

### Goals/Objectives/Student Outcomes:

Students will:

- Increase their understanding about the many daily tasks and chores regularly accomplished by early 20th-century Iowa farm women who lacked electricity in their homes.
- Compare and contrast Iowa farm women of the 1920s with farm women of today.
- Become aware of the daily work expectations of 1920s Iowa farm women.
- Work cooperatively in pairs and groups to complete instructional tasks.

### Materials:

1. Butcher paper and markers for brainstorming
2. Chalkboard and chalk for Venn diagrams
3. Student copies of "A Day in the Life of a 1920s Iowa Farm Woman" (see attachment)

### Background:

The following are excerpts from Dorothy Schwieder, "Iowa Farm Women in the 1920s," *Iowa History Teacher*, March 1984:

In the 1970s, Iowa poet and author James Hearst wrote about growing up on an Iowa farm in the early 1900s. Among the many topics Hearst covered was a description of his mother and her work as a farm woman.

Hearst's comments about his mother serve as a good starting point for a discussion of Iowa's farm women in 1920s. Like Mrs. Hearst other Iowa farm women in the twenties worked extremely long hours performing many tasks both inside and outside the farm home. While the general rule prevailed that housework was women's work, that rule did not stop the farm women from doing outside work—including raising poultry, tending a large garden, sometimes helping with milking, or special chores such as corn picking.

On the farm, women performed a wide range of domestic tasks. Because most farm families produced nearly all their own food in the 1920s, the farm wife spent much of her time either raising or preserving food. Farm women canned large amounts of vegetables

and fruits, grown in their own gardens and orchards. Most farm families butchered their own meat, including both pork and beef. Farm women canned and preserved much of the meat. Milk cows were standard on the Iowa farm in the 1920s, so the family produced its own milk and cream. Women sometimes churned their own butter. Some women continued to make their own soap, a practice carried over from their grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

A major food staple in any farm home in the 1920s was bread, and most farm women baked it regularly. One woman raised on a farm in Boone County in the early 1900s, remembered that with a large family of nine children, her mother baked bread twice a week. Each time she made eight loaves of white bread, a large pan of biscuits, and five loaves of graham bread. This same women often baked enough cookies to fill a large roasting pan!

A major task of Iowa farm women in the 1920s was raising chickens. Although some eggs were eaten by the family (as well as some of the chickens), most were carefully collected and taken to town on Saturday night. There they were sold to local merchants. Egg money was especially important to farm women because they used it to buy groceries such as flour, sugar, and coffee. Egg money also frequently paid for household items and clothing. One farm woman stated that the egg money determined how much her family purchased at the store. In other words, the amount the woman spent for groceries and clothing each week had to equal the amount she made from her egg sales each week.

Perhaps the busiest time on the Iowa farm in the 1920s was when threshers arrived. Each summer, five or six farm families worked together to help each other thresh grain. Each farm woman was expected to serve three meals to the threshers when they arrived to work at her farm. The threshing crew might include ten men or might include thirty men. Preparing for threshers took both time and effort. To handle this large task, farm women often helped each other. It took advance planning to prepare food for twenty or thirty hungry men, and considerable preparation to set up and set the tables. As well as preparing a big meal at noon, each farm woman made two lunches a day for the workers. They delivered these to the men while they worked in the field. Sometimes it took several days to finish the threshing. In that event, the farm women had several big noon meals to prepare.

At the same time that Iowa farm women faced onerous work loads within the farm home, they had few social outlets outside the home to counterbalance their heavy work schedules. In the twenties, some of

them belonged to local extension clubs, but many did not. For the majority, the local church and school provided their main social activities outside the home. Farm women, along with their families, often attended box socials, spell downs, and picnics at the nearby school house. Many also attended the ladies aid society of their local church. For most farm families in the 1920's, their rural neighborhood provided the boundaries for their lives.

While most farm women believed, as did their husbands, that farm living was superior to town or city living, the 1920s also witnessed some discontent with farm life. Through that decade, farm living was often contrasted with town or city and found to be deficient when compared to town or city living. In general, farm life was portrayed as monotonous and dreary. Farm children were depicted as receiving inferior educations. Farm families were seen as having fewer social and cultural opportunities. Perhaps of greater importance, town and city residents had a whole host of conveniences and comforts that farm people lacked, such as electric lights, electric appliances, central heating, and indoor plumbing.

