

“Women work particularly well in community organizations”: Cultivating Community and Consumerism in the Comanche County REA Women’s Club, 1939-1940

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Abstract

From 1939-1941, the U.S. Rural Electrification Administration conducted a nationwide educational campaign to share the benefits of electricity with rural Americans, known as the “Electric Farm Equipment Show.” A key part of the show was a series of appliance schools, which were run by female home economists and targeted to women. This article examines an appliance school organized for one REA Women’s Club, as described in a 1941 report by Clara O. Nale, the chief home economist of the REA. Using primary documents from REA home demonstration agents, we reveal how officials like Nale navigated the disconnect between the official REA project that assumed a gendered division of labor with the real needs of the farm women they served. Using the 1930 and 1940 census, we also gathered biographical details of club membership, to better understand who was being served by REA programming. Through the Comanche County REA Women’s Club, we explore how the meaning of work, rural identity, and gender was rapidly changing during the late New Deal. Our findings also highlight the critical importance of women’s community organizing in contemporary electrification efforts.

Keywords: New Deal, gender, rural electrification, Rural Electrification Administration, home economics

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“We found this group had a very keen insight into the farm problems in that section, and elsewhere, and they were alert to changes that might affect farm incomes. They were quick to see the application of electricity to many types of farming, and it is my thought here that much can be accomplished in getting more farm equipment into use, if women are given more practical information on the subject.” – Clara O. Nale, Chief Home Electrification Specialist, Utilization Division, U.S. Rural Electrification Administration, 1941ⁱ

1. Introduction

On December 7, 1939, the electric circus came to Comanche County, Texas. A large tent was erected on T. J. Williams’ farm, a mile and a half outside of town, where hundreds of men, women and children crowded into it over the course of two days. The first night opened with welcoming speeches, introductory talks on lighting and a demonstration of the uses of electricity in poultry production.ⁱⁱ The night concluded with a free screening of the 1937 film *The River*, a documentary about the Tennessee Valley Authority’s work to restore the Mississippi River.ⁱⁱⁱ The following morning was devoted to a “special demonstration for school children,” while the afternoon was split into two sessions of programming for adults. In the main tent, home demonstration agents showed off electrified laundry machines, roasters, and refrigerators; out on the midway, REA engineers demonstrated how small electric motors could aid the farmer in

tasks like feed grinding, ensilage cutting, corn shelling, and irrigation.^{iv} In the evening REA Home Economic Specialist Miss Kathryn Harris led a cooking contest on electric ranges. Meanwhile, the local R.E.A. Women's Club operated an "all-electric lunch tent" where they served hot meals to guests all day and night. The local newspaper, *The Comanche Chief*, proudly advertised that "[t]he whole family can come to the show prepared to stay all day without troubling to pack a lunch."^v

With its big tent, free food and festivities, the event was designed to bring electric education to rural farmers with all the pageantry of a circus and the camaraderie of a dinner on the grounds. The speeches and special guests represented a who's who of community leaders and government agents, including representatives from the REA's Utilization Department, Electrification Specialists, as well as the Agricultural Extension agents from nearby counties. After all the prizes were awarded and the pomp and circumstance wrapped up late in the evening on that Friday, the tent and supplies were packed up, and they were on the road again.

Officially known as the "Electric Farm Equipment Show" (EFE Show), the electric circus was the U.S. Rural Electrification Administration's campaign to spread the good word of electricity to rural communities in the late 1930s and early 1940s. From 1939-1941, the electric circus traveled to over 60 locations scattered across the United States.^{vi} To accompany the traveling show of electric farm equipment and home appliances, the agency also employed a cadre of experts to teach rural people about the merits of electric living — most notably, a group of female home economists. These agents worked with local cooperatives to stage multi-day events complete with covered-dish suppers, cooking competitions, and beauty pageants.^{vii} All this excitement was designed to drive new members to local rural electric cooperatives, increase utilization, and foster load building by connecting customers to novel products and loans through

the Electric Home and Farm Authority (EHFA). Private companies and local dealerships were invited to supply appliances for the roadshow, as well as “permanent” space reserved for national manufacturers, including General Electric, Westinghouse, and Frigidaire.^{viii}

REA officials were acutely aware that interest in electrification might ebb once the circus packed up and left town. Home demonstration agents recognized that converting rural men and women to the “electric way” required more than a two-day demonstration, hot meals, and a movie screening. Lasting impact needed local champions of electric living. REA agents tapped into existing social infrastructures, training and cultivating advocates through the agricultural extension service, church groups, farm organizations, 4-H clubs, rural co-ops and more. Among these groups were the over 47,000 home demonstration clubs across the country, which the REA engaged for their local organizational capacity.^{ix}

A key dimension of this work was outreach to women. Upon entering a new county, home economists were encouraged to connect with local leadership, including parent-teacher associations and women’s clubs, in order to share information and set up public training for women on farm electrification, electricity and family health, and home appliances. Although men often made the final decision on major purchases, a woman’s ownership over the domain of the home made her a critical target of the REA’s messaging. This was an early lesson from the first days of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA): without a wife’s support, it was almost impossible to sell energy-intensive appliances like the electric range.^x

The electric circus arrived in rural communities during a period of profound change and upheaval. The definition of “rural” and “farmer” had always signaled a wide range of class, race, and labor relationships that often had very little to do with either population density or relationship to the land.^{xi} From the 1930s, many self-identified “farmers” began engaging in off-

farm work, such as long-haul trucking, to supplement their income.^{xii} Some communities achieved quasi-middle class lifestyles, in which car ownership and trips to the city were the norm. Meanwhile, other communities lived lives that more closely resembled their homesteader ancestors.^{xiii} Tenant farmers and sharecroppers, arguably those with the strongest claim to the label “farmer,” were often excluded from government programs designed to serve rural Americans, as well as from popular understandings of agrarian life.^{xiv} In fact, Works Progress Administration (WPA) photographers were often discouraged from taking photographs of indigenous farmers and farmers of color; as a result, the visual archive of American rural life during the 1930s remains overwhelmingly white.^{xv} Gender relations were also in flux during this period. Farm programs such as 4-H and the Future Farmers of America (FFA) constructed and reinforced gendered divisions of labor and expectations about heteronormative sexuality through educational programming aimed at rural schoolchildren and teens.^{xvi} The discipline of home economics was part of this gendered division of labor, and the REA electrification specialists arrived with those assumptions in mind.

More generally, the relationship between producers and consumers was also shifting rapidly during the 1930s. While urban business interests focused their attention on increasing spending by middle-class consumers, New Deal economists advocated for the importance of increasing the purchasing power of the working class. An emerging philosophy of “consumerism” focused on consumer education and empowerment in the face of corporate oligopolies who had little incentive to create cheap, quality products available to all. New Dealers envisioned these modern consumers as educated, rational decision makers whose knowledge of products in the marketplace could counterbalance corporate capitalism.^{xvii} Home economists were thus key actors in the cultivation of early twentieth-century “Mrs. Consumers.”

While historians have explored the divisions between working-class consumerism and the emergence of mass consumption after World War II, the role of rural consumers in earlier histories of consumerism is less well explored.^{xviii}

Today, the REA's approach to electrifying rural America is widely regarded as a success. Historians have shown how the REA's educational programming incorporated rural farmers into an emerging consumer culture defined by ownership of electric irons and indoor refrigerators.^{xix} Public policy scholars who study electrification and energy access in low- and middle-income countries also highlight the REA's work with rural cooperatives as an example of a successful electrification program.^{xx} Recent quantitative analysis of energy consumption patterns confirms that living within reach of the EFE show increased energy consumption by up to 90 kWh a year, which would have cost a farmer \$4.45 in 1940 and around \$87 today. By the REA's own calculations, that would have been enough power to grind 9,000 ears of corn, shear 3,600 sheep or milk 2,700 cows.^{xxi} This would have been a significant increase in electricity use, which enabled the rural cooperative model to recoup costs, repay loans and further expand across the country. The success of the REA can be directly tied to the agency's efforts to sell electric farm equipment to farmers – and electric home appliances to the farmers' wives.

