

Economic realities, however, stymied the commission's push for local and county libraries during the depression years, and library services and resources were stretched extremely thin. To extend its reach, the commission pursued cooperative efforts. In 1929, it teamed with the Extension Service at South Dakota State College in Brookings to launch an ambitious reading program. The "Reading in the Home" project aimed to increase and facilitate reading among South Dakota's rural women and their families. Participants were members of the state's large network of home extension clubs, first organized after the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914. This act provided for extension work in agriculture and home economics, carried out by states' land-grant colleges in cooperation with the USDA.²⁰

Home extension work, as the *Dakota Farmer* promoted it to its readers, was a nationwide system of adult education established for the purpose of aiding farm women

and girls with the tasks and concerns of homemaking and rural life. At the start of the 1930s, fourteen home demonstration agents served thirty-six of South Dakota's counties, numbers that remained fairly constant throughout the decade in spite of the unstable economy. National figures were comparable, with roughly half of the counties in the United States having home demonstration agents in the mid-1930s.

Supplementing the work of the home demonstration agents were volunteer leaders, taught by specialists at district or county training schools.²¹

In 1930 South Dakota had a total of 87,050 farm women. The dire conditions of the depression reduced that figure to 76,048 over the next decade. During these years, home extension club membership (which included non-farm women as well) was variable, climbing ultimately from around ten thousand members in 1930 to over eighteen thousand in 1936, and ending the decade with around fourteen thousand members. For the rural women who chose not to affiliate with the clubs, the reasons varied. Some women felt they could not spare the time. Others did not join home extension clubs under the mistaken belief that they were ineligible or, as extension historian Dorothy Schwieder notes, under the impression that the clubs were "only interested in prosperous farm families, not in less fortunate ones." "They are for the leisure class," wrote a farm woman from Brown County. "I don't feel entitled to a half day a month for pleasure. . . . I don't need to burn up gasoline and desert my family to get inspiration. . . . All I can see in my mind's eye when I hear about these successful club women is a lot of overworked husbands and neglected children." She relied on magazines for ideas, she stated, and preferred to spend most of her time at home.²²

Farm women who did participate in extension clubs, though, enthusiastically attested to the increased opportunities and motivations for themselves and their

families. Several women wrote letters to the *Dakota Farmer* encouraging club membership. A mother of three reported that children were welcome at her club, while a mother of five from McCook County expressed her belief that farm women could surely manage their work and meals so they could be gone a few afternoons a month without any harm to the family. "In fact, they will all gain something," she maintained. "I think it a great pity that any club group has given anybody the impression that Homemaker's clubs are for the leisure class," declared another busy farm woman and mother, "for I think that is precisely what they are not." Noting that she liked "to get off the place once in a blue moon," she lauded the social benefits and useful information she gained from her club. Among the educational programs extension clubs offered were food selection and preparation, clothing, family economy, home furnishing, family relationships, community service, and recreation. The "Reading in the Home" project, along with music appreciation and dramatics, fell under recreation.²³

Each year, South Dakota home extension club leaders attended reading training schools taught by the South Dakota Free Library Commission director, bringing reading materials and guidance back to their local clubs. Club members received an outline providing lists of suggested book titles and information on the year's chosen theme. Among the reading themes in the 1930s were the novel, life in America, life in other countries, pioneer life, and biography. The commission encouraged local and county libraries to purchase the books on the lists for "Reading in the Home" participants to borrow. The commission also acquired a number of copies of each recommended book which they sent to individuals on month-long loans.²⁴

To provide reading incentives for home extension members, the South Dakota Library Association awarded prizes (three dollars for first place and two dollars for

second) to the clubs submitting lists of the most books read, accompanied by members' personal comments on each title completed. In 1938 the Worth While Club of Loomis in Davison County won first place for reading and reviewing 195 books from the reading list, and the home extension club of Viborg in Turner County earned a close second, reading 194 titles. In the same year, Stella Page Day reported that the twelve members of her Butte County extension club and their families had read a total of 436 books on the reading list and "many, many more" not on the list. Most of the books had come from individual loan from the commission and from traveling library collections, one of which she hosted in her farmhouse. Because of the books they read, she asserted, she and her fellow club members kept abreast of the times and mentally alert. Drama and reading were profitably paired, with extension club members portraying vignettes from home reading project books in drama productions at county fairs and achievement days. O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* was a popular source of dramatization, as were other pioneer novels. In 1938 South Dakota extension clubs presented some twenty-five historical pageants based on the year's reading selections.²⁵

Throughout the depression years, the reading program grew in popularity. Club members avidly praised the program. "Reading in the Home has been without question one of the finest projects attempted by the extension service," affirmed Bernice Smiley of Mount Vernon, South Dakota. "Coming as it has when people have been almost powerless to direct their minds from the multitude of anxieties it has been a joy and an education." Brown County extension club member Martha Davies further testified to the program's growing appeal, noting that when reading was first presented to the club, several of the members had protested that they did not have time to read entire books. "But," she stated with delight, "after the first few book reports were given and inquiries

sent their way, 'twas found one member read 'the first book in 25 years.' There were 65 books read during the season and the vote was unanimous to continue the reading program the coming season."²⁶