Farm women themselves often reacted to these social deficiencies. Sometimes they wrote letters to *Wallaces' Farmer*, Iowa's leading farm journal, telling of their conflicting feelings about rural living. On one hand, they recognized that farm life could produce great rewards. Yet, they also recognized that farm life—at least in the 1920s—often resulted in considerable social deprivation for children and parents alike.

Throughout the 1920s, rural people worked hard to alleviate some of these social deficiencies. Farm families organized community clubs in rural neighborhoods. More and more farm women attended events sponsored by county home economists and by Iowa State Extension personnel. While these actions brought greater rural solidarity and more social interaction, the real solution to the social problems of the 1920s would not come until the following decade. Not until the 1930s did farm families achieve a social equality with town and city families. That equality would come through improved transportation facilities and the development of rural electric power. In the 1930s, roads in different parts of the state were hard-surfaced. For the first time farm families could get to town regardless of the weather. They could then enjoy social activities that town people had been enjoying for decades. Moreover, establishment of Rural Electrification Associations in the 1930s meant that large numbers of farm families could enjoy the conveniences and comforts of town and city living. While the changes that came in the 1930s certainly did not eliminate the many different work roles of the Iowa farm women, they did allow them to carry out these roles more quickly and more efficiently.

## Procedure:

### 1. Introduction:

Ask students to brainstorm a list of as many items as possible in their homes that operate using electricity. First list electrical items on a sheet of paper individually, then combine their lists in groups of three or four students. Then complete a class list of home electrical items (appliances, conveniences, machines) on butcher paper. List them in a column on the left-hand side. Inform students that many families in Iowa didn't even have electricity until REAs (Rural Electrification Associations) were established. Students' grandparents or elderly friends in their 70s would likely recall times with limited or no electrical service.

2. Looking at the above list, list in the right-hand side how tasks using this electrical item would have been performed in the 1920s without electricity.

Examples:

Electric clothes dryer—Letting clothes dry on clothes line with wooden clothes pins.

Microwave oven—warming food on the stove top or in the oven.

3. Note that many of the tasks above were chores of the farm woman. Try to recreate a day in the life of an Iowa farm woman in the 1920s. Imagine a daily routine on a summer day when garden produce was abundant, children were out of school for the summer, and life was very busy on the farm. Did the 1920s farm woman carpool kids to computer class or tennis lessons? No. Discuss what she would need to do and organize on the farm.

Examples:

Garden produce—What crops would be grown? Harvested? How were they stored?

Meals—What would the husband, children, and hired hands eat three times a day? Did she bake or buy bread? Did she help butcher beef and pork? What did they do with the meat? What would she do with her "egg money" or "cream money"?

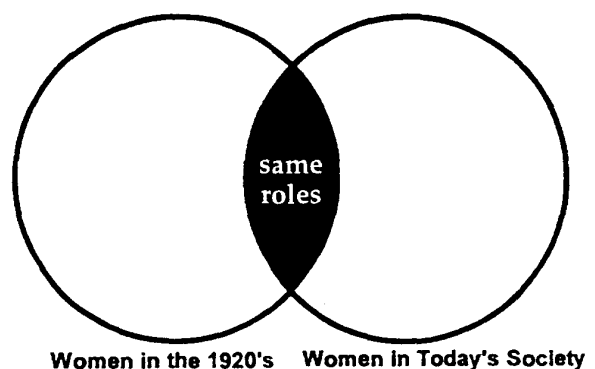
Laundry: How was washing, drying, and ironing done?

Reading: Did the family read at night? How? What might they read?

4. Using the above questions to stimulate thinking, complete the attachment activity, "A Day in the Life of a 1920s Iowa Farm Woman."

Compare farm lore now and then by drawing a Venn Diagram (see below) on a chalkboard. Generate the tasks, chores, or job responsibilities of women living in the 1920s compared with those living in today's society. Record ideas from the students by listing 1920s tasks in the circle to the left and contemporary women's roles in the circle to the right. List any roles similar to BOTH in the center overlapping space.

