Cabot Women Remember

The women of Cabot share a remarkable strength and determination. Early in the century, many stayed home and dedicated themselves to raising healthy children and supporting their husbands in any way necessary. Others struck out, as did Gertrude Wells, the first woman Democrat to be elected to the Vermont House of Representatives. Many were discouraged from taking on "men's work."

"My father didn't believe in women working in barns, so when we went in the barn, we went to admire the cows or see what was going on in there." — Louise Farr Staples

"I wasn't allowed to milk because my father played baseball and my mother said if I learned to milk he'd never come home." — Bessie Bean

But the farms would have had a hard go of it without the women. Marvey Domey remembered her grandmother, Kate Gould: *"She did all my grandfather's book-work. She fed everyone, including the hired help."* Kate Gould filed the registration papers on the cows. *"Back then you had to draw [the markings] on graphs of every calf that was born and send it in to get registration papers."*

Some girls and women were expected to pitch right in with farm and field work. *"I know there were some women in town who did work outdoors. They didn't do that on our farm. Mother had all she could handle feeding, clothing, and taking care of the family."* — Jennie Donaldson

Zoe Smith Irish remembered Belle Labree: *"She was an awful worker. She'd go right out to the barn and help milk the cows and go to the sugarhouse and boil sap all night. Tell you, she was a worker."*

Belle's daughter, Blanche Lamore, continued the family's tradition of hard work. Blanche started earning money when she was fifteen selling strawberries for fifteen cents a quart. *"And then when I was sixteen, I went to the Woodbury Lake house and worked there all summer. I was paid six dollars a week and I worked from 7 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. five nights a week, and two nights a week until 11:30. They had a dance hall then."* Seventy years later, in her 80's, Blanche was still doing housework. *"I earn more in one hour now than I earned all week there."*

Blanche also loved to trap animals and started at a young age. *"I did not have very good clothes to trap with in those days. You had to have rubbers and things because you go through brooks. So when it come to a brook very deep they had to carry me across and maybe I was ten years old and the more I went trapping with the menfolk the more I liked it because I did like to be outdoors. . . I used trout that I'd caught and had them in a jar all summer so that they had a good smell when you got ready to use them. Sometimes I would catch a hedgehog, sometimes skunks, sometimes weasels or a partridge. Sometimes the neighbor's girls would want to go with me and I liked company. But they really held me up because they just wasn't used to walking so it was really, we was just strolling on a day like that. I never wore very good clothes because once in a while I did get scented with skunks."* — Blanche Lamore

Clara, Flora, Howard, Charles, and George Carpenter circa 1920

Barbara Carpenter recalled hearing that Howard Carpenter offered his girls, Flora and Clara, 50 cents if they would come out to the barn and learn how to milk a cow. Their mother, Lillian (Shepard) was quick to retort: "I'll give you each a dollar if you'll stay in the house." They never did learn how to milk cows.

Below: Blanche Lamore shows off some of her pelts, circa 1945.

HOME LIFE

Laundry day is always a challenge, but before electricity it was particularly difficult.

"Monday was always wash day. While we had a hot water tank, the water for the rinse tubs was always put in those tubs the night before. Dad could do a lot of the lifting. The wash boiler was filled because all the white clothes and things of that sort were boiled. That was ready for the morning. The washing equipment was set up in the kitchen in the winter, but in the summer it was in the walkway between the kitchen along the side of the shed out to the privy. The clothes were washed on a scrub board. I think my mother's was rippled glass as I remember it. . . . Of course between the wash tub and the rinse tub there was a wringer set up. If you washed then you put it into the rinse tub where the clothes were soused up and down. Then they were wrung into a basket and taken outdoors to dry. There was another wringer which had larger rollers and there were grooves with raised sections. You would use that on the men's overalls and pants and things of that sort. You'd run them through into one tub and then run them back and forth several times, and that was the way that the clothes were cleaned. Mother used to have reached about that stage of the washing when the men came in to dinner. My father used to run those overalls and pants back and forth." — Jennie Donaldson

"I had one of those cranking things. It was a big wooden tub and it had a thing inside of it and you turned the crank and you could wash the clothes. And then you'd take them and rinse them. You had a wringer which would hitch right on to it. And wring your clothes with the wringer and hang them out. . . . They used to make their own soap a lot, you know. As I remember they had to make it with lye and grease of some sort. Foul, awful, dirty clothes we had to wash. In barn work you have awful dirty clothes." — Zoe Irish

"I would come home in the afternoon and help my mother with the heavy work, the mopping and the washing. 'Course we washed by hand, didn't have electricity nor running water in that house. The water had to be lugged up from the pump, so I would come home and help her with those things and then I would go back to the Gould's and clean up after the supper. Then I went back up to the schoolhouse and stoked up the fires and split some more wood." — Irene Carroll

Electricity made things easier, but the first electric washing machines were crude.

