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"BUT WHAT KIND OF WORK DO THE REST DE YOU DO?"

Child Labor on Nebraska Farms • 1870-1920 •

By Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

I am a little boy ten years old. I go to school when we have school, but we haven't got any school now. It will begin soon. I helped to farm last spring; I plowed with three horses and helped cultivate corn and make hay. . . . I have to feed nine calves and my little brother and I carry in the fuel.

Bryan Echternkardt
Knox County, Nebraska
1907¹

I am a girl of fifteen years and a few months old and am trying to finish the eighth grade this spring and am awfully busy. I have to take care of the chickens and the sitting hens before I go to school and those who have it to do know that it is no little job. I have sixteen little chickens. I feed them corn meal crushed in pieces about as large as a kernel of wheat. This I take and boil in a pot or skillet before I give it to them and I haven't lost a chick.

Laura Brown
Cuming County, Nebraska
1907²

Bryan Echternkardt and Laura Brown were turn-of-the-twentieth-century Nebraska farm children. Certainly they attended school and played with their friends, but when writing to the children's page of a farm magazine, they described their lives largely in terms of work. In a nation where childhood, in the ideal, was increasingly defined by school and play, farm families continued to be highly integrated and interdependent units. Their success depended upon the work of children who remained tied economically to the family until they were twenty-one years old or married. Moreover, for the

children—and their families—to be successful, children had to cultivate habits of independence and initiative from a very early age, and take on the work habits of adults well before their twentieth year.³



Turn-of-the-twentieth-century farm families lived in a world that prized usefulness in children; cutting firewood was one common chore for boys.
The Nebraska Farmer, January 26, 1916.

Because of their economic reliance upon children, farm families across the nation increasingly ran counter to developing ideals about the place of children in society. Even before the Civil War, middle-class urban families began to shelter their children from the working world, preferring that they

devote themselves to education and play. That idea, however, was slow to take hold among rural and poor working families, for whom children were economically valuable, unlike the economically worthless but emotionally priceless children of the urban middle classes. In the period from 1870 to 1920, reformers put pressure on legislators to exclude children from the workplace, and to force parents to send their children to school regularly, resulting (though often not without a fight) in the enactment of child labor and compulsory schooling laws in every state. Americans were coming to see children less as economic assets and more as emotional ones.⁴

Farm families, on the other hand, continued to live and work in a world that prized usefulness in children. The great truth of farm children's lives was that farms were tied as tightly to children's labor and their ability to work responsibly and independently as the children were bound to the farms. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Nebraska farms were family farms, and they could not survive without the productive efforts of all of the family members. Most families could not afford hired labor, and, since labor shortages were common in the American West through much of the late nineteenth century, even those who could afford hired help might not find workers available. Survival, much less prosperity, for family farms required the labor of men, women, and children. Children's tasks ranged from the ordinary to the extraordinary, and generally involved much unsupervised labor. Youngsters

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg is associate professor of history at Iowa State University.

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typically learned tasks by working beside their parents until they were able to perform them without supervision.⁵

The care of animals was an important chore assumed by young children. Parents honed children's skills by giving them small, weak animals to raise that otherwise might have died, training youngsters in the care of livestock while risking no more than time and the life of an animal that otherwise was uneconomical to keep. The experience of young Katie Classen of Gage County, Nebraska, was typical. In 1907 she wrote to *The Nebraska Farmer*, "We have some sheep and last summer we had some little lambs. Papa gave me one which had been sick and he didn't think it would live but it did and when it was big I sold it." The implication was that she was allowed to keep the proceeds, which would have taught Katie the value of hard work and responsibility, as well as training her in the care of lambs.⁶

Children also cared for animals as herders. Many pastures were unfenced, and children's time and effort substituted for posts and wire. Whether it was because families could not afford fencing or simply because child labor was available, herding was a primary childhood responsibility. Ten-year-old Myrtle Jordan and her sister herded 750 sheep in 1907, and other boys and girls, such as thirteen-year-old Viola Pospeshill of Venus, [Knox County] Nebraska, herded cattle. In 1912 she wrote, "When we first came to our ranch we had to herd cattle to keep them away from the stacks of hay. I always rode a white horse named Daisy."⁷ Her experience illustrates another truth about children's labor on the farm: It was not all onerous and unpleasant. Herding could be overly hot, overly cold, or monotonous, but it also could be enjoyable, and many children found working with horses in the open air exhilarating rather than tedious. As the mother of one young cowgirl wrote in a letter to a family friend, "Belle is out helping drive cattle so you know she is happy."⁸