**Venn Diagram of Women's Roles  
in the 1920s and Today's Society**



## Assessment of Outcomes:

Have each child write a journal about the life roles of a typical Iowa farm woman in the 1920s. Ask students: What tasks and roles did she generally have (or not have) to do in her work? What were her challenges? What were her joys? Evaluate the quality and historical authenticity of the child's writing.

## Extensions and Adaptations:

1. Oral History—Interview an Iowa grandparent, elderly friend, or relative. Ask them to describe life as a child with limited or no electrical services. What was life like? Describe their daily chores and tasks. Ask if they have any old photos to share or lend. Have the student think of three interview questions, write up the interview, bring any photos, and share orally in class.
2. Economics—Think about the US Postal Service way back when! What did postage stamps look like in the 1920s? How much did it cost to mail a letter and a postcard? (Check in stamp collector's guides available at post offices and book stores.) Find out how much basic foods cost in the 1920s. How much was a loaf of bread, a gallon of milk, a pound of bacon, a pound of flour, a pound of sugar, and a dozen eggs? (Check in an old newspaper using the public library's microfiche).
3. Organizations/Publications—Research the 4-H Clubs of America. What do the four H's stand for? What did kids do at a 4-H meeting years ago? Research the REA (Rural Electrification Association). What role did this group play in Iowa's rural development. Would rural electrification make a woman's life different? How? Research Wallaces' Farmer magazine. Who would read this journal? Would women read it? What would one learn?
4. Art Project/Story Writing—Draw a scene from rural Iowa farm lore in the 1920s. Include a house, garden, chicken coop, farm field in the background, maybe even the family dog or an old model car. Write a creative story about a family who lives in this rural setting.
5. Three-Dimensional Art Project—Make a three-dimensional house using the diorama art project based on the American Gothic house drawing (see attachment). Make it creative and colorful. And find out who Grant Wood was and what American Gothic is.

## Resources:

*Goldfinch* 15 (Fall 1993).

Copies of *Wallaces' Farmer*.

## The Diary of a Farm Wife: Emily Hawley Gillespie

Emily Hawley came to Iowa in 1861, when she was twenty-three years old. She married James Gillespie in September 1862, and in December they began working their own farm, one and a half miles west of Manchester, in Delaware County.

The diary entries on these pages are in Emily's own words. Emily wrote about her family, friends, and neighbors. By 1872 she and James had been working the farm for ten years, and had two children: Henry, age eight, and Sarah, age six. In 1870 Emily bought a sewing machine; before that, she made all the family's clothing by hand. Her diary shows what she and James did each day, and how often farmers traded work for each other. Parents would get together to hire a schoolteacher for their children. Neighbors visited, ate together, and stayed overnight.

As you read, ask yourself: What were Emily's jobs on the farm? How did she help earn money? What did her family usually do on Saturdays?

### JANUARY 1872

4. *Thursday.* children at school. I go to the mill with James, he took 14 bushels of corn — we stay to dinner at Dan Ryan's. Mary buys a sewing machine like mine.

10. *Wednesday.* cut cloak & dress for Sarah, James help Estey kill hogs — Trumblee here begging for poor family — give butter & meal.

22. *Monday.* wash, bake etc. Bly here to get job to frame barn; offers for \$20 — \$5 less than Trumblee. cold & blustery.

26. *Friday.* James pay taxes \$29.66.

27. *Saturday.* mop, bake, churn, iron, etc. go to town, bargain for 2,000 ft. of lumber.

### FEBRUARY 1872

1st. *Thursday.* so cold children have stayed at home all week.

7. *Wednesday.* sew carpet rags & cook. James take children to school & do chores. Nathan Nelson died yesterday — consumption & derangement of mind.

8. *Thursday.* warm & pleasant. good sleighing. we attend the funeral of Nathan. there were 37 sleighs followed in procession to the grave.

11. *Sunday.* we attend meeting in evening. Brother Wood Lecture on the subject of Marriage & Money.

### MARCH 1872

1st. *Friday.* James' birthday — 36, he & Bly go to town in forenoon, [build] frame on barn in afternoon. sell 2 pigs to Smith.

