During a session at the annual meeting marking the Agricultural History Society’s 100th anniversary, Bert Way, editor of this journal, made a stunning pronouncement. With the publication of the five articles in this special issue, he said, *Agricultural History* will double the number of African American women historians with articles published in the journal. While we were not aware of the precise figures when we envisioned this special issue, we sensed that this journal had a poor track record of publishing essays authored by African Americans. For most of its history, the Agricultural History Society, like most professional history associations, was less than welcoming to African American and other nonwhite scholars. It is not surprising, then, that the pages of the journal have rarely featured scholarship by historians of African descent.¹

Today, we can only imagine what would have happened if the editors of the journal had invited Helen G. Edmonds, a historian of fusion politics in late nineteenth-century North Carolina, to contribute to the pages of this journal during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.² How would her contribution have changed the way scholars understood black and white farmers’ influence on agrarian politics? What would have happened if historians at the institutions now known as Tuskegee University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University, or Hampton University had been in scholarly conversation with historians at Cornell University or the University of Iowa? How might that have shaped the historiography of United States agriculture? How might it have changed policy discussions during the 1950s? How might it have changed the plight of American farmers, and informed the state of American agriculture today?

Part of our impulse in pulling together this special issue was to open up opportunities for scholars today to compensate for the exclusionary practices that deprived journals such as this one of scholarship by African American historians, the vast majority of whom taught at Historically Black Colleges and Universities during the age of Jim Crow. The *Journal of Negro History* was
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one of the only outlets for publishing their important contributions. Because they were compelled to write against the grain of racist scholarship that omitted the historical contributions of African Americans, black professional historians also tended to shy away from agricultural topics that seemed to only reinforce the association of black people with physical labor. The experiences of rural African Americans and black women in particular demand a more robust scholarly exploration in order to flesh out the complexity and diversity of their lives in agricultural spaces. This must, of course, include discussions about how they, as beings even more marginalized than black men and white women, navigated Jim Crow laws and white supremacy. This issue of Agricultural History, then, is the beginning of what we hope will be the ongoing foregrounding of scholarship about rural African American women in the twentieth-century South.

In our quest to address enduring inequalities in this and other academic journals, we also sought to include scholarship by historians currently working at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and small public, predominantly white, institutions, who often do not publish as often as scholars at larger public or private institutions because they lack time off from teaching or resources to pursue their research agendas.

While this issue helps to redress past and enduring racism and inequality in the academy, what is most exciting about it is its unprecedented scholarly contribution. The articles in this issue showcase scholarship at the intersection of three vibrant fields: rural and agricultural history, southern history, and African American women’s history. Carmen V. Harris, one of the contributors, pioneered this approach in her article “‘Well I Just Generally be the President of Everything’: Rural Black Women’s Empowerment through South Carolina Home Demonstration Activities.” She joined Valerie Grim, Lu Ann Jones, Rebecca Sharpless, and Melissa Walker in revolutionizing the field of southern rural women’s history.

Building upon these scholars’ groundbreaking work, this special issue of Agricultural History explores African American women’s contributions as farmers, as agricultural educators, as home demonstration agents, and as civil rights activists in the rural South during the age of Jim Crow. The articles by Carmen V. Harris, Dawn Herd-Clark and Chrissy Lutz, Cherisse Jones-Branch, Adrienne Petty, and Yulonda Eadie Sano reveal the extent to which black women working in rigidly prescribed roles within an unequal society labored to push boundaries for the good of their families, their communities, and American society as a whole. Whether they were farmers, agricultural
professionals, public health professionals, or activists, these women could never separate their labor in the rural South from the larger project of civil rights and economic justice. Together, the essays showcase southern black women’s endeavors to subvert Jim Crow even though they were working within institutions and a society at large that sought to preserve and protect it.

