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Cockfighting in the American Midwest During the Mid-Twentieth Century: Women's
Participation in the Practice

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Clifford Geertz's "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" is one of the most recognized modern sources on cockfighting. Geertz's use of thick description to analyze the motives behind the actions of Balinese cock fighters is an important methodological approach in understanding cock fighting around the world. Geertz's essay, although crucial in its pioneering use of thick description, cannot be used as a universal source on cock fights. The primary reason for this is because Geertz's essay focused on Balinese cock fighting which was as an exclusively male sphere of activity.¹ Although cock fighting in Bali was an exclusively male practice, cock fighting in America, and specifically in the American Midwest, was an activity participated in by both men and women. Women were certainly not the majority of the participants at cock fights but enough of them were present to be included in the discussion of one of the practices that shaped rural America in the twentieth century.

Geertz asserted that Balinese men viewed their gamecocks and the performance of their gamecocks in fights as a symbol of their own masculinity.² Geertz continued by explaining that the relationship between Balinese men and their gamecocks was not just metaphorical. They spent large amounts of time with their gamecocks which led to an even stronger identification between the two.³ Cock fighters in the Midwest identified just as much with their gamecocks as the Balinese did but they also emphasized the importance of breeding and as a result stressed the significance of hens. In the Midwest, cock fighting was more than just a cultural practice. For

1 See Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-454.

2 Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," 99 & 124. Geertz also references Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's work on Balinese character which asserted that in Balinese culture, the gamecocks were often "viewed as detachable, self-operating penises, ambulant genitals with a life of their own."

3 Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," 100.

many men, it was their livelihood. Breeders were much more willing to sell their gamecocks than a hen because hens were crucial in preserving a specific strain or breed of gamecock. When sold, a good hen sold for much more than a proven gamecock.⁴ Similar to the way in which hens were important in the breeding of gamecocks, women, although lacking a significant presence, were important in preserving rural ties to the practice of cock fighting.

Although women were involved in the practice of cock fighting, the majority of women did not participate or were outspokenly against it. Some reasons women, and specifically wives of cock fighters, disliked cock fighting were the betting associated with it and that fights often took place on Sundays. For men who both raised and fought gamecocks, it often required long work days of caring for the gamecocks and lots of traveling to fights across the state and region.⁵ Although the violent nature of the sport was a likely reason some women objected to the practice, rural women often witnessed the death of animals on farms and were therefore concerned with other aspects of the practice. Even though there were objectors, the presence of women, even a small number, proves that the assumption that cock fighting was an exclusively male activity is false.

Newspaper coverage of cock fights provides important records of participation in and arrests made at cock fights that are helpful in understanding the threshold with which women participated in the practice. Various articles on cock fights from the 1930s through the 1960s note the level of participation by women. An article describing a fight in Ottawa, Illinois listed the

⁴ C.A. Finsterbusch, "The Female Line," *Grit and Steel: Published in the Interest of Those Devoted to the Game Fowl* 28, no. 5 (September, 1927): 21-24; Lyle C. Miner, interview by author, Normal, IL, October 29, 2010.

⁵ Lyle C. Miner, interview by author.

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participants as “100 men, women and children squeezed into the dingy one story building.”⁶ Two other articles listed “50 men and women arrested” and 50 men and 25 women arrested.⁷ The importance of these three articles is that women were cited alongside men which means they had a significant presence at the fights. One cock fight was cited as being held on a female’s, Mrs. Alberta White’s, property.⁸ Another article stated that women even participated in the gambling that occurred at cock fights.⁹ They also often monitored tables outside the fights to collect entrance fees.¹⁰

Grit and Steel and *The Gamecock* are two cock fighting periodicals that were published throughout the twentieth century. These two periodicals often included photographs taken at cock fights that shed light on women’s participation. At the 1961 World Series of Cock Fighting, held at Oaklawn in Hot Springs, Arkansas a photograph is included of a Mr. and Mrs. Remley from Marion, Indiana.¹¹ In the May, 1965 issue there is a photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Bud Dale attending a fight in Kellyville, Oklahoma.¹² Another photograph is a family picture of a husband,

6 “Outlawed Cock Fights Pack ‘em in Year Around: Bettors Swarm Near Pit, No Police Interference,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 16, 1942, 9.

