

# Tales of the Grandmothers

## WOMEN AND WORK

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I begin with the story of a girl baby, born 1826 in Massachusetts, Luna Puffer Squire (Squier). As a seven-year old Luna came with her family to Illinois, where she married at 19. The family farmed; their place was about 100 miles up the Illinois River north of St. Louis. That gave them easy access for harvesting timber and shipping wood to build the growing city during the U. S. years of westward expansion. One piece of family lore holds that they owned barges and tugs that moved the logs to the city, until these were lost during the Civil War.

Luna, by then several months pregnant, with 5 other children, the oldest 19, in late summer 1863 saw husband John off to the South as a soldier in the Union Army. Fix this picture in your mind. This now 37 year old woman in a farming / lumber family has 5 children ranging in age from 19 to 2, and a baby due before the year ends. Her husband is hundreds of miles away fighting a war to preserve the union. No census taker would record her as employed. But, for sure, this woman is working. There, in part, is my point. But, let's go on with Luna Puffer Squire Nairn's story.

"Captain" John as the family always thereafter referred to him was later wounded in the war. Family tales and his obituary in the local paper attribute his death in 1874 to the war injury although clearly he lived several years after the war ended . . . and fathered another baby. Family stories also related that when Luna Puffer learned of his injury, she knew the dangers of recuperation in an army hospital, (even then they knew more people died after their injuries from dirt and infections than the wounds themselves) so she boarded a river vessel, headed down the Mississippi and retrieved him. She brought him back to IL where she cared for him. And in 1866 birthed another baby.

After John's death, 48 year old Luna Puffer, led herself and the five Nairn children, three of whom were married by then, West to homestead in Kansas sometime in the 1880s. Luna Puffer Nairn received a land patent in 1887 in Pawnee Rock KS, a town where she is considered a founder of the local Methodist Church. The new Kansans encountered years of drought and subsequent crop failures; some moved at least temporarily to Raton, N.M. (perhaps drawn by prospect of railroad jobs); one moved south drawn by the prospect of more "free" land when

the Oklahoma Indian territory was opened for white settlement; others returned to Illinois where Squire and Nairn families live today.

I start with the tale of Luna Puffer Squire Nairn for several reasons. First, I am in her family a century later, those who moved to Southern Kansas to "run the Cherokee Strip," and I never heard of her as a child. My family "dropped" her story and told us about later immigrants, male of course. Second, she and her daughters & granddaughters (my grandmothers) illustrate the points I want to make. They explode the myth that has pervaded my adult life: that women in the U.S. first entered the workforce in large numbers during the 20th century women's revolution. That myth lives on for two reasons, both illustrated by Luna Puffer and her granddaughters: We have buried the stories of women's lives, and we have discounted their labor as "not-work."

The two reasons weave together to support that myth that women first entered the workforce in large numbers during and as a result of the "women's liberation" movement of the 1960s & 70s. Surely, the myth usually credits the many "Rosie the Riveter's" of World War II with showing women they could hold nontraditional employment, but it does not credit the long history of other income-earning labor by women prior to WW II. The myth does recognize that women often worked outside the home for pay prior to marriage, especially garment industry factory workers. But it ignores the many other kinds of income production in which women engaged prior to the "second wave feminism" of the 20th century. And it ignores the role of women's work in what Anne Ferguson has described as reproductive labor, a category that refers to far more than birthing babies. It includes all work, paid or otherwise, required to reproduce the culture (not just the species).

The myth of the nonworking woman deep sixes the history of urban homes as craft shops. Only when the economy industrialized did production for sale move outside homes where everyone had been involved . . . although often children were apprenticed to someone else's home. When factories took the laborers "out" to work, childcare became an issue, so an ideology was needed to provide for it without the factory owner being responsible. Woilah! Childcare becomes women's work. Only, no

surprise, turns out that it's not "really" work because it doesn't earn any wages. With the full development of Victorian era beliefs, the cult of true womanhood reached fruition. Never mind that the cult was built on the experiences of the generally well-to-do families. The culture developed the idea that such a role was ideal, so not only do these elite groups largely populate the opinion making classes; they constitute a class and way of life toward which even working class and poor families aspired. Often, after the Civil War, newly freed Blacks assiduously sought such respectability as well. To have a "nonworking" wife was a mark that a man had achieved sufficient status in life to afford such a luxury. Poor families (American Indian, Black, White, Latino, Asian heritage, immigrant families of most ethnicities) never had that luxury. But we don't tell those stories.