Children often worked herding animals, and in ranch country might spend many hours alone on horseback. Probably only the boy on the white horse at the center, who appears to be the oldest of the three, was actually entrusted with that duty, since only his stirrups are adjusted to the length of his legs, and the other two horses are being held. The two younger boys are likely mounted only to pose for the photograph. All are the children of William Erickson of Cherry County, Nebraska. NSHS-RG2608-3359.

The number and variety of tasks that farm children shared with their parents and siblings was considerable. As their judgement and physical strength developed, their responsibilities increased. Eight-year-old Margaret Carr of Greeley County put the following question to the child readers of *The Nebraska Farmer*: "Of course we all play but what kind of work do the rest of you do? I have a sister fourteen years old and a brother twelve years old. They husk corn and I herd cows in the stalks. We have eighteen cows."⁹

Husking and herding were common children's chores, as were feeding and watering animals, carrying fuel, milking cows, hunting eggs, and working in all phases of crop production. By their teens, many children were handling horses and plowing, planting, and harrowing. As fifteen-year-old Alberta Chalmers of Walthill, Nebraska, asserted, "Ever since I've been old enough to handle a team I've helped my father in the hay field." Although it was more

common for older girls to help their mothers in the house, Alberta was not alone in working in the fields with her father. Work often had to be done regardless of gender-based constraints.¹⁰

Discussions of child labor in the diaries of farm parents make it clear that the children's stories about their work are not exaggerated. In 1879 Charles Story, his wife, Melvina, and four children, Irene, eleven; Leouis, ten; Fred, seven; and Jennie, six, migrated from Pennsylvania to Nebraska, settling in Buffalo County. In his diary, Charles Story reports that although Fred and Jennie were a bit young to be much help with field work, Irene and Leouis worked with him. In particular, they helped harvest, husk, and shell corn, even working by moonlight to bring in the crop. By 1881 twelve-year-old Leouis had become his father's right-hand man, joining him in nearly every task on the farm, from cutting wood and hauling straw to driving the team while planting corn.¹¹



Holding the sack while an adult gathers corncobs, probably as fuel for a kitchen range, a young child learns household chores. *The Nebraska Farmer*, March 22, 1916.



The partial subsistence economy of most turn-of-the-century farms included raising much of the family's food. Food preparation chores assumed by children could include killing, plucking, and dressing a chicken. *The Nebraska Farmer*, July 28, 1915.

The Story children's ability and willingness to work were particularly important, given the family's straitened financial circumstances, which had them burning corn for fuel and hunting rabbits for food. In 1880, with the farm barely established, a broken arm left Charles Story "crippled up, & may be for life." He temporarily left the family farm to work as a clerk for a grocer in Kearney. A man was hired to care for the farm in Story's absence, but his work proved unacceptable, and in November Story returned home, unable or unwilling to leave the farm in the care of a wife seven months pregnant and four children ages eleven and under. In Story's absence, Leouis and Irene had no doubt worked with the hired man, as they had worked with their father.¹²

Even though the Story children worked hard, their father acknowledged them as children, with children's needs and desires. Although the family faced Christmas 1880 exhausted, impoverished,

and dreaming of a "return to civilization," Charles and Melvina gave the children the best holiday they could. On December 25, 1880, Story wrote:

Christmas. A clear but rather cold day. The children were up bright & early to see if Kris Krinkle had found them in the wilds of Nebraska, and sure enough he had for there was a Wild Plum tree fastened upright in a box, and transformed into a splendid Christmas tree with little cupids, fairies, angels with red wings and other candy and attractive ornaments. Kris had no presents for the little ones, but he brought them doughnuts, pop-corn kisses, and mixed candies, so they were happy. I received a fancy cushion for my rocking chair, the united work of wife & daughter.¹³

Although they were back at work the next day, the Story children had Christmas.