Some home extension groups carried their enthusiasm for reading into establishing community libraries. In Pringle in Fall River County, the extension club launched a library in the little town of less than one hundred. Initially a shelf in the home of a club member, the library grew to occupy a prominent space in the post office. In Quinn, also in western South Dakota, the local extension club likewise started a library, and in Pierpont in the northeastern part of the state, the Home Extension and Federated Women's Clubs joined together in a library project.²⁷

Many other women's clubs in South Dakota studied literary and scholarly topics, often benefiting from the services of the commission. In 1930 it loaned material to two hundred clubs and continued to provide resources and reference help throughout the decade. The women's clubs were pivotal in organizing dozens of the state's libraries.²⁸

In the mid-1930s the newly established Works Progress Administration (WPA) began providing funds and workers to assist with library services in South Dakota; and in 1938 the WPA and the South Dakota Free Library Commission entered into an agreement for a statewide library project. Collaboration with the WPA was not free of problems, however. The WPA's lack of library experience and training and the commission's lack of control over the project were initial points of contention. Among the beneficial outcomes of the WPA were funding for library additions and staff and for a bookmobile jointly sponsored by the South Dakota Congress of Parents and Teachers and South Dakota Free Library Commission. The bookmobile, stocked principally with Library Commission books and bound magazines, made monthly trips to counties in

northwestern and central South Dakota. "When people heard it was coming their way, they stood out on the highway and waved it in," recalled Parents and Teachers Council state president Gertrude Flyte. "Their great appreciation brought joy to my heart but tears to my eyes. The people were . . . struggling to exist in these wide-open spaces where drought and grasshoppers still held sway." Despite the bookmobile's popularity, the WPA discontinued the service in November 1939. Meanwhile, access to libraries gradually increased. In 1940, the commission reported 107 libraries in South Dakota: sixty-seven tax-supported public libraries, five jointly sponsored by public and private agencies, and the rest sponsored and maintained by clubs. The state still had only four county libraries, and 69 percent of the total population lacked access to a local library.²⁹

As the call for library services and the interest in reading grew, the age and variety of books available to farm families was an ongoing issue. The commission's meager funding during the depression years was a source of frustration, leading it to lament the necessity of circulating "hundreds of books which really should be withdrawn because of their condition." Limited personal finances and the significant effort required to acquire new materials also contributed to the scarcity of recent books in rural households. Some farm women were unconcerned, proudly expressing a preference for older literature. "I have been reading with a great deal of pleasure an old copy of Jane Aust[e]n's *Pride and Prejudice* which I have had for about thirty-five years and for which I paid the small sum of thirty-five cents when we made a trip to the county seat one day," proclaimed one rural South Dakotan. "No other purchase of that far-off day is even remembered, but the little book still remains a treasured possession read over and over. It is only one of many that have given me a great deal of pleasure in the years gone by and will continue to do so as long as I live." Joy Keve Hauk of Haakon County similarly prized

Pride and Prejudice, noting that she reread portions several times a year, finding it always new and its characters remarkably modern. "Human nature evidently has not changed a particle since then," she observed, "and one recognizes with delight characters that seem to have been drawn directly from among one's own friends and relatives." Her threadbare copy had been passed down through three generations.³⁰

Other readers lamented or derided the lack of current literature. Stirring the pot was a provocative letter appearing in the June 1935 *Saturday Review of Literature*. The letter, written by bookseller Alan Devoe of Hillsdale, New York, and reprinted in the *Farmer* in December 1935 with a call for reactions, cast farmers as "pitiful ignoramuses" with "no inkling at all that literature is still alive" and berated local newspapers and journals for their lack of book news. Devoe characterized the typical farmhouse library as "fifteen or twenty musty volumes ranged on the shelves of the corner cupboard," consisting primarily of farm reports and "such gilt-filigreed opera as the 'Life of Washington' and similar horrible tributes to the persuasiveness of some itinerant book-agent in the eighties." Farm families, he harangued, needed "to be weaned from their fifty-year-old copies of 'The Life of Washington' and tattered volumes of Sir Walter Scott, and led into book realms more modern and more thrilling."³¹

The inflammatory letter drew a spirited reaction from rural readers. Although the *Saturday Review of Literature* printed just two responses to Devoe's critique, the *Farmer* reported receiving a flood of letters indicating the high regard in which books were held and the widely felt lack of titles to select from. "It is evident that farmers read a much larger number of older books than of the newer ones," the *Farmer* observed, "and that they read many more books than they buy." The farm journal's book columnist Paul C. Hillestad grouped the 350 references to specific books and authors into nine categories:

Modern novels	70
Older popular fiction	62
Classics and standard works	59
Recent popular fiction	57
Recent non-fiction	45
Miscellaneous reference books	18
Bible and religious books	15
Poetry	13
Modern adventure	11 ³²

