

# READ IOWA HISTORY

STUDENT MATERIALS



## People at Work

LESSON PLAN FOR SUPPORTING QUESTION

**How did Iowans make a living to support their families and communities in 1900 according to census records?**

1<sup>ST</sup> GRADE

**STATE HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY OF IOWA**  
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

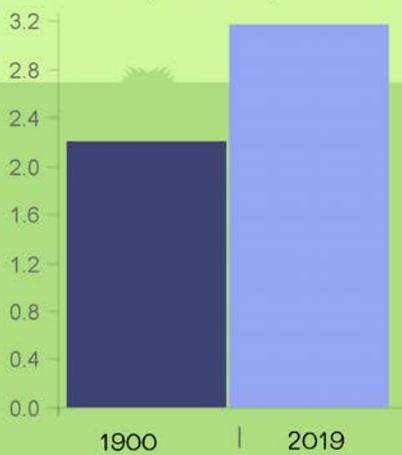
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## Iowans at Work

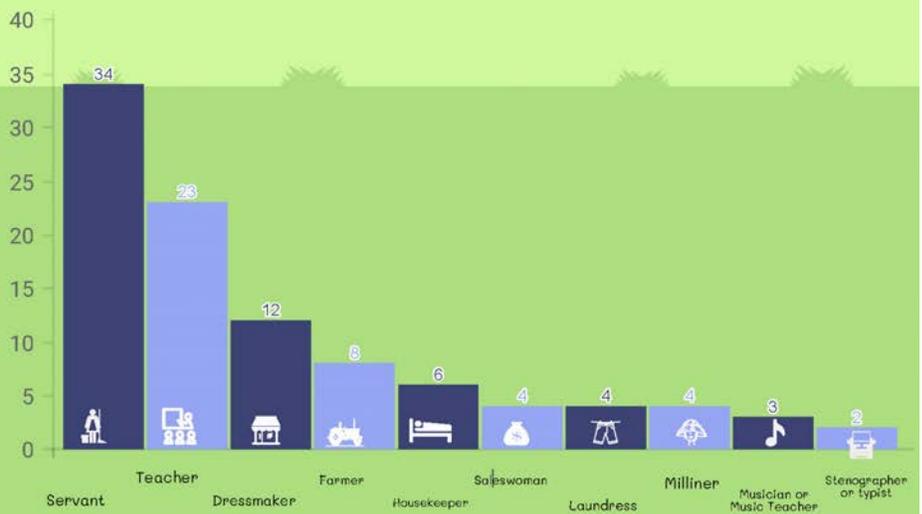
# 1900

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

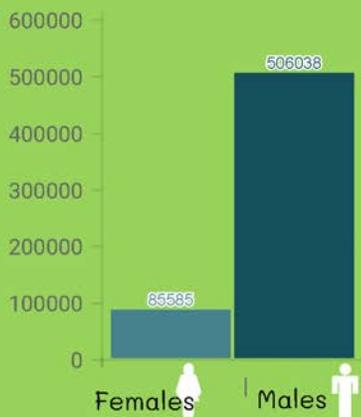
Population of Iowa (in millions)



Percentage of Females in Top Ten Jobs, 1900



Females and Males in the Labor Force, 1900



Percentage of Males in Top Ten Jobs, 1900



These graphs show the population of Iowa in 1900 and what occupations were the most common during this time period. *Courtesy of the U.S. Census Bureau*