One common interpretation connecting some of the articles is the centrality of black women’s activism and teaching through public health initiatives to sustaining rural southern African American communities, given their unequal access to physicians, hospitals, and the many other resources necessary to sustain human life. Yulonda Eadie Sano’s article, “‘Protect the Mother and Baby’: Mississippi Lay Midwives and Public Health,” explores women whose work was crucial to the functioning of farms throughout the South. Mississippi officials and other southern states disregarded African American midwifery because they, informed by racist ideas, believed it was unskilled and primitive. In the absence of a sufficient number of trained physicians in southern states, however, midwives attended births for the vast majority of African American women. Sano analyzes public health and elected officials’ ambivalence although their racism did not preclude them from working with midwives to educate black women about measures they could take to reduce infant mortality. However, on the state and national level, they downplayed their collaboration with African American lay midwives, thus disregarding their crucial labor in black communities.

Cherisse Jones-Branch’s article, “‘To Raise Standards among the Negroes’: Jeanes Supervising Industrial Teachers in Rural Jim Crow Arkansas, 1909–1950,” argues that Jeanes teachers’ responsibility for instilling healthy habits in their students pervaded their daily work to such an extent that they emerged as activists who framed good health as a fundamental civil and human right. Because labor exploitation and poverty left many farm families more likely to contract diseases due to food insecurity, malnutrition, and unsanitary conditions, teachers in rural schools could not concern themselves solely with training their students to read, write, and do arithmetic. All educators in the rural South had little choice but to concern themselves with the health of their students because of the epidemics in the region. However, as Jones-Branch shows, this responsibility fell most urgently on African American teachers because many of their students lacked access to even the most basic preventative care. “‘To Raise Standards among the Negroes” recasts teachers in the Jim Crow South as public health crusaders, and urges scholars to pay closer attention to the multiplicity of hats that Jeanes teachers wore.
Another theme knitting some of the articles together is the ever-present threat of sexual violence for black women and its impact on their organizing work and activism. Dawn Herd-Clark and Chrissy Lutz’s “‘No One Was on Their Own’: Sociability among Rural African American Women in Middle Georgia during the Interwar Years” makes clear that the work of home demonstration agents did more than help farm women improve their families’ circumstances. Agents working through Fort Valley State College and the US Department of Agriculture helped black agrarian women build social networks that were crucial to their emotional well-being. By providing a space for women to socialize, play games, and organize, as Herd-Clark and Lutz show, home demonstration agents provided women with a space that broke the social isolation of their everyday lives and shielded them from the threat of sexual violence. The article nudges historians to consider emotional health as seriously as they have considered physical health.

Adrienne Petty’s “The Town and Country Roots of Modjeska Monteith Simkins’s Activism” establishes the civil rights icon’s family farm in South Carolina as a space that not only shaped her upbringing in ways that influenced her activism but also provided an economic underpinning for her civil rights work. Petty shows the central role Simkins’s mother played in purchasing and running the family farm, and how the specter of sexual violence influenced her parents’ decision to buy a farm in the first place. In addition to exploring the question of how civil rights activists “made a living while making a difference,” Petty takes the unusual approach of focusing on two generations of her own family history to raise new questions about farm ownership and civil rights activism.

Finally, Carmen Harris’s “The South Carolina Home in Black and White: Race, Gender, and Power in Home Demonstration Work” builds on her pioneering work driving home the overarching consequences of racism and inequality for professional black women working in the Jim Crow South. Harris shows that African American and white home demonstration agents shared a common dedication and determination to ameliorating the lives of rural women, and frequently cooperated along gender lines because they faced sexism that undervalued their work and left them unequally compensated compared with male extension agents. Compounding the situation for black women agents, Harris argues, was the additional burden of racism, which deprived them of an “equal professional sisterhood” with white agents. Harris’s essay unmasksthe absurdity of Jim Crow by showing how racism squandered opportunities for equal and fruitful collaborations between professional wom-
en to improve rural life for all southerners.

Taken as a whole, this special issue confirms that, because African American women lived and worked under the unequal and racist Jim Crow regime, they consciously and intentionally accepted the challenge to make their mark on southern agriculture to improve rural life. It is further evidence of the fertile yet largely unexplored ground from which much can be learned about the long-overlooked intricacies of rural black women’s lives and experiences.

NOTES