"Mother had a Maytag with a big wooden barrel that you always had to take out afterwards and dry so it wouldn't mildew. Monday was wash day, it was also always baked-bean day at our place. The beans could be started the night before and when the fire was built in the morning they were in the oven ready to bake and by noon they'd be ready without any effort. It was always brown-bread day too. The brown-bread was steamed on the stove. In the winter the clothes were still hung out on the porch and of course they froze. I can remember them bringing in those stiff clothing, sheets and underwear which were draped over clothes bars and gradually dried out.

"Tuesday would be ironing day. There was a lot of ironing to be done because clothes were cotton. All the men's shirts and the women's dresses and petticoats and aprons were starched. The flatirons were heated on the cook stove. Always when the clothes were going to be ironed, the night before they would be sprinkled so that they would be ready for ironing the next day. The electric iron definitely made things easier. That meant that you didn't have to keep that cook stove with a big fire all day to heat the irons. . . Baking went on most every day. We made a lot of doughnuts, bread was made just about every other day. The bread was set the night before and put in a big mixer which had a crank on the top. Mother usually planned to make six loaves of bread and two tins of raised rolls every time." — Jennie Donaldson

"I've oftentimes thought I don't see how my mother ever did the work she did here on this farm up the hill. We had five or six men to feed all the time and she did all home cooking and everything. . . And all the children. I remember turning the bread mixer for her – one of those big ones for five or six loaves. After we got done working at night we boys took turns always turning mother's bread mixer for her. It was no woman's job to turn the thing by hand."

— Aaron Bolton

Cabot Home-Economics class, 1915. The girls sewed their own outfits.

"Most everybody chewed tobacco. My mother wouldn't have a spittoon in the house. My father had to chew outdoors. There was a man that had a mill down here below my mother's house and he had a kind of little store there. Back then they had chewing tobacco and little flags, kind of felt and very pretty. I remember he had eye trouble and he went down to Lottie Smith's there and . . . she was fixing his eye and he spit on her stove. . . But I guess he never done it again!"

— Blanche Lamore

WOMEN WORKING OUT

"I would go up to the school house at five in the morning and get the schoolhouse ready for school and chop some wood for the hot lunch and dust. Then I'd walk down to Gould's and I did all the upstairs work

before breakfast. Then when the hired men came in, Kate [Gould] did all the cooking, and we would sit down to this great breakfast — hash browns and hot cereal, doughnuts, hot rolls, bacon or sausage, all the coffee you wanted. It was really a great breakfast and I did my duty by it too, by then.

One year when I was working there they killed a pig and they ground up seventy pounds of the fat with one of those number two hand grinders. My arm didn't work right for weeks afterwards. . . I packed the sausage in pound butter boxes. They were waxed and they packed it in there and then you could take them out and slice it. But of course not many had freezers back then. We had to depend on the cold weather and plenty of snow to freeze it." — Irene Carroll

Irene was paid $7 a week for working at the Gould's and $9 a month in the summer and $15 a month in the winter for taking care of the Lower Cabot schoolhouse.

Zoe Smith Irish also remembered "working out" for the parents of Mabel Smith (Mrs. Carroll Houghton): *"I used to do the washing. Just general housework. All the cooking I done and this woman she had dropsy. . . . But back then when I was working out they'd bloat up with all this fluid inside and the only way they had to help 'em was to have a doctor come in and he had to tap 'em. Now God only knows how they done it. But he'd draw that fluid out and then they'd go I don't know how long and have to have it done again. . . . The way she died was that the fluid worked up so high that it cut her breath right off."* — Zoe Irish

"I done the washing for Carroll Houghton and his family. . . [I] carried the water from the back room to my kitchen to do it for a family of six or seven children and a man and wife and the man's mother for a year, to pay for my rent." — Helen Wheeler Smith

Secretarial positions were not open to women during these years and teaching and nursing were the other two main outside occupations.

