## HISTORIAN STUDIES FARM LIFE AMONG WOMEN OF THE WEST

#### By Amy Stahl

artha Ascuena knows the meaning of hard work. A farm wife on a 60-acre ranch south of Mountain Home, she's helped irrigate, cut corn, drive the trucks and move

100 head of cattle. She can't imagine a better way to make a living. "I always thought I would be a farmer's wife," says Ascuena. "It was all that I knew and I loved it from the very start."

Boise State historian Sandy Schackel has heard similar words spoken over and over by dozens of women she's interviewed for a study of farm wives in the West. Despite long hours, economic hardships and the increasing pressures of agricultural conglomerates, farm families are tenaciously holding on to a lifestyle.

"The similarities between the women I've interviewed is the satisfaction they've received from being a farm wife or ranch woman. They think it's a wonderful life," she says. "The women almost all refer to the quality of life for children growing up on the farm. The kids don't hang out at a 7-11 at night. Their parents know where they are."

Schackel admits that historians have been slow to acknowledge the significance of farm and ranch women. Rural sociologists have studied families and communities, but it wasn't until the women's movement gained momentum in the 1980s that historians began to study the role of rural women in the social fabric. Now it's a "thriving" field, says Schackel.

The author of Social Housekeepers: Women Shaping Public Policy in New Mexico, 1920-1940, Schackel developed an interest in researching farm and ranch women after receiving a call from an editor at an agricultural history journal.

A literature search turned up some material about farmers in the Midwest and South, but very little about the men and women farming and ranching in the West. Now Schackel is gathering oral histories from throughout Idaho, Oregon, New Mexico, Arizona and other western states for her second book.

Oral histories provide a valuable record of a segment of the population that was frequently overlooked until recently. Not until 1978 did the U.S. Census begin to identify American farmers by gender, for example. "Women's voices are present in the oral history process," says Schackel. "They're there, they're heard, they're not hidden in family papers."

For her interviews, Schackel asks the women about the history of their farm or ranch, the nature of their work, information about how decisions are made on the farm, and the scope of their community of family and friends.

She also questions them about the changes they have seen in the last few decades, the amenities they may have missed by living in a rural area, and their level of satisfaction with ranching/farming as a way of life.

While most of the women Schackel interviewed prefer to work on the farm, many have also found jobs in town. Lila Hill is among those who work in both worlds. Lila and her husband, Earl, live on a 147-acre dairy farm in Meridian. In the early 1980s they found themselves at a crossroads in an era of rising farm costs and falling dairy prices.

Lila, who already taught music lessons to students in her home, found that she needed another way to make money. So she completed a computer course and found work as a church secretary.

"It is apparent that farm women make the choice to work off-farm in order to provide the family with necessities," says Schackel. "It's almost required now

> because it's so hard to make a go of farming without a second income." Nor is this income pin money for frivolous purchases, she says. It's used for "survival" to buy groceries, school clothes, tires for the pickup or a new tractor.

Although most of the women she's talked to treasure their quality of life, Schackel says that many have convinced their children to go to college to learn something other than farmwork. "The kids want to leave because of the hard work and lack of travel." Or the family may decide to subdivide the farm for housing developments or sell out to agribusinesses.

Despite the hardships, it's a hfe many farm and ranch women wouldn't give up. Editha Bartley, owner of a 4,000-acre cattle ranch and sawmill in northeastern New Mexico, says: "I love people and working with people, but I love the quiet and isolation. I love this kind of country."



Schackel has interviewed farm women in all cormers of the rural American West.



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### BSU CENTER HELPS IDAHO COMPLY WITH WATER STANDARDS

By Janelle Brown

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ne statistic speaks gallons about the challenges Idaho faces when it comes to meeting government standards for safe drinking water:

In Idaho, there are 200 cities. There are 2,000 public water systems.

"Can you imagine that?" says Bill Jarocki, as he leans back in his chair inside his office at Boise State University. "If you have 15 water connections, or 25 people, you have a public water system. A day care, a church, a trailer park — they all have to meet national standards."

Jarocki, director of the recently funded Environmental Finance Center headquartered at BSU, knows firsthand the challenges of complying with the provisions of the Safe Drinking Water Act in both Idaho and other Northwestern states.

He's worked with city officials from Chignik, Alaska, to Pocatello at EFC-sponsored workshops. And the center he heads is taking a national role in designing methods to assess the viability of public water systems. The EFC is likely to receive a national demonstration grant from the Environmental Protection Agency this summer to develop models to help states assess how viable their systems are. "This puts a national focus on BSU," says Jim Weatherby, chairman of the Department of Public Policy and Administration. "We're pleased to have the EFC here."

With a first-year budget of nearly \$360,000, the Region 10 center is the newest of the six university-based facilities that comprise the network of EFCs in the U.S., and serves Idaho, Washington, Oregon and Alaska. Funded by the EPA and other agencies last November, the EFC is charged with helping communities in the Northwest address the "how-to-pay" issues of environmental regulatory compliance. Its activities are coordinated with the University of Idaho and Idaho State University.