Responsibility and the ability to work independently were important within the farm household as well as in the fields. Girls learned from an early age to cook, clean, sew, and attend to other tasks their mothers performed in the house and barnyard, and a well-trained

daughter was of enormous help. In 1916 eight-year-old Mamie Dunne, of Calamus [Loup County], Nebraska, did much to lighten her mother's load, caring for her baby brother, washing the dishes, carrying water and fuel, and tending the chickens. In addition, she wrote, "I am going to learn to crochet this winter and when I am old enough I will join the sewing club." Moreover, a daughter thus trained was better prepared to become a farmer's wife and manage her own household. Household training also allowed families to rely on the children if a parent was away, or in the event of illness or family emergency.¹⁴

The pages of *The Nebraska Farmer* are filled with stories of girls and, occasionally, boys, who filled their mother's shoes when necessary. Eleven-year-old Ruth Landwehr, of Columbus, Nebraska, described her responsibilities in a matter-of-fact tone: "When my mamma was sick of course I had to do the housework." That entailed scrubbing

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and cooking, neither of which she found particularly objectionable. The scrubbing, she asserted, was "fun." Her proudest accomplishment was making soup for her mother. "My papa killed a chicken and I dressed it and made mamma chicken soup. Mamma said it tasted good. She said I was doing pretty well." Ruth's mother evidently had prepared her well.¹⁵

Fathers, too, taught children their daily chores in the event that they had to travel to town for the day. Although the father's chores probably would have fallen primarily on the boys, it was most often girls who wrote to the children's pages of *The Nebraska Farmer*, proud of their ability to meet adult responsibilities. Agnes Adelle Stewart, of Friend, Nebraska, took over for her father when he attended livestock sales. Her jobs included the care of twelve horses and other barnyard chores. She wrote that she "had to start at three o'clock and got done at five o'clock." Perhaps it was because these tasks were often considered "boy's work" that Agnes Stewart felt such a sense of accomplishment.¹⁶

An important test of a child's training might come when he or she hired out to

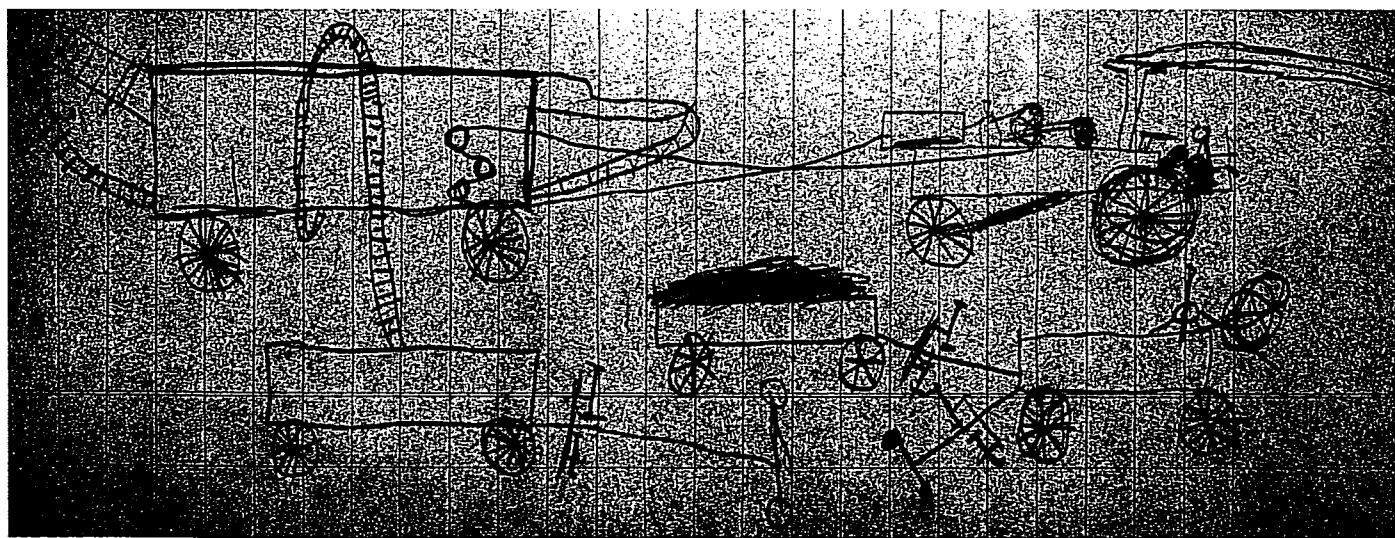
work for someone else. Families had many reasons for sending their children to work on other farms, but it often was a way to feed and clothe children who otherwise might have been forced to go without. In the 1870s Peter S. Petersen's father, a Danish immigrant who settled near Dannebrog, placed his son with several local farmers. Although some employers paid wages, the agreements stipulated only that the farmers would provide Peter with food and clothing. It could be a difficult life, and some employers were abusive. One employer, the Goetche family, while feasting in his presence on butter, preserves, and ham, provided Peter only bread and lard, and required him to knit the mittens and socks he received as part of his wages. He slept in the attic, and had no bed.