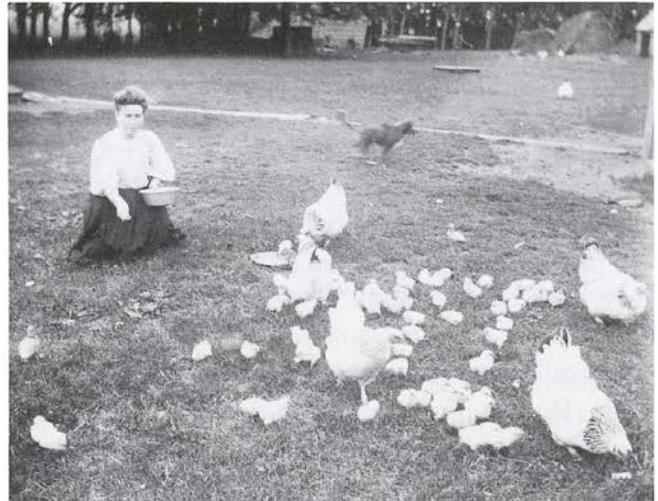
# Farm Women

EMILY Hawley Gillespie of rural Manchester, Iowa, farmed with her husband in the late nineteenth century. In addition to her regular housework, child care, sewing, and cooking tasks, Emily had many farming chores. She planted and tended the garden, took care of chickens, picked and preserved fresh berries, canned grapes, made cheese, husked corn, and cooked extra meals for threshers. To earn money, she churned and sold butter, trimmed hats, and raised and sold over 100 turkeys a year.

Like other Iowa farm women, Emily had the traditional duties of a wife and mother. Some of her farm chores provided her with extra money. Many farm women contributed their earnings to the cash income of the **farmstead** (farmland and buildings). Their work also brought other rewards. When women sold their homemade items, food, and produce, they could spend time socializing with friends and neighbors.

Men and women had separate and different jobs on the farm. While men and boys worked outside building fences, digging wells, planting and harvesting fields, women and girls had other responsibilities. Gardening, taking care of chickens and turkeys, and preparing food were the central farm chores for women.

The **division of labor** was not so rigid on the farm. Women did help in the fields when their husbands were sick or a hired hand quit. Matilda Paul plowed and milked when her husband became ill. When Matilda husked corn and dug potatoes, she put her youngest child in a large box for safety while she worked. “I shouldered my



*Women who lived on farms had many extra responsibilities. Many fed and took care of poultry like chickens and turkey. Then they sold the eggs and poultry.*

hoe and have worked out ever since,” Matilda wrote her family. “. . . I wore a dress with my sunbonnet wrung out in water every few minutes and my dress also wet.”

Some women managed farms themselves when their husbands died or were away from the farm for a long time.

Many people think that farm women were isolated and lonely. But their work brought them in contact with other women. Women often watched each other’s children, sewed for one another, visited town to sell their food and produce, or shared work. Harriet Brown Connor remembered working with a female neighbor. After the men brought a butchered hog into her kitchen, Connor and her friend picked hog guts “all day long.”

With the money Emily Gillespie earned from selling homemade molasses and cheese, she purchased groceries and sewing supplies. Women used their extra income to buy schoolbooks for their children and machinery for the farm. Others even contributed to the purchase of a new farm. □

# Hired Girls and Boys

**E**LME KNEESKERN earned \$1.50 per week to help neighboring farm women with chores in the late nineteenth century. She worked at farms within nine or ten miles of her family’s home in northeastern Iowa.

Elme was a hired girl, or domestic servant. In 1880 almost one-half of the working women in Iowa were employed as domestic servants. Unlike a maid in a wealthy city family, hired girls in Iowa usually helped local farmers’ wives during the busiest times of the year. During the summer and fall seasons, they helped farm women with the cooking. More meals were served to the extra hired hands (men who were paid to plow and harvest). During the spring and fall, hired girls worked day shifts to help clean houses or harvest crops.

Most hired girls were in their teens, although women of all ages worked as domestic servants. They were often treated like a member of the family. Hired girls sat down and ate with their employers’ families. Others lived with their employers.

One midwestern magazine recommended that the hired girl act as an assistant “in all operations of the kitchen—washing dishes, ironing, baking, sweeping, making beds and cooking meals.” The magazine also suggested that hired girls sew in the afternoons and help the boys milk the cows every night and morning. Iowa hired girls did many of



*Around the turn of the century, this Iowa girl hung up laundry on the clothes line. Hired girls were often responsible for washing, drying, and ironing clothing.*

those things.

Young boys were also hired to help farmers. Their responsibilities were different from those of a hired girl. A hired boy’s job did not usually include domestic duties. Instead, boys helped with slaughtering livestock, building and maintaining fences, taking care of crops, and planting trees.

Older women were included in the ranks of domestic servants. Many were paid as domestic servants to wash clothes. In 1873, Mary Hooper of Scott County paid her washer woman 75¢ a week to do the laundry.

