

Faculty Research Award Final Report  
Nathan Deutsch Faculty Development Funds  
July 15, 2015

**“Home Demonstration Clubs and Rural African American Women’s Activism in Arkansas, 1930s-1960s”**

**Cherisse Jones-Branch, Ph.D.  
Department of History  
Arkansas State University-Jonesboro**

In June 2015 I presented my paper, “Home Demonstration Clubs and Rural African American Women’s Activism in Arkansas, 1930s-1960s,” at the Southern Association for Women Historians’ triennial conference in Charleston, South Carolina as part of a panel I organized titled “Arkansas Women in 20th Century Southern History” which included my colleagues Dr. Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman (ASTATE) and Dr. John Kirk (University of Arkansas at Little Rock). Scholarship on women in 20th century southern history rarely considers the contributions of Arkansas women. Like women in other southern states, Arkansas women’s experiences were notable and diverse. My paper and this panel sought to fill that lacuna in the scholarship by highlighting at least a few Arkansas women who are an integral part of the state’s rich and varied history.

In my paper I argued that in the 1930s through the 1960s, African American women residing in rural Arkansas developed agency and autonomy through their membership in home demonstration clubs with the assistance of home demonstration agents. In Arkansas, the black “State Home Demonstration Council” and its white counterpart, the “Arkansas Council of Home Demonstration Clubs” helped women coordinate their club activities under the auspices of a statewide organization. On the surface at least, these organizations appeared to offer rural black and white women the same farm and home improvement services. However, as a part of the “State Council” local home demonstration clubs with the assistance and guidance of African American agents encouraged black women to quietly resist the racial strictures they faced in Jim Crow Arkansas by providing them with opportunities to develop a sense of dignity, self-sufficiency, and leadership skills at a time when their race and gender demanded their marginalization and subordination.

Home demonstration clubs developed in Arkansas after the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, which created the United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service (USDA). The act supported, using federal, state, and local funds, the establishment of an Agricultural Extension Service (AES) at state land grant colleges and universities and a cadre of farm and home demonstration agents to promote agricultural reform. As the number of home demonstration clubs in Arkansas increased, so too did the need for a statewide organization to unite rural women and coordinate their activities. Home demonstration clubs served many purposes in rural communities. They provided women with a forum to ask questions and to discuss health and child care concerns which in turn equipped them with the leadership abilities to help others in their communities.

In 1929, white home demonstration agents and club members organized the Arkansas Council of Home Demonstration Clubs. As was typical of the Jim Crow restrictions of the time its membership excluded black women. But because black home demonstration agents and club members served and often lived in the most impoverished communities around the state and often had to do so with fewer resources, they understood the importance of coordinating their efforts into a state organization of their own. In 1936, two home demonstration agents, Cassa Hamilton Lawlah, African American, and Connie J. Bonslagel, white, helped establish the predominantly black State Council of Home Demonstration Clubs or the "State Council," at a farmers' conference at the predominately black Arkansas A. M. & N College in Pine Bluff. Like the Arkansas Council, the State Council created a network of county clubs in rural black communities around the state.

Local home demonstration clubs and the "State Council" served as important conduits for rural African American women's activism throughout Arkansas. Club membership allowed black women to not only develop important skills for survival, but also allowed them, with the assistance of home demonstration agents, to uplift their communities and to hone their leadership abilities. Forming relationships with home demonstration agents further encouraged some women to see them as role models and to subsequently consider careers with the Arkansas Agricultural Extension Service. Black women's agency and autonomy through home demonstration clubs also speaks to the ways in which rural communities, despite their often impoverished status, were critical sites of unrecognized potential and empowerment that allowed them to challenge the limitations of the society in which they lived. In the final analysis, understanding the significance of home demonstration clubs and the development and cultivation of African American women's leadership abilities in ways that affirmed their dignity and humanity proved critical to the amelioration of conditions in impoverished rural black Arkansas communities.

My research on this topic has resulted in additional opportunities for presentations and publications. In July 2015, I gave a presentation on rural black women's health and education activism in the Arkansas Delta to the Arkansas Teachers Corps in El Dorado. I will submit a longer version of my conference paper to *Agricultural History* (the Agricultural History Society's journal) for consideration for publication and I am currently finishing a chapter for *Food History and Rural Women Professionals, 1880-1945* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press) which will be edited by Dr. Linda Ambrose, Professor of History at Laurentian University, Ontario, Canada and Dr. Joan Jensen, Emerita Professor, New Mexico State University. Finally, this research is part of a larger book project titled "*Better Living by Their Own Bootstraps*": *Rural Black Women's Activism in Arkansas, 1913-1965*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press).