This article examines an appliance school organized for one REA Women's Club, as described in a longer report written in 1941 by Clara O. Nale, the chief home economist of the REA. Using primary documents from REA home demonstration agents, we reveal how officials like Clara Nale navigated the disconnect between the official REA project that assumed a gendered division of labor with the real needs of the farm women they served. Using the 1930 and 1940 census, we also gathered biographical and demographic details of the club membership, to better understand precisely who was being served by REA programming.^{xxii}

Lastly, we contextualize our findings within existing historical understandings of the REA, the New Deal, and 1930s consumer politics, along with the potential implications for contemporary electrification efforts.

A closer look at the REA Women's Club in Comanche County can show how the meaning of work, rural identity, and gender was rapidly changing during the late New Deal. REA women's clubs reveal how these traveling technocrats incorporated women into the larger state-building project of electrification. Yet the quasi-utopian potential of drawing on woman power to foster cooperation and community is ultimately a cautionary tale. Many of the women served by these programs were overwhelmingly white and comparatively affluent. A study of the REA Women's Club in Comanche County is at once a vision of the radical potential of the work conducted by women home economists at the REA and a powerful reminder of the limits of the New Dealers' vision for an enlightened America.

2. The REA, Utilization, and Rural "Citizen Consumers"

The REA's goal of electrifying rural farms through cooperatives was singularly focused on maximizing utilization. Increasing the use of electricity by end consumers – "building load" – was critical to justify the investment in the power grid.^{xxiii} Initially, the REA struggled to achieve these utilization goals. The agency leaders operated on faulty assumptions that rural consumers would follow purchasing patterns similar to urban consumers, in which nuclear families could be expected to purchase home appliances, farm equipment, and durable goods for individual households. From initial reports of agents in the field, the REA quickly learned that the cultural attitudes and activities of rural life did not lend themselves to the modern appliances that were

the symbol of convenience and modernity for urban households. In many cases, farmers who joined cooperatives would sign up, connect their household and then only purchase lighting – a technology that quickly improved life but used very little electricity. The major appliances pushed by the REA because they used significant power, such as refrigerators and electric ranges, were mostly ignored by rural consumers, who had practical reasons to prefer their current technologies.^{xxiv}

When their initial strategies fell short, REA leaders took a new approach, in which they incorporated educational programming such as the “electric circus,” as well as standalone “appliance schools.” However, the REA’s approach to electrical education remained tethered to the practical demands of building load: without farmers using electricity, cooperatives could not pay back their 10-year loan. Thus, the agency willingly partnered with corporations like General Electric and Westinghouse and encouraged them to create equipment designed specifically for rural consumers.^{xxv} In exchange, these national companies obtained a front row seat to the electric circus and first dibs on a brand-new market. We see echoes of this in the reports on the Comanche County Appliance School, which was set up with products from local “dealers and distributors” – although the report is careful to never mention the brand names of any products. Nevertheless, in a faded photograph a handful of women stand around two electric sewing machines, one of the women listed is Miss Young, a representative from Singer sewing machines.^{xxvi}

3. “Women’s Work” and the Comanche County Appliance School

In a 1941 report entitled “Training Programs for Farm Women,” Clara Nale notes that thirty-five women showed up for the first day of the Comanche County Appliance School.^{xxvii} For four days in July, the women cooked on electric stoves, laundered shirts, and tested electric

irons – all of which was made more enjoyable through the novelty of air conditioning. None of them had previously cooked using electricity, and they were initially skeptical. And yet, in Nale’s experience she had “never found a group that was as responsive as this one was, as eager as they were, to tackle this problem of education in utilization and cooperation, which they felt was very much needed on this project.”^{xxviii} By the conclusion of the school, the women proved to be passionate proponents of the “electric way” of life.

Although home economists highlighted the value of consumer education in their reports to superiors, these schools primarily functioned as marketing campaigns to increase utilization of electricity. First and foremost, the REA needed to sell equipment that would be appealing for farmers to buy, and dealers to sell, that also used a lot of electricity.^{xxix} The electric stove fit the bill perfectly. The one dilemma was that many farm women had grown accustomed to their existing gas, kerosene, or wood-burning stove, and needed considerable convincing to adopt a new appliance that cooked differently.^{xxx} To overcome this hurdle, REA bureaucrats emphasized that electric stoves could be cheaper than the alternatives in the long run. In a script for a famous “Cookery Duel” that featured two men having a cooking competition, electric stoves represent “economy – in time and labor, as well as money.” The women of the Comanche County Appliance School were asked to prove this for themselves by calculating the cost of operation for an electric stove versus their current gas or wood burning stove.^{xxxi}

The REA designed distinct curricula for men and for women, with electrification specialists segregated by gender. The aim was to provide the information that a farmer or his wife might need in order to furnish the farm with the latest technologies. As seen in the example above, electrical equipment was not gender-neutral. The electric stove, as a kitchen appliance, resided in the domain of women. The “Cookery Duel” was billed as entertainment precisely

because it was humorous that two men might cook dinner. In this vision of the world, women's participation on the farm kept her largely indoors, and any market participation took the form of supplementary income to the farm's main agricultural outputs. This gendered division of the curriculum not only relied on prior assumptions about which aspects of farm living occupied men and women, it simultaneously reinforced those assumptions.

According to the REA, men worked outside; women worked inside. No matter how Nale's *Training Program in Home Electrification* tried to slice up the work of the farm, this division of labor is entrenched in its pages. The four-day program for women focused primarily on kitchen and laundry equipment, from electric stoves and refrigerators to irons and washing machines. Even when women were asked to step outside the kitchen, they rarely left the home. On the first day of the appliance school, women were instructed to make a floorplan of their home lighting – carefully noting the number of circuits and fuse sizes – in order to identify potential issues with appliances and whether they had adequate lighting.^{xxxii} Although 'adequate lighting' is never defined in this report, it harkens back to other lighting campaigns that warned women of how poor lighting can be a danger to children's eyesight.^{xxxiii} To crib from Virginia Woolf, women in REA programming were viewed as the angels of the house – domestic, diligent, caring mothers – who considered electricity as a means of protecting their children.

This indoor-outdoor division of labor falls into a pattern of gendered assumptions evident in other New Deal programs. Men's labor programs were the purview of coherent, national programs such as the CCC and the WPA, whereas women's programs were often incorporated into state programs with varying degrees of efficacy.^{xxxiv} The National Recovery Administration set women's minimum wages at below men's minimum wage, which ultimately discouraged women from participating in paid labor. Agricultural workers, domestic workers and teachers

were exempted from Social Security benefits, which meant that 30% of women in the paid labor force were not supported under the scheme. Even the women who had fought for women's wages and lower working hours did so in order to allow working women to spend more time with their children. The Maternalist movement saw poor wages for women not as a cause of poverty and economic dependence, but a barrier to women being good mothers. Women's natural place was in the home.^{xxxv} Resettlement programs in the South defined their own success in part through images of rural women working in the (newly electrified) home and not out in the field.^{xxxvi} In the case of the Appliance School, this focus on housework may have been an assumption based on the target audience of middle-class women, whose farm labor was less likely to have included field labor. However, even within this brief report, we can see women resisting the neat gendered labor split between domestic and farm work, and we see evidence of home economists attempting to broaden the curriculum for women accordingly.

Nale's reports to her supervisors offer a glimpse into the work that women actually did on the farm. Although there were some amusing questions – would pudding cooked in an electric oven not taste like onions? – there were also questions that revealed the lives these women lead. In contemplating the switch to an electric stove, one woman mused whether it could cook enough beans for eight farmhands — hardly the ideal nuclear family envisioned by male REA bureaucrats.^{xxxvii}

Even the Appliance School's own programming failed to stay inside the home. The group took two "field trips," to the farm of Miss Alice Robertson and the farm of Mr John Cowan. Miss Robertson's farm on Route 1 represented "a real human interest story, rather dramatic in character."^{xxxviii} According to Nale's report, Alice Robertson left her small-town job and returned to the family farm in Comanche after her brother, a college professor, had a nervous breakdown.