For most hired girls, work lasted until they moved to town for a different job, returned to school, moved back in with their families in case of emergency or illness, or got married. □

## Farmer Plowing with a Two-Horse Team, ca. 1900

PART 2



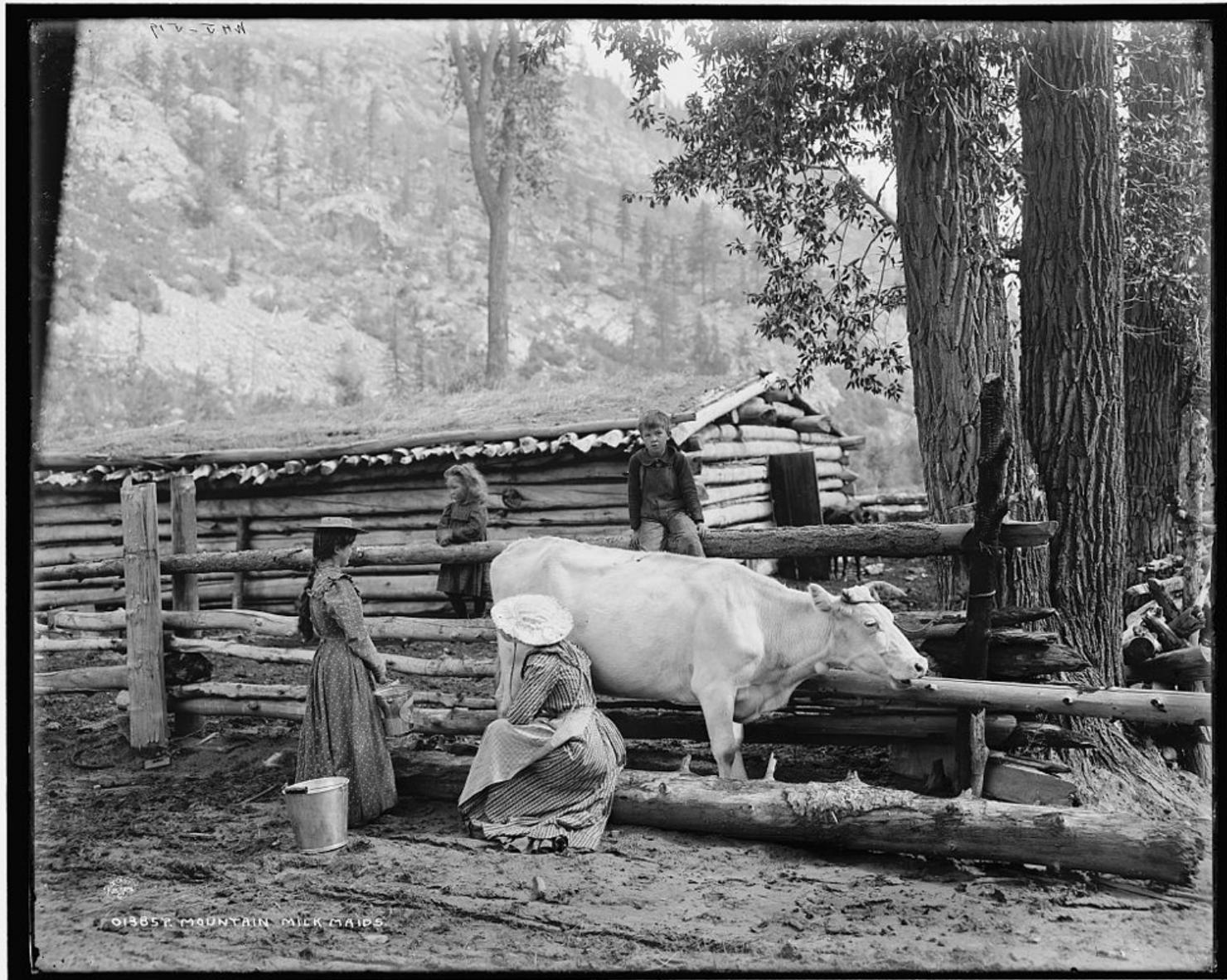
In 1900, most people in Iowa lived and worked on farms. From about 1850 to 1880, many people moved to the new state of Iowa. In this photograph, an Iowa farmer plows in preparation for planting the next crop. *Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Larson, Andrew Orm, ca. 1900*