Since the "nonworking" life was the ideal, failing to achieve it was not much talked about. That would have been a mark of failure. Another belief also became necessary. Along with the concept of the "nonworking" woman came a view of motherhood as the primary role for women, a role for which they are uniquely suited by biology and god. To accomplish the widespread acceptance of these twin myths, our culture elevated certain stories about our past and it rendered other narratives invisible. And there I want to focus, on the story of invisible working women.

Stories usually told are illustrated by these data from the Population Resource Center: In 1900, census reports identify just 19 percent of women being paid for their work. Today, nearly 60 percent of U.S. women participate in the cash economy. Does that mean that in 1900 81% of women did not work? Or that today 40% do not? Far from it. So what's wrong with the picture?

To fill in the many missing spaces let me trace my maternal ancestors after Luna Puffer Squire Nairn. I'll quickly look at five generations, ending with mine. These stories are relevant because there is no reason to believe the women in my family are particularly unusual. Indeed, in that our family represents women of rural background and little wealth, we are probably more representative of families in general than the typical well-to-do Victorian model of "true womanhood." Most women who traced their maternal descent line would find a similar kind of story.

Over half the population relied on agriculture for livelihood in the middle 1800s (the USDA history reports 64% in 1850). So let me give you a short description of the typical farm family's life in the years before our current era of industrialized farming. Economists and historians often describe the "farmer" as the male parent in such families. That is an abomination. It leaves unmeasured

and usually unnoticed labors of other members of those families, labors required in pre-industrial farming for survival, and increasingly, to produce income. Farm and ranch families' income often came from a "cash crop" of wheat, corn, sheep, cattle, etc., but their farms also supplied most of their food and much of their clothing. One of my earliest memories is going with my mother to the feedstore, where she spent a bit extra to buy chicken feed in sacks instead of bulk. I would be taken along at these times to pick out the pattern of the sacks so that when they were emptied, we could wash them and mother could make my school clothes for the year. We usually purchased our coats and bluejeans (overalls for the boys), but shirts and dresses were homemade, and rarely from fabric purchased for that purpose until WW II (along with some rain) eased the depression of the 30s.

I could go on. There was food preparation and preservation, quilt and blanket making, wood chopping and (sometimes) coal carrying, retrieving and disposing of water, AND production of meager cash crops, whether that was hay, milk, cream, cotton, corn, cattle, pigs, chickens, eggs, or lumber. Farm women did all these activities. And farm children, girls and boys, also engaged in this work as soon as they were old enough to tote a feed pail, pull a weed or pick a strawberry. Income as well as subsistence of farm families depended on the labor of ALL the adults and most of the children. So, regardless of how economists might measure the labor, in families that remained the typical nuclear one, women were farmers, not just helpmates for the man of the farm. And that was work. In short, farm women have worked just as long as there have been farm families. And while at the end of the 20th century, farmers constituted only a tiny percentage of the population in the U.S., the comparable figure at the century's beginning was 40%. That's 40% of the women in the country in 1900 engaging in both subsistence and income producing labor—none of it counted in the reported statistics.