27. *Wednesday.* James go to mill, 6 bushels of wheat. buy shoes for Sarah \$.95.

### APRIL 1872

1st. *Monday.* wash, mop & cook. go to get grist, — buy garden seeds, licorice & postage stamps. James & Bly frame.

17. *Wednesday.* fix hens' nests etc. James sow wheat.

27. *Saturday.* Chapmans, Mrs. Smith & Sellens, Henry Stimson & us go & clean schoolhouse.

28. *Sunday.* we ride over to creek, catch five minny fish. Henry get one.

### MAY 1872

1st. *Wednesday.* sew some & cook. have 100 turkey eggs setting & 55 hen's eggs. James plow.

4. *Saturday.* churn, bake, mop, iron etc. James plant potatoes, we go to town in evening. sell 20 lbs. butter \$2.80; buy 2 readers, 3rd, \$1.20 8 lbs. of sugar \$1.00.

5. *Sunday.* John & Harriet & David here to tea. I bake 3 pies & a cake.

6. *Monday.* children commence to go to school. Miss Pope, teacher, to teach 5 months for \$80.

7. *Tuesday.* James mark corn ground.

8. *Wednesday.* churn. make straw tick (mattress cover) & cook. James plant corn. rain.

26. *Sunday.* we are at home. have 90 chickens & 60 turkeys.

### JUNE 1872

13. *Thursday.* bake, sew some. James hoe onions in forenoon. he & Chapman break in afternoon.

18. *Tuesday*. clean house. have fed salted meal to my turkeys accidentally, — killed 18. James make bedsteads in forenoon, plow corn  $\frac{1}{2}$  day.

19. *Wednesday*. bake, churn, pack butter etc. James plow corn. Henry and Sarah have the *chicken pox*.

JULY 1872

10. *Wednesday*. bake pies & cook. James build fence in forenoon & rake hay for Sellens in afternoon. very warm.

17. *Wednesday*. churn. go rasberrying. James bind wheat.

18. *Thursday*. clean house. Sellens & Chapman cut hay for James. James rake hay.

31. *Wednesday*. James work for Chapman in harvest.

AUGUST 1872

26. *Monday*. can 5 qts. peaches. children go to school. James help McMillen thresh.

SEPTEMBER 1872

24. *Tuesday*. clean up house & cook. James help Uncle thresh. 'tis the first day of the fair, I would like to go very much indeed.

25. *Wednesday*. we go to the fair but too late to enter my things.

OCTOBER 1872

4. *Friday*. bake bread. threshers came. 4 to dinner & 8 to supper, stay all night.

5. *Saturday*. they finish threshing, though rainy, 125 bushels wheat & 140 oats.

9. *Wednesday*. knit etc. help James put up oats. cold. freeze.

11. *Friday*. sew & bake, churn. James dig potatoes, he sold cows to Beal for \$40.

23. *Wednesday*. Mr. Oviat's barn burned last night, cause — kerosene from lantern. NOVEMBER 1872

4. *Monday*. wash, bake, churn, etc. James husk corn  $\frac{1}{2}$  day. we go to town in afternoon sell 56 doz. eggs for \$11.20

21. *Thursday*. finish [sewing] coat & cut pants. James husk corn. we visit at Sellens. DECEMBER 1872

6. *Friday*. patch, sew, etc. James take 81 chickens to market, get \$12.60.

7. *Saturday*. we go to town in afternoon sell 67 lbs. butter \$6.70.

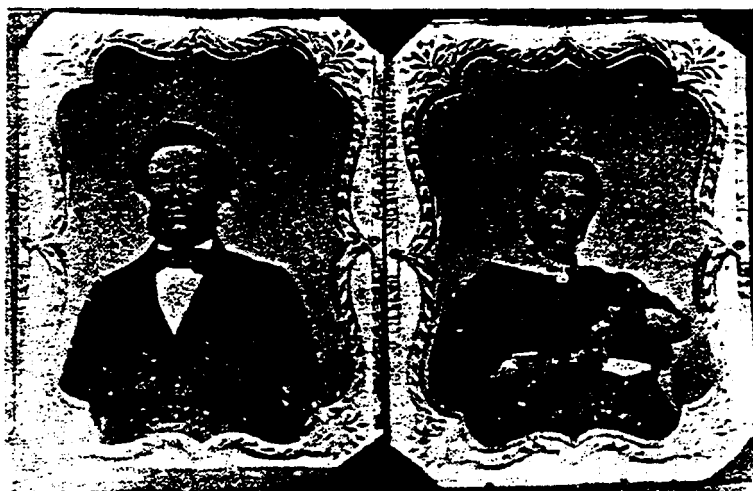
10. *Tuesday*. bake etc. James get up some wood. he & Bly lay foundation for barn  $\frac{1}{2}$  day.