## Man Feeding Pigs in the Barnyard, ca. 1895

PART 2

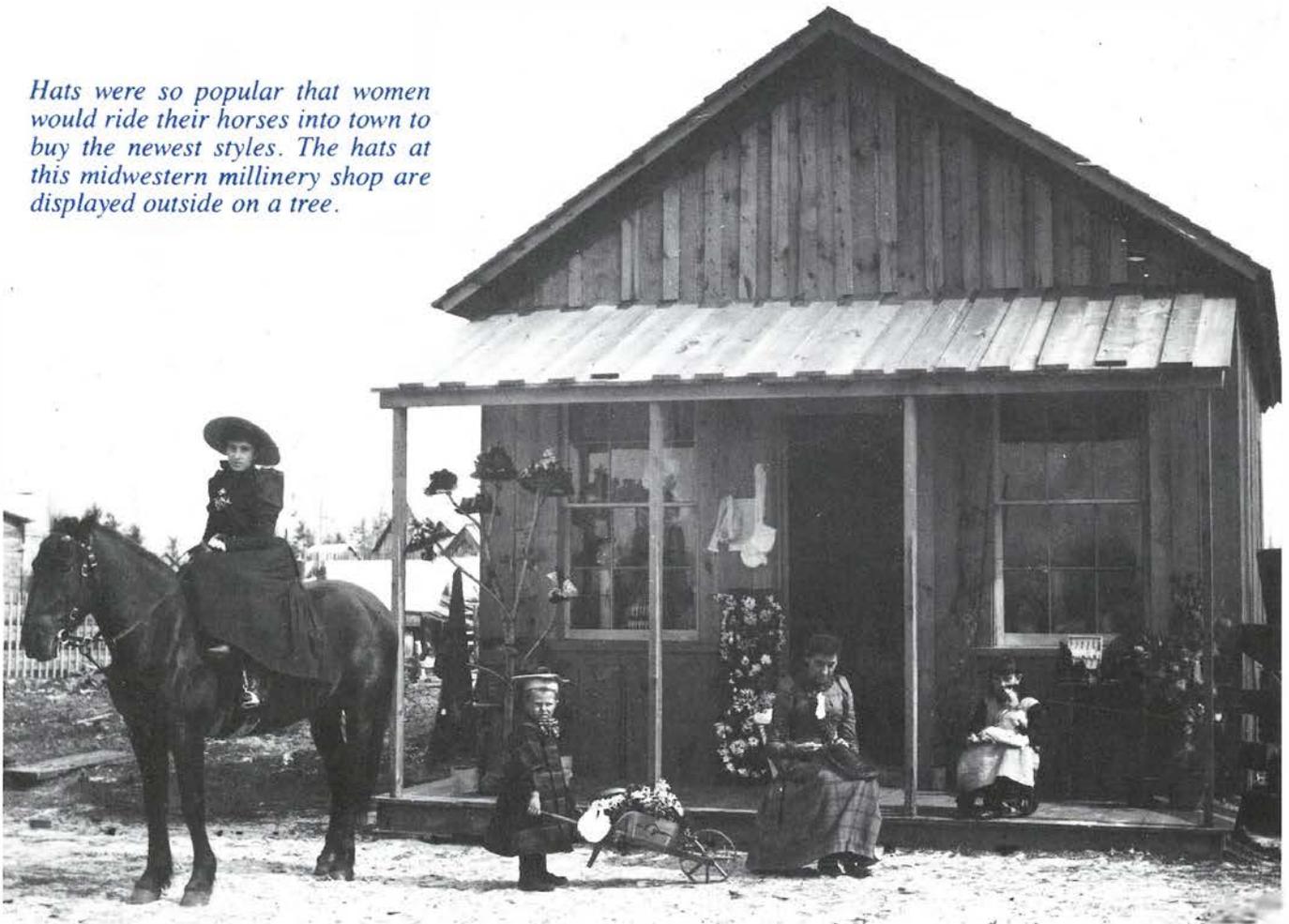


Farming was a very big job around 1900, requiring lots of hours and a great deal of hard work. On most farms, many people were needed to finish all of the jobs on a farm, and often several family members all worked together to make the farm a success. This farmer just finished putting out corn to feed the hogs. *Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, ca. 1895*



Part of the work typically delegated to women on a frontier farm was taking care of livestock that provided food for the family, and milking was done twice a day. The cow in this photo is tied to the log fence with a rope. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, Jackson, William H., "Mountain milk maids," ca. 1900*

*Hats were so popular that women would ride their horses into town to buy the newest styles. The hats at this midwestern millinery shop are displayed outside on a tree.*



Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin

## In the Millinery Shop

**T**WENTY-YEAR-OLD Elizabeth Wright Heller sold hats in 1880 at Mrs. Ann Swezey’s millinery shop in Marengo, Iowa. “It was fun to sell hats and I had very good luck at it,” Heller recalled. “So I tried them on myself to show them off, and usually made a sale.”