Since the farmland was relatively poor, she started by selling flowers and pressing grape juice. Both of these businesses became quite lucrative, and she further invested in them by getting an irrigation system installed and an electrically heated pressure cooker. A little further down the road, Mr. Cowan showed off the electric brooder that he used for raising pheasants and African partridges, which were sold to the Golden Pheasant Restaurant in Dallas for \$1.50 a bird – described in the report as “a very fancy price.” Although Mr Cowan’s main cash crops were actually peaches, grapes and cattle – and that pheasant brooding was therefore a side business – here were examples of outdoor farm activities that the REA home economists at least believed would interest the women.^{xxxix}

Home economists were first and foremost educators – but as it turned out, programs like the Comanche County Appliance School also taught the REA what *they* needed to know to help farm women address the challenges of agrarian life. Enthusiastic home economists arrived in town prepared to give women information about electric refrigerators, washing machines, kitchen lighting and perhaps the occasional chick brooder. But these agency experts were “simply swamped” with questions from their students about everything from plumbing to electric wiring, which prompted Nale to contemplate “the type of information that [...] users should have before and after they get electricity.”^{xl} In many ways the appliance schools acted like a focus group discussion where the REA was learning just as much about the consumer as the consumer was about the product.

Savvy home demonstration agents recognized that these rural women had a more expansive role on the farm than was acknowledged in their curriculum, and made adjustments as they went. For example, while an earlier 1936 pamphlet of “Xmas suggestions” for the Clinton, Tennessee Cooking School listed “gifts for Mother” that only included electrical equipment one

would find inside the four walls of a kitchen, later materials acknowledge that women stepped outside of the home.^{xli} A chart of “Routine Housekeeping Tasks,” which appears multiple times in the work materials of REA home economist Louisan Mamer, shows the ebbs and flows of what counted as housekeeping all through the calendar year. From January to December, the chart includes school and community activities, sewing, home cleaning, gardening, baby chicks, help haying, field work, harvesting and meals, canning, vegetable storage, readying the house for winter, and – in December, a spike simply labeled “Christmas.”^{xlii}

In her notes on training programs, Clara Nale repeatedly emphasized how the women of Comanche County were an integral part of the farming economy. She observed that farm women “were alert to changes that might affect farm incomes” and “were quick to see the application of electricity to many types of farming.”^{xliii} More importantly, she recognized that the REA was losing out on potential load-building by ignoring the full extent of women’s labor. Nale took issue with how agency programming focused on promoting outdoor uses of water to men, while ignoring the distinctly indoor uses for women: “While the [REA] project personnel has been talking a great deal about [outdoor] water pumps, they have done very little on plumbing.”^{xliiv} By assuming that women were confined to the home, and, crucially, that their tasks within the home followed prescribed gender expectations, these programs missed out on opportunities to market indoor plumbing, electric brooders, irrigation systems, and even their exalted electric stove directly to women. Farm women were busy, indoors and out.

4. Who were the women of the Comanche County REA Women’s Club?

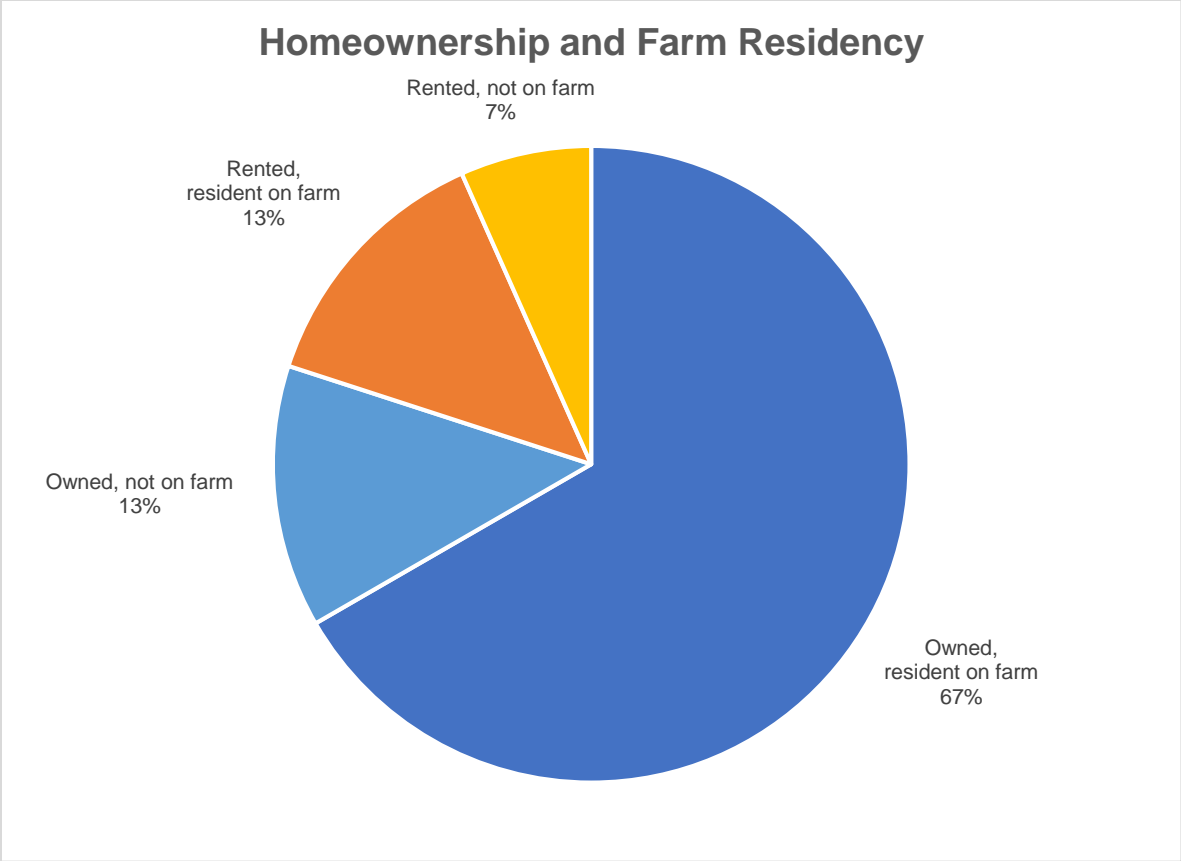
In the early twentieth century, women participated in numerous civic associations that often straddled the lines between social club and political organization. Organizations ranged from PTAs (200,000 members in 1920), the Women's Christian Temperance Union (500,000 members), the National Association of Colored Women (100,000 members in 1917) and the behemoth General Federation of Women's Clubs (1.5 million members).^{xlv} Others, like sewing clubs and quilting bees, emerged more organically around traditional domestic activities.^{xlvi} While these clubs ostensibly reflected a communitarian ethos, they also demarcated subtle class divisions within communities.

One important prerequisite for a successful cooperative was a community who could pay for power, which would increase the chances that the project would break even. As a result, the agency focused on organizations and groups that included middle-class consumers, whose buying power was deemed greater and thus more likely to meet utilization goals. When home electrification specialists were tasked with surveying local organizations, they prioritized organizations that included "middling ranks of the socio-economic system."^{xlvii} This included grammar and high schools, public libraries, churches, farm organizations, Men's and women's clubs, Parent-Teachers' Associations, 4-H clubs, Future Farmers of America and other youth organizations.^{xlviii} While lower-class and working-class households also formed social clubs and organizations, the REA did not engage with those organizations as frequently as middle-class clubs. The agency's decision to focus on middle-class women's lives also helps explain the bifurcation of gendered labor we see in the REA's program of education. The REA assumed that women did not work outdoors or in the fields precisely because they expected their audience to be educated, middle-class and, therefore, removed from the physical labor of the farm. The agency's purpose for working with local organizations and local people was never about

bringing power to the masses; it was a strategy to tap into a new class of consumers in middle America.

