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In the Field the Women Saved the Crop: The Women's Land Army of World War II

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In the Field the Women Saved the Crop: The Women's Land Army of World War II

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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Abstract

The Women's Land Army brought together rural and urban sectors of the United States in a climate of national and regional crisis. By the time the country was cast into war, the agricultural sector was already caught in a downward economic spiral that drove away laborers. With demand falling, and farms propped up only by experiments in subsidy and parity, when military and industrial jobs emerged in urban areas, farm laborers became scarce. At the same time the war created jobs for men outside of the agricultural sector, farm prices recovered and demand soared, forcing farmers to look to women for much-needed farm labor. The federal government proved a hesitant partner in the program, preferring to advance labor initiatives that did not challenge existing gendered divisions of labor endorsed by the USDA Extension and Home Demonstration programs. It was only in 1943, under extreme pressure, that Washington created the WLA that workers and farmers had demanded since 1941. Examining the Women's Land Army of World War II allows us to discern rural, urban, and federal attitudes toward gendered labor by creating an environment that incentivized new relationships between women, farms, and profit-driven farm labor.

Women, both rural and urban, proved eager to participate in farm labor programs, and farmers, aware that labor resources were limited, readily accepted the possibilities of the program and gave women the chance to prove their mettle. This mindset was couched in the reality that most farmers were already aware that at least some women were perfectly competent farm workers. Most farm women, though relegated to monikers of "farm wife" or "farm daughter" performed labor alongside husbands and fathers who received the preferential title "farmer". The WLA did not break new ground for rural men, but it did change perceptions of women on farms. Under the auspices of patriotic enthusiasm, farm and urban women received social permission to enter the fields openly, and own their personal roles in farm production.

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The writing of this dissertation overlapped with many career and personal developments. I am grateful to colleagues and administration at Crowder College for their ongoing support as I have scrambled to balance this project with a new career. I am especially indebted to Ron Cole and Keith Zoromski, whose thoughtful commentary, support, and collegiality have made this project possible. And thanks especially to my husband, Nathan, who has been unendingly patient with the many demands that academia has placed on my time. He alone is happier than I am to see this work completed.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Nathan, who officially has the patience of Job. I would not have been able to consider, let alone complete a journey through graduate school without him. It is dedicated also to my parents, who were committed to seeing their children achieve academically against many odds. And to my siblings, whose perfect miscellany of support and competition made me strive for excellence. It is also dedicated to Mike Rogers, the undergraduate English teacher who made me believe graduate school was not beyond my abilities, and to the memory of Wayne Neal, who taught me the rewards of stubborn persistence. Without people like these, people like me would never succeed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction:

In December, 1945, Florence Hall, Director of the Women's Land Army (WLA) bade her state representatives a premature goodbye. "We can be proud of the very definite contribution women have made to food production during the war years... It is not probable, however, that there will be need for a nation-wide Women's Land Army Program in 1946." Though Hall was ultimately mistaken, and some women continued to be recruited and deployed in the 1946 crop year, her message is telling. Though women had proven highly valuable to the agricultural sector during World War II, Hall was eager to put it behind her, and assumed the United States would have no further involvement in supplying women's labor for farm work. "It is expected" Hall conceded "that thousands of women will continue to be placed in local farm jobs in many areas, especially for seasonal work." Even though Hall recognized that women themselves wanted to continue to take wage work on farms, she was already distancing herself from the program--perhaps unsurprisingly so. Though the Women's Land Army ultimately fielded over 3 million women as farm hands under federal authority, the government was a hesitant contributor at best. The WLA program challenged many entrenched ideals surrounding gendered labor, but also exposed an uncomfortable reality. The Federal Government authored the WLA program only after long hesitation, and to minimal resistance from farmers or urban women. Though the program undeniably challenged traditional understandings of gender and labor, of the three groups negotiating the WLA program, the government was more crippled by gender ideology than either urban women or farmers. Farmers and urban women were eager to put aside gendered labor expectations in the name of wartime productivity. So much so, in fact, that their collaboration began long before the government acquiesced to assist organizationally. In spite of

the fact that farmers and urban women supported continued cooperation, the Federal Government proved to be more conservative than farmers or workers, and had to be dragged into the project by the farmers and women whose values the government pretended to defend.¹

The Federal government hesitated to encourage women to take on farm labor even though farmers looked to women from their families, their communities, and from farther afield to assure their harvests. Though there were a number of local, state, and private systems created to move any available labor, including women into farm fields, especially for seasonal work, the Federal Government hung back, hesitant to involve itself with any possibility of a federal program that relied on women as farm workers. It was only when the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) failure to act on farm labor shortages became an embarrassment that Washington, D. C. grudgingly authorized but ultimately underfunded the WLA. The organization did more than help the United States meet its initial wartime labor gap. Even though the USDA attempted to create a conservative organization that minimally contravened traditional gendered ideology, it failed. By bringing urban and rural people together to renegotiate their respective interpretations of gendered labor, the WLA program made the rural sector a post-war champion of women in traditionally male-dominated labor.²

The Women's Land Army belongs among studies of twentieth century labor studies, as well as rural studies and gender studies. The process of recruiting and enticing urban women to farms threw the role of rural women into reconsideration, allowing them to embrace the crucial role that they had covertly played in farm production for centuries. Oscar Lewis points out in his

¹ WLA Newsletter, Florence Hall to State WLA supervisors, December 10, 1945.