Hats were an important accessory for a nineteenth-century woman’s wardrobe. Women wore a hat or bonnet whenever they left the house.

Some women bought a new hat every season or for special occasions. While hats were available from general stores and mail-order catalogs, most women preferred buying individually designed hats at local millinery shops.

A **milliner** designed, trimmed, and sold hats and bonnets. Most nineteenth-century Iowa millinery shops were owned and managed by women. In the 1870s and 1880s, millinery work



Gilbert Irish Collection. SHSI

*Women at this Iowa City millinery shop are ready for the Christmas rush of customers.*

was the third most popular employment for women.

The majority of milliners were single women. However, one study found that almost one-third of Iowa milliners in 1880 were married women.

Owning a millinery shop was one of the few socially accepted ways women could own businesses. Mostly men operated other types of stores. A milliner had a wide variety of duties. She was a buyer, designer, stocker, salesclerk, advertising manager, and accountant.

Milliners were creative in designing hats. Edith Jacks, a nineteenth-century milliner, remembered “fashioning those . . . wire frames with silk or lace; then decorating them with flower and vegetable gardens.” Milliners also designed hats with colored feathers, satin ribbons, and clusters of artificial birds and fruit.

Besides hats, millinery shops sold ladies cuffs, collars, gloves, sewing supplies, fashion magazines, and the current dress patterns. The shops provided rural Iowa women with the

current fashion styles of eastern cities. An 1873 newspaper advertisement for Pratt and Strub, an Iowa City millinery, read: “Nowhere else are the equals of our millinery offers to be found. We believe we are the only house where original New York Pattern Hats are to be found.”

Some milliners traveled to eastern cities to buy new hats. Mrs. Whitcomb, a Hampton milliner, visited Chicago every spring to select new styles. “Pausing from biting off a thread or plying her needle to a bit of straw,” remembered Oney Fred Sweet, “she told of her personal contacts with the famous ones of the metropolis.”

Women also flocked to local millinery shops to meet friends and socialize. “Every afternoon the narrow space inside the walls of packing boxes was crowded. After school we girls always went there,” wrote one novelist. “Married women began to call each other by their first names. In the milliner shop they chattered like girls, laughed, and spoke without thinking.” □



## Muscatine’s Pearl Button Factory

THE WORLD’S first fresh-water pearl button industry was started in Muscatine, Iowa, in 1891. A German immigrant named John F. Boepple used clam shells from the nearby Mississippi River to make inexpensive pearl

*Women workers in button factories used dangerous machines to cut the shells into circles called blanks. Some women cut their fingers in the machines.*

buttons, hat pins, and charms. At the time, buttons made from ocean shells were popular, but expensive. Pearl buttons made from shells found in fresh-water rivers were easier to find and cheaper to make.

Within two years, Boepple’s Muscatine Button Factory grew from one-room into a two-story brick business employing 100 people. Entire families dug clams and sold shells to the booming button industry. By 1897, there were 53 button-making companies in Muscatine. The town was nicknamed “Pearl City.”

While Iowa was an agricultural state, industries were growing rapidly. The button industry was ranked as the fourth largest in the state for employing women workers. By 1900, more than 21,000 women held manufacturing and mechanical jobs. The 1900 census, for example, showed that women worked in carpet, boot and shoe factories, in knitting mills, and as glove makers and button makers.

In the Muscatine Button Factory, like most late-nineteenth century factories, men and women were **segregated** (separated) and had different jobs. People believed men should have the more physically demanding jobs. Traditional views about “men’s work” and “women’s work” also divided men and women.

In the button factory, men pulled the shells out of large vats and removed the remaining clam meat. Then they cut shells using automatic saw machines. Boys as young as 14 served as apprentice button cutters.