Beyond this part of the story, however, is the fact that virtually all nonfarm women did much of the same work I've just described. For the vast numbers of small shopkeepers, those who were part of the urban merchant class, women worked in the shops right along with the men . . . and the children. Other urban women worked in other ways to earn income. Some were laborers outside the home before being married. They were mill workers, school teachers, domestic help in homes of the well-to-do; they were dressmakers, milliners, mid-wives, cooks, laundry workers, etc. When married and with children, many women did piece work, and they took in sewing—or boarders. Both kinds of working women are among my grandmothers. My great grandmother outlived her

husband by 39 years. And this was pre social security. Family stories have it that “aunt Mary” as her obituaries said she was known, was fiercely independent. She supported herself for 35 + years by taking in roomers; Caldwell was a crew change location on the railroad, and railroad men needed sleeping rooms. She managed pretty well, eventually having a house of her own although its early version of a reverse mortgage made it bank property when she died in 1937. The most valuable item she owned at her death was a nearly new Speed Queen “electric” washing machine— valued by the appraiser at \$10.

My grandmother outlived her husband by 24 years. Upon his death she sold chickens and other vegetables from the family’s huge garden, and when she couldn’t sell all she had, she opened a restaurant on a corner of the lot of her mothers’ rooming house. Ultimately her sons moved that tiny building (3 rooms; I remember it well) to a corner of the big lot where the family home sat. She moved into the little house and rented the big house, which helped support her for many years.

My mother was a farmer; one of her sisters farmed then later moving to the state’s largest city and becoming a real “Rosie Riveter,” building B-29 bombers during World War II. After the war she was among the women entering the clerical staff of the growing economy. My third aunt among Luna Squire Nairn’s progeny became, immediately upon graduating high school, what we then called a “hired girl” (that is now a nanny). This was while she attended business school; then she too took work in a war-related role. The five women of this family in the next generation (mine) have all worked for pay, outside the home, for most of our lives. Only two stopped out of the paid labor force temporarily during pre- and early school years of their children.

As I noted before, these stories are not unique. What I want to do, finally, is pull both threads of this argument together. I begin by saying that I do not accept the ludicrous definition of “work” as only that effort that earns compensation (i.e., stay-at-home mothers don’t work, while child care center employees do). “Women’s” work is work, whether or not anyone pays for it and whether or not economists and government statisticians consider it that or not. This is that “reproductive labor” to which I referred. The economic system as we have built it with paid labor largely done outside the home would not survive without the whole range of “home” work. After “employment” moved out of the home into factories and institutions, fathers had to leave home on a daily basis for long hours. We don’t even need to think about the need for women to birth babies (the literal reproductive labor) required to replace the workforce as existing workers age

and die; there was a whole other range of things that had to be done just so that “father” could “go to “work” in the developing industrial economy. Think of all the support systems the paid employee had to have, especially in the days when “he” worked from dawn to dusk. Early industrial institutions weren’t known as benevolent organizations—they didn’t have child care, health services, on site laundry facilities, cafeterias or lunchrooms, etc. ALL those services had to be provided for the worker. All those services are labor.

Thus I draw the first conclusion of my argument: Women have always worked, even the well-to-do Victorian “housewife.” Record keepers and historians just haven’t counted what they did as income earning, whether it was women in farm and shopkeeping families or those engaged in unpaid labor. How convenient it was to proclaim those kinds of labors as “women’s work,” for which they were naturally prepared by their physiology. These tasks didn’t require education in counting and reading and writing and therefore they weren’t anything requiring skill for which one would pay or that one would consider “work,” real work that is. Please don’t miss my irony there!

What the women’s movement of the 60s & 70s did in the U.S. was to bring huge numbers of bring those unpaid working women into the paid labor force. It brought the children of earlier generations of low paid domestic and service women workers into higher education. From the first women who entered colleges and universities in the late 1800’s, we have today women as a majority of college students. So now, women are, in large numbers, part of the professional and paid salary labor force. Now, they “count.” At first in this movement, and somewhat still today, these new paid labor force members worked two jobs. They were still primarily responsible for all those things needed to support paid laborers even as they worked a full-time job for pay. They worked this second shift because aside from seeing schooling as a public responsibility, we do not hold either government or employers responsible for all that “reproductive labor.” But as women’s skill level and pay has come closer and closer to that of men in the paid labor force, we have begun to pay for that women’s work. More and more, we pay for our “domestic” work: cooking, cleaning, child care, etc. Not surprisingly, however, most of the increasing numbers paid to do such “women’s work” earn very low wages. Not surprisingly this segment of the growing service economy is predominantly female—(or immigrant men, and that’s another whole speech).