Above: Women's Tennis. From left; Unknown, Emma Laird, Agnes Warren, Grace Wooster, Nellie Williams, and May Amesbury
Below: Skating on the common about 1907.

MAKING DO

Cabot had a few wealthy residents, but the majority of Cabot's citizens just managed to get by. Some, like Irene Carroll, who found herself as a single mother, worked extra hard to feed her children: *"There wasn't any welfare then. I never asked for any help from the town or anybody else. I used to go and see Ned Barnett and he sometimes had surplus commodities that he would give me. . . Sometimes they had canned pork which was very good and raisins. One time he gave me a ham, but it wasn't like one of those Virginia hams you buy, it was a solid cube of salt.*

"We had a big garden and canned and we made-do. Of course I could buy milk for six cents a quart. Mason Chester and his wife lived down there on the corner [Katz, 1999] and I picked chickens for him for 25 cents an hour. I picked chickens for George Gould for 25 cents an hour too.

"They used to have a beef roast, a barbecue. . . They buried this animal in a pit and roasted it. And Homer Darling had charge of that and 'course when they dug it up and went to use it, there was a lot of meat on the outside that was really almost burned. He took that all off and gave us a lot of that and we lived on that all one winter; it was good. It was overdone, but it was good.

"Mason Chester and his wife used to go to Barre every week. They used to go to big Ladd's grocery store where the bank is now. They'd buy up all the odds and ends of fish that they had in the store that didn't sell. And they'd always give me some of that and it was beautiful, but small pieces. We used it." — Irene Carroll

SEWING AND CLOTHES

Women also supported the families by sewing clothes. Frances Wheeler remembered: *"My mother made all of our clothes, even our coats. My mother made a lot of clothes for us. She was a good seamstress, which was a good thing when you had seven daughters. She used to make quite a lot of clothes for us. . . [The fabric] came on the train [from Sears]. It really come in the mail, but it come on the train up to Marshfield Depot and Ed Spencer was our mail carrier. Of course that was an attraction. We kids always watched for him every day because that was something out of the ordinary in home life. And he always brought it and she'd buy a big — pretty near a bolt at a time. Because there was so many of us. And she'd dress Hazel and I alike a lot of the time, and Grace and Arlene were dressed alike."*

— Frances Wheeler

Above: Olive & Jennie Gould weaving carpet.
Below: Mary Abbott Walker at the spinning wheel.

"There was another man, Barney Adelson, and he came usually in the fall. Once a year. He had a big wagon with shelves in there. Drove a huge dark bay horse. He used to come, he used to plan to get at our place so that he'd spend the night. In his wagon he had bolts of cloth and it was beautiful cloth. He also had percale for aprons and things of that sort. He always planned to stay at our house and he would let my mother choose a bolt of cloth to pay for the horse and him staying there overnight. I think one time he had a bolt of unbleached sheeting and I think this was a trend. People were going to use that instead of buying the more expensive percale for sheets. The strips were not wide enough for a whole bed, you'd have to sew them very carefully, the seam down the middle. That was the scratchiest, hardest material you ever saw. We all hated those sheets. After they'd been washed time and time again they began to get soft enough though. But that was one purchase made from Barney that we didn't appreciate."

— Helen Smith

"Well, hey, my grandmother and then my mother sewed for me. I had an aunt, Clarissa Woods, who was a very big woman. She was a nurse. My grandmother could take her coat and make me a coat. The back panel was set out, but all the rest of that cloth was all good. There was still plenty of good material."

— Lois Domey

Edith Miller remembered her mother buying hats occasionally from a milliner, Millie MacIntyre, in Cabot Village. Etta Walbridge was a fine seamstress and sewed for other families as well, making many wedding dresses, among other garments.

