Review of *Working the Land: The Stories of Ranch and Farm Women in the Modern American West* by Sandra K. Schackel

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In 1995 Sandra Schackel, then professor of history at Boise State University, was asked to contribute a chapter about rural women’s experiences to an anthology on the post-World War II American West. The research Schackel accumulated for that chapter, largely in the form of interviews of farm- and ranch-wives, provided the foundation for this slender volume. It is a foundation upon which she did relatively little to build. While her oral-historical approach suggests some tantalizing avenues for further exploration, they remain for the most part rural roads not taken.

Schackel interviewed roughly fifty women, aged twenty-four to eighty-three, from several western states (primarily New Mexico and Idaho), and from reasonably diverse ethnic backgrounds. Her interviews yielded five themes, which provide the structure for the book: the satisfaction derived from the farming/ranching lifestyle, the flexibility of gender roles, the importance of off-farm wage labor, farm/ranch tourism, and agricultural activism.

Schackel bemoans the “lack of research material” on rural women’s lives available to her. Yet there has been a veritable explosion of scholarship in this area in the past twenty years, and her oral history would have benefited from being more fully cast in its light. Unfortunately, because the book is thinly researched, her elaboration of these themes does not tell readers much more than they might hear were they to stumble into a Cowbelles luncheon.

Schackel aims to portray her subjects’ lives to suggest their complexity. For all the romance
about simple family values, hard work, and love of the land (and there is plenty of that here), there is as well an undertone of poverty, privation, and hardship. As one of her interviewees says, “it was always a crisis, all my life.” Yet her discussion is disingenuous at several points. For example, stressing the “gender equity” of rural life, she notes her informants’ tendency to describe their role as men’s helpers: “By ‘helping out’ in these ways, women are able to deny that they actually perform farmwork and can then claim that they are living up to the postwar domestic ideal of homemaker. Like her urban counterpart, the agricultural woman is reshaping her role in a changing agricultural economy.” Women’s “liberation” this is not. Nor does it adequately reflect the complex terrain of gender relations—rural and urban—in twenty-first-century America. A similar problem clouds Schackel’s discussion of agricultural “activism,” which for her informants consistently means working in the interests of agricultural lobbies like the National Cattlemen’s Association, to educate the nonfarming public about the evils of, as one of them stated it, “this environmental movement that is destroying the West.”

These rural women’s lives and stories are, as Schackel asserts, important in and of themselves. But they cry out for the kind of critical contextualization a historian can bring. Alas, that is precisely what is missing in this book.

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