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# LITERACY IN AMERICAN LIVES

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# 1

## LITERACY, OPPORTUNITY, AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

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The foundation of national wealth is really people – the human capital represented by their knowledge, skills, organizations, and motivations. Just as the primary assets of a modern corporation leave the workplace each night to go home for dinner, so the income-generating assets of a nation are the knowledge and skills of its workers – not its industrial plants or natural resources. As the economies of developed nations move further into the post-industrial era, human capital plays an ever more important role in their progress. As the society becomes more complex, the amount of education and knowledge needed to make a productive contribution to the economy becomes greater [Johnson & Packer, 1987, p. 16].

With this policy blueprint, called *Workforce 2000*, the U.S. Department of Labor bluntly exposed the way that literacy ability, corporate profitability, and national productivity have all become entangled. At one time, American workers had value for their capacity to transform raw materials into consumable goods. But by the start of the twenty-first century, they had become the raw material itself. The nature of work in the United States puts a premium on the ability to traffic in symbols generally and in verbal symbols particularly, as print and print-based technologies have penetrated into virtually all aspects of money making. In an information economy, reading and writing serve as input, output, and conduit for producing profit and winning economic advantage. Systematic information has replaced direct experience as the basis for knowledge making and decision making, turning texts into the principle tools and literacy into the principle craft of the information economy.<sup>1</sup> If the ability to read and

write was once regarded as a duty to God or democracy, it is now, according to the government, a duty to productivity, and one with increasingly sharp consequences for those not in compliance. Unrelenting economic change has become the key motivator for schools, students, parents, states, and communities to raise expectations for literacy achievement. It is also considered the key reason for widening gaps in income between skilled and unskilled workers.

But for all of the attention paid to this modern-day literacy crisis, in which the demand for literacy seems chronically to outstrip supply, not enough concern has been paid to how economic change itself affects people's ability to become and stay literate. The economic shifts that move us "further into the post-industrial era" do not merely apply pressure for a more highly literate workforce; they also, more profoundly, constitute the turbulent conditions in which individuals, families, and entire regions must collect resources for literacy learning. Fierce economic competitions, including the changes in communication they stimulate, can destabilize the public meanings and social worth of people's literate skills. They also can reconfigure the social and economic systems through which people must pursue literacy and pass it along to others.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter looks at the effects of rapid economic change and regional restructuring on opportunities for literacy learning as they manifest themselves in local ways of life. The perspective will be through the lifelong literacy learning of two twentieth-century women, each born into the family farm economy of the upper Midwest. The focus especially will be on how regional restructuring can alter access and reward for literacy and how the interplay of receding and emerging economies affects the social contexts that sustain possibilities for learning.

As explained in the Introduction, the cases are built on an analysis of what I call the sponsors of literacy, those agents who support or discourage literacy learning and development as ulterior motives in their own struggles for economic or political gain. Sponsors became a particularly illuminating lens for tracking the presence of economic forces at the scenes of literacy learning, for tracing connections between the ways that money gets made and the way that literacy gets made. Sponsors appeared all over people's memories of how they learned to write and read, in their memories of people, commercial products, public facilities, religious organizations, and other institutional and work settings. As we will see below, sponsors are an especially tangible way to track connections between literacy as an individual development and literacy as an economic development because of how closely literacy in the twentieth century grew integral to the interests of corporate capitalism. Sponsors, as I

came to understand them, embody the resource management systems of literacy, particularly avenues to access and reward. Sponsors also introduce the instability in the worth of people's literacy. As various sponsors of literacy emerge and recede, and as their prospects rise and fall as part of economic and political competition, so go the prospects of those they sponsor, both in terms of opportunity for literacy learning and the worth of particular literacy skills. Analysis of sponsorship exposes the ways that individual acts of literacy learning partake of social and economic conditions around them and pinpoints the changing conditions of literacy learning across time.

Previous social histories of literacy have paid particular attention to material and cultural conditions that spread mass literacy in its initial stages in the United States and elsewhere, especially in the periods before mandatory public schooling. Where once investigations into the spread of mass literacy relied on crude measurements such as signature rates or book ownership,<sup>3</sup> revisionist historians try to recover the broader contexts that favored or disfavored literacy in particular times and places. They seek an understanding of both the "pull" of literacy (i.e., the various economic, political, and social factors that induced literacy use or denied it) and the "push" for literacy (i.e., the motivations, aspirations, and struggles by which common people gained access to reading and writing). These investigations have considered, among other factors, religion, imperialism, occupations, population density, slavery, urbanization, commercialization, democratization, schools, political stability, transportation, trade, family relations, and various pressures of supply and demand as they contributed or not to the spread of literacy. Disagreements abound as to which factors accounted most for the entrenchment and continued growth of literacy. Historians variously emphasize one factor over another, although more recent thinking suggests that regions arrived at literacy (or didn't) by differing constellations of conditions. Blanket claims about the causes of literacy are extremely difficult to apply.<sup>4</sup>

Histories of the spread of mass literacy are filled with information about the major sponsoring agents responsible for the pull toward learning to read and write. This history demonstrates how, until relatively recently, the major agents of literacy have been church and state. Missionaries, conquerors, conscriptors, and nation builders throughout time imposed literacy and literacy teaching as part of the mass conversion of hearts and minds required for their causes, just as resisters, critics, heretics, and revolutionaries could use literacy to withstand or transform indoctrination. In the United States, the aim of universal literacy began as an imperative of the Christian mission and, by the middle of the

nineteenth century, had shifted to secular interests of nation building, social conformity, and civic responsibility. Commercial interests, of course, produced and distributed Bibles, books, newspapers, writing utensils, and other such material goods and stimulated growth in the occupations that supported these products.<sup>5</sup> But until only quite recently literacy was principally a form of consumption, not of production; serviceable forms of reading and writing were practiced in society long before literacy was required by or relevant to most occupations.<sup>6</sup>

