



# Working the Land: The Stories of Ranch and Farm Women in the Modern American West

*Sandra K. Schackel*

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Helen Tiegs didn't take to driving a tractor when she became a farmer's wife, but after fifty years she considers herself the hub of the family operation. Lila Hill taught piano, then ultimately took a job off the farm to augment the family income during a period of rising costs. From Montana's cattle pastures to New Mexico's sagebrush mesas, women on today's ranches and farms have played a crucial role in a way of life that is slowly disappearing from the western landscape.

Recalling her own family-farm ties, Sandra Schackel set out to learn how these women's lives have changed over the second half of the twentieth century. In *Working the Land*, she collects oral histories from more than forty women—in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Oregon, and Texas—recalling their experiences as ranchers and farmers in a modernizing West.

Through this diverse group of women—white and Hispanic, rich and poor, ranging in age from 24 to 83—we gain a new perspective on their ties to the land. Although western ranch and farm women have often been portrayed as secondary figures who devoted themselves to housekeeping in support of their husbands' labors, Schackel's interviews reveal that these women have had a much more active role in defining what we know as the modern American West.

As Schackel listened to their stories, she found several currents running through their recollections, such as the satisfaction found in living the rural lifestyle and the flexibility of gender roles. She also learned how resourceful women developed new ways to make their farms work—by including tourism, summer camps, and bed-and-breakfast operations—and how many have become activists for land-based issues. And while some like Lila made the difficult decision to work off the farm, such sacrifices have enabled families to hold onto their beloved land.

Rich with memory and insight into what makes America's family farms and ranches tick, *Working the Land* provides a deeper understanding of the West's development over the last fifty years along with new perspectives on shifting attitudes toward women in the workforce. It is both a long-overdue documentation of the lives of hard-working farm women and a celebration of their contributions to a truly American way of life.

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