Hired out to several employers, Petersen's childhood was characterized by constant movement, living and working at home when his father needed him, and working for others in between times. Because his father believed "there are too many educated crooks now, it would be better if we had more working men," Peterson did not go to school, and probably had more work

experience and less school experience than most Nebraska farm youngsters.¹⁷

Other families were less extreme, and the circumstances under which children were hired out varied, but the practice gave families financial flexibility that was especially important in hard times. In 1920, a tight year for many Nebraska farmers, the boys of the Drake family of Holt County worked for wages that allowed them to buy new clothing. In a letter their mother wrote, "The boys have bought their clothes all winter with money they earned by helping outside a few days at a time. It sure has helped for everything is so high, and the rest of us have made over our old ones."¹⁸

Some parents' needs and expectations extended far beyond this level of juvenile participation in the farm economy, and young children were expected to assume very high levels of responsibility. Jules Sandoz, a Swiss immigrant who settled in the Nebraska Sandhills, relied heavily upon his wives (he married several times) and children to manage his farm. Sandoz, more a dreamer than a farmer, let the work fall heavily upon other members of his family, and expected high levels of



Like their letters to farm publications, turn-of-the-century farm children's artwork often focused on their work. This child's sketch, included in the diary of Washington Lafayette McClary of Lewellen, Nebraska, depicts a threshing scene in rather intricate detail. It includes a steam tractor supplying power through a belt to a threshing machine, and several wagons with accurately rendered hitch details. NSHS-RG3775

responsibility from his children. On one occasion he left his thirteen-year-old daughter, Marie, and twelve-year-old son, James, to hold down the family claim on a new homestead. The two slight children—neither weighed more than sixty pounds—were left alone “in a strange land twenty-five miles from home with a .22 rifle for protection.” Only after fires swept the area did their father return to check on them.¹⁹

Difficult circumstances forced other families to rely heavily on children. In 1889 or 1890, for example, Benjamin Gitchel, who had settled in Buffalo County with his wife and family in 1880, suffered an apparent stroke that caused a progressive paralysis of his right side. The hard economic times of the 1890s compounded the family’s already difficult situation, and they could not afford to hire help, so the Gitchel boys, ages ten and eight, became farmers. In letters to relatives, their mother proudly described their labor and the small sums the family had to spend for hired help. Gitchel appreciated the sacrifice their work represented, writing to his mother, “They are good boys to work.”

Circumstances prevented them from attending school full time, and Gitchel wrote, “The boys take turns herding the cattle on the prairie and go to school, but that will last only a month longer and whether the feed will carry the stock through or not is to be told.” The Gitchel daughters attended school more regularly, were qualified to teach school, and brought additional income to the household. In spite of difficult circumstances, Ben Gitchel had high hopes for the children: “We want to give our children an education if nothing else then they will be better able to compete for a livelihood [sic] in this world of strife and oppression [sic].” Eventually, all the children became schoolteachers, quite a feat, given the demands placed on them by their father’s precarious health.²⁰

Stories like the Gitchels’ were not unusual. Growing up in the early twentieth century, William Culver Wilson of

Hayes Center also was the son of a disabled father. The fall William was to begin high school, his father “met with a terrible accident which was to render him a cripple for life.” The family was “already poor and badly in debt,” and many families, faced with such a situation, would have removed their children from school and expected them to work full time, “but not in my case! In the face of all his miseries, expenses and pitiful disability, Father never once thought of taking me out of school. What a father!”