This history is enlightening as a general reminder of how the meaning of literacy and the means by which it arrives to people is always under historical change. Specifically, historical accounts demonstrate how newly emerging sponsors of literacy can take over the ideological apparatus associated with earlier forms of literacy. Work by Soltow and Stevens (1981) and Graff (1979, 1986) illustrates how the moral basis of religious literacy could be appropriated, nearly wholesale, by the “civic religion” of literacy for citizenship. Reading could retain an association with virtue and industry even while moving into a secular context. In a related vein, this history illustrates how one wave of literacy development enables the next. Without the efforts of churches to establish schools and inculcate a moral imperative for literacy teaching within families, the state would not have been able to use literacy so effectively for social control and nation building. Likewise, the relative democratization of reading and writing skill that accompanied state sponsorship of schooling became an irresistibly exploitable resource for corporate capitalism as it developed in this century. As we will see below, these dynamics of literacy sponsorship and ideology enter quite specifically into individual experiences with learning to read and write. This cumulative history of religious, political, and economic interests remains embedded in the systems and practices through which people encounter the meanings and means of literacy today.

Many histories of the initial spread of mass literacy focus on regions as the basis of their analysis.<sup>7</sup> Because they have had to account for uneven growth in literacy, historians have looked at geographical and demographic factors that distinguished areas of widespread literacy from areas of moderate or low literacy. From a regional perspective, historians are able to demonstrate how unequal distributions of literacy related to unequal distributions of other things – wealth, roads, schools, trade, political privilege. How closely people lived together, the kinds of work they did, their relationships to centers of political power, the relative cost of educating children or purchasing books – all of these material conditions affected rates of literacy growth in the past. These histories, of course, turn up inequities within regions as well as among them; women’s literacy

grew more slowly than men's, blacks' more slowly than whites'. However, these studies show that members of disenfranchised groups had better chances of gaining literacy when they lived in regions where literacy was otherwise abundant.<sup>8</sup>

Regional histories also illuminate the value of literacy as a resource. In the early days of mass literacy, the worth of individual literacy would rise with the rates of literacy in a region. The greater number of people who could read or write, the more those skills could be traded on to conduct social and economic relations and the more likely that reading and writing skills learned in youth would not be lost. (Falling out of literacy was a frequent occurrence in contexts where the uses of reading and writing were few).<sup>9</sup> It is a question whether these same conditions pertain now in quite the same way. Although literacy today obviously still takes its value from its widespread currency, economic changes have brought complications to this formula. Rising values of advanced skills, propelled by new literacy-based technologies, deflate the value of basic literacy in the marketplace today and threaten to make many forms of reading or writing obsolete.<sup>10</sup> Where in the past, social and economic stratification determined one's chances of sharing or not in a common literacy, today literacy itself is more complexly stratified and contributes to widening gaps in social and economic status. Even further complicating are the impacts of information technologies and global consolidations of capital, which, as Castells (1989) observed, is changing the relationship between geography and wealth production. Be that as it may, these historical accounts are a useful reminder that the spread of literacy in the past was fitful, fragile, and vulnerable to disruptions and uneven terrain (geographical, economic, and political). Although much changed during the twentieth century, these histories provide useful conceptual clues for approaching contemporary literacy learning. Based primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these histories treat the arrival of literacy as an agent of change in regional societies, as a new ingredient in social and economic relations. What is left to consider is how a changing literacy, linked to a changing economy, affects regional societies and opportunities for learning within them.

The following discussion, then, looks at two people who learned to read and write within the context of the family farm economy of the upper Midwest. Their accounts can provide a stark and immediately accessible illustration of relationships between literacy learning and economic competition because changes to rural life in American are both dramatic and familiar to the society. Yet the patterns to which this essay draws attention also can be traced – in various degrees and configurations – in the lives of scores of other Americans who participated in an array of



rural, urban, and suburban economies over the course of the twentieth century. The analysis will pursue the following general lines of inquiry: What bearing does membership in an economic system have on the sponsorship of literacy learning? How do regional economic competitions enter into experiences with literacy? What opportunities and barriers for literacy learning arise during economic transition and transformation?

Let us, then, consider the parallel lives of two European American Midwestern women I will call Martha Day and Barbara Hunt. Both were raised on 80-acre, low-income dairy farms that their fathers had inherited, Day in northern Indiana and Hunt in southern Wisconsin. Both grew up in sparse, rural settlements of 500 families or fewer, some distance from stores and schools. Both were the middle of three children. Both found much of their academic writing less memorable and satisfying than their extracurricular writing: Day with the high school yearbook and Hunt with her state forensics association. Both read often for pleasure, and both kept journals. Neither had much money or family encouragement for schooling beyond the twelfth grade, and both left home and went to work shortly after high school graduation. For all of these striking similarities in background, however, the differences in their life circumstances are more pronounced. For one thing, they were born 68 years apart, Day in 1903 and Hunt in 1971. Further, although Day found her way after high school into a journalism career, becoming a columnist and women's editor for a regional magazine, the *Mid-Plains Farmer*, Hunt, at 22 years old, was cashiering at the Mid-Plains Mobil Station,<sup>11</sup> doing child care on the side, and taking an occasional course in the human services program at a two-year technical college 25 miles from her home.