Although most respondents staunchly rose to the defense of their reading, over a third concurred at least in part with Devoe's assessment. Farmers' reading was limited, they conceded. But so, too, some were quick to point out, was the reading of many urban residents. Among the respondents critical of rural reading conditions was a South Dakota farm woman "agree[ing] with Mr. Devoe in every respect." Declaring that "farm bookshelves are far too few and small, and the books are antiquated," she contended that farm families in fact possessed even fewer books than Devoe suggested and underscored the urgent task of capturing the interest of young potential farmers. "Get them into the reading habit by publishing reviews of good books and stress the enjoyment derived from reading," she entreated, dismissing attempts to target older generations as "pretty hopeless, for it's almost impossible to 'teach an old dog new tricks.'"³³

"Yes, farmers do read!" protested another South Dakota letter writer, who identified herself only as "I. B. A." Refuting Devoe's charges that farm families read only

outmoded literature, she listed the books most recently discussed at her own rural women's club, including Walter Boughton Pitkin's *Life Begins at Forty*, Bess Streeter Aldrich's *Spring Came on Forever*, and, "fresh from the press," *North to the Orient* by Anne Lindbergh. "The years of depression have made the people more booky," she maintained, citing as support a recent local news item reporting a total of 1,207 books read by ten rural home extension clubs in the previous year. "And I'll wager that not one of them was by Scott, Dickens, Buffalo Bill, or [evangelist] Dwight L. Moody."³⁴

The reading interests of rural South Dakotans were actually quite varied, "I. B. A." claimed. Conceding that "a farm life slant always has its appeal," referencing the books of Rose Wilder Lane and Bess Streeter Aldrich, she highlighted the popularity of other works, such as Emil Ludwig's acclaimed biography of Napoleon and Pearl Buck's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Good Earth*, and pointed to the continuous attraction of Honore Willis Morrow, Gene Stratton Porter, Earl Derr Biggers, and Kenneth Roberts, authors known respectively for writing Westerns, romantic fiction, mysteries, and historical novels. Familiar with circulation patterns at "our little city library," she reported that half of the loans were made by farm families in town on Saturday afternoons or evenings. Also evidence of varied reading practices and intellectual curiosity, she noted, were farmers' frequent requests to the commission for technical and specialized books. "I. B. A." concurred with Devoe on one point--the importance of farm journals and papers in influencing reading habits. She recommended that farm publications carry prominently placed book reviews and advertisements of books on "domestic activities, poultry raising, farming, etc., with fiction scattered in."³⁵

A number of farm magazines did, in fact, include book news. The *Dakota Farmer*, which vied with the *Farmer* for the distinction of most widely read farm publication in

the Dakotas, offered periodic book reviews. Typical selections were domestic and farm-related works, ranging from *Good Taste in Dress* and *2002 Household Hints to Practical Sheep Husbandry* and *A Guide for Sexing Chicks*. Fiction reviews appeared as well, often featuring regional or rural-oriented works.³⁶

The *Farmer*, too, devoted space to literary topics, soliciting and printing subscribers' letters about their reading. In response to a 1931 survey, readers identified more than three hundred favorite book titles. Fictional works topped the list, followed by biography and travel. Novels repeatedly cited included Bess Streeter Aldrich's *A Lantern in Her Hand*, Edna Ferber's *Cimarron*, O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, and Dorothy Canfield Parker's *The Deepening Stream*. Other popular authors were Grace Richmond, Kathleen Norris, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Zane Grey, and James Oliver Curwood, the latter four novelists appearing frequently on national best seller lists of the 1910s and 1920s.³⁷

A reader from Brookings County, identifying herself as "Mrs. C. N. P.," shared her favorites, including Martin Johnson's *Camera Trails in Africa*, Alfred Aloysius Horn's *Trader Horn*, Emerson Hough's *The Covered Wagon*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, Ferber's *So Big*, Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, S. S. Van Dine's *The Bishop Murder Case*, and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Detective stories were a recently discovered pleasure. "There isn't any type of story that takes one's mind absolutely off her work quite like a good mystery," she concluded.³⁸

In the fall of 1933, the *Farmer* began a "Book Chats" column, in which columnist Hillestad celebrated the joy of reading and encouraged readers to submit reviews of their favorite books. Hillestad reminded readers of the value of books as tools. "Books on home making and on the care of children can do much to make home life more attractive and satisfying," he asserted. The *Farmer's Wife* also took an interest in rural

reading habits. Lucile Reynolds's study of farm women's reading was based on surveys distributed to women by the magazine in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Almost half the respondents had read five or more books during the year, while 14 percent had read none. Two thirds of the books read were fiction titles and one third nonfiction. The farm women had read many of the same books read by urban readers. Top fiction authors were Gene Stratton Porter, Harold Bell Wright, and Zane Grey. Of the nonfiction read, Reynolds observed, almost thirty percent belonged to the category of "religion, character education, philosophy, psychology, and education."³⁹

