

I Know How to Work: Stories of Farm Women in Stokes and Surry Counties

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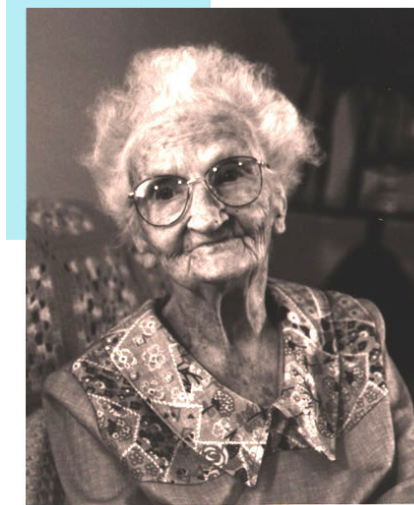
The lives of rural women in North Carolina have changed greatly over the past one hundred years. The following article is based on oral histories of women born in the late 1890s and early 1900s. They all grew up on farms and know the meaning of hard work in a way that most of us will never understand. They may not have had the luxuries and modern conveniences that so many of us take for granted, but they look back on their lives with happiness and fond memories.

Gilda Knight Spainhour

Gilda Spainhour and her husband, Will, live just east of King in Stokes County. Gilda began working at a very young age. "When I was ten years old I would go out and stay with people and cook for them. I done the cooking for all the hands and milked two cows and fed the hogs, and I got a dollar and a quarter a week. I know how to work," she told *Tar Heel Junior Historian* magazine.

She worked for Jim Kreeger, a landowner in King, and made enough money to buy her black-buttoned wedding shoes. She made her wedding dress from blue wool. "We got married on Wednesday and the next day Will finished sowing wheat. We moved into a log house--great big logs. The floors were pretty pine; there wasn't such a thing as paint then."

Their house had no luxuries, only the bare necessities. "I wish you could have seen how we done and what we had. Grandpa Spainhour made us a box up on the wall for our cupboard, and Grandpa and Will made the table. [The woodstove] had one leg broken off. We had it propped up. We used it about four years because we had to have farming tools and other things. What you *needed* came first, it wasn't what you wanted."



Gilda Spainhour

Gilda looks back on her seventy-nine years of marriage with satisfaction. "I've got a good man. He's done just as much in raising this family as I. I think he's pinned on more diapers than I have." What her husband did to help with the children was unusual for a man born in 1888. "Well, there wasn't many men done it," she said.

Ida Mae Cundiff

Baking sweet potatoes in her Mount Airy home, Ida Cundiff tells about her childhood, almost a hundred years ago, growing up on the Milton Cundiff place near the Yadkin River. Her older sister, Julie, was a cook in the Cundiff household. Her grandfather was a slave.

When Ida was a little girl, she worked in the fields: "When I got big enough. Yes, that what I did, chile. Hoeing, chile. Hoeing the crops. You'd go down to the river bottom. . . had corn or tobacco all down there."

When the boys would come courting her sisters, she pestered them to give her money for candy. They would give her a nickel just to get rid of her. Ida explained the value of money spent almost a hundred years ago: "A nickel! Lord, chile. A nickel was just like a dollar. . . That was something!"

She would give the nickel to her father so he could buy candy for her at the nearest town, Siloam, in southeastern Surry County. Sometimes she and her sisters rode with him on a two-horse wagon.

"Daddy would hitch up the wagon, put us all in there, and here we'd go--a quilt back there. We young'uns back there. . . Yeah, them days were good days. I enjoyed it. We had some good days all right!"

Magdalene Robertson Tilley Compton

Magdalene Compton, eldest of nine children, grew up in the Snow Hill community near Lawsonville, north of Sauratown Mountain. From her house it is about thirteen miles through a valley into Stuart, Virginia. Magdalene used to go there with her father when she was young. They would travel by wagon three or four times a year to the mill at Stuart, north across the North Carolina state line, east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. They took wheat from the family farm to the mill and had it ground into flour.



Ida Cundiff

"I went with him many a time. We'd start out early in the morning and be gone all day. Get back by dark. He would carry a whole load of wheat--what the mules could pull. Get it ground up enough to last two or three months," she said.

Magdalene grew up on a tobacco farm. Her family, like other Stokes and Surry farm families, also grew the food it ate. Although men did the heavier outdoor work on the farm--building fences, clearing fields, and plowing with mules--both men and women shared in other chores. Women chopped kindling and carried water and wood into the houses. They also built fires to cook food and heat the houses. She explained that her grandfather "had four boys and four girls, and the girls worked just like boys until they got to be old ladies. I've seen 'em pitch hay and the water just run off of 'em." Magdalene herself preferred outdoor work to inside chores. "Give me the outside anytime!"



Magdalene Compton

Magdalene said people today are much more wasteful than they were when she was growing up. "They didn't buy new stuff like they do now. If you wore out a shirt or something, and it had a hole or two in it, and it was ragged, and you didn't want to wear it, you'd cut the good parts of it out and make you a cotton top or a quilt and fix it. If people had to live like we lived back then, they'd go wild. They waste more than we had."