This contrast speaks directly of course to the rising standard for literacy and school achievement across a 60-year span. Martha Day's high school graduation in 1920 made her among the best-educated members of her community, whereas in the 1980s the only thing guaranteed to a high-school graduate like Barbara Hunt was that she would earn several hundred thousand dollars less over her lifetime than college graduates. But these accounts also point up subtler cultural changes that affect literacy development. Day came of age when the small family farm economy in the Midwest was worth more, literally in terms of dollars and jobs but also culturally and socially. At the turn of the twentieth century, Day belonged to the 40% of the U.S. population engaged in the agricultural sector. By the time of Hunt's birth in 1971, farm kids belonged to the 2% of the population left in agriculture. Day's residence on an 80-acre farm and her attendance at a two-room country school made her background typical of European Americans in her predominantly rural state. Sixty

years later, rural schools joined urban schools in being chronically under-financed in comparison with suburban districts, and family-owned dairy farms were disappearing from the Wisconsin landscape at a rate of 1,000 farms a year.<sup>12</sup> Although Martha Day and Barbara Hunt both were profoundly affected by wrenching transformations in rural life, Day was able to trade more seamlessly on the status of her farm-girl background to make the transition from physical to mental labor. For Hunt similar features of the farm-girl background found little resonance within the economy in which she was competing.

### **“The Typical Little Village of That Day”: The Case of Martha Day**

At the risk of oversimplifying, we could say that Martha Day’s earliest literacy learning took place within a local society that was growing together while Barbara Hunt’s took place within a local society that was coming apart. Many elements of Day’s earliest literacy memories are set within an emerging infrastructure of electric lights, paved roads, rural mail delivery, rising farm prices, farm journalism, and expanding schooling that developed as part of a turn-of-the-century boom time in Midwestern rural areas.<sup>13</sup> Like many people I have talked to from this time and place, Day shared proudly in a progressive identity that seemed to be delivered into many rural households along with the local newspaper. Reading of periodicals was linked to forward-looking thinking, intelligent farming, and political participation, including people like Day’s parents, who, like most of their neighbors, had but grade-school educations. Here is Day’s recollection of the presence of newspapers in her home:

Dad always subscribed to [the nearest daily] and took it by the year. My dad was smart and a good scholar and a most interested man in politics and everything that was going on. I don’t remember reading it much, but I remember when my father came in from working in the fields, the first thing he’d do [was], if the paper, if the mail had come, he would sit down and read the newspaper. He was very sharp on that kind of thing. For that day.

Martha Day attended grade school about one mile from her farm in one of the many two-story brick schoolhouses that had been scattered around her county in the late nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Because her commu-

nity did not provide public education beyond tenth grade, she and her brother finished high school in a larger town, carpooling with neighbors to make the 10-mile drive. It was in high school that Day discovered her love of writing, primarily through work on the yearbook and through the school library. Current books also arrived at her home by mail, sent at birthdays and holidays by a favorite aunt who was a librarian in Washington, D.C. "I got the feeling of emotions coming through words on paper," Day recalled. "I think reading makes people want to write."

At the time of our interview in 1992, Day was still stinging from the gender discrimination that sent her brother away to college while she stayed in the area to care for her invalid mother. "[My brother's] teachers encouraged him," she explained. "They got a rector scholarship. Told him about it. Nobody told me. I made grades just as good as his. But they didn't push girls, and my parents couldn't have sent us on." Instead, when her mother was well enough, Day moved to the nearest city, worked in the book department of a large department store, and took secretarial courses at night.

Day was part of a major migration of the 1920s – an outflow from the countryside that would help to radically alter the community into which she was born.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, many social aspects of a lingering nineteenth-century agrarian tradition seemed to follow her to town, significantly conditioning her literacy opportunities. Chief among these was the broad overlap of homogeneous social institutions that had organized her childhood and would subsidize her "love of writing" well into adult life.

Early in the interview, Day recalled attending grade school in what she described as "the typical little village of that day." "There was," she said, "a school, a church, and a general store." Education, religion, and commerce were located, literally, at the same intersection of her village, so it is not surprising that Day remembered her early literacy learning taking place within a small and local social network. In such a system, you were defined by the family you belonged to, its reputation, and its social standing. Nelson (1995) has written about the economic function of the ethnic homogeneity on which many Midwestern rural communities were founded, calling their close-knittedness "an essential feature of the labor system." Residential segregation was perceived "as a prerequisite for material as well as social success," which in turn depended on "informal bargains and implicit understandings" (pp. 6–7). Despite the fact that so many people were on the move at that time – or perhaps because of it – this network was still in place for Day when she relocated to the city, 50 miles away. "I never did have to hunt for jobs," she said. "Somebody from my area always said, 'Call me' or 'We've got a job. Would you be interested

in it?” Both the informality and the redundancy of these social networks were evident in Day’s account of her break into journalism, which occurred shortly after her marriage to a bookkeeper in 1925. She and her husband began attending a Methodist Sunday school class for young married couples that was taught by the then managing editor of a local newspaper. Aware of Day’s interest in writing, he asked her to put together a monthly newsletter for the Sunday school group. A few years later, this man bought a small, regional farm magazine and invited Day to become a part-time “rewrite man,” as she called herself. Her job was to recast into short news items the press releases and bulletins that were pouring out of the state agricultural university and experimental stations at that time.