Instead of having William board in town, as the family had planned, they bought him an automobile, and he drove to and from school daily. Working in the evenings and on weekends, and with the help of an “intermittant [sic] hired man,” Wilson kept the family corn and hog operation in business. During his senior year, when the prosperity accompanying World War I eased the family’s circumstances, he could board in town “and really enjoy my Senior year.” His parents supported him, Wilson said, because they “wanted me to have a better life than they had.” Although he was grateful for their sacrifices, the experience convinced him that his future lay in education, not agriculture.²¹

What to modern sensibilities might seem an extreme economic reliance on youngsters probably was common. Fathers became ill and died, leaving wives and children to carry on the best they could. The Gitchels and the Wilsons were but two of many families forced to adapt women’s and children’s work and responsibilities to a father’s disabilities. Severe economic stress and natural disasters also might force fathers and older brothers to seek employment elsewhere, leaving mothers and younger children to operate farms, a situation that was common in other prairie and Plains states including Kansas, the Dakotas, and Minnesota. Settlers in Nebraska faced similar environmental conditions, and often experienced serious economic stress.²²

Droughts, grasshopper plagues, panics, and depressions also sent men east

looking for work. As Ben Gitchel wrote to his family in Michigan during the troubles of the early 1890s, “One of our neighbors went to Ill. this winter to husk corn.” If the neighbor’s household included a wife and children, something Gitchel did not note, they probably would have taken over the farm chores. Writing in 1957 and 1958, Mrs. W. O. Bishop, born in Furnas County, Nebraska, in 1884, recalled the stresses of operating a farm while her father worked for wages elsewhere. “My Mother . . . with the older children’s help did a large share of the breaking of the ground and raised all the crops they could. As my Father spent much time working away from home to earn as Many dollars as possible to supply some of the need of the large family. He went different years to Fort Robinson Nebr to help make hay for the Many horses and mules the government kept there.” This division of labor was a common response to the problems of distressed, cash-poor farm families. For the strategy to work, children had to be trained from an early age in habits of hard work and independence.²³

Reliance upon the abilities of children sometimes put them at risk, however. Youngsters were not always careful, and many farm chores were inherently dangerous. Although there is little statistical information, anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of injuries and near misses among farm children was quite high.

Animals posed a threat, and horses, cows, sheep, and pigs usually were much larger than the children who often came in close contact with them. Many children seem to have viewed farm animals as a challenge, risking dangerous pursuits, such as riding the cows. This certainly held the possibility of injury, especially if a brother decided to twist the cow’s tail. In one such incident, Arthur Single, living on a farm near North Platte, Nebraska, found himself on the ground. “She pitched me off. It made me mad, . . . but I like to ride cows.” Fortunately, this incident did not result in injury, and Arthur lived to work

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Farm work often placed children at risk, sometimes from animals like this Hereford bull that were much bigger than the children entrusted to tend them. *The Nebraska Farmer*, March 10, 1915.

another day, and probably to ride many more cows.²⁴

Injuries from animals occurred not only through misbehavior and risk-taking; everyday activity also brought children and animals into dangerous proximity. In 1905 six-year-old Norman McClary of Lewellen, Nebraska, walked too close to a cow in the barn. She swung her head around, "striking him squarely in the mouth—loosening 6 teeth, breaking three of them off—up inside the gums." "Poor boy," his father wrote, "he is certainly worked up over it and so am I."²⁵

Farm implements also were dangerous. While driving a hay rake Clarence Jacobson of Lynch, Nebraska, slipped and fell in front of the implement. One

of the horses kicked him in the head, and both started to run, dragging him a considerable distance. He suffered a fractured skull, a broken lower jaw, and facial cuts requiring stitches. He survived the ordeal, and learned a valuable lesson: "a rake is a dangerous implement with frisky horses and a twelve-year-old 'kid.'"²⁶

On March 5, 1880, while working with his grandfather, Leouis Story tangled with the harrow, and "one of the harrow teeth had penetrated his side below his heart and entered the dear little fellow's lungs." His father described his condition as "critical," and Leouis did not return to the fields until April 30. Farm implements, farm animals, and farm work offered infinite possibilities for injury.²⁷