"We wore dresses and in the winter we had leggings and heavy jackets. . . . For sledding we still wore skirts and we had

Good Templars Mrs. Kimball and Etta Connor.

big boots, you know, overshoes. Oh yes, that was the way we were brought up." — Zoe Irish

"You could buy those old long-legged black stockings, And long-legged underwear that you hated. You couldn't pull your stockings up straight. It was awful. . . . We never wore slacks. We always had serge material, a woolen material and as soon as we got home we had to take it off and put on our old clothes because we didn't have more than two outfits a week. Wa'n't no frills." — Blanche Lamore

"My mother was a good seamstress and we just did the best we could. We wore it out, used it up, or did without." — Irene Caroll

FEEDING THE FAMILY

Families raised most of their own food. *"We almost never bought any foods from the stores. Perhaps some peaches, but I don't remember buying anything else. Animals were raised for consumption, gardens yielded cellars of canned vegetables. . . They cured their own hams and bacons . . . They had a barrel . . . and they saved the corn cobs, using burning corn cobs to cure the bacon. Then after Gus Malmquist came to town and established the meat business, he cured hams and bacon and we at least sent our hams and bacons to him to be processed.*

"Another thing that we used to make when they butchered beef, they would take certain cuts to make into dried beef and they would hang those on the front porch. This was a season of the year when there weren't any insects, thank goodness. Then they would have that to slice. . . . And we made mince-meat. A lot of apples went into mince, so we had mince-meat pie. . . 'Course part of the summer work, too, was to can the strawberries and later on the raspberries and the blackberries. The canning was done in Ball jars. The sterilizing was done in the wash boiler. Mother had a wooden rack that she put at the bottom of the boiler. . . She always planned to put down enough so that it furnished until the new crop came the next year. We always had dried beans enough to go the year until the new beans were available." — Jennie Donaldson

"We had pigs and we had the ham. They pickled it you know, smoked it like. Boy it was good. . . . pickled it in sulfur. . . My mother canned and canned. Us girls would go out and pick berries and we canned them. We had a big garden. We had one cow so we had our own cream and butter." — Frances Wheeler

"We always raised pigs. My father butchered for years. . . I used to stay home from school the day we cut up pigs. We had two crocks. One for salt pork and one for hams and bacon. My father raised northern corn for the cows and we used those corn cobs. . . We had a barrel and a small iron kettle and we used to fill the kettle with coals from the stove and put the corn cobs on top of the coals and then cover it with the iron cover so the smoke would just come out around the edge. And that would keep it smothered so it wouldn't blaze. We'd hang the hams and bacon on a rod across the top of the barrel and cover it up with some old quilts or whatever. We used to smoke them about three or four days." — Bessie Bean

"Further back they used to send to Sears Roebuck to get part of their food. . . Tripe and codfish and prunes in little kegs. . . We'd go down here [to Marshfield] to the railroad station and pick up the food. . . I remember the salt salmon we used to get. Great big wide ones, you know. It was real good. You couldn't buy it today.

"I think his name was Smith. . . used to deliver meat. . . We were about the last ones he'd come to. And my mother would look the cart all over to find a good piece of meat that she wanted and she'd say: 'That doesn't smell too good to me.' 'Oh, put a little sodie on it,' he'd say 'It'll be all right.' She wouldn't buy it. One of the Burbank boys drove the fish around and it was pretty nice to have because we didn't get fresh fish in here too often. . . As I remember it, he had cracked ice around the fish, but that was the last of it. Maybe the first of it was salted." — Aaron Bolton

Malmquist also peddled meat. *"[The cart] was all closed in, the back covers shut down tight. And in the summer he always had big cakes of ice in there. He'd open it up. He had his scales there and everything . . . and he always give us kids a hot dog I remember. . . Everything was covered up. He was spic and span, that guy. He was a good meat man."* — Dwight Clark

"Clarence Wheeler sold fish from a cart. He had eels, he had cod, haddock, salmon sometimes, not very often, and perch. But it seems like he had cod and haddock a lot and

mackerel. Mackerel was cheap so the poor people could buy that. . . It was in barrels, different barrels that he had when he'd bring it around in his cart. I think he just got it every week and just come around and sold it right away."

— Blanche Lamore

"There was a man went around with hulled corn too. Had a wagon with a box on the back of it. . . It was treated with sulfur and a lot of people liked it. They ate it with milk. . . It was processed. It was sold dry. . . we used it just as it was, maybe we had to wash it." — Irene Carroll

"I remember the Grand Union Tea Company. They ran a regular route all through the area. Tea, coffee, those were the two main things. . . . I think they delivered at least once a month, possibly more. There was also the Raleigh Company. . . The outstanding things that I remember they had to sell were their spices. I still have some spices my mother bought from them and they're just as good now as they were when we bought them." — Jennie Donaldson