Some women worked machines that drilled



*Most women workers in button factories spent ten hours a day sorting buttons and placing them in boxes.*

oles or polished buttons, but most women and girls were employed as sorters and button carders. Sorters separated and counted finished buttons. Carders included many married women and girls. They worked at home and sewed the finished buttons onto cardboard pieces. Their work was often **repetitive** (doing the same thing over and over) and dull.

Women were paid not by the number of hours they worked, but by the number of buttons they drilled, polished, sorted, or sewed. This form of payment called **piece rate** was common in most turn-of-the-century industries. It encouraged women to work faster and longer and to bring work home after hours. Employees already worked ten to twelve hours a day.

Button factory work was often hazardous for both men and women. Iowa was one of the few states in the U.S. with no laws concerning workers' health and safety in the late nineteenth century. Employees breathed thick shell dust that caused lung diseases. Drilling and pressing machines often cut off or gashed fingers.

Women were slowly stepping out of the home into the public work world. Like the women employed at the Muscatine Button Factory, many found their work tiring, low paying, and sometimes dangerous. □

Based on interviews with employers and employees in Iowa button factories around the turn of the century, O.D. Longstreth wrote a report in 1906. Read about the working conditions for women in button factories. Then answer the questions. (*Answers on page 23.*)

*The inspiration and excitement of the crowd are very attractive to the young women. Where the button factories are established girls much prefer the factory to domestic employment.*

*The work which the women do in this business has been done by them since the industry started. The men have come to regard it as women's work . . . The employers regard the women as more refined and [skillful] at the machine work than man could possibly be. Since [the employer] can [hire] female labor cheaper than male help, he naturally encourages this view of the proper sphere. The work [requires] great accuracy, quickness of judgment and speed . . . and coordination of the mind, eye, hand, and body . . . this constantly for ten hours daily, must cause nervous harm . . .*

### Questions

1. According to employers, why are women good factory workers?
2. Why do you think women wanted to work in a factory?
3. Compare working in a button factory to working as a domestic servant. Which would you rather do? Why?



The Des Moines Brick Company made bricks used to build roads, houses, and other buildings like schools, stores, and churches. *Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, ca. 1900*



In small towns, stores carried many kinds of products: clothes, food, wagon/machine/auto parts, dishes, tools, hats and many other items. In cities, stores specialized into a certain kind of product. The shop in this photograph features E.J. Crane, a watchmaker and jewelry store, in Richmond, Virginia. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, "E.J. Crane, watchmaker and jewelry store with man working in window and man standing in doorway, Richmond, Virginia," 1899*



Carpenters built things such as furniture, tools, and buildings. Some carpentry projects were small, such as fixing a chair, and some were large, such as building a multi-story building. This photo shows two men training to become carpenters by learning to use a saw to cut wood and a plane to make the wood smooth. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Carpentering," November 1918*

Dressmaker Angelina Guinzali in Boston, Massachusetts,  
January 25, 1917

PART 3



As fashions became more elaborate and railroad systems made them more available throughout the United States, dressmakers transitioned from sewing by hand, as seen in this photo, to using a sewing machine. In this photo, Angelina Guinzali, is working as a dressmaker Boston, Massachusetts. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, Jackson, William H., "Mountain milk maids," ca. 1900*

# Slates and Blackboards

**I**N EARLIER times, girls were denied an education because some people thought that their bodies were too weak and their brains too small. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, this thinking changed. People believed girls

should be educated so that they could be better wives and mothers.

Because women took care of children in their role as mother, teaching neatly fit into their “womanly duties.” As men left teaching for

*Teachers around the turn of the century often had students of all ages in their classrooms. School supplies were scarce in these early schools. How is this 1900 classroom different from your own?*



higher paying work in factories or farming, jobs opened up for women. Women, with less ways to earn cash wages, were paid less than men.

By 1880, teaching was the second most popular employment for Iowa women. Two-thirds of public school teachers were women. Many women wanted to escape what one girl called the “drudgery” of farm work. Others wanted to earn money to help support their family’s income, or to pay for a brother or sister’s education.

## Riding Horseback to School

What was life like for teachers? Let’s take a look at Alice Money Lawrence who lived on a farm near Albion. When she was 14 years old, Alice made \$1.50 a week for taking care of sheep. She used the money to pay for tuition at the Albion Seminary (school) where she received a teaching certificate in 1866.