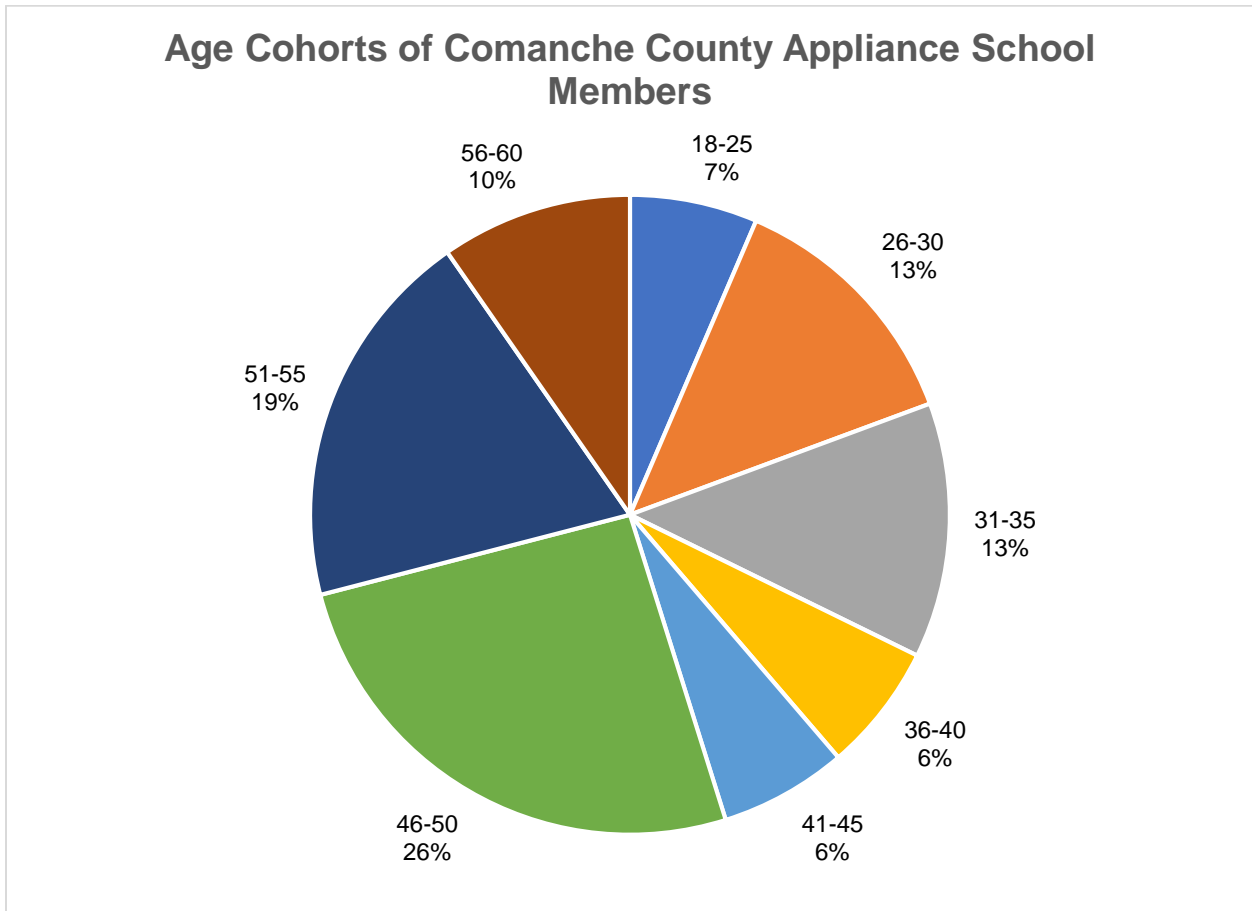
The women of the Comanche County REA Women's Club generally fit the mold of prospective middle-class consumers. The club certainly included a few notable locals you might expect to serve as "rural farm leaders:" Women like Mrs. George Black, wife of the local postmaster, and Mrs. J.C. Helm, part of a husband-and-wife team of schoolteachers. Many of the club members had high school educations, and they had, on average, 1 more year of schooling than their husbands. A few of the women had literally married into the cooperative as wives of REA draftsmen, engineers, and local leadership. But the clubwomen's husbands pursued a broad range of occupations, from the general store owner to filling station operator. Nevertheless, of the 31 clubwomen who appear in the report, all but 7 identified as farmers in the 1940 census. (Appendix A)^{xlix} For those who did identify as farmers, there would have been a notable difference between tenant farmers and farmers that owned their farms. At the time, tenant farmers still worked land under suffocating conditions that often left them in debt to landowners.¹ In 1935, 57% of Texas farmers were tenant farmers.^{li} And yet, in our group, almost all who self-identified as farmers owned their farms. Home ownership was generally quite high overall, with 80% of the households involved in the program owning their home. (Appendix A; Figure 3)

Figure 3. Homeownership and Farm Residency, Comanche County REA Women's Club



However, upon closer inspection, the co-op membership was just as complicated and interesting as real farm women: there was Ruth Laughlin, a divorcee who described her occupation as “Farmer” and “Employer,” and Mrs. Camp Cowan, whose husband raised the “fancy” pheasants for a restaurant in Dallas. The club crossed generational lines as well: the average age of membership was 46, but the group included several new brides and old maids. (Figure 4) Eighteen-year-old Frankie May Wood joined the club along with her mother. Perhaps the most unusual story was that of Miss Alice Robertson, who (as noted above) had left her job in a small town to return to Comanche to embark on a new venture as a self-described “Florist” who sold “Flowers and Fruit.”^{lii} (Appendix A)

Figure 4. Age Cohorts of Comanche County Appliance School Members



The women of the Appliance School may not have been working-class tenant farmers who spent their days alongside their husbands in the fields, but their middle-class lifestyles still included a wide range of labor: from schoolteachers to homemakers, farmers to flower sellers. The programming of the electric circus, like other programs targeting rural populations, reinforced an idealized vision of farmer and wife, but those identities were never clearly delineated. By the end of the Appliance School, Ruth Laughlin knew what she might look for in her next iron, but who would give her advice about processing her corn or irrigating her fields?

5. Who were the home economists at the REA?

Home economics grew out of the domestic science movement at the turn of the twentieth century, with the pioneering work of women like Ellen Swallow Richards and Margaret Murray Washington, who created a scientific discipline that could be the purview of women. During the New Deal, the field of home economics was subsumed into the larger project of cultivating rural consumers.^{liii} Since then, the legacy of home economics has been decidedly mixed. Scholars have identified how home economics reined in efforts toward women's equality and erroneously confined the scope of women's labor to work inside the home. Today, home economics is often criticized for its political conservatism, and the ways that its messaging reinforced traditional gender roles.^{liv}

The gendered division of labor was baked into the very structure of the REA. Women employees were *home* economists, *home* electrification specialists, while men were simply engineers and electrification specialists. While typically sidelined to areas traditionally labeled as “women's work,” such as the efficient running of the kitchen, the laundry and the household, the women of the REA had an opportunity to shape key elements of the agency's programming. In late 1939, as the Utilization Division was getting started in earnest, the REA employed 17 (female) home electrification specialists and an equal number of (male) agricultural engineers, who covered the entire country.^{lv}

These women home economists were career professionals, often younger, well-educated and less likely to be married than their rural students at the traveling appliance schools.^{lvi} They were also significantly harder to track down in the U.S. Census, given that they spent most of their time on the road, were likely to change their name after marriage, and pursued a variety of careers after their time at the REA came to an end. Some of the ancillary staff were locals, like

Miss Verna Castleberry, who was from the nearby town of Ranger, in Eastland County; others, it is impossible to know.^{lvii} As for Clara Nale, she was married by the time she hit the road for the EFE show, but continued to use her maiden name in her professional life. Based on census records, Nale and her husband, James (“Jimmy”) Gentle, may have lived apart for the first few years of their marriage while Nale built her career at the REA. When the census taker came by in 1940, they were lodgers in separate boarding houses, she in D.C., he in their home state of Alabama, where he sold automobiles.^{lviii} Still others, like Dora B. Haines, who owned her home in D.C., more closely fit the definition of a Washington bureaucrat with little connection to the rural areas she served as an REA representative. (Appendix C)