Day worked at home, with a typewriter, desk, and filing cabinet that the editor provided. Each Sunday, she brought her rewrites to church and received a new batch of assignments. Occasionally, the editor asked her to write a feature story, usually about a farm woman. Occasionally, Day’s husband would go along on her feature assignments to take photographs that illustrated her published articles. The editor was instrumental in teaching Day classic elements of journalistic style. She recalled:

He kept building me up, you know, giving me a little more instruction. How the first paragraph had to do this and so forth. He would try to coach me along. He’d say, “Now that might have been better if you’d included a little less in that paragraph and things like that.”

At the same time, the editor encouraged Day to appeal to her farm background as she imagined topics and audiences. “He’d say, ‘Imagine you are a farm woman,’” she recalled. “That I grew up on a farm helped me in some respects. It wouldn’t today.”

When commercial farm publishing entered a bonanza period in the 1940s, the newspaperman’s local farm journal was bought out by a much larger conglomerate, which I call here the *Mid-Plains Farmer*.<sup>16</sup> Day was invited to move to corporate offices and, between several more buyouts and mergers, gradually assumed more editorial responsibility. She contributed a bimonthly column on domestic topics, compiled cookbooks that were distributed as complimentary promotions, and traveled regularly to Chicago and other big cities for editorial meetings or conventions of the National Association of Women Farm Editors (whose membership numbered 16 nationwide). She retired in 1968. At the time of our interview in 1992, she was widowed and residing in a residential care facility near her daughter,

some 400 miles from her birthplace. She wrote letters to church friends, some from the original adult Sunday school class, and showed me extensive memoirs she had written in several bound journals that her daughter had bought for her. Although her eyesight was deteriorating, she had recently composed a humorous poem about osteoporosis that a nurse helped her to get published in a health magazine for senior citizens.

This account urges us to consider two significant dimensions of literacy development: first, how the cultural and social organization of a particular economy creates reservoirs of opportunity and constraint from which individuals take their literacy, and second, how these backgrounds can later become exploitable by agents of change. Day's memories of early literacy learning carry the paradoxes and tensions alive in rural, white societies at the turn of the twentieth century, as young people were shaped by conservative values of farm and village even while they were heading for lives elsewhere. For Day, these paradoxes registered most painfully in the gender inequality in which her expanding educational and geographical horizons were encased. Although both she and her brother left the farm, he went to college and to an eventual science career in the nation's capital. She took her interest in reading and writing 50 miles to her state capital for jobs selling books and taking dictation. Yet staying back left her tethered to the conservative social institutions out of which her later literacy opportunities (and their exploitable value) would come. Although village life was already under radical change, the legacies of the village economy, in which religious, educational, and commercial interests blended so routinely, were still intact in her social sphere. This tradition provided the point of contact for Day's entrance into paid, professional writing and sanctioned the informal apprenticeship by which she learned her trade. Local ownership of newspapers and farm journals was part of this social milieu, helping to make Day's local identity part of her qualifications for her first job. Interestingly, in the small, nonspecialized operation of the local farm journal (in which news stories and columns were often contributed by farmers themselves), gender specialization was less pronounced, and Day took on the assignments of a "rewrite man," dealing with technical and agricultural information coming from the land-grant college. Only with her later transfer to the larger corporation would her duties become exclusively that of a "women's" editor.

One more aspect of cultural and social organization is worth noting here. This was a period when print, although becoming more widespread, nevertheless was most readily identified with and experienced through particular institutions in society: the church, the school, the popular press. These were the basic institutions that had promulgated an initial mass lit-

eracy in the latter half of the nineteenth century in America. These institutions and their practices came forward into the twentieth century as dense sites of literate resources. This concentration of literate heritages into a few institutions made it common to find people like the Sunday school teacher/newspaper editor, in whose very figure coalesced the religious and secular print traditions that lie deep within the history of the United States. Several members of Day's generation recalled influential teachers who seemed literally to embody these print traditions and make them available in informal, apprenticeship relationships. These strong figures were principal forms by which literacy opportunity appeared in the social arrangements of this time and place.<sup>17</sup>

What remains most interesting about Day's background is how attractive and exploitable it became when the farm magazine industry took off in the 1940s. This was a period of favorable growth in agricultural journalism. Farm outputs were up; fertilizers, irrigation, and other commercial products were being sold, principally through print advertising. A rapid rise in education levels was under way. Agricultural colleges continued to pump out information, which had to be translated into popular treatments. Magazines in this period attempted to appeal to the entire farm family and to uphold feel-good elements of the agrarian tradition even as they subtly changed habits and practices of farm families toward a new, much more business-oriented mode of farming.<sup>18</sup> Women's news was crucial to the commercial success of these magazines, in part because, as Day explained, wives typically were the family members who placed the subscriptions. Although eventually overcome by the growing popularity of full-scale, national women's magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Good Housekeeping*, women's sections in regional farm journals carried features on topics ranging from gardening and canning to dress, diet, faith, and marital advice.<sup>19</sup> Day wrote on all of these topics in her column, which was often organized around the seasonal rhythms of the farm life in which she had grown up.