Alice’s first teaching job was at a school in Grundy County, 16 miles from her home. She rode 45 minutes on horseback each way to school. Twelve students of all ages were in her class, but five left school when harvest began. Older farm boys usually helped with the fall harvest and spring planting. Because so many rural kids had to help with farm chores during these times, there were two school terms: “winter” and “summer.” They each were about four months long between the harvest and planting seasons.

In 1868 Alice taught at another school. Teachers often moved from school to school. She instructed 40 students in a one-room Vienna Township schoolhouse. Students learned reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, and geography. They had to memorize many facts.

Students in nineteenth-century schools did not have colorful textbooks and magazines, maps, globes or films. Students brought whatever books they had from home. The only supplies found in most classrooms were slates and the blackboard in the front of the room.

Like other teachers, Alice “boarded” with a family. She paid for rent and food. She disliked these living arrangements because the house was dirty and her hostess could not cook well. Alice spent long hours alone at the schoolhouse reading and writing letters.

Despite its difficulties, teaching was rewarding for Alice. In the late 1860s, she wrote to her sister Sarah in Ohio:

You ask if I like teaching. Oh, yes, the teaching part but not the discipline. I had to keep all my scholars but one in at recess today, and I had to whip one boy—the first punishment of that kind that has been necessary. Then it is so hard not to like some children better than others, and there are so many little disputes to settle. But I do like teaching.

In 1869, Alice ended her teaching career. She married a doctor the following year. For many women like Alice, teaching was not a lifetime career. They taught only until they married.

Yet, other women did pursue lifelong careers in education as teachers, principals, and school superintendents. Some women teachers went on to careers in professional fields. Education and teaching had helped to open once-forbidden doors to business, law, and medicine. □

## Teacher and Students at Whittier Primary School in Hampton, Virginia, ca. 1899

PART 4



By 1900, more and more kids in Iowa were going to school. In rural places, a one room school had many grades learning together with one teacher. In urban places, such as in this photo, a teacher had a class of students who were all in the same grade level. This photograph shows children learning about Thanksgiving in their classroom at Whittier Primary School in Hampton, Virginia. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, Johnston, Frances B. "Thanksgiving Day Lesson at Whittier," ca. 1899*



Millie K. Frese

**In the summer of 1920, a young Iowa girl left home to work for a farm family. Will the experience be a good one?**

Lena Richards was going on 13. She'd lived in town all her life, with her parents in the bungalow behind the creamery her father managed. She'd never been away from home before by herself. That's why Lena was so surprised when her mother came home with this news:

"Mrs. Graham gave birth to twins last week. She's looking to hire someone to help out for a spell."

Mama always thought Lena was missing out, not having any brothers or sisters around. Working for the Grahams would be a good experience, she reasoned. Mama called it an opportunity. Papa, after a bit of convincing, agreed.

So that's how Lena found herself in the front seat of Mr. Graham's truck early on the first Monday morning of summer vacation. She clutched her suitcase in her lap on the way to her very first job.

"The house sits behind that clump of pines," Mr. Graham said, turning up a bumpy dirt lane toward his place. "We raise a little of this, a little of that," he continued, cheerfully talking about corn, oats, wheat, milk cows, sheep, pigs, and —

Chickens! What a cackle they made scurrying out of the way when Mr. Graham pulled the truck into the yard.

A wiry old man with a white pointed beard opened Lena's door and reached for her suitcase.

"Pa, this is Lena," Mr. Graham said.

"She don't look like much of a farmhand to me," Old Mr. Graham snapped. "She'll have to earn her keep around here like the rest of us." Old Mr. Graham didn't mince words and she'd heard that he didn't waste money. Lena couldn't tell if he was smiling or not as he turned away.

"Don't mind Pa," Mr. Graham said as he led Lena indoors. "It's the roosters you gotta look out for around here!"

Lena didn't have a chance to ask what he meant. They were already in the kitchen and Mrs. Graham, relieved to see her new helper, had things for Lena to do.

"The wash water's hot," Mrs. Graham said, taking a steaming copper boiler off the stove. Lena followed





greens, fried chicken, new potatoes and garden peas, cold milk, warm rhubarb pie, stacks of sliced homemade bread, and pitchers of cold milk.