The *Farmer's Wife* field editor Carroll P. Streeter noted a special interest in information on recreation and home improvement. Farm journals and women's magazines were often filled with directives on beautifying homes and farmyards; and even though the devastated economy and arid climate of the 1930s could render these beautifications impossible to achieve, books and information on home improvement were nonetheless in high demand. The *Farmer's Wife* reported receiving hundreds of letters inquiring about lily pools and rock gardens. Margaret Koenig, home extension agent of South Dakota's Fall River and Custer counties, corroborated that club members were "most interested in books on home interest and home life."⁴⁰

Popular as well were materials providing ideas on making a little extra money and also travel stories with their power, as a reader of the *Farmer's Wife* observed, to "take us to far away places and relieve our minds completely of all the cares and duties we have here." Technical information on farming was not much in demand, reported Streeter. "Farm magazines, college bulletins and county agents keep most farmers supplied with more of it than they can use. And as one farmer remarked, 'I don't want any of that stuff anyhow--I already know how to farm better than I do farm.'" Rather,

concluded Streeter, readers “want something that will cheer them, help them keep up hope, get their minds off their troubles, and inspire them to win the fight.” He maintained that the material found in farm and home magazines was a reliable reflection of what farm families wanted to read because the magazines’ very existence depended on their ability to attract these readers. Indeed, many women wrote letters to farm publications praising the contents. The letter of a satisfied subscriber to the *Dakota Farmer* is illustrative, relating how she “read every word” of the farm journal, eagerly turning first to the “Home” page and the discussion of topics “all so vital to farm women.”⁴¹

To appeal to the literary tastes of their readers, farm publications also included serialized stories in their pages. Westerns, mysteries, farm and frontier fiction, romances, and adventure stories were typical fare. The *Dakota Farmer* carried fictional selections in the early years of the depression, featuring the adventure romances *Under Frozen Stars* by George Marsh and *Webster-Man’s Man* by Peter B. Kyne. The *Farmer*, favoring mysteries, included among its selections Mignon G. Eberhart’s *The Patient in Room 18* and *Mystery of Thatcher House* and Catherine Tongue’s *The Secret of the Cottonwoods*. Such selections, particularly the mystery and adventure stories, reflect education professor and reading scholar Douglas Waples’s findings in a depression-era study in which he concluded that readers enjoyed stories exalting “the common aspiration to uncommon cleverness.” But above all, Waples asserted, people most liked reading “about themselves,” preferring “the fiction which dignifies the kind of persons they are or think they may become.”⁴²

Farm women’s comments support this observation, praising, in letters and other comments, stories with a familiar setting or characters. The editorial staff of the

Farmer's Wife consciously tried to play to its readers' preferences through its selections. Among the magazine's frequently serialized authors were Ruth Sawyer, May Griffiee Robinson, and Hugh J. Hughes. Their stories, glorifying the home and the family, were primarily set in rural locales or pioneer times. Typical were Sawyer's *Folkhouse* and *The Luck of the Road* ("a story of the kind of folks you know, and most of you seem to like best the stories of everyday folks who happen to be caught in the circumstances of romance or adventure"); Robinson's *Immortal Dream Dust*, set on the Kansas prairies; and Hughes's farm-centered *Clean Wind Blowing* and *Leather Hinges*, heavily promoted by the magazine's editors as "one of the best of many stories that have been written about rural life." Readers would identify with this farm tale, the editors promised. "You'll read in his story your own experiences, or those of your forbears, and you'll see in it the unfolding of the factors that are so greatly influencing our present times. You'll find in it, too, something of adventure and much of romance."⁴³

Stories with sentimental, nostalgic, and idealized agrarian themes were certainly popular with farm women, as indeed they were nationally. The status of Nebraska author Bess Streeter Aldrich is a case in point. Her appeal to depression-era farm women is indisputable, her name frequently leading all others in reading surveys. Although Aldrich's stories tended to uphold traditional roles and expectations for women, farm women did not focus on that message and were pleased to identify with her protagonists, as illustrated in a *Dakota Farmer* essay. "To Mrs. Aldrich, the early pioneers are sturdy, fun-loving, courageous people who faced the same problems we face today," the writer declared, "not, as some would have us believe, stupid and brow-beaten men and women made dull and deficient by their constant contact with the soil."