By 1940, Utilization Division director Clara Nale had ambitions that went beyond education or women’s clubs. In Nale’s report, she describes the acute need for expanding outreach to women’s groups, not just for the purpose of education on electricity or home appliances, but for what she described as the “training of farm women leaders.”^{lix} And the success of the REA Women’s Club in Comanche County, a place with apparently no prior organized agricultural clubs for women of any kind, was prime evidence of the potential of such programs. Nale appears to be at once looking ahead to a time when traditional heads of household will be drafted into service (“In view of the National Defense Program...”) but she also is explicit about her vision that farm women can be effective “community leaders” in their own right.^{lx}

While it is all too enticing to read the cultivation of “women leaders” as a feminist project of women’s empowerment, the reality of what Nale was advocating for in 1940 is much more complicated. Nale probably envisioned herself as a leader – she had climbed the ranks of the REA home economics division and established herself as an expert in her field at the ripe age of

36. In many respects, Nale embodies the tensions embedded in early twentieth-century home economics, which reinforced notions of separate spheres for men and women, even as it allowed a new group of educated women to join the professional class in one of the few areas where they were viewed as unquestioned experts. In envisioning a greater role for women leaders, Nale may have been advocating for herself as much as the farm women.

The home economists of the REA represented another critical tension in this New Deal program: one between creating the educated customer and promoting mass consumption. To what extent were REA home economists truly working in support of consumer education and the philosophy of cultivating “citizen consumers,” and to what extent were they the handmaidens of capitalism who helped corporations like General Electric and Westinghouse reach a new market of rural Americans?^{lxvi} Other scholars have noted the tension that emerges throughout the 1930s as the Bureau of Home Economists saw that cooperating with industry was pushing home economists further from consumer support and towards advice about consumers.^{lxvii} Specifically, within the REA, home economists and county agents pushed back at pressure to act as sales agents, noting their true role as educators.^{lxviii} As one scholar describes it, “[b]y uncovering the secrets of the chaotic marketplace and sharing them with homemakers, home economists aimed to construct an ideal American citizen consumer... By constructing this ideal consumer, the bureau emphasized women’s roles in consumption over their roles in production, but it also worked to elevate the status of that role through the idea that women’s work as consumers had social and economic value.”^{lxix} From the perspective of the home economist, then, the educated consumer was a critical actor in a rational marketplace, which allowed for them to argue that the education of women was the cornerstone of a happy, healthy economy.

6. Making A New Deal for Farm Women in Comanche County

On the final day of the Comanche County Appliance School, Mr. Thomas and Mrs. Black of the REA and cooperative board, respectively, opened a discussion on the question, “Do the farm families on REA lines really know what membership in the cooperative means, do they know what a true cooperative is, and if not, what can this women’s club do to help them?” The conversation quickly turned to school improvements, such as school lighting and hot school lunches. One woman suggested that through the REA Women’s Club, the communities represented could advocate for better lighting “in both the schools and the homes.” Despite the days of appliance demonstration and field trips, we don’t know that a single electrical appliance was sold. Instead, some of the liveliest discussion – with the greatest plans for follow-through – revolved around the everyday benefits of electricity, in the form of “wholesome, hot lunches for the children.”

It is hard to know what the New Deal proponents of a politically engaged “consumerism” would have thought about this turn in the conversation. New Dealers like Gardiner Means saw the education of grassroots organizations as the creation of powerful consumers – not as an engine of private sector growth, but as a corrective to powerful oligopolies.^{lxv} But to what extent were hot lunches really subverting the whims of corporate capitalism? Meanwhile, REA leaders, who envisioned success in terms of utilization, would have likely seen the focus on school lighting and hot lunches as an abject failure of their policies.

Ultimately, these schools succeeded in a way that none of the bureaucrats may have intended or even imagined, by empowering women to make the electric changes they wanted to see in their own communities. At the end of each ‘school’ day, the students convened to discuss the role that their group could have in the county’s electrified future. As the session wrapped up,

they agreed to take their learning out to other members of the community. They would start by educating the local public schools on proper lighting and food preparation. By plugging into these networks, the home economists helped integrate women into the overall state-building project of electrification. The Comanche County REA Women's Club — not the REA — would promote better school lighting.

The REA's goal to sell consumer products and increase utilization and the home economists' goal of educating the modern consumer were both mediated through the priorities of women on the ground. This appears compatible with Nale's own vision of her work: "The training of these key women in the proper utilization of electricity is basically important from both the standpoint of helping the community to enjoy the social and economic benefits of electricity, but also to help in making the cooperative secure and successful."^{xvi} However, it is unclear that the REA, focused as they were on energy-intensive loads, would have considered school lighting a win for the cooperative after a week of hawking the latest refrigerators, air conditioners and electric ranges. The battle between consumer education and corporate capitalism falls flat in the face of women's interests in meeting the real needs of the community.

7. Conclusion

The original premise of the REA appliance schools relied on patriarchal assumptions about rural farm life that poorly reflected the range of work that women actually did on the farm. The REA's goal in sending home economists to appliance schools around the country was to expand the reach of electric products so that electric cooperatives functioned economically. Home economists agreed that women were half of the equation: sell to the farmer, sell to the

wife. But this approach only works when you sell the correct product to the correct customer. The REA was trying to sell appliances to women and farm equipment to men, without considering that women may also have been customers for farm equipment. Even Nale, arguably the woman with the most control over REA programming to women, acknowledged how the incorrect assumptions about women's lives likely limited the efficacy of the program.

Unlike the commercialism of the electric circus, these schools turned out to be much more than a sales pitch. We have shown how the women home economists made intentional choices to build up women's leadership in the community, which Clara Nale, the REA's Chief Home Electrification Specialist, identified as crucial for maximizing electricity's social and economic benefits.^{lxvii} From Nale's perspective, enlisting women's groups in community education campaigns was a crucial element of the success of the REA. In reports to her superiors, she argued that the "training of farm women leaders ... would not only strengthen the electric cooperative, but it would also contribute in many ways to other agricultural programs."^{lxviii} Extension studies shared with the REA home economists highlighted how indirect influence through previously existing networks was one of the most important methods of information dissemination.^{lxix}

Rather than take on the message of "electric living" and the lure of mass consumption, the women of Comanche County made electricity serve their own interests – interests that had a more communalist bent. Interestingly, even in contemporary studies of electrification and development, there is the growing recognition that women have different spending priorities than men. Although this can lead to increased adoption of modern energy technologies, it often does not.^{lxx} Instead, the priorities are less aligned with technological apathy and closer aligned with the social role that women play in their households and communities. There is evidence that

women are more likely to prioritize spending on the household or children's welfare, which has a real impact on infant health and mortality.^{lxxi} In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the first act of the REA Women's Club of Comanche County was to improve lighting in the school.

At the same time, any communitarian promises of the Comanche County REA Women's Club as an example of women-led activism aided and abetted by the state, had crucial, if familiar, limitations. In part because the REA's target audience were potential consumers of home appliances, the agency found the most success in comparatively affluent, predominantly white communities who could afford to purchase those appliances. While the REA's efforts to develop gender-specific programming are glaringly obvious, the Mamer papers leave a deafening silence on the ways these programs were also segregated by race – if they reached non-white farmers at all.^{lxxii} In this light, it may be more than a simple coincidence that Comanche County was also a sundown county at the time the REA selected it for a stop on the EFE show.^{lxxiii}

Although the white, male REA leaders did not understand the needs of farm women, the home economists successfully leveraged existing women's groups and networks to make the agency's programming more responsive to the needs of rural communities in ways that also increased utilization overall. In this way, the appliance schools had an impact that lasted long after the REA "circus" had packed up and left town. In challenging the expectations of their own educational mission, REA home economists did more than inform women about modern conveniences available through electricity – they helped women envision a role for themselves in their communities' electrified future. Insofar as that vision was limited by preconceived expectations about race, class, and gender, it is the much the same set of factors that limits the success of similar electrification initiatives even today.