Mr. Graham gave thanks for the meal, for the land that provided the food, and for the hands that prepared it. Then they ate until they could hold no more, with Lena refilling the food platters for the hungry workers. After the men were finished eating, it was Lena and

Mrs. Graham to the wringer washer and piles of dirty laundry on the back porch. She rolled up her sleeves and went to work.

Hot sudsy water splattered the front of Lena's dress as she washed and rinsed the laundry. The shirts. The pants. The dresses. The underclothes. The towels. The diapers. Her arms ached from cranking the washing machine and from lugging fresh kettles of hot water. They ached from stretching to clip the heavy, wet wash onto the clotheslines out by the vegetable garden. Sweat streaked her face. Damp auburn curls stuck uncomfortably to her forehead. It was almost lunch time when she finished.

Lena decided she didn't like Mondays on the farm much at all.

The men came in from cultivating corn; they watered the horses, then sat down to eat. What a feast! Lena helped serve a salad made with fresh

Mrs. Graham's turn. They enjoyed a quick meal, then cleared the table and washed the dishes.

During lunch, the babies slept; when the dishes were done, Mrs. Graham fed one while Lena rocked the other on the shady front porch.

"We always rest awhile after lunch," Mrs. Graham explained. "Then it's time to gather eggs." She told Lena where to find the baskets, how to line them with handfuls of grass to cushion the eggs, and where to find the chicken feed.

Lena had never been inside a chicken coop before. She stepped cautiously through the door. A few hens remained on their nests until Lena shooed them away.

"Stubborn birds," she muttered. The eggs she found were warm and smooth to her touch. Some were white, others brown or creamy colored. Soon the basket was full.

Lena blinked hard as she stepped back out into the afternoon sun. In the moment it took her eyes to readjust, a big black-feathered rooster with a bright red comb collided, scratching and pecking, into the back of her legs. Lena screamed. The rooster crowed. The hens beat the air with their wings.

"Those roosters are mean as the dickens!" Old Mr. Graham hollered above the noise. He ran toward Lena, swatting the fierce bird with a broom. Lena fought back tears as she saw blood trickle down her leg where the rooster had gashed her calf. She was afraid to look into the basket of eggs.

"No harm done," Old Mr. Graham said, noticing a half dozen or so broken eggs oozing from the basket. He helped Lena to her feet and put his arm around her shoulders.

"Next time carry the broom along with you," he advised. "That old rooster doesn't mess with my daughter-in-law. But the rest of us take precautions."

This time, Lena could see he was smiling.

After she had cleaned and bandaged her wound, Lena carried in wood for the stove and a pail of fresh drinking water for dinner. Mrs. Graham helped her gather the dry clothes off the line. Both Lena and Mrs. Graham were glad wash day only came once a week.

That evening, Lena helped wash the supper dishes. When the last plate was put away and everything was in order for the day to come, Lena fell into bed bone tired. A soft breeze tickled the thin muslin curtains hanging over her open window.

Lena Richards knew she'd earned her keep. ▲





In 1900, servants took care of the household. Servants might dust, like the woman in this image, mop floors, tend fires, run errands and do the shopping, wash laundry, help family members with what they needed, and sometimes do the cooking. Sometimes servants lived with the family they worked for, and sometimes they lived in another house away from the family. This photograph shows a man and woman who worked in the Roosevelt family's household at Bulloch Hall in Roswell, Georgia. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, Paxton, William M., "The house maid," between 1900 and 1920*



In 1900, the work of housekeepers and servants probably looked very similar. In larger homes, more hired help meant that they could specialize and only do certain tasks. A housekeeper would have been in charge of taking care of the house, cleaning, decorating, repairing household items, and sometimes they were also the cook. The cook seen in this photo is from a very famous large house: the White House in Washington, D.C. That's where the President of the United States lives. *Courtesy of Library of Congress, Johnston, Frances B., "Cook in White House kitchen," ca. 1890*

# Lesson Summative Assessment

**Directions:** Draw a line from the photograph to the word that tells where that kind of work is happening.



School

Store

Home

Factory

Farm



**Directions:** Write one sentence to answer the question below.

**How does work in 1900 compare to work today?**

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