By 1939, *A Lantern in Her Hand* was in its seventieth printing, identified in a Gallup poll survey as “one of the ten books most read by American women.”⁴⁴

Farm and pioneer fiction abounded in the 1920s and 1930s. Whether set in the present or past, farm novels and stories attracted numerous depression-era readers. Farm women were inspired by these heroic tales of characters who surmounted daunting challenges. A Spink County reader testified to this sense of inspiration after reading Willa Cather’s *Shadows on the Rock*. The determination displayed by pioneers, she asserted, was motivating for future generations: “We are encouraged by their fortitude in the face of hardships that were real. Seeing our crops disappear, or receiving so little for our produce, losing our farms even does not seem to unnerve us so badly when we know others have gone through hard places before us.”⁴⁵

Another rural reader wrote to the *Farmer* expressing deep appreciation for the immigrant novels of South Dakota-affiliated O. E. Rølvaag. She lauded Rølvaag’s determination to depict the tragic stories of pioneers, in which “the hardness of life and the loneliness of the prairie almost wreck spirit and body,” and concluded, “As I come in contact with this Norse sounding vernacular, I am carried back to my childhood. . . . I am certain that I will never find in fiction anything more fascinating to me than these novels of pioneer life in the Northwest, with their intimate revelations of the everyday life that goes to make history.”⁴⁶

The popularity of novels by Rølvaag and others who portrayed the great cost of the pioneering experience reveals that the partiality toward sentimental works was by no means exclusive. Notable are the comments of a Nebraska reader, who, having read forty books in 1935 and more in 1934, identified two of the very best as Caroline Miller’s *A Lamb in His Bosom*, an unsentimental novel of pioneer life in Georgia, and Mari

Sandoz's *Old Jules*, the realistic, often gritty biography of the author's father. *Old Jules* is "magnificent," proclaimed the reader, "one of the best books it has ever been my privilege to read." But neither was she opposed to sentiment, as evidenced by her praise for *Spring Came on Forever*, Aldrich's latest idealized depiction of pioneer life.⁴⁷

Pioneer and farm novels both reflected and resisted conservative domestic ideology. Although accounts by authors such as Aldrich might reinforce traditional roles and expectations for women, other novels expanded gender roles. Works by Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, and Edna Ferber featured characters who were among the strongest female protagonists in popular novels. Farm women embraced that sense of independence and took pride in being worthy successors of these tenacious forebears.⁴⁸

Pioneer novels, then, fulfilled two key elements farm women sought from their reading: validation of their way of life and strengthened faith in their ability to cope. Stereotypes and cultural bias were certainly present in many of these novels, as they were in other popular works of the era. An awareness and analysis of these elements, however--including the common, if unintentional, tendency to favor the predominant European American culture and failure to address the costs of the pioneering experience on other groups--largely belonged to a later era. Rather than probe into underlying ideologies and assumptions, farm women extracted from their reading that which met their emotional and social needs.⁴⁹

Although farm women's selections emphasized the traditional and familiar over diversity and cultural inclusiveness, the lists of materials read and the emphasis of the "Reading in the Home" project on books from and about other countries reveal that the women did transcend their communities, cultures, and experiences through their reading. "It is surprising to note the interest which one takes in items in the newspapers

pertaining to foreign countries as a result of the fact that we have studied about these countries," wrote one "Reading in the Home" participant. "This year's reading has made my world larger, or should I say smaller, as it has brought different classes of people closer to me," noted a club member from Turner County.⁵⁰

This broadened perspective was among the many meaningful outcomes reading provided in the lives of rural women. Along with expanded awareness, reading brought pleasure, companionship, and a restored sense of hope. Reading in a variety of formats and literary genres, farm women satisfied their longing for recreation, inspiration, increased knowledge, and personal growth. In a testimony to the joy of reading, Myrna Lyman spoke for many rural readers: "How many, many times I have been asked, 'Don't you get terribly lonely out there, so far from town, so isolated?' And always my answer has been, 'Never, so long as I can read!'"⁵¹

1. "What Do Farm Folks Read?" *Farmer* (Dakota ed.), Dec. 7, 1935, 28. The *Farmer* was published by the Webb Company of St. Paul, Minnesota. Due to a merger, the publication was known as *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home* from 1929 to 1934, and then continued again as *Farmer*. The Dakota edition was published from 1935 to 1979.

2. For more on the depression and its effects in South Dakota, see, Paula M. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996); Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), 277-97; US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. Population, Pennsylvania--Texas*, vol. 2, pt. 6 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1943), 435; Vera Petharam and W. F. Kumlien, "Population Changes in South Dakota 1930-1940," South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, *Rural Sociology Pamphlet No. 1* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1940); W. F. Kumlien and Howard M. Sauer, "Population Migration to and from South Dakota, 1930-1940," South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, *Rural Sociology Pamphlet No. 2* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1940); W. F. Kumlien, "Basic Trends of Social Change in South Dakota. II. Rural Life Adjustments," South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, *Bulletin No. 357* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1941), 6.

3. Grace E. Wasson, "Use of Time by South Dakota Farm Homemakers," South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, *Bulletin No. 247* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1930), 6. Kumlien, "Basic Trends of Social Change," 19. See, also, Edmund de S. Brunner and J. H. Kolb, *Rural Social Trends* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933), 65-66. A 1928 USDA survey found the average work week for farm women nationwide to be

sixty-three hours. *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1928* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1929), 620. In 1940, 17.7 percent of South Dakota farmhouses had electricity, as opposed to 10.9 percent in 1930. US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Agriculture, General Report, Statistics by Subject*, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1932), 539; *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Agriculture, General Report, Statistics by Subject*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1942), 541. According to a 1935 survey, 12 percent of South Dakota farm families had a central heating system, 16.7 percent had electricity, and 24.4 percent had an inside water supply. W. F. Kumlien et al., "The Standard of Living of Farm and Village Families in Six South Dakota Counties, 1935," South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, *Bulletin No. 320* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1938), 33-36.