The person of Martha Day, the badge of her integrity in her home community, became a badge of her value to the enterprise of farm journalism as it was being practiced at this time. Her conservative farm background, her WASP-ish mores, and her ideological comfort with print as an agent of improvement enabled her to voice the values that the *Mid-Plains Farmer* needed for commercial success. These commercial needs became the vehicle for Day's adult literacy development. This window of opportunity was brief, however. By the time Day retired in the late 1960s, general farm magazines were on the wane, women weren't home anymore to be interviewed for her feature stories, more and more of her published

recipes were being provided by large food processing industries, and agribusiness was changing the farm economy from top to bottom. In the interim, though, Day fulfilled her desire to be a writer and had gotten to travel to Chicago and other big cities to gather news, attend conventions, and participate in corporate editorial meetings. All of these opportunities were immensely satisfying to Day from the perspective of the 1990s. At the age of 89, she was still writing and finding her constituency through the newer publishing niche of senior citizen magazines.

It was common to find other European American women among Day's cohort whose early opportunities for education and literacy were freighted with similar responsibilities for upholding agrarian traditions. Rural teaching was one such open opportunity. Industrialization that was under way in the cities at that time relied on steady production of cheap food, so government and business worked programmatically to maintain the farm economy. Rural schools and farm journals were particularly important organs by which the values of agriculture and rural society were reinforced among countryside populations. Ultimately, this effort proved futile, but it was an effort that fell often to women, whether as journalists or grade-school teachers who were recruited to the Country Life Movement at this time.<sup>20</sup> Careers for women engaged them in ideologically conservative work in which their affiliation with rural societies and values became their greatest credential. In other words, conservative gender traditions were exploited for conservative social agendas, with predictable consequences. The work of shoring up a fading way of life that fell to Day and others like her would help to shore up later rounds of economic disadvantage for women as the technological literacy of the male domain came to be much more heavily rewarded later in the century.

In tracing the relationship of Day's literacy development to the economic backdrop in which it occurred, I am not suggesting that hers was the only – or even the most typical – experience of the farm people of her generation. Indeed, among other Midwestern European Americans of her cohort that I interviewed, extreme physical isolation, poor schooling, instability in farm prices, and the catastrophes of the Depression all made access to material and institutional supports for literacy difficult and sometimes impossible. For people bearing the burden of racial discrimination, the conditions usually were much more difficult. However, I did want to show how dynamics of economic competition create the context in which literate resources are pursued, expended, enjoyed, and rewarded. For Day, membership in a cultural majority within a stable – in fact, growing – economy provided both the means and mentality by which her liter-

ate interests and skills could pay off. Although Day made a successful transition from agricultural to intellectual labor, the transition depended on being well connected to an older order on whose value she could continue to trade. These social structures provided the forms of sponsorship, invitation, and access by which Day learned and practiced literacy. These structures also provided the ideological constraints that determined what Day wrote, for whom, where, and for how long.

### **“I Did a Lot with Homelessness”: The Case of Barbara Hunt**

Barbara Hunt was born in 1971, three years after Martha Day retired from the staff of the *Mid-Plains Farmer*. She was one of three daughters in a family operating a small-acreage dairy farm during some of the most crisis-ridden years in the history of the dairy industry. Lower commodity prices, lower incomes, decreasing farmland values, and difficulty in servicing debt were putting lots of family farms out of business.<sup>21</sup> Wisconsin saw a 50% decline in farms between the 1960s and the 1990s, with the biggest jump between 1987 and 1992, the years that Hunt was attending high school.<sup>22</sup> In ironic contrast to Day’s memories, Hunt’s keenest memories of the presence of a newspaper in her home were the budget calculations that her father would pencil in the margins.

Like Day, Hunt grew up in a small, ethnically homogenous community founded in the nineteenth century by German Catholic clerics and dairy keepers. At the turn of the twentieth century, it had been one of the main production areas in the state for butter, grain, and tobacco. Now, still characterized as a place where few residents are not related to each other, it is anchored by a stone church, built in the 1850s, which abides as the main social institution. But at the end of the twentieth century, there were neither schools nor much of a commercial base left in this unincorporated community. Hunt was bused 10 miles north across the county line for schooling, and her family drove 20 miles south to find a major shopping district. Passed by when a state highway was built in the 1940s, this community experienced less than a 3% economic growth rate between 1980 and 1990, compared to a 14% economic growth rate in the county overall. Per capita income lagged in relation to the rest of the region as well. On the other hand, dairy herds were still thick, and competition among the farms was quite keen. In the late 1980s, land in the area was changing hands at a record pace as farmers with more capital were buying out their neighbors.