Appendix A: Census Data on Comanche County Women’s REA Club¹

Salutation	First Name (from 1941 report)	Family Name	Resident on farm (6)	Husband Age in 1940	Woman Age in 1940	Highest Education - Husband (14)	Highest Education - Wife (14)	Occupation Husband (28-29)	Occupation Wife (28-29)	Race	Home Owned (O) or Rented (R) (4)	Monthly Rent (if rented) (5)	Value of home (Owned) (5)	Monthly income (32)	Other household members in 1940	Census Source
Mrs	Joe	Baggett	Yes	56	51	8	16	Farming	Teaching - public school	W	R	6	N/A	800 (W)	No	1940
Mrs	George	Black	Yes	69	60	--	--	Post Master	None	W	O	--	--	--	No	1930
Mrs	J E	Burt	No	54	38	12	12	Commodity Clerk (WPA)	--	W	R	10	N/A	200	S (8)	1940
Mrs	W H	Burton	Yes	60	58	13	12	Farming	--	W	O	N/A	5750	1000	S (31) D (17)	1940
Mrs	W W	Chancellor	Yes	45	39	9	12	Farmer	--	W	O	N/A	6000	--	D (7)	1940
Mrs	W? R	Cormack (Carmack)	No	64	54	12	8	Operator - Filling station	Helper - filling station	W	O	N/A	450	0	No	1940
Mrs	Camp	Cowan	Yes	23	22	13	11	REA Draftsman	--	W	O	N/A	500	1500	D (3)	1940
Mrs.	W P	Easley	Yes	34	31	9	12	Farmer - Farm	--	W	R	6	N/A	0	S (6) F (52)	1940

¹ Names taken from Clara O. Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification” (Rural Electrification Administration, Utilization Division, 1941), Box 23, Folder 3, Mamer Papers. Most married women were referred to by their husbands’ names in this report; see Appendix B for the women’s given names and their roles in the REA Club. All other demographic data from: Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012; except Mrs. George Black, whose information comes from: Ancestry.com. 1930 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc. Numbers in parentheses correspond to 1940 census column numbers. (--) indicates blank or no data; other household members have been abbreviated for space, e.g. Son = S, Daughter-in-law = DIL, etc.

Salutation	First Name (from 1941 report)	Family Name	Resident on farm (6)	Husband Age in 1940	Woman Age in 1940	Highest Education - Husband (14)	Highest Education - Wife (14)	Occupation Husband (28-29)	Occupation Wife (28-29)	Race	Home Owned (O) or Rented (R) (4)	Monthly Rent (if rented) (5)	Value of home (Owned) (5)	Monthly income (32)	Other household members in 1940	Census Source
Mrs	Doc	Edwards	Yes	52	50	--	11	Auto mechanic	--	W	O	N/A	1000	825	No	1940
Mrs	W A	Frazier	Yes	66	56	0	7	--	--	W	O	N/A	500	0	No	1940
Mrs	Paul	Hampton	Yes	42	41	13	12	Farming - Stock Farm	--	W	R	5	N/A	0	No	1940
Mrs	J C	Helm	Yes	62	52	16	14	Public School Teacher	Public School Teacher	W	O	N/A	900	H (640) W (560)	S (23)	1940
Mrs.	G H	Hillin	Yes	52	47	4	7	Operator - Farming	--	W	O	N/A	600	0	S (21) D (10)	1940
Mrs.	M O	Lane	Yes	55	50	7	7	Farmer - Farm	--	W	O	N/A	1500	0	S (17)	1940
Mrs	W I	Lane	Yes	40	35	11	10	Farming	--	W	O	N/A	6000	0	D (13)	1940
Mrs	Ruth	Laughlin	Yes	N/A	46	N/A	9	N/A	Farmer	W	O	N/A	1500	0	S (17)	1940
Mrs	Raymond	Levisay	Yes	32	32	11	11	Farmer	--	W	O	N/A	2500	900	S (4)	1940
Mrs	J B	Maples	Yes	29	30	12	11	Farmer	--	W	R	5	N/A	0	S (9), D (7)	1940
Mrs.	Troy	Morgan	No	53	47	8	7	Merchant - Merchandise general	--	W	O	N/A	500	--	No	1940
Mrs	Elroy	Morgan	Yes	26	27	12	11	Farmer	--	W	O	N/A	800	--	D (3)	1940
Mrs	D E	Nabors	Yes	59	55	8	8	Operator - Farming	Housewife - Farming	W	O	N/A	1000	0	No	1940

Salutation	First Name (from 1941 report)	Family Name	Resident on farm (6)	Husband Age in 1940	Woman Age in 1940	Highest Education - Husband (14)	Highest Education - Wife (14)	Occupation Husband (28-29)	Occupation Wife (28-29)	Race	Home Owned (O) or Rented (R) (4)	Monthly Rent (if rented) (5)	Value of home (Owned) (5)	Monthly income (32)	Other household members in 1940	Census Source
Mrs	J B	Pogue	Yes	54	53	9	10	Farmer (livestock)	--	W	O	N/A	20,000	0	D (24)	1940
Mrs	W S	Price	Yes	35	32	17	16	Extension work - State	--	W	O	N/A	3000	1900	S (7, 1)	1940
Mrs	Carl	Roberts	Yes	47	46	7	11	Farmer	--	W	O	N/A	3000	0	S (23, 18, 15) D (10)	1940
Miss	Alice	Robertson	Yes	N/A	49	N/A	13	--	Florist - Flowers and Fruit	W	O	N/A	500	0	M? (69) B (47)	1940
Mrs	B J	Stevens	Yes	54	48	9	9	Farmer	--	W	O	N/A	1000	0	S (21) DIL (23) GD (4mos)	1940
Mrs	E E	Straley	No	34	30	11	10	REA Electrician	--	W	O	N/A	2000	1000	S (10m)	1940
Mrs	A C	Thomas	No	32	26	14	16	Superintend ent / REA	Secretary - REA	W	R	5	N/A	H - 1680 W - 300	--	1940
Miss	Martha	Wetzel	No	N/A	42	N/A	16	N/A	--	W	O	N/A	1000	385	F (72) M (72)	1940
Mrs	F J	Wood	Yes	54	51	7	9	Farmer	--	W	O	N/A	700	0	D (18) ² S (12)	1940

² Frankie May Wood, at age 18, is counted as part of Mrs. F.J. Wood's household for the purposes of this table and related figures.

Appendix B: Comanche County REA Ladies' Club Membership List³

Salutation	First Name (Husband, if applicable)	First Name (Club Member)	Family Name	Position in the Ladies Club	Occupation (28-29)
Mrs	Joe	Coda	Baggett		Teaching - public school
Mrs	George	Zora M	Black	Secretary of Board of Directors	None
Mrs	J E	Willie	Burt		--
Mrs	W H	Pearl	Burton		--
Mrs	W W	Truth	Chancellor		--
Mrs	W? R	Ada	Cormack (Carmack)		Helper - filling station
Mrs	Camp	Edna	Cowan		--
Mrs.	W P	Edna G	Easley		--
Mrs	Doc	Maude	Edwards		--
Mrs	W A	Sarah?	Frazier		--
Mrs	Paul	Winnie D	Hampton		--
Mrs	J C	Beatrice	Helm	President of Ladies Club	Public School Teacher
Mrs.	G H	Bessie I (or J)	Hillin		--
Mrs.	M O	Unie	Lane		--
Mrs	W I	Alma	Lane	Vice President of Ladies Club	--
Mrs		Ruth	Laughlin		Farmer
Mrs	Raymond	Luella	Levisay		--
Mrs	J B	Wilma	Maples		--
Mrs.	Troy	Ressa	Morgan		--

³ Names taken from Clara O. Nale, "Training Program in Home Electrification" (Rural Electrification Administration, Utilization Division, 1941), Box 23, Folder 3, Mamer Papers. Most married women were referred to by their husbands' names in the 1941 report; first names were extracted from census data. All other demographic data from: Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012; except Mrs. George Black, whose information comes from: Ancestry.com. 1930 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.

