

FARMLIFE IN THE MIDWEST

TYPICAL CLOTHING IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

MEN

Not much changed between the late 19th century and early 20th century. For men, soft felt brimmed hats were popular, but one shift from the 19th to 20th century was the popularity of flat brimmed hats. Overalls, suspenders, sweaters, vests, and buttdown shirts were extremely common.



WOMEN

While history shows that women too wore overalls, for women on the farm, a simple day dress and apron with an option for a bonnet were what was preferred. Children's fashion was essentially mini versions of adult wear.



Practicality was key, so for women we see a lot of feed-sack, or flour-sack dresses. The grains and goods that were bought in bulk were sold in textile bags as this was easier for transportation of large amounts. The repurposing of the bags had been common since the late 19th century, however in the 20th century rural women began to use the fabric to create new clothing at a cheaper cost. The results were beautiful day dresses and even formal celebratory wear. The notion of repurposing flour or feed sacks into apparel became so popular during this time that the companies who sold the supplies would print their textile bags in varying pastels and even patterns to entice sales. Rural newspapers and magazines would print "feed-bag sewing patterns" for people to use and re-purpose. Once a garment was past its use it was often used for rags or made into a quilt.



"When farmers brought home big sacks of flour or livestock feed, farm women used the sacks as material to sew everything from girls' dresses to boys' shirts and even underpants."

https://livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/life_06.html

CHILDREN'S ROLES

Children played vital roles in family farms and the economy in the early 1900s. At the same time, however, negative attitudes against child labor were growing among middle-class urban elites. Rural communities demanded a contribution from children, unlike middle-class, urban communities who believed they should play and act like kids. Farm children grew up in a system that held value in their usefulness on the farm. Work was their priority. School, and recreational activities were secondary, and even seen as a luxury by some. If the family valued education, it was often hard to achieve due to weather, long distance, and other factors..



Group of school children at Taylor School House, 1932. Teacher - Eileen Walton Burkhalter

Typically, a male child would have tasks around the farm such as feeding the cows and milking them. They had special milk buckets with holes perforated on the lids to work like strainers, otherwise the milk would make them sick. After turning the cows to the pasture, he would go back to the house for breakfast. Later, he would get firewood, split, and cut them in smaller pieces for the stove, carry it back into the house, then get ready for school. School would start at 8:00am. Kids would have to walk to and from school every day. Students would not speak unless spoken to. If they talked back or made a mistake, they would be disciplined..

By the time boys were about 11 or 12 years old, they took on most of the farm work. Because of this, they did not have nighttime rituals and would go straight to bed. Working to the point of physical pain and exhaustion was not uncommon.

Parents valued hard work, taught their children to be useful, and educated them in farming so they could be successful in the future as farm owners or laborers. Both boys and girls were taught to work in the fields, however, girls would also work in the home. This also depended on the father's beliefs, as the leading figure of the house. Beliefs about the proper gendered division of labor tended to crumble in the face of necessity.

As young as the age of four, parents taught their children to do simple tasks. They would help their mothers inside and outside the house. Some of the chores for 5-year-olds included drying dishes, keeping wood-boxes and water buckets filled, and the coal bucket filled with anthracite during the winter. Outside they would oversee gathering eggs and feeding the chickens. Teenage boys around the age of 16 would already be tasked with cutting and hauling wood, butchering, cleaning, hauling manure, plowing, planting, haying, harvesting, and threshing. For girls, once they reached their teens, they would spend most of their time doing house chores, helping their mothers cook, bake, churn, iron, wash, sew, and other housekeeping chores. However, they would work on the fields if needed, too.

Parents found that their children often acquired responsible values and held a sense of family solidarity, as they learned to do farm work. Every so often, some families would allow their children to play around the farm, wander to nearby creeks, or collect fruits and nuts in the forests.



HAVE A CONVERSATION

Discuss the following reflection questions with your moms, dads, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, and friends!



What activities do you do every day? Do those activities change with each season? What about your education, is it prioritized in your home? How far do/did you have to travel for school?



In the book, *Growing Seasons*, Papa wanted to show off his invention at the Fourth of July Celebration. He invented a power transmission that would help farmers and their families with everyday chores. If you could invent anything, what would it be and why?



In the book, *Growing Seasons*, Elsie's family hurried to finish their chores so they could go into town to celebrate. They rode a merry-go-round, listened to patriotic speeches and a band playing marches, watched a hot air balloon being launched, and ate ice cream. What types of activities does your family do to celebrate the Fourth of July?



In the book, *Growing Seasons*, the entire family helped with the work on the farm and in the house. How do you think family members divided jobs (men, women, children)? How would the chores differ throughout the seasons in the Midwest?



*What are some professions the adults in your life have? Is it something they wanted to do all their lives? What do/did you want to be when you grow up?



Portrait of four daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Lee of rural Herscher, about 1909.

From left: Mabel, Edna, Lillian, Elsie