4. Nelson, *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own*, 57; "Things I Want to Do," *Farmer's Wife*, Apr. 1931, 56. For discussion on attitudes toward farm women's work, see, also, Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 214-43.

5. Quoted in Nora M. Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer* (Aberdeen, SD), Nov. 18, 1939, 453; Quoted in Mrs. H. [Dagny] Hinderaker, "Reading Report for 1939-40," *Dakota Farmer*, Apr. 20, 1940, 176.

6. "Clubs Require Too Much Time," *Dakota Farmer*, Oct. 1, 1930, 914; Lucile Winifred Reynolds, *Leisure-Time Activities of a Selected Group of Farm Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1939), 18.

7. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1934), 16; Wasson, *Use of Time by South Dakota Farm Homemakers*,

25; "Finds Joy in Reading," *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Oct. 17, 1931, 21; "The One Thing Needful," *Farmer's Wife*, Feb. 1931, 14.

8. Kumlien et al., "Standard of Living," 34; A. J. McGuire, "Along the Road," *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Nov. 14, 1931, 35; Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940); "Books and the Radio," *Saturday Review of Literature* 13 (Feb. 15, 1936), 8; "What, No Books?" *Saturday Review of Literature* 19 (Mar. 11, 1939), 8.

9. Rose Tomsik Van Schaack, *A Time Remembered: Memoirs of a Prairie Wife* (Mesa, AZ: By Author, 1987), 174-75.

10. Reynolds, *Leisure-Time Activities*, 1-3; *Fifth Census of the State of South Dakota Taken in the Year 1935* (Pierre: South Dakota Dept. of History, 1936?).

11. W. F. Kumlien, "What Farmers Think of Farming," South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, *Bulletin No. 223* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1927), 14; W. F. Kumlien, "Public Library Service in South Dakota," South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, *Bulletin No. 301* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1936), 9. In her study of farm women's reading, Lucile Reynolds noted the popularity of newspapers and magazines. She found that of the total subscriptions, nearly 40 percent were for farm magazines; 33 percent were for parents' and women's magazines; and 5.6 percent were for religious publications. Reynolds, *Leisure-Time Activities*, 46-47. In a study of *Dakota Farmer*, historian Paula M. Nelson observes that the farm publication had its highest circulation during the worst days of the depression. Nelson, "'Everything I Want is Here!': The *Dakota Farmer's* Rural Ideal, 1884-1934," *South Dakota History* 22 (Summer 1992): 105. In Dec. 23, 1933 *Dakota Farmer* stated that the paper had 96,410 subscribers, 93,248 in the Dakotas. A 1931 survey found that of 2,004 farm families in

the Dakotas, 1,305 read *Dakota Farmer* and 1,302 read *Farmer and Farm, Stock and Home. Successful Farming* (Des Moines, Ia.) was third in popularity with 742 readers. *Publications that Influence the Farmers of the Dakotas: A Survey Conducted for the Dakota Farmer* (Minnesota: Erwin, Wasey & Company, 1931), unpagued.

12. "Yes, Farmers Do Read!" *Farmer*, Jan. 4, 1936, 22; Stella Page Day, "What the Free Library Means to Us," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 24 (Sept. 1938): 37; Stella Page Day, "Reading Project Enjoyed," *Dakota Farmer*, Apr. 23, 1938, 194.

13. The South Dakota Free Library Commission was established through the lobbying efforts of the South Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs and the South Dakota Library Association; for more, see, Lisa R. Lindell, "A 'Splendid Service': The South Dakota Free Library Commission in the 1930s," *South Dakota History* 35 (Fall 2005): 249-71.

14. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 6-7, 19; Joanne E. Passet, "Reaching the Rural Reader: Traveling Libraries in America, 1892-1920," *Libraries & Culture* 26 (Winter 1991): 113; *Fourteenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1940): 12.

15. Kumlien, "Public Library Service in South Dakota," 13-14; Susan L. Richards, "The Building of Carnegie Libraries in South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 20 (Spring 1990): 2-3.

16. Leora J. Lewis and Mary A. Dolve, "Reading in the Home: The Novel—Second Year," South Dakota State College Extension Service, *Extension Circular No. 311* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1931), 10; W. F. Kumlien, "Equalizing Library Opportunities in South Dakota," South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, *Bulletin No. 233* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1928), 24.

17. Lewis and Dolve, "Reading in the Home," 10. See also "Hyde County Library Receives Publicity," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 15 (Dec. 1929), 63; *Tenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1932), 14.