Hunt's residence in a village that had grown little in 90 years was not "typical for its day," and its homogeneity was no longer relevant to the structure of labor, as many residents scattered each morning in their cars for service jobs that had overtaken the urbanizing county.<sup>23</sup> Farm concerns no longer dominated the regional newspapers to which residents of her community subscribed, and the radio, television, and film that infiltrated the Hunt household in the 1970s and 1980s primarily delivered urban-oriented images, information, and perspectives. Hunt recalled with a laugh missing her favorite TV sitcoms because of evening milking chores and then having to watch *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie*, which were on at a later hour. Her school system, answerable to state mandates, typically strained out local culture from its curriculum, so that it would not appear strange, for instance, that in high school, Hunt and her sister studied German as a foreign language, not as the language of the founders of their community. The family purchased used books as well as a used typewriter on trips to a Catholic thrift store. ("We used to go to [the thrift store] and the books were real cheap. They'd be like three cents," Hunt recalled. "So a lot of our books at home were like that. Hey, even if you didn't like them, they were cheap.") Although, as we will see, the teenage Hunt, like Martha Day, was discovering a love of writing and searching for avenues for this drive, she was acquiring literacy as part of a demographic minority, as a member of an unincorporated political unit within the context of late twentieth-century social transformations. Compared with Day's literacy sponsors, Hunt's were more remote and more distributed across geographically and ideologically diverse institutions. Assembling available literacy resources was proving more difficult for Hunt than it had for Day. So was finding employer-sponsors who could enhance her literacy development in her adult years. Her paying jobs were not related to agriculture but rather to low-end retail and government-subsidized services common to areas with stagnant economies. Hired as a home health aide after high school, she charted the weight and pulse of elderly clients on Medicare. ("If anything happened, you had to write," she said, "and I had a lady that everything happened to.") But she was laid off when, during major HMO shuffling in the county, the agency relocated. In the mid-1990s, Hunt's most steady source of income was in day care and private baby-sitting, as farm wives sought off-farm employment to stanch the loss of farm incomes. ("Right now I'm baby-sitting, and I always read to the kids 'cause I think you should. It sinks in," she said.)

To understand how Hunt undertook literacy development during hard times, it will be useful to look at two major sponsors of her writing during

late adolescence and early adulthood: the High School Forensic Association to which she belonged for five years and the human resources program of an area two-year college, where she was enrolled part time. Both of these institutions were in some ways helping Hunt to carry her literacy and literate potential into her local economy.

Hunt joined the forensics club in eighth grade. “As soon as I heard about it, I knew I wanted to be in it,” she said. For one thing, forensics allowed her to satisfy a lifelong quirk: the love of reading aloud. Early in our interview, she described a familiar living-room scene from her childhood:

Ever since I was little, I liked to read aloud, and I'd always bug people. I'd be with [my younger sister] and she'd be on the couch and I'd be on the chair, and we'd be reading out loud. We'd get up to a level and it was, “Stop, stop. Stop reading so loud.” We'd get louder and louder. She'd stop and I'd go in my room and read out loud anyway. Maybe it was something where I knew, maybe I knew I would like to do my own thing and write on my own.

As a member of the forensic club, Hunt first competed in the category of declamation, reciting published dramatic pieces from memory. But by high school, she was performing in the original speech division, composing and delivering four- and eight-minute speeches.

The forensic club in her high school was part of a statewide consortium of speech, debate, and theater clubs. Interestingly, this association had been founded in 1895 by a school superintendent from the very same district in which Hunt was a student. In fact, this was the first high school forensic association in the United States.<sup>24</sup> In later years it was sustained by the state university extension service and on occasion sponsored joint competitions with Future Farmers of America. By the time Hunt was a member, the forensic association had become an independent organization subsidized by dues from member schools. Headquarters provided handbooks and other instructional guides, trained and certified speech coaches, sponsored regional and statewide competitions, and published a newsletter. This state organization in turn held membership in a national high school forensics association that also sponsored events and provided instructional and promotional print materials.

As a participant in competitions, Hunt wrote speeches on topics of her choice. She picked topics that, in her words, “had real emotion,” involving issues that “affected me but kind of affected other people.” Her preferred topics included abortion, crack use, racism, and homelessness. “I did a lot with homelessness,” she explained. “The homeless problem at the time

was my sophomore year, 1986–87. There were three million homeless people in the United States. I wanted to get people to realize what was going on.”

To put her speeches together, she used the school library as well as notes she took from TV news and magazine shows. She also was influenced by Hallmark Hall of Fame specials. Song lyrics that she heard on the radio also helped her to reflect on her life and her speech topics. “Songs to me are like some books or some speeches,” she said, “when they seem to be exactly what your life is.” Hunt also sometimes enhanced her presentations with film clips that she taped on a VCR. She practiced her speeches while doing the chores. “I’d be going along the front of the cows, feeding them with my shovel, and I’d be doing my speech,” she recalled. She traveled throughout the region with her speech team, qualifying a couple of times for championships held in the state capital. She also found satisfaction when she developed original introductions that were praised by her coach and sometimes imitated by other students.

Despite its many transformations over a 100-year period, we can say that the forensic association was carrying forward remnants of an oratorical culture that had traditionally sponsored literacy of rural students.<sup>25</sup> The organization trained extracurricular teachers and subsidized public forums in which Hunt usually had more freedom to express herself than in school-assigned or church-assigned writing.<sup>26</sup> That her writing could be performed orally was a powerful incentive for her continuous membership in the organization – one of the few to which she belonged in high school. This format also provided a strong ethical and emotional appeal for her: “When you give a speech, you have to know the material,” she said. “I love it when people [in the competitions] know their speeches and are looking right at you as they give them.”<sup>27</sup>

For Hunt, high school forensics was sustaining oratorical and ethical values long associated with Midwestern agrarian politics and local self-improvement organizations. Through it, Hunt was able to articulate issues that, as she said, “affected me but kind of affected other people.” Like Martha Day, she was voicing the conditions of her time and place but translated through urban equivalents that dominated national media as well as the prepackaged research materials in her high school library. This translation of rural social problems through dominant urban ones was not one with which Day had to contend as a writer. And it was not without tensions – some of which infiltrated into Hunt’s relationship with her own parents. For instance, speech practice in the dairy barn was conducted under her breath:

Dad probably got so sick of me. He never knew what I was saying because I would never tell him what I was actually saying. I would say it to the cows so he never knew what I was practicing. I could probably give my homeless speech right now, though, if I really thought about it.