A major challenge for many water systems is generating enough money to maintain the infrastructure and make improvements, says Jarocki.

Technical expertise is often an issue. Many communities need help with financial planning and rate setting. Establishing sound management practices over the long term is another concern.

Idaho's large proportion of small public water systems is not unique, Jarocki adds.

"We're pretty much a microcosm of the nation," he says. "There are many issues to address."

Jarocki and Weatherby credit Sen. Dirk Kempthorne, R-Idaho, with playing a pivotal role in getting the center established. Kempthorne sponsored the 1996 Safe Water Drinking Act Amendments, which included provisions that the EFC network address the issues of safe drinking water and the viability of public systems.

"Sen. Kempthorne put us on the map. Designating an EFC to do this work elevated it tremendously," says Jarocki, who formerly directed the Idaho Division of Environmental Quality's drinking water protection program and helped lay the groundwork to get Boise State designated as the center's home.

Jim Aho, city manager of the tiny town of Burns, Ore., says he's also glad there is expert help on water system issues nearby. When this community of 3,000 undertook a \$6 million project to expand its public works, Aho knew he'd need more than a calculator to figure out how that would affect the town's water and sewer rates. So he drove the 200 miles to Boise and attended an EFC workshop on how to use a new computer program, RateMod, to crunch the numbers for him.

"The workshop was a tremendous help," says Aho, who was among officials from nine communities who attended. "I was very impressed."

The RateMod workshop is among a number of outreach programs the EFC has planned. Jarocki is also finding ways to use the expertise of BSU faculty and students, from helping set up an EFC web site to providing technical aid.

The center also developed criteria the DEQ can use to determine if water systems are viable and, hence, eligible for state funds.

"It's a valuable service for us, and for the communities involved," says Bill Jerrel, a DEQ loan specialist who uses the EFC study as he reviews loan applications.

There's more. Lots more. Jarocki is full of energy, enthusiasm and ideas when it comes to the EFC and what it can accomplish.

"I love this job. It allows me to be an entrepreneur," says the recipient of two National Performance Review "Hammer" awards from Vice President Al Gore for his work on reinventing community compliance with mandates. "This is what public service is all about."

# **Of Politics and Plants**

BSU professors ponder, tap and probe the West's natural resources.

# FREEMUTH EXPLORES

John Freemuth doesn't mince words when it comes to public lands. Even if he steps on a few toes.

"I'm a real believer in applying one's knowledge to the world, not pontificating from an ivory tower," says the Boise State political scientist.

"That doesn't mean we have all the answers, that we're always right," he adds. "But we need to be engaged."

For more than a decade, Freemuth has done just that, adding his voice and expertise to the debates raging in Idaho and the West about managing public lands.

Freemuth is the author of Islands Under Siege: National Parks and the Politics of External Threats, and is now at work on a new book, Reinventing the Gospel: The Politics of Ecosystems Management, to be published in 1998.

Freemuth's latest book examines the new partnerships being forged by land managers and user groups under an interdisciplinary approach to lands management. He explores whether ecosystem management is "living up to its PR" as a superior way to manage lands or whether the turf wars between government agencies still remain.

"We're on the cutting edge of this issue, because it's being played out in our neck of the woods," adds Freemuth, referring to the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project which is headquartered in Boise.

The controversies surrounding public lands management aren't going to disappear, says Freemuth, and neither are the politics.

"Science is a necessary but insufficient condition for public policy," he says. "We make decisions based on societal values."

### PROFESSORS LEAD STUDENTS TO WATER

To help their students learn important construction principles, Charlie Gains and David Small have gone to the well.

It's not much to look at, just a 35-foot, 8-inch diameter pipe sticking a foot or two out of the ground near a parking lot. "But 6 feet below is a pool of groundwater," explains Gains, "and what this well gives us is a model to illustrate the importance of water conductivity and the motivating forces of water in soil."

Gains, a BSU professor of construction management, and Small, an adjunct engineering instructor, wanted to illustrate the critical need to gauge water tables at construction sites. It's one thing, they say, to teach soil mechanics as it relates to foundation and earthwork construction with lectures,



books and illustrations; it's another to demonstrate such concepts with the real thing.

So this spring with funds from the BSU department of construction management, Gains and Small had a well dug less than 100 yards from the construction management offices and classrooms in BSU's Engineering Technology Building.

The decision to drill the well was driven by construction industry needs. "Whether a construction project is a building foundation, the side slopes to a canal or a trench for a pipeline, it's critical to know the amount of moisture in the ground," says Gains. "The primary goal is to avoid catastrophic failures at construction sites, in deep trenches, cofferdams, tunnels, etc."

"By using this well, our students can learn how to ascertain how much water is going to be in the soil and predict where the groundwater table is going to be."