18. Quoted in "Hyde County Library Receives Publicity," 63; *Hyde Heritage* (Highmore, SD: Hyde County Historical Society, 1977), 247-48.

19. "What the County Library Means to Me," *Dakota Farmer*, Mar. 1, 1930, 264.

20. Smith-Lever Act, Public Law 95, *US Statutes at Large*, 38, (1915): 372-73.

Home extension clubs were an outgrowth of homemakers' clubs, allied with Farmers' Institutes. Gilbert S. Weaver, "Twenty-Five Years of Agricultural Extension Work in South Dakota," South Dakota Agricultural Extension Service, *Mimeograph Circular No. 223* (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1937): 40. For more information on rural extension and adult education, see, Edmund de S. Brunner and E. Hsin Pao Yang, *Rural America and the Extension Service: A History and Critique of the Cooperative Agricultural and Home Economics Extension Service* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1949); Edmund de S. Brunner and Irving Lorge, *Rural Trends in Depression Years: A Survey of Village-Centered Agricultural Communities, 1930-1936* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 177-248.

21. Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Feb. 13, 1937, 99; Weaver, "Twenty-Five Years," 44-45; Brunner and Lorge, *Rural Trends in Depression Years*, 181. In her analysis of farm women's leisure activities, Reynolds found that aside from the church, extension work was the organization of primary importance for the women studied. Reynolds, *Leisure-Time Activities*, 31.

22. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population, Montana-Wyoming*, vol. 3, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1933), 838; *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940*, 491-500; Dorothy Schwieder, *75 Years of Service: Cooperative Extension in Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 97; "Clubs Require Too Much Time," 914. The census totals include South Dakota farm women age twenty-one and over. In addition, there were 50,444 rural non-farm women in 1930 and 54,674 rural non-farm women in 1940. South Dakota's total population was 692,849 in 1930 and 642,961 in 1940.

23. "Children are Welcome at Club," *Dakota Farmer*, Oct. 1, 1930, 914; "In Defence of Club Work," *Dakota Farmer*, Nov. 15, 1930, 1032; "Not for Leisure Class," *Dakota Farmer*, Dec. 1, 1930, 1054; "Something for Everybody," *Dakota Farmer*, Oct. 1, 1930, 915; Weaver, *Twenty-Five Years*, 43-45; Brunner and Yang, *Rural America and the Extension Service*, 96-7. Recreation was a key emphasis of extension programming during the bleak years of the depression. In a 1930s study of agricultural extension activities, Brunner and Lorge noted the significant development and growth of recreational programs throughout the country. They reported that of the forty states answering a survey, thirty-two had "well-defined" general recreation programs, and the remaining eight were all doing "a little." Twenty-six of the states had drama programs, twenty had music programs, twelve had arts and crafts programs, and eight had reading programs. Brunner and Lorge, *Rural Trends in Depression Years*, 189. South Dakota's "Reading in the Home" project was singled out as a model in several national publications. See, for example, "A State-Wide Reading Project," *Christian Science Monitor*, Aug. 29, 1936; J. H. Kolb and Edmund de S. Brunner, *A Study of Rural Society: Its Organization and Changes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 452-53.

24. Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Mar. 28, 1936, 171-72; "Reading in the Home," 8.
25. Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Jan. 28, 1939, 36; Day, "What the Free Library Means to Us," 37-38; Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Mar. 28, 1936, 172; Hott, "Homemaker's Corner," *Extension Farm-Home News* (Brookings, SD) 6 (Feb. 1939): 3. The interest in recreation and dramatics brought a representative of the National Recreation Association to the state in 1939 to conduct three-day dramatic institutes in Meade and Hand counties. Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, June 17, 1939, 260.
26. Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Jan. 28, 1939, 36; *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 9; Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Aug. 31, 1935, 323.
27. Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Feb. 29, 1936, 113; Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Mar. 28, 1936, 171; "Items of Interest," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 26 (Mar. 1940): 6.
28. *Ninth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission* (Pierre: The Commission, 1930), 6; *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 8; Gertrude A. Null, "What the Library Means to South Dakota Clubwomen," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 26 (Mar. 1940): 2; *50th Anniversary of the South Dakota State Library Commission and Histories of South Dakota Libraries by their Librarians: 1913-1963* (Pierre: The Commission, 1973).
29. "South Dakota Library News," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 24 (Mar. 1938): 17; "Bookmobile Makes Initial Appearance," *South Dakota Parent-Teacher Magazine* 11 (Mar./Apr. 1938): 10-11; "WPA Library Service in South Dakota," *South Dakota Library*

Bulletin 24 (June 1938): 26-27; Gertrude E. Flyte, *When the South Wind Blew Softly* (n.p.: By Author, 1973), 25; *Fourteenth Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 4. In January 1940, Library Commission Director Mercedes B. MacKay outlined suggestions for improved methods of organization and operation of the WPA Statewide Library Project, which were implemented in 1940 and 1941. MacKay, South Dakota Library Commission report, [1940], Lawrence Fox Papers, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, SD; "WPA State Wide Library Project," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 26 (Dec. 1940): 57-58; "WPA Library Service Project," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 27 (June 1941): 36.