At the time of our interview in 1992, Hunt's forensic experience was finding some resonance in a psychology class that she was taking in a human services program offered at an urban technical college to which she was commuting. In the class, she was being asked to write short essays on contemporary social problems. The course was part of a two-year degree program that had begun in the early 1980s to qualify people as technical assistants in social service programs such as drug rehabilitation and family counseling. This vocational program took shape in response to growing regional demand for professionalization in social work, which was accompanying increased private and public investments in child and family welfare. The program, which focuses mainly on problems of urban poverty, racial discrimination, and substance abuse, had become a popular vocational choice for young, first-generation college women from rural areas. In 1998, six years after our initial interview, Hunt was still trying to finish her two-year degree while continuing to work in area day care centers.

Although it is too soon to predict the full life and literacy trajectory of Hunt, it is clear that many of the local cultural assets that subsidized Day as she made her way into adult literacy either are not available to the younger woman or simply are no longer worth as much in her society. The dairy farm life that Hunt was born to will be hard to parlay directly into economic opportunities – except insofar as it has fine-tuned her sensitivity to human distress. But sensitivity to her rural time and place needs lots of reinterpretation and transformation to operate in the field of social service as it was taught and practiced at the end of the twentieth century. To become a writer in this field, Hunt would need to negotiate abstract academic training, bureaucratized delivery systems, and urban biases that did not confront Day – at least not so centrally – as she broke into agricultural journalism in the 1920s. Hunt's imaginative use of mass media, including songs, news, and TV docudramas, were of some assistance in helping her to develop a more abstract sensibility and identity on which so much contemporary writing relies.

For all of the differences in situation between the two women, it is also worth noticing the similarities in their accounts, particularly the conservative effects of gender. Across the century, gendered divisions of labor constrained options for women, especially those with modest educations.

If Day as journalist was tapped to stabilize traditional farm families for the benefit of an industrializing economy, Hunt as day care worker was tapped to stabilize families in which women and men were being drawn off the farm into wage jobs.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, conservative cultural supports associated with traditional agrarian societies proved vital in encouraging and validating both women's literate skills. Like the figure of the Sunday school teacher/publisher in Day's young adulthood, the state forensic association in Hunt's life delivered traces of older agrarian institutions like the state extension service and self-improvement societies. With its ties to agrarian oratory, speaker integrity, and concern with social issues, the forensic club served as a reservoir of literate practices and values through which Hunt could use her writing to witness for her place – even as she encountered a form of schooling and a larger society that did not make that easy.

### **Literacy Learning and Economic Change**

Literacy learning is conditioned by economic changes and the implications they bring to regions and communities in which students live. Economic changes devalue once-accepted standards of literacy achievement but, more seriously, destabilize the social and cultural trade routes over which families and communities once learned to preserve and pass on literate know-how. As new and powerful forms of literacy emerge, they diminish the reach and possibilities of receding ones. Throughout the 20th century a lopsided competition between corporate agribusiness and family farming altered life for millions of people in the rural Midwest. The accounts of Martha Day and Barbara Hunt can aid speculation about where in the processes of literacy learning economic change has greatest impact. First, we must notice the potential advantages that come with being well connected to dominant economies, whether in periods of stability or change. Dominant economies make their interests visible in social structures and communication systems. Growing up in the heyday of independent agriculture, Day literally could see her way of life reflected everywhere – from the physical arrangement of the institutions sponsoring her literacy learning to the stories and pictures carried in the print media she encountered. Economic typicality as enjoyed by Day seems to remain an advantage even during periods of stressful transition because at least for a while the powerful resources and skills built up in well-developed economies are attractive sites for reappropriation by agents of change. But as family farming receded in economic and cultural dominance, its social structures weakened as an

objectified presence in the world around Hunt.<sup>29</sup> With every revolution by which the greater region in which she lived turned to information and service production, the mismatch intensified between the conditions in which her family labored and the conditions in which she was forced to learn and find a living. It is here where literacy disadvantage and economic disadvantage find their relationship.

Hunt's contemporary experience helps to gauge particularly the effects of late twentieth-century economic life on literacy learning. Even in rural areas, the complexity of social organization as well as the proliferating reliance on print means that encounters with literacy are more likely to be spread out across ideologically diverse sources and specialized, often remote institutions. Influences on literacy are simply more diffused. The role of multimedia in Hunt's writing development is perhaps the best illustration of this phenomenon, as she coordinated sources from print, television, radio, and film and transformed them all into the older rhetorical genre of the timed speech. Especially in contrast with Day's experience, Hunt's experience also shows how rapid economic change can interrupt or enervate the social mechanisms that traditionally have supported and sustained literacy. As investments in local education, commerce, and social welfare drain away from a community, the process alters if not erases the institutions by which literacy learning – at least until recent times – has been most broadly sponsored. For these reasons, making literacy, like making money, was proving more complicated for Hunt than for Day, requiring considerable ingenuity, translation, and adaptation. In her early twenties, Hunt was learning to write for an economy she aspired to join while enjoying few of the powerful subsidies that the sponsors of that economy contributed to literacy learning. This is a condition faced by millions of literacy learners of all ages at the beginning of the twenty-first century, learners whose ways of life and labor are undergoing permanent destruction and replacement.