25. *Wednesday*. Christmas. make me an apron, a shirt for Sarah & cook. James do chores. children get magazines & papers in their stockings.

30. *Monday*. visit at Dan Ryans while James attend Auction, he bought two yearling heifers, paid \$20.75. snow.

31. *Tuesday*. the year ends in a most beautiful day. James go after his yearlings.

Division of the State Historical Society



Name:

Date:



## A Day in the Life of a 1920's Iowa Farm Woman

What tasks and chores do you think an Iowa farm woman would complete in the course of single day? After discussing possible farm tasks, list how she might spend hour by hour. Oh, yes, don't forget to put the kids to bed!

5:30 am

6:30 am

7:30 am

8:30 am

9:30 am

10:30 am

11:30 am

12:30 pm

1:30 pm

2:30 pm

3:30 pm

4:30 pm

5:30 pm

6:30 pm

7:30 pm

8:30 pm

9:30 pm

10:30 pm



What do you think of this woman's day compared to your mom's day? Write your opinion on the back of this sheet. Compare your day schedule and opinion with a partner's work.

# Make a House

by Kay Chambers

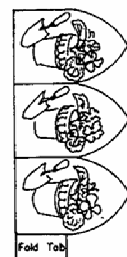
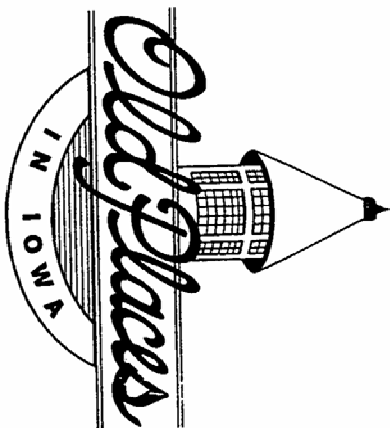
You can re-create the famous house in the background of Iowa artist Grant Wood's painting, *American Gothic* by making a shoe-box model.

You need:

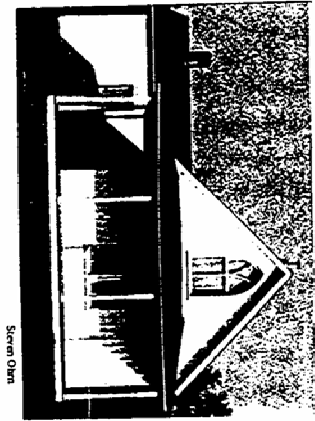
- 1 shoe box
- scissors
- glue or tape
- 2 sheets blue construction paper
- 1 sheet green construction paper
- 6 round toothpicks
- colored pencils or crayons (access to a photocopy machine)

Steps:

- 1 Make a photocopy of the illustrations on these two pages.
- 2 Cut out the house and porch roof.
- 3 Fold along lines marked V. One line marked VL must be folded toward you to make the L shape of the house.
- 4 Glue or tape the roof tabs to the house sides.
- 5 Fold under porch roof and position it around the house corner. Glue one tab to the front and one to the side of the house so that the top of the porch roof is straight along the dotted lines.
- 6 With shoe box on its side, glue blue paper to represent sky and green paper to represent grass.
- 7 Center house against the long side of shoe box. Fold under tabs and glue them to the bottom of the box.
- 8 Cut and glue toothpicks to the bottom of the box and the porch to make pillars as shown in the photograph.
- 9 Color the flowers and cat pieces. Cut, fold, and glue as shown to make stand-up figures.



The original American Gothic house in Eldon, Iowa.



Scene One