7 “Nab 50 at Cockfight in Lemont Twp,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 27, 1966, 2; “Trappings Tip to Owners of Fighting Cocks: Policemen Among 75 Taken in Raid,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 15, 1948, A1.

8 “Nab 50 at Cockfight in Lemont Twp,” 2.

9 Guy Murchie Jr., “Cock Fighters Stage Regular Sunday Show,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 13, 1939, 1, 3:3.

10 “Cockfight Pit Booms and it’s No Secret,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 16, 1956, 1.

11 O. Fudd, “Old Albany Fowl,” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 21, no. 12 (April, 1961): 39.

12 Jack Porter, “The Eidt Story,” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 28, no. 1 (May, 1965): 31.

wife and son.¹³ One woman is even photographed alone and the caption explains that she is the conditioner of gamecocks at a game farm in Missouri.¹⁴ In a February, 1968 issue of *Grit and Steel* there is a photograph of three spectators, two of which are women.¹⁵ Women are in very few of the photographs but their presence at all shows that women were accepted as part of the cock fighting community.

Another main feature of cock fighting periodicals was short summaries of cock fights that appear to have been sent in by participants. Although the majority of these articles were written by men, women were also featured.¹⁶ Women also wrote in with letters of appreciation for the practice. One woman wrote that she and her husband had been borrowing issues of *The Gamecock* from a friend and decided to get their own subscription. She wrote: “We enjoy the magazine very much and are eagerly awaiting the arrival of *our* first copy.”¹⁷ In a letter in 1968,

¹³ Ibid, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid, 34.

¹⁵ “Gallant Gamecocks Going,” *Grit and Steel: Published in the Interest of Those Devoted to the Game Fowl* 69, no. 10 (February, 1968): 30; Also see Don Atyeo, *Blood & Guts: Violence in Sports* (New York: Paddington Press, Ltd., 1979), 99 for another account of a third of the spectators being women and a brief description of a cock fight.

¹⁶ Mrs. Jimmy Hibbs, “Nimrod Wins at Gray Arena,” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 21, no. 12 (April, 1961): 54; Mrs. Carl Ricks, “Western Slope Hacks,” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 21, no. 12 (April, 1961): 56; Brenda Noey, “Ten Entries at C&D Game Club,” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 28, no. 1 (May, 1965): 50.

¹⁷ Towanda Welch, “Present for Husband,” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 28, no. 1 (May, 1965): 70.

a woman who wrote to *Grit and Steel* stated that she and her husband were looking forward to the season and hoped they could attend more meets than in the previous year.¹⁸

Some women were more than just participants and grew to love and be educated on the practice. In one article in *The Gamecock*, the author addressed the problem that people had with children being at or participating in the fights. “I ain’t so sure I’d want to go to a place where they don’t like kids, although I can’t help but wonder what they do there that might be detrimental to the well being of a child.”¹⁹ Women often wrote letters and articles to cock fighting periodicals expressing their opinions on the sport. In one such article, a woman wrote about her hardships in taking care of the cocks when her husband first started raising them. At the end of the letter she wrote “But thanks to your fine book, “**GAMECOCK**”, I’ve learned a lot.”²⁰ Another women initially seemed to have problems with cock fighting, but at the end of the letter she wrote about how she missed going to the cock fights when it was off season and “‘to all the wives of a cockfighter,’ the moral of this story is ‘if you can’t lick ‘em, join ‘em!’”²¹

One of the finest pieces of evidence on women’s knowledge and participation in the practice of cock fighting comes from a letter to the editor in a 1939 *Chicago Daily Tribune*

18 Mrs. Floyd E. Brown, “Personals,” *Grit and Steel: Published in the Interest of Those Devoted to the Game Fowl* 69, no. 10 (February, 1968): 36.

19 Smoke Wilkie, “Smoke Signals,” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 49, no. 1 (May, 1986): 95; Although not certain, women and children’s presence at the fights may have contributed to a more moral environment than had existed prior to their involvement. For example, very few fights allowed drinking which could have been due to the presence of women and children: Lyle C. Miner, interview by author; Atyeo, *Blood & Guts: Violence in Sports*, 99.

