

Maime Garner's Bonnet: Fashioning a Life in Rural NC in the 1950s

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Rural farm life in the mid-1900s in Eastern North Carolina entailed dedication to crops, livestock, and the home – especially for women since they did most, if not, as much work as farmer husbands. For a widowed woman, though, farm life involved help from her children and neighbors. Farm life wasn't a lavish lifestyle, but working hard to earn simple luxuries, such as fabric to make clothing for a family, grew pride in self, families, and purpose in life. My great-great maternal grandmother, Maime Garner, led a hard, but fulfilling life as a widowed farmer in Johnston County, North Carolina (more specifically, Selma). By farming she could trade her crops for other crops or goods and sometimes money (an amount, today, that we would view as spare change). Her family was like other farm families in the “hub of the tobacco universe” (Brooks 84) in that they were patient, resourceful, and sharing to survive (Smith and Wilson 161). Aside from working hard every day and caring for her children, she loved sewing, making clothes, and other articles for the home. One piece of clothing in particular, a bonnet she made in 1954, which she wore while farming and doing housework, has been preserved by my mother in memory of Maime. Although she made many more bonnets through her lifetime, this one is the only one of hers preserved by family. Maime's life is a unique historical example of the challenges of farm life for women of Maime's generation in Eastern North Carolina who filled many roles. Maime and those in her community lived practically while enjoying the simple pleasures of life.

Girls growing up in rural North Carolina in the early 1900s usually spent their childhood lives on farms and married into another farm family when it was their time to, just as Maime did;

some others, though, were fortunate enough to be accepted into college and to afford it in order to become teachers, while others worked in town as secretaries or cashiers for various “mom and pop shops.” Today’s generation of young women would probably think that Maime yearned to leave the farm and go off to college to pursue bigger dreams besides being a farmer’s wife because that’s the trend for young women today, but most women farmers in that time actually preferred the farm life because “southern women have always had a special attachment to the land...[and] by preference or necessity been part of the agricultural heritage of the Old South” (Ferris and Wilson 1550). A lifestyle that would seem to be a life full of struggles and hardships today actually was an accomplishment and a source of pride to Maime and other women like her in her time. Accomplishments such as having at least six children, although 12 or 13 weren’t uncommon (Maime had nine), and getting to the end of a cotton row instead of doing endless rounds of housework (Ferris and Wilson 1552). Maime and the women in the community she lived in grew up on farms knowing “the meaning of [taking pride in] hard work in a way that North Carolinians born in more recent times can probably only imagine” (Phillips 19).

The tobacco process was a long one, and while women were involved in the day-to-day function of the farm, they had specific tasks at harvest time. Planting took place in late spring and harvesting took all summer. Women farmers’ roles included stringing tobacco on sticks after the men cropped the leaves and brought them to the barn. After the men raised and stacked the sticks to cure the tobacco, women would take the dried leaves off the sticks and then the men would take the final product to warehouses for auction (Brooks 33) in late fall. According to Pittard, a writer for *Our State*, “putting in a barn of tobacco was often a community undertaking, with neighbors lending a hand in return for help with their own crop. It was a time for visiting and fellowship, as well as hard work” (120). Even though Maime would sit in the shadow of the

curing barn, she still wore her bonnet because it helped shade her face and neck from the hot sun when she was planting, sometimes helping with harvesting, and busy at other outdoor jobs. However, she also wore her bonnet to showcase her beautiful and delicate craftsmanship.

Although women farmers were a part of a joint effort in the fields (North Carolina 47) they didn't farm every day. While men worked on other chores such as "building fences, clearing fields [and], plowing with mules" (Phillips 22), women had other necessary work like "gardening, preserving fruits and vegetables, raising chickens[,]...gathering eggs, milking cows[,]...churning butter," (Ferris and Wilson 1552) and carrying water from the well to the house. Another outdoor chore that had to be done was laundry: "clothes had to be washed and brought out and boiled and battled and then washed again and then rinsed" (Smith and Wilson 164). Another outdoor chore, though maybe scary to us, but not to experienced Maime, was killing water moccasin snakes while trying to fish for dinner at the lake nearby the farm.

There were tasks to be done in the house that Maime enjoyed aside from working outside. "Making a home" was an essential responsibility for women, (North Carolina 49) and although expected by her culture, one which Maime also enjoyed. Maime loved to sew and cook at least two meals for the family a day, and even though she wasn't outside, her bonnet stayed on her head. All of the clothes worn by Maime and her family were fashioned by her from material she traded with her crops or bought with money from her families' earnings (Pittard 118). Not many household items or clothing were bought for, though, because Maime's family, like the other farm families in Selma, had to be frugal with their earnings and made their own furniture, clothes, mattresses, pillows, quilts, and other household accessories.

Although Maime was widowed several years after bearing her last child, she still lived fully and worked ardently on the farm with the help of her children and neighbors. The nature of being a farmer meant that there were good and bad years and not much money, but rural women felt pride and satisfaction from working on the land, growing their food, and living an independent life (Smith and Wilson 161). By the 1950s, all but one of Mamie's children, who continued to live with her on the farm, had families and farms of their own. One of her daughters went to college to become a teacher and helped pay for her education by hairdressing. Although some times were trying for Maime earlier in her life, success came through her accomplishments, and she was able to afford improvements to her home around the time she made the preserved bonnet in 1954. Electricity, better transportation, improved communications (Ferris and Wilson 1552), peddle sewing machines and cast-iron stoves made life easier, but Maime always remembered her roots and how much she appreciated the simple life.

Women in early 1900 rural North Carolina were much more than what we call "supermoms" today; they were every rock in their families' foundation, and although farm life has declined today, "rural women have adapted their traditional roles to the needs of modern agriculture and thereby have reshaped their ties to the land" (Ferris and Wilson 1552). I hope women and their families today can learn from the experiences and wisdom shared by women like Maime. My mother, Sharon, was blessed to know her great-grandmother. Sharon absorbed Maime's moral character and strong lessons to always be honest and treat people the way you would want to be treated and applied them in her life. Sharon spent summers on her great-grandmother's farm and learned how Maime lived and learned to respect this way of life. Maime also taught my mother to sew, and to this day my mother has to create and sew all the curtains in the house. She knows, like Maime and women of her time did, how to take great

pride in the human touch of a mechanized society (North Carolina 47) through small accomplishments to heighten self worth when times get rough. Maime may not have had luxuries like television and computers or modern conveniences such as dishwashers, microwaves, and lawnmowers that so many of us take for granted (Phillips 20), but she enjoyed her simple life full of hard work. Maime's impact on my family is still relevant, especially through my mom because she is also a hard-working happy woman, who follows the strong principles Maime passed on, along with her bonnet.

Works Cited

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