Household tasks also offered opportunities for mishap, especially since many chores involved fire. Before World War II, most farm families cooked, washed, and ironed with fire. In 1914 Edithe Lundstrom and her three brothers of Clearwater, Nebraska, at home alone, decided to make dinner. They put a kettle of water and meat on the stove, and while they were in the barn doing chores, the fire nearly went out. One of Edithe's brothers decided to remedy the situation by adding kerosene to the smoldering corncobs and applying a match. Predictably, "the fire blazed up and blew the stovepipe down and lifted a lid from the stove. It made everything in the room black with soot and also the cellar." No one was injured, and the children hoped to avoid telling their parents, but they arrived home sooner than expected. "Mamma found the whole house was covered with soot and she was frightened. . . . I was so frightened that I will never forget it." Edithe ended her story with their parents' return, but no doubt punishment of some sort followed.²⁸

Other children were exposed to danger in ways that might be surprising to urban parents in the twenty-first century, few of whom would be likely to expect young children to be able to kill rattlesnakes. But such was the case of Charles Turner, raised in Saline and Jefferson counties. In a matter-of-fact tone, Turner related the following tale from his childhood: While his father broke prairie, Charles was to "plant a garden of melons, squashes, pumpkins and citrons by cutting a gash in a sod and hand dropping the seeds and tamping the gash together with the back of the axe." But rattlesnakes were abundant, and "every little while I would call my father to come and kill a rattlesnake. He was killing one very often by stamping them to death with his heavy high topped boots." Charles's father eventually lost patience and told his son, "if I was a boy ten years old and had an axe I'd never call any one to come and kill a rattlesnake for me. Well the next one I met I

very carefully reached and killed him and before we finished breaking that little patch I had killed 10 rattlesnakes and he must have killed over fifteen on about an acre of land." And so, at the tender age of ten, Charles Turner mastered the art of rattlesnake slaying.

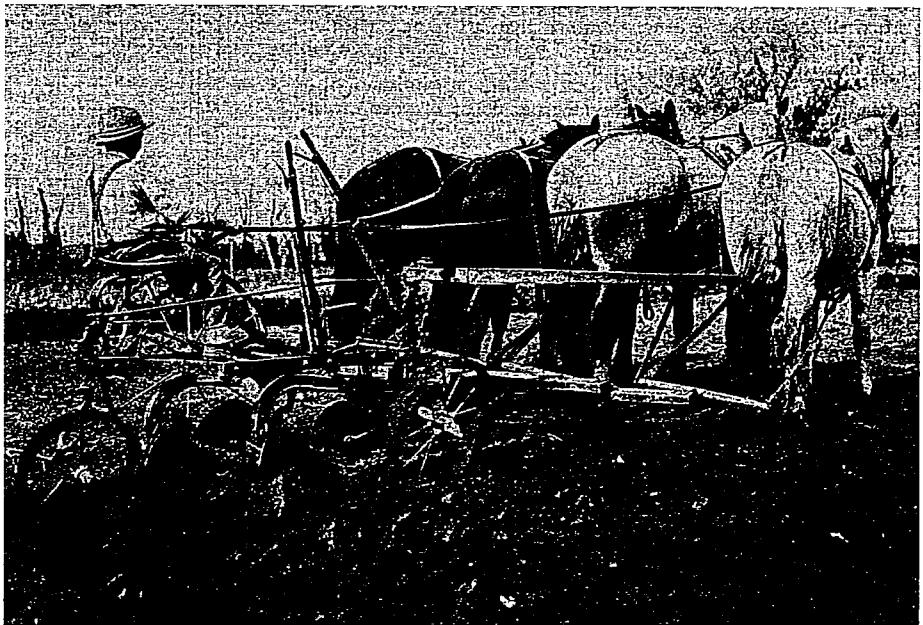
Despite the dangers, most children, like Charles Turner, lived to tell their tales.²⁹