Salutation	First Name (Husband, if applicable)	First Name (Club Member)	Family Name	Position in the Ladies Club	Occupation (28-29)
Mrs	Elroy	Lessie	Morgan	Reporter	--
Mrs	D E	Murrel / Merrill	Nabors		Housewife - Farming
Mrs	J B	Lee	Pogue	Secretary-Treasurer of Ladies Club	--
Mrs	W S	Dorotha	Price	Wife of President of Board of Directors	--
Mrs	Carl	Minnie	Roberts		--
Miss		Alice	Robertson	Farmer in Comanche	Florist - Flowers and Fruit
Mrs	B J	Ruth	Stevens		--
Mrs	E E	Alfa	Straley		--
Mrs	A C	Birdie Lou	Thomas	wife of Project Superintendent	Secretary - REA
Miss		Martha	Wetzel		--
Mrs	F J	Annie	Wood		--
Miss		Frankie May	Wood		--

Appendix C: REA Staff Associated with Comanche County Women’s Club⁴

Salutation	First Name	Family Name	Position in the Ladies Club (if applicable)	Resident on farm (6)	Woman Age in Census	Highest Education (14)	Occupation (28-29)	Approx. Location (1-2, or top of page)	Home Owned or Rented (4)	Monthly Rent (if rented) (5)	Value of home (Owned) (5)	Monthly income (32)	Race	Census Source
Miss	Verna	Castleberry	Project Bookkeeper	No	26	14	Bookkeeper - REA Office	Comanche Town	Boarder	--	N/A	900	W	1940
Mrs	Dora B	Haines	Educational Director, Division of Engineering and Operation	No	51	--	Journalist - Press	District of Columbia (Washington, DC) Police Precinct 3	Owned	N/A	17000	--	W	1930
Miss	Clara O	Nale	Chief Home Economist	N/A	26	16	Demonstration agent / County	Lauderdale Street, Russellville, Alabama	Boarder	--	--	--	W	1930
Mrs	Clara N	Gentle	Chief Home Economist	No	60 ⁵	12 ⁶	Executive, Rural Electrification Administration	Leroy Place/ Connecticut Ave, District of Columbia	Boarder	--	--	--	W	1940

⁴ Names taken from Clara O. Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification” (Rural Electrification Administration, Utilization Division, 1941), Box 23, Folder 3, Mamer Papers. Demographic data cross-referenced from 1930 and 1940 census: Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012, and Ancestry.com. 1930 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc. A few REA staff associated with the Comanche County appliance school could not be located in either the 1930 or 1940 census. Their names are: Miss Kathryn/Katherine Harris (Home Electrification Specialist) and Miss Marie Keough (Finance Department). Clara Nale is listed twice.

⁵ This age was penciled in, presumably after the fact, and is incorrect. Based on all other documentation, including the 1930 census, Nale would have been around 36 years old. The only logical reason why “60” might have been entered is because of Nale’s rank and title.

⁶ This is also incorrect, based on the 1930 census and her wedding announcement that describes her as a college graduate. “Clara Olive Nale Is Married to James W. Gentle,” *Franklin County Times (Russellville, Alabama)*, October 14, 1937.

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- ⁱ Clara O. Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification” (Rural Electrification Administration, Utilization Division, 1941), 11, Box 23, Folder 3, Louisian E. Mamer Papers, Smithsonian National Museum of American History.
- ⁱⁱ “Details of Big Electric Show Announced by REA Officials (Clip),” *The Comanche Chief*, December 1, 1939.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Pare Lorentz, *The River* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Resettlement Administration, 1937), <https://archive.org/details/RiverThe1937>; Robert J. Snyder, “The River (National Film Registry Essays)” (Library of Congress, 2015), <https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/river2.pdf>.
- ^{iv} “Hundreds Attending Electric Appliance Show Near Here,” *The Comanche Chief*, December 8, 1939.
- ^v “Program - Farm Equipment Tour - Dec. 7 and 8,” *The Comanche Chief*, December 1, 1939.
- ^{vi} Franco Picone, Tri Truong, and Zhihao Han, “REA Data Explorer,” Data+, 2020, https://energyaccessproject.shinyapps.io/REA_Dataset_App/.
- ^{vii} Madeline Fowler, Abigail Phillips, and Grace Meade Sipp, “Beauty and Efficiency: The Modern Woman and Household Appliances at the REA Roadshow,” 2020, https://energyaccess.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Fowler_et-al_Beauty-and-Efficiency_Final.pdf.
- ^{viii} Rural Electrification Administration, “REA Electric Farm Equipment Show - The System’s Part,” 1941, Box 6, Folder 1, Mamer Papers; Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
- ^{ix} Rural Electrification Administration, “Outline of an Educational Program for REA Financed Systems” (1939), Mamer Papers.
- ^x Kline, *Consumers in the Country*.
- ^{xi} Shane Hamilton, *Trucking Country: The Road to America’s Wal-Mart Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 187–231; Anne B W Effland, “When Rural Does Not Equal Agricultural,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000): 489–501; Anne Effland, “Small Farms/Family Farms: Tracing a History of Definitions and Meaning,” *Agricultural History* 95, no. 2 (2021): 313, <https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2021.095.2.313>.
- ^{xii} Hamilton, *Trucking Country*.
- ^{xiii} Katherine Jellison, “‘The Man Operating the Farm and the Wife Operating the Household and the Garden’ Technology and Gender Roles, 1940,” in *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 107–29.
- ^{xiv} On tenant farming, see Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971); Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).
- ^{xv} Sarah Boxer, “Whitewashing the Great Depression,” *The Atlantic*, December 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/12/whitewashing-the-great-depression/616936/>.
- ^{xvi} Gabriel N. Rosenberg, *The 4-H Harvest: Sexuality and the State in Rural America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
- ^{xvii} Meg Jacobs, “‘Democracy’s Third Estate’: New Deal Politics and the Construction of a ‘Consuming Public,’” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 55 (April 1999): 27–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547999003178>.
- ^{xviii} Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 2007); Lawrence B. Glickman, “The Strike in the Temple of Consumption: Consumer Activism and Twentieth-Century American Political Culture,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (June 2001): 99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674920>; Frank Trentmann, “Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 3 (July 2004): 373–401, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009404044446>; Landon R. Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers’ League, Women’s Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, N.Y.: Knopf, 2008), 18–61.
- ^{xix} Kline, *Consumers in the Country*; Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Ruth Schwartz Cowan, “The ‘Industrial Revolution’ in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century,”

Technology and Culture 17, no. 1 (January 1, 1976): 1–23; Carolyn M. Goldstein, *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth-Century America*, *Creating Consumers* (University of North Carolina Press, n.d.), https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807872383_goldstein; Carl Kitchens and Price Fishback, “Flip the Switch: The Impact of the Rural Electrification Administration 1935–1940,” *The Journal of Economic History* 75, no. 4 (December 2015): 1161–95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050715001540>; Audra J. Wolfe, “‘How Not to Electrocute the Farmer’: Assessing Attitudes Towards Electrification on American Farms, 1920–1940,” *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000): 515–29.

^{xx} Lorenzo Pellegrini and Luca Tasciotti, “Rural Electrification Now and Then: Comparing Contemporary Challenges in Developing Countries to the USA’s Experience in Retrospect,” *Forum for Development Studies* 40, no. 1 (March 2013): 153–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2012.732108>.

^{xxi} Picone, Truong, and Han, “REA Data Explorer”; Rural Electrification Administration, “Demonstrations of Electrical Equipment,” Sponsored by the Shelby County Rural Electric Membership Corporation, January 10, 1938, Box 26, Folder 8, Mamer Papers.

^{xxii} See Appendix A and Appendix B.

^{xxiii} Jonathon Free, “Meet Mr. Kilowatt: Building Demand for Electricity in the Rural U.S., 1936–1940,” *Technology’s Stories*, August 27, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.15763/jou.ts.2017.08.27.03>.