20 Mrs. Clay Grantham, “The Woes of a Cocker’s Wife,” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 49, nos. 4&5 (August-September, 1986): 119.

21 Esther Dennis, “The Battle Was On (In the Cockpit and Home),” *The Gamecock: The Monthly Magazine Devoted to Game Fowl* 41, no. 8 (December, 1978): 54.

article. The letter was written in response to an earlier article covering a cock fight. The reporter made several observations and assumptions at the end of his article that portrayed the fight and the people attending the fight as ignorant.²² In Miss Lonettie Kennedy's response through a letter to the editor, she discredited the reporter's article by attacking his incorrect assumptions. She stated that the reporter was incorrect in his description of the gamecock's shaved legs and that the legs are never shaved.²³ Miss Kennedy also stated that from the time gamecocks were baby chicks, they fought with one another and "will fight until death rather than eat if the choice is given to them."²⁴ She continued by arguing that *The Chicago Tribune* should be less focused on writing negative stories on cock fighting and work to get it a license so it can be taxed in the same way hunting and fishing are. She also argued that cock fighting is much more humane than sports like fishing or hunting because the "game cock has a chance for his life in the pit."²⁵ The letter ended with this statement: "It may be of interest to know that I am of the feminine sex, 27 years of age, born and raised in Chicago, and enjoy sports of all kinds, bar none. I'm writing this in defense of the game cock and his fanciers. We are far from farmers and there is nothing brutal in our makeup as your reporter would have people believe."²⁶

This exchange is also important because it shows the differences in views of cock fighting between urban and rural observers. Farm and rural women were receiving pressure from

22 Murchie Jr., "Cock Fighters Stage Regular Sunday Show," 2.

23 Lonettie Kennedy, "Voice of the People; About Fighting Cocks," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 19, 1939, 14.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

all angles to become more urbanized. During the mid-twentieth century, gender relations and roles on the farm were shifting rapidly. Rather than working side by side with their husbands or even maintaining a household economy where goods were produced, rural women were encouraged to become more like urban women.²⁷ Farm women who adhered to the shifting gender roles began to identify more with urban women because they had similar identities with their femininity and the hierarchy of gender and class.²⁸ Rural women who refused to follow the trend of gender relations continued to view their importance in the context of their importance to the family or farm economy.²⁹ Because of their identification with farm life, they were more accepting of cock fighting because it was a practice that farm men had participated in for a century and it held farming and rural communities together during a time of great upheaval due to industrialization and mechanization.

Although women who participated in cock fighting saw it as holding their community together; it also brought many problems because so many farm and rural women had adapted to the changing values of womanhood. Like their urban counterparts, rural women began to see themselves as preservers of morality and ideals within the home and focused more on consumption rather than production.³⁰ After World War I, organizations in rural communities began to be gender specific which further contributed to a sense of a separate female identity that

²⁷ Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 214.

²⁸ Ibid, 215.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 122-23, 216-17.

had not existed as strongly in earlier generations.³¹ The community within cock fighting was strong but the shifting gender roles resulted in many rural women and their families identifying with urban values which not only changed the rural economic landscape but resulted in increasingly harsh critiques of the practice of cock fighting from both urban and rural observers.

Women's participation in the practice of cock fighting redefined typical values of womanhood that emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Although the majority of women in the Midwest and across the nation did not participate in this practice, enough women were present to differentiate cock fighting in America from other parts of the world. Women who continued to support cock fighting and the traditional roles of rural women that had existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries showed a rebellion towards the conformity of women that was sweeping through rural areas of America during the mid-twentieth century. Their participation in the practice may be the reason why, in rural communities, cock fighting was viewed as a moral and family practice. Even though the women who participated in cock fighting were pulling away from new values of womanhood, they did continue to assert their morality and family values in the practice of cock fighting. Woman's participation may have differentiated American cock fighting from Balinese cock fighting, but in both countries cock fighting was a cultural and social force that had many implications in the way those regions developed.

³¹ Ibid, 122.

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