30. "Report of the Free Library Commission," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 23 (Dec. 1937): 43; "Why Not a Book Christmas," *Farmer's Wife*, Dec. 1933, 11; "Review of My Favorite Book: 'Pride and Prejudice,'" *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Nov. 11, 1933, 17. Charles Dickens was also highly praised, see, "Balances Reading," *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Oct. 17, 1931, 22; Lyman, "What the County Library Means to Me," 264.

31. Alan Devoe, "Wanted: Rural Book News," *Saturday Review of Literature* 12 (June 15, 1935), 9.

32. "Critic Set Right on Farm Reading," *Farmer*, Jan. 4, 1936, 22. Leading the list were Bess Streeter Aldrich, H. G. Wells, the Bible, Zane Grey, and Gene Stratton-Porter. Paul C. Hillestad concluded that with the possible exception of the large number of older popular novels, "the range and variety seems to be as manifold and unpredictable as any cross-section of American life anywhere." Hillestad, "What Farm Families Read," *Saturday Review of Literature* 13 (Feb. 15, 1936), 9.

33. "Making Reading a Habit," *Farmer*, Jan. 4, 1936, 24.

34. "Yes, Farmers Do Read!" 22.

35. Ibid.

36. *Dakota Farmer*, July 4, 1936, 351; Aug. 1, 1936, 391; Dec. 26, 1931, 823; Sept. 14, 1935, 345. For regional fiction reviews, see, *Dakota Farmer*, Dec. 26, 1931, 823; June 4, 1938, 269; Feb. 25, 1939, 81, 95.

37. "Friendships Are Found in Books," *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Oct. 17, 1931, 21-22; Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Best Sellers: 1895-1975* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1977).

38. "Discovers Relaxation in Mysteries," *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Oct. 17, 1931, 22.

39. Hillestad, "Book Chats," *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Sept. 30, 1933; Reynolds, *Leisure-Time Activities*, 50-57.

40. Carroll P. Streater, "Books and Farmers," *South Dakota Library Bulletin* 17 (Dec. 1931), 67; Quoted in Hott, "SD Home Extension News," *Dakota Farmer*, Dec. 17, 1938, 532.

41. Streater, "Books and Farmers," 66-67; "Discussions Are Helpful," *Dakota Farmer*, Oct. 1, 1930, 914.

42. *Dakota Farmer*, 1930-1933; *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, 1931-1933; Douglas Waples, "People versus Print," in *Library Trends: Papers Presented before the Library Institute at the University of Chicago, August 3-15, 1936*, ed. Louis R. Wilson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 260. In another study of reader preferences in the 1930s, Jeannette Howard Foster examined the most read fiction authors, grouping them by quality and subject classes and by reader characteristics. Most popular overall were adventure, detective, and love stories. Housewives preferred

novels of family life. Foster, "An Approach to Fiction through the Characteristics of its Readers," *Library Quarterly* 6 (Apr. 1936): 154-74.

43. *Farmer's Wife*, June 1934, 3; Jan. 1932, 3.

44. "Save Your Pity," *Dakota Farmer*, Feb. 25, 1939, 81; Carol Miles Petersen, *Bess Streeter Aldrich: The Dreams Are All Real* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 89.

45. "Review of My Favorite Book: 'Shadows on the Rock,'" *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Nov. 11, 1933, 18; Patricia Raub, *Yesterday's Stories: Popular Women's Novels of the Twenties and Thirties* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 60.

46. "Review of My Favorite Book: 'Giants in the Earth,'" *Farmer and Farm, Stock & Home*, Nov. 11, 1933, 18.

47. "More Book Reviews Needed," *Farmer*, Jan. 4, 1936, 22.

48. Raub, *Yesterday's Stories*, xviii; Janet Galligani Casey, "Farm Women, Letters to the Editor, and the Limits of Autobiography Theory," *Journal of Modern Literature* 28 (Fall 2004): 99-100. For other studies on the roles and perspectives of farm women in this era, see, Janet Galligani Casey, "'This is YOUR Magazine': Domesticity, Agrarianism, and *The Farmer's Wife*," *American Periodicals* 14 (Autumn 2004): 179-211; Gerry Walter and Suzanne Wilson, "Silent Partners: Women in Farm Magazine Success Stories, 1934-1991," *Rural Sociology* 61 (Summer 1996): 227-48; Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies & the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*.

49. Reflecting a cultural bias was *Under Frozen Stars*, serialized by *Dakota Farmer* from Sept. 1930 to Sept. 1931, in its racially demeaning dialogue and description of native peoples. For discussion of reading as a complex event carried out in the context of women's ordinary lives by which they actively construct meaning, see, Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 6-8; David Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 184.
50. *Eleventh Biennial Report of the South Dakota Free Library Commission*, 9, 17.
51. Lyman, "What the County Library Means to Me," 264.