Seraphine Crosby Wiswell
Gertrude Wiswell Wells

Helen Wheeler Smith remembered crackers by the barrel: *"Montpelier crackers . . . some that got cracked or broken or something they'd fill the barrel up. Then pretty near every Sunday night we had tomato soup and crackers for supper."*

"My mother had two barrels in the pantry and they took the grain somewhere and got it ground during World War I, so we always had flour to home, and they raised their meat. At that time we didn't have electricity, so my mother always had to can the meat . . . the hams and the shoulders and the salt pork were salted and cured. . . She used corn cobs and smoked things in a barrel. She used to put them in a pickle, some kind of a pickling brine and then she would smoke them." — Blanche Lamore

"My mother believed in oatmeal. We had oatmeal every morning. But we had maple sugar on it if we wanted, or maple syrup or molasses. We got oranges and orange juice whenever we could. Of course you couldn't get juice then like you can now. And she made grain rolls out of old roll irons and they were always a big lot of them on the back of the stove." — Louise Staples

May Wheeler remembered her mother making cornbread using cattle feed: *"We fed provender. And we'd get the cornmeal — there was a cornmeal and there was a bin with bran – bins with the cover that lifted up, in front of the cows on the feed floor. And when we were going to have johnnycake, my mother'd send me out to dish the cornmeal out of the bin. . . She sifted it, as I recall."*

The creamery took over the Merritt garage and turned it into a public freezer locker.

"That changed a great deal of the canning process. You not only froze your meat and put it in those lockers, you froze fruit. I think it was basically for members who belonged to the co-op. The place was open all day. Each one had their own lock. The lockers were really just spaces shut off with chicken wire, they were rather open."

— Jennie Donaldson

While most Cabot women had their hands full looking after their families, a few influenced the community as well. Jane McKay's great-grandmother, Seraphine Crosby Wiswell was one such person. Esther Bundy called her "the bank of the town," explaining that Mrs. Wiswell inherited most of her father's fortune, and put the money into government bonds. She loaned to people she felt could pay back and she refused others. *"If they didn't pay, Grandma would foreclose. Grandpa was just the other way. Everybody owed him money and it didn't mean anything. He was a typical doctor."*

— Esther Bundy

"She used to apparently have men coming to her advising them how to invest their money because she tripled her inheritance. She was very shrewd and invested money in silver mines out west. She also let mortgages out. And you know she was really a financier, which is unusual for the 1890's. . . My husband seems to think she had lots of enemies because she was very shrewd and foreclosed a lot of mortgages in Cabot . . . but I think she was respected in the town."

— Jane McKay

Crosby's daughter, Gertrude Wells, continued the tradition of being a strong woman. As a woman legislator, she is described in a Jan. 1933 *Barre Times* as "a woman of extraordinary ability and pleasing personality and is the type of Vermont woman legislator who justifies woman suffrage. She is well informed on all vital questions of the day."

Jane's mother, Marjorie Coyle, upheld the tradition. *"My mother was an organist in the church and she was a very active community person. My grandmother started the woman's club and my mother was the president and that was a thriving organization. When I hear about the poor little women being stuck in home and all, I wasn't brought up that way. . . the women in my family were the strong ones it seems. My mother certainly wasn't suppressed, staying in the kitchen, that sort of thing. She was a product of the Victorian age. She was a Victorian lady. For instance, she often told me that she only did housework in the morning and never in the*

afternoon. And she was a very social person and liked people and she was a gad-about . . . who wasn't gifted in sewing and domestic. . . There were many more women in the village of her interests. They had teas and she had many friends."

— Jane McKay

All of these women remained strong personalities, determined to be self-supporting and independent. Eighty-eight year old Helen Talbert spoke of receiving twelve dollars from "welfare" after her husband died: *"I had my daughter take me down to Barre, right to that place. I said 'Here's the check you sent me.' I took it back, told them I didn't need it. I went right down and told them, I said 'I don't want help.' I said 'Give it to somebody else. I don't want any welfare'."*

Helen & Wes Talbert

Cabot Girl Singers, 1950

Left to right: Beverly Talbert (Boudreau), Marilyn Bolton (Perrin), Marylyn Wheeler (Searles), Olive Smith (Larson), unknown, Ann Peck (Harding), unknown (obscured by Ann), Sally Gibson (Dix), unknown, unknown, Eileen Gibson (Walker), Martha Wheeler (Neveau), unknown, Virginia Maynard