So here we are today. Some things have not changed. Some women in families who can afford it don’t do paid work outside the home. Many other women work two

jobs, one paid and one unpaid—or sometimes two paid and one unpaid. But much has changed. Large numbers of women are now working at professional and other relatively high paid jobs, including all of us here in this room I suspect. That, surely we will all agree, is great progress related to women and work. And that is why it is wonderful to be here today as part of this celebration honoring your Woman of the Year. Virtually all of us here today have found our way into roles not traditional for women. And I suspect all of us here have been blessed in doing so. We have worked hard and been, mostly, relatively well compensated. We have found our way to places that appreciate what we do and have done. And we live in a society that now largely supports our working at paid employment that we find rewarding and enjoyable and which we would probably want to do even if we weren't well rewarded financially.

My second conclusion about women and work is that those of us now with relatively well paid employment have a remaining responsibility. We need always to remember that those unheralded unpaid women workers are, in fact, working; and we need to begin talking in ways that re-

flects such recognition. We need to reflect our awareness that all labor is work whether compensated or not. We need to talk in ways that distinguish paid from unpaid labor. Ironically, recent technological changes will help in this process. As “working at home” grows, we'll have to find new ways to describe which workers get paid by salary or wage and which are compensated only by the love and affection of those they serve. We all should consider, for instance, banishing the term “working mothers” from our vocabulary. All mothers work, whether for pay or not. Those who work in the paid labor force may or may not work harder than those who do it for no pay. But it is all work and we need to name it that

And finally, we must attend to our own lives so that we do not entrench this new situation I describe. We do not want to repeat the old model where the wealth of some depended on the relative poverty of others. We surely do not want to build our success and that of the women who follow-us on the backs of low paid women. Achieving that goal will require our constant vigilance. I invite you to join me in such awareness as we celebrate working women everywhere.

## Bombarded On All Sides

### HANDLING EVERYDAY INFORMATION

Address by JEFF DAVIDSON, *author and conference speaker*

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**I**n the beginning God created the heavens and earth, and about four billion years later, humankind. How did we initially fend for ourselves? What was our economic livelihood? How did we make it through this earth? We were hunters and gatherers. Before hunting and gathering came into full swing, and before the bow and arrow were perfected, people were gored by bulls.

The next great age of humankind was the age of agriculture; people learned they could plant seeds and grow corn. Before the age of agriculture coalesced, people starved because there wasn't enough corn. After that age, came the age of industry—production, consumption, capitol goods, shipments, and warehousing. Before the age of industry was in full swing, many people caught their fingers in machines.

#### The Information Age Isn't Here

What age are we about to embark on? We are in a nether-land, an era I call the Over- information age. The age of information is coming, and when the age of information is here, we will have a different perspective than we do now. In the information age computers will be voice-activated. When you want information you talk to

a wall, because there's a computer built into it. You will say, “Computer, give me the information on this subject,” and a friendly voice will give you the information. If you ask the computer a question and it doesn't respond the way you want, you can ask it differently.

When we are in the information age, we will not have to deal with clipboards, printouts, posted pads, instruction manuals, 89-page DVD instruction manuals. You will not have to deal with everything that's beating down on you now, because there will be another way to proceed: Information will be as accessible as turning on a light switch. The problem is that, between now and then, you're going to be subject to a daily glut of information competing for your attention. Every time the government passes another piece of legislature or adds to a policy, it results in more paper on your desk.

When it comes to online information, the number of e-mails you receive is probably growing at a frightening pace. Actually, among those with e-mail accounts, the number of e-mails everyone is receiving daily is escalating.

Since the start of the century, the annual number of e-mails to members of the U.S. Congress exceeds 80 mil-

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