Nebraska's turn-of-the-century farm children lived in a working world, their lives governed by the annual rhythms of the farm—plowing, planting and harvesting. They nurtured young animals and herded older ones. They began with small chores, suitable to small hands, and progressed to chores requiring greater responsibility. Many—perhaps most—of Nebraska's farm families could not survive without the labor of children, and the legal status of children reflected that reality. Nebraska child labor laws neither mentioned nor protected farm children working their parents' land, though children under fourteen working in factories and stores, or in any business during school hours were protected by law. The only agricultural labor mentioned was that of children working for hire in beet fields. Other types of farm labor, including labor on a parent's property was not mentioned. In this, however, Nebraska was well within national norms. No state regulated a child's labors on his or her parents' farm.³⁰

Moreover, Nebraska school laws, as late as 1920, permitted a school year as short as twelve weeks in rural districts, as compared to nine months in Nebraska's urban counties, Lancaster and Douglas. The law required that a youngster attend only eight hours per week during the twelve-week session, and exemptions were allowed for children essential to the support of their families. In this regard, too, Nebraska's policies were about average; many states allowed rural parents to remove their children from school under special circumstances and for family emergencies, and farm labor was one of the most common reasons for which authorities



The Nebraska Farmer, May 26, 1915.



Farm implements like this road drag (top) and plow, as well as animals and the inherent dangers of farm work, offered infinite possibilities for injury.
The Nebraska Farmer, April 5, 1916.

Child Labor on Nebraska Farms, 1870–1920



Husking corn in a farm kitchen in about 1900, an unidentified mother and daughter exemplify the traditional expectations of children and their labor that governed turn-of-the-century Nebraska farm families. NSHS-T454.

excused children from school.³¹

The law tacitly acknowledged a simple economic fact: Nebraska farm families, like those throughout the nation, were economic units, dependent upon the labor of children as well as adults. Children's responsibilities ranged from simple daily chores, requiring only an hour or two, to being the family's primary farmers or housekeepers. Turn-of-the-twentieth century children's roles were much like those played by their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents as children—roles governed by traditional expectations about children that the twentieth-century would be slow to change.

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A Note on Sources

Historians of childhood must find their sources where they may, and a history of children's farm labor in Nebraska is no exception. For this study, I have utilized parents' letters and diaries, detailing their children's work, as well as children's letters. I have also made use of unpublished, manuscript memoirs. These sources are available at the Nebraska State Historical Society. I have also turned to a somewhat unusual source: children's letters to agricultural periodicals. I first discovered these writings while doing research on New Zealand's rural children, and believe them to be an important source of children's writing about themselves. While they come to us through a series of editors (parents, teachers, and the editors of the children's pages), they are among the few sources of detailed discussions of children's work, play, and school experiences available. The children's page of *The Nebraska Farmer* is especially useful, providing for the first twenty years of the twentieth century a large number of children's letters about their daily lives. Sometime around World War I, however, the letters become less useful, as the children's page editor began to set topics about which the children were required to write, rather than allowing them to write about any topic they might desire. For a discussion of the use of such letters, see Rollo Arnold, *Settler Kaponga: 1881–1914, A Frontier Fragment of the Western World* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1997), 172.

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Notes

¹ "Work and Play Club," *The Nebraska Farmer*, Jan. 2, 1907, 11.

² Laura Brown, "What One Girl Does," *Nebraska Farmer*, May 1, 1907, 434.

³ Turn-of-the-century is defined as the period from 1870 to 1920. Children are defined as young people living and working under the control of their parents, regardless of their chronological age. A fifteen-year-old child, emancipated and living independently, would not be considered a child, but a twenty-year-old still resident on and economically responsible to the parents' farm would be considered a child.

⁴ Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 56–58.

⁵ For an excellent discussion of the meaning of usefulness in an agricultural context, see Clair Toynbee, *Her Work and His: Family, Kin and Community in New Zealand, 1900–1930* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1995); Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 20–22.

⁶ "Work and Play Club," *Nebraska Farmer*, Mar. 6, 1907, 249.

⁷ "Work and Play Club," *Nebraska Farmer*, Feb. 13, 1907, 167; "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, June 12, 1912, 613.

⁸ Elliott West, *Growing Up With the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 105–106; James E. Potter, ed., "The Ranch Letters of Emma Robertson, 1891–1892," *Nebraska History* 56 (Summer 1975): 229.