^{xxiv} Ronald R. Kline, “Resisting Development, Reinventing Modernity: Rural Electrification in the United States before World War II,” *Environmental Values* 11, no. 3 (2002): 327–44; Ronald R. Kline, “Agents of Modernity: Home Economists and Rural Electrification, 1925–1950,” in *Rethinking Home Economics*, ed. Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti (Cornell University Press, 2019), 237–52, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501729942-014>.

^{xxv} Michelle Mock, “The Electric Home and Farm Authority, ‘Model T Appliances,’ and the Modernization of the Home Kitchen in the South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 80, no. 1 (2014); Gregory B. Field, “‘Electricity for All’: The Electric Home and Farm Authority and the Politics of Mass Consumption, 1932–1935,” *Business History Review* 64, no. 1 (1990): 32–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3115844>.

^{xxvi} Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification.”

^{xxvii} Nale.

^{xxviii} Nale, 8. Emphasis in original.

^{xxix} Kline, *Consumers in the Country*, 249.

^{xxx} Mark Aldrich, “The Rise and Decline of the Kerosene Kitchen: A Neglected Energy Transition in Rural America, 1870–1950,” *Agricultural History* 94, no. 1 (2020): 24–60, <https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2020.094.1.024>.

^{xxxi} Clara O. Nale, “Electric Cookery Duel” (1940), Box 6, Folder 1, Mamer Papers.

^{xxxii} Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification,” 9.

^{xxxiii} Rural Electrification Administration, “Better Sight, Better Light for the Farm Home: Better Farm Home Lighting” (1939), Box 23, Folder 2, Mamer Papers.

^{xxxiv} Suzanne Mettler, *Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

^{xxxv} Kathleen M. Keller, “Federalizing Social Welfare in A World of Gender Difference: A History of Women’s Work in New Deal Policy,” *Southern California Review of Law and Women’s Studies* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 145–86.

^{xxxvi} Amanda Coleman, “Rehabilitating the Region: The New Deal, Gender, and the Remaking of the Rural South,” *Southeastern Geographer* 50, no. 2 (2010): 200–217, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.0.0082>.

^{xxxvii} Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification,” 10.

^{xxxviii} Nale, 11–13.

^{xxxix} Nale, 11–13.

^{xl} Nale, 8.

^{xli} Clara O. Nale, “Electric Fair Cooking School - Clinton, Tenn. - Dec. 2, 3, 4, 1936” (1936), Box 26, Folder 4, Mamer Papers. In this pamphlet, Nale is listed as a home economist for the TVA.

^{xlii} This undated report is included with other Extension studies in Mamer Papers, Box 4, Folder 5.

^{xliii} Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification.”

^{xliv} Nale.

^{xlv} Kristin A Goss, *The Paradox of Gender Equality: How American Women’s Groups Gained and Lost Their Public Voice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 26.

^{xlvi} Sarah A. Gordon, “‘Boundless Possibilities’: Home Sewing and the Meanings of Women’s Domestic Work in the United States, 1890–1930,” *Journal of Women’s History* 16, no. 2 (2004): 68–91, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2004.0045>.

^{xlvii} Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 98.

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- ^{xlviii} Rural Electrification Administration, “Outline of an Educational Program for REA Financed Systems.”
- ^{xlix} For the purposes of these calculations, Frankie May Wood is not counted separately, since she was part of her mothers’ household.
- ¹ Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*; Keith Volanto, “Leaving the Land: Tenant and Sharecropper Displacement in Texas during the New Deal,” *Social Science History* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1996).
- ⁱⁱ Cecil Harper Jr. and E. Dale Odom, “Farm Tenancy,” in *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association, October 22, 2020), <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/farm-tenancy>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification.”
- ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Linoleum, Better Babies, & the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).
- ^{liv} Sarah Stage and Virginia Bramble Vincenti, eds., *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Danielle Dreilinger, *The Secret History of Home Economics: How Trailblazing Women Harnessed the Power of Home and Changed the Way We Live*, First edition (New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021).
- ^{lv} Kline, *Consumers in the Country*, 180.
- ^{lvi} Dreilinger, *The Secret History of Home Economics*. While it was significantly more challenging to find demographic information on the REA staff who worked with the Comanche clubwomen, what little evidence we could find confirms this conclusion. See Appendix C.
- ^{lvii} Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012. In the census, Castleberry is listed as 26 years old and a “lodger” in Comanche, with her 1935 residence as “Ranger.” Given that the REA was not created until 1935 and Castleberry would have been 21 at the time, it is generally safe to assume that she was from Ranger, or, at the very least, that she was local.
- ^{lviii} Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012. Nale was married to James Gentle in 1937, until his death in 1965. Based on available records, she never remarried. “Clara Olive Nale Is Married to James W. Gentle,” *Franklin County Times* (Russellville, Alabama), October 14, 1937. “Clara Nale Gentle (1902-1989),” Russellville, Alabama, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/63385662/clara-gentle>.
- ^{lix} Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification,” 2.
- ^{lx} Nale, 3,5.
- ^{lxi} On “citizen consumers,” see Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 18–61.
- ^{lxii} Carolyn M. Goldstein, “Mediating Consumption: Home Economics and American Consumers, 1900-1940,” *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, University of Delaware, 1994), 134, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (304114124).
- ^{lxiii} Ronald R. Kline, “Agents of Modernity: Home Economists and Rural Electrification, 1925-1950,” in *Rethinking Home Economics*, ed. Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti (Cornell University Press, 2019), 237–52, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501729942-014>; Kline, *Consumers in the Country*, 209; Goldstein, “Mediating Consumption: Home Economics and American Consumers, 1900-1940,” chaps. 4–6.
- ^{lxiv} Goldstein, “Mediating Consumption: Home Economics and American Consumers, 1900-1940,” 92.
- ^{lxv} Jacobs, ““Democracy’s Third Estate.”
- ^{lxvi} Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification,” 5.
- ^{lxvii} Nale, “Training Program in Home Electrification.”
- ^{lxviii} Nale, 2.
- ^{lxix} Lucinda Crile, “Percentages of Practices Adopted Due to Types of Extension Teaching Methods” (U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension Service, 1941), Mamer Papers.
- ^{lxx} Ipsita Das et al., “A VIRTUOUS CYCLE? Reviewing the Evidence on Women’s Empowerment and Energy Access, Frameworks, Metrics and Methods” (Sustainable Energy Transitions Initiative and the Women in Environmental Economics for Development, October 2020), <https://energyaccess.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/White-paper-on-gender-and-energy-access-Oct-2020.pdf>; Ariva Sugandi Permana, Norsiah Abd. Aziz, and Ho Chin Siong, “Is Mom Energy Efficient? A Study of Gender, Household Energy Consumption and Family Decision Making in Indonesia,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 6 (March 2015): 78–86, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2014.12.007>.
- ^{lxxi} Esther Duflo, “Women Empowerment and Economic Development,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 1051–79, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.4.1051>; Edwina Fingleton-Smith, “The Lights Are on but No (Men) Are Home. The Effect of Traditional Gender Roles on Perceptions of Energy in Kenya,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 40 (June 2018): 211–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.01.006>.

^{lxxii} In the records surveyed for this project, we were unable to identify clear evidence of Black women who served as REA home economists or demonstration agents; however, there is ample evidence that Black women were employed in USDA agricultural extension work during this period. See: Carmen V. Harris, “The South Carolina Home in Black and White: Race, Gender, and Power in Home Demonstration Work,” *Agricultural History* 93, no. 3 (2019): 477–501; Kathleen C. Hilton, “Both in the Field, Each with a Plow’: Race and Gender in USDA Policy,” in *Hidden Histories of Women in the New South*, ed. Virginia Bernhard et al. (Southern Conference on Women’s History, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

^{lxxiii} On Comanche County as a sundown county, see: Billy Bob Lightfoot, “The Negro Exodus from Comanche County, Texas,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (January 1953): 407–16; John Leffler, “Comanche County,” in *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association.), accessed September 10, 2020, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/comanche-county>; “Tabooed: Texas County Where Negroes Are Unknown,” *The Courier-Journal*, August 19, 1901.