This analysis has tried to get beyond the rhetoric that usually surrounds the topic of literacy and the economic needs of the nation. No teacher or policymaker at any level can ignore the power of the country's economic system, its direction of change in the twentieth century, and the implications that brings, especially now, for literacy and literacy learning. However, we do not need to think only in the terms that government reports suggest. The school's responsibility should not be merely – and perhaps not mainly – to keep raising standards, revising curricula, and multiplying skills to satisfy the restless pursuers of human capital. Efforts must not go only to preparing students for future demands, nor should students' problems with reading or writing be defined solely in terms of

rising expectations versus insufficient skills. Economic changes create immediate needs for students to cope with gradual and sometimes dramatic alterations in systems of access and reward for literacy learning that operate beyond the classroom. Downsizing, migrations, welfare cutbacks, commercial development, transportation, consolidation, or technological innovations do not merely form the background buzz of contemporary life. These changes, where they occur, can wipe out as well as open up access to supports for literacy learning. They also can inflate or deflate the value of existing forms of literacy in the lives of students. Any of these changes can have implications for the status of literacy practices in school and for the ways students might interact with literacy lessons.

Increasingly, the ramifications of economic transformation form the history of literacy itself. For these reasons, they deserve a more central role in developing theories of individual literacy development. How do rapid changes in the means and materials of literacy affect the ways that people acquire it or pass it along to others? What enhances or impedes literacy learning under conditions of change? What might we gain by approaching learning disturbances in reading and writing not as individual difficulties but as the perpetual condition in which all of us are forced to function? How can we develop approaches to literacy that are more sensitive to the actual conditions in which people learn to read and write?

The economic conditions of students' lives – although usually the purview of school social workers or financial aid officers – should also be consulted for guidance in curricular thinking. Lessons in reading and writing at any level can bring conscious attention to the origins of texts and their relationship to social context. Learning how to read and write should include developing knowledge about material and technological conditions involved in those practices, as well as the changes that have occurred in reading and writing across time. The problems of literacy as a social issue can and should be incorporated into what counts as basic literacy instruction.<sup>30</sup>

The concept of sponsorship is a concrete analytical tool that can be used toward such projects at various levels. Tracing the sponsors who develop and deliver curricular materials to their schools can heighten students' awareness of who is interested in their reading and writing skills and why. It also can bring attention to the complicated, fast-moving, and far-ranging interrelationships that bear on contemporary reading and writing and may give students useful ways to understand the reasons that school literacy differs from the kinds they engage in elsewhere. Sponsorship is a tool that can clarify for teachers how students in their classrooms are differentially subsidized in their literacy learning outside of school by virtue of the economic histories of

their families and regions. Because sponsorship focuses on the many factors that create and deny literacy opportunity, it moves our sights beyond the socioeconomic profiles of individual families toward broad systems of resources for literacy operating in students' worlds. Those who consider public schools an organ of democracy rather than of the marketplace can evaluate how well their schools manage the public resources of literacy under their control to extend the broadest benefit to the most people. As public sponsors of literacy – and not merely teachers, testers, or sorters – schools might include among their measurements of performance how well they redistribute their considerable material powers and intellectual resources to equalize life chances.

Educators at all levels deal with curriculum and performance standards that emanate from governments, regents, district offices, or other centralized agencies. These standards, which usually come in the form of objective aims, goals, requirements, outcome criteria, and so on, usually mask the struggles among competing parties that have gone into their making. They almost always deliver, in unquestioned ways, the prevailing interests of dominant economies. The writing instruction that Barbara Hunt received, the materials she used, the opportunities she was given and not given were all connected, in various ways, to the victories of agents of economic change in her society. New ways of producing wealth invite new forms of social and labor relations, including communicative relations.<sup>31</sup> These presumed relations work their way into the teaching and learning of writing both in and out of school. And they are telegraphed in education standards or policy statements like the one with which this chapter opened. Bourdieu (1998) has observed that

What appears to us today as self-evident, as beneath consciousness and choice, has quite often been the stake of struggles and instituted only as the result of dogged confrontations between dominant and dominated groups. The major effect of historical evolution is to abolish history by relegating to the past, that is, to the unconscious, the lateral possibilities that it eliminated. (pp. 56–57)

Yet in Hunt's writing, in her efforts to "do a lot with homelessness," we see that histories are not abolished, are not yet submerged in full unconsciousness, even as they undergo transformation. Her experiences speak to the importance of rejecting the amnesia invited by the new imperatives for literacy and reanimating standards with historical awareness. In that way, we can better appreciate the positions of students (or entire schools) in receding economies. To be viable, Hunt, mostly on her own and in the



span of a lifetime, must accomplish an abrupt transition from family farm to twenty-first-century postindustrialism – a transition that took the country itself several generations and myriad forms of sponsorship to accomplish. And she must rely heavily on the institution of the school to make that leap. For her and many others, literacy learning entails more than attaining the reading and writing abilities implied by ever-rising standards. It also entails an ability – somehow, some way – to make the transformations and amalgamations that have become embedded, across time, in the history of those standards. Teachers sensitive to the projects of translation and adaptation that underlie students' writing can listen for those moments when students express them and then recognize their value. But, even further, with the right care and insight, the “lateral possibilities” that Hunt's writing remembers and imagines may not be eliminated. Hunt should be able to look to her school for help in articulating the suffering of her community and for realizing her solidarity with those people, urban and rural, who are “kind of affected” by the same issues as she. When we read, write, teach, and learn with historical consciousness, we save from extinction the often inchoate yearnings of voices in change.