⁹ "Work and Play Club," *Nebraska Farmer*, Jan. 2, 1907.

¹⁰ "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, Sept. 18, 1912, 869; Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*, 20–21.

¹¹ Charles Augustus Story, Jr., Manuscript Diary, 1879–1881, Film RG3010, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska (hereafter, NSHS).

¹² Ibid., July 6, 1880; Sept. 12, 1880; Nov. 8, 1880.

¹³ Ibid., Dec. 25, 1880.

¹⁴ "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, Dec. 9, 1916, 1275. It probably was common for four- and five-year-old children to help with housework, although the following claim, made by a girl for her eighteen-month-old sibling, may stretch credibility: "I have two sisters, one's name is Eris. She is eighteen months old and can dry dishes for mama." "Work and Play Club," *Nebraska Farmer*, May 15, 1907, 475. Boys rarely wrote about household tasks, perhaps because they found it embarrassing. Girls could justify their field work on the basis of necessity, but it was less acceptable for boys to do the same with household chores. I have found only two letters from boys to *The Nebraska Farmer* describing housework, one writing about making candy while his mother was away from home, another, Oren Wilson, age thirteen, describing doing his sisters' work, including cooking, while they were away. He noted that his cooking was not very successful, but his housework was: "I did the morning work in about two hours and my sisters usually spent the greater part of the day doing it. Papa said I was doing fine." "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, Dec. 2, 1914, 1149, and July 15, 1914, 717.

¹⁵ "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, Feb. 7, 1912, 161.

¹⁶ "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, Jan. 17, 1912, 65.

¹⁷ Peter S. Petersen, Manuscript Reminiscence, 98, 101–104, RG4021, NSHS.

¹⁸ Almira Mae (Payne) Drake, Typescript Letters, "Mazie," to Mrs. Le Roy Payne, University Place, Nebraska, Mar. 30, 1920, RG4165, NSHS.

¹⁹ Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press Bison Books, 1985), 351, 348–54.

²⁰ Benjamin S. Gitchel to Mother, July 13, 1892, Oct. 15, 1894, Jan. 21, 1897, Gitchel-Larsen Family Correspondence, RG3622, NSHS.

²¹ William Culver Wilson, Typescript Reminiscence, 12, 12–13 RG 0723, NSHS.

²² This family survival strategy is described in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *On the Banks of Plum Creek*.

a semi-autobiographical novel about life in Minnesota during the grasshopper plagues. Historians have also found it among settlers in South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming. Glen Schwendemann found the same patterns among Exoduster (formerly enslaved) families who settled in central Kansas in the 1870s and 1880s, and the strategy appears in family diaries from the Kansas settlement period. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 210–239, 69–81; Glenda Riley, "Introduction," xxii–xxii, in Edith Eudora Kohl, *Land of the Burnt Thigh* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986); Glen Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 1968): 16–17; Norton Family, "The Norton Diaries (1876–1895) as Copied and Annotated by Helen Norton Star," Manuscripts Division, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

²³ Benjamin Gitchel to "Friends at Home," Jan. 7, 1895, Gitchel-Larsen Family Correspondence; Mrs. W. O. Bishop, Beaver City, Nebraska, "Sod House letters, 1957–1958," to *The Nebraska Farmer*, RG721, NSHS.

²⁴ "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, June 12, 1912, 613.

²⁵ Washington Lafayette McClary, Manuscript Diaries, 1892–1938, Oct. 3, 1910, RG3775, NSHS.

²⁶ "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, Mar. 27, 1912, 381.

²⁷ Story diary, Mar. 5, 1880.

²⁸ "Young People," *Nebraska Farmer*, May 27, 1914, 603.

²⁹ Charles M. Turner, Typescript Reminiscence, 12, RG1478, Box 1, NSHS.

³⁰ United States Department of Labor, Children's Bureau, *State Child-Labor Standards, January 1, 1921* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Labor, 1921).

³¹ State of Nebraska, Department of Public Welfare, *Report of the Nebraska Children's Code Commission 1920* (Lincoln: Department of Public Welfare, State Capitol, 1920), 12; Nettie McGill, *Children in Agriculture, Bureau Publication No. 187* (Washington: Department of Commerce, Children's Bureau, 1929), 29, 47.