² For Rural-to Urban migration see: John T. Shover, *First Majority—Last Minority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976); Everett M. Rogers and Jay Staten, *The Embattled Farmer* (Golden: Fulcrum 1987). For new responsibilities for women in agriculture, Deborah Fink "Rural Women and Family in Iowa" *International Journal of Women's Studies* 7 (Jan-Feb, 1984) 57-69; and Pete Daniel "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II" *Journal of American History* 77 (Dec. 1990) 886-911.

On the Edge of Black Waxy, that farm families did not want to admit that women did work in the fields not because women were actually confined to the household, but because gendered ideologies had become so complicated that a women doing field work simultaneously undermined her own class and her husband's masculinity. Because profit-driven labor was gendered masculine and field work was associated with lower class women, farm women who did field work did not admit it. Rural wives were stakeholders in the farm business and treated machinery, livestock, and crops with a care and regard matched only by their husbands but risked their reputations if they took any pride or ownership in their own profit-oriented labor. With the arrival of the WLA, rural women had the opportunity to recreate their own roles on the farm and publicly claim their stake in farm work with the same pride and patriotic enthusiasm that brought urban women to their homes and fields. Katharine Jellison's *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology 1913-193* examines the influence of technology on farm women in the Midwest and points out that "Farm Women's activities had never strictly taken place within the farmhouse. Women's involvement in wartime field work, therefore, actually represented an expansion of the farm duties they had known before the war." As Jellison argues, women did not gain new roles in wartime, but this study argues that farm women gained validation of the work they already performed because the WLA created an opportunity for rural people to privilege their own interpretation of the value of female labor.³

According to farmers, workers, and even extension agents, the WLA was a stellar success. Mobilized women were able to get and keep production above pre-war levels even in a situation of rationing of metal and gasoline that sometimes immobilized tractors. Extension agents and state secretaries of agriculture conceded that women were an efficient and effective

³ Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill, 1991) 131; Oscar Lewis, *On the edge of the Black Waxy: a cultural survey of Bell County, Texas*. Saint Louis.24-25; Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900 – 1940*, 159-162

labor source that sustained agricultural production so essential to the war effort. In spite of these accomplishments and accolades, after the war, the WLA's contributions were sufficiently distasteful to the United States that they disappeared from the national memory. Walter Wilcox's 1947 *The Farmer in the Second World War* ignored the program entirely only two years after the close of the war. His 1973 reprint did not acknowledge the WLA either. Wilcox affirmed the impressive productivity of the war, but gave credit to technological advances rather than labor programs, saying "[A]griculture showed far greater flexibility and ability to expand total production in this war than in the last. This greater flexibility of agriculture resulted both from a higher level of technology including increased mechanization, and from improved and increased governmental planning and direction." Wilcox argues that machines made the difference, but does not recognize the role women played in bridging the space between unmechanized and mechanized agriculture. David Danbom likewise in his *Born in the Country* claims that [A]griculture underwent a revolution in productivity spurred by machines, chemicals, and improved plant and animal breeds." Again, the labor of 3 million women that bridged the gap between Depression and mechanization appears incidental to the study. In the women's stead, machinery, technology, government organization, and research rise as beacons of American achievement. Machinery is modern, it is sophisticated, it is a mark of societal advancement, and it does not offend gendered sensibilities. Research is likewise sophisticated, the product of a nation committed to inquisitive innovation. The next war would see more equipment, more fertilizers and pesticides, more hybridized and high-yield crops mobilized in support of global peace. But no action plan ever again called for a Women's Land Army in spite of its glowing success⁴.

⁴ Walter W. Wilcox's *The Farmer in the Second World War*, (New York: DaCapo Press) 1973, 51-68. David Danbom's *Born in the Country* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press) 2006, 233-238.

I contend that the reason the Women's Land Army has passed into such obscurity that even agricultural history textbooks neglect the program's contributions has to do with the ideological framework of the organizations that helped to create it. Pressured very much against its will, the Federal Government created a WLA program only when confronted with the awful reality that women were already doing farm work under the auspices of other programs, and that no other proposed solution offered the same responsiveness and flexibility for seasonal work in particular. The Federal Government had no intention of expanding or enhancing the roles of women anywhere in the United States through World War II programs, but rather saw women's labor as a resource to be tapped at federal convenience for the achievement of national goals. There was no revolutionary intent perceptible in secretary of agriculture Claude Wickard's reluctant advocacy; rather he capitulated to circumstances under intense pressure from outside forces, creating the program because others supported it, not because he did.

The USDA's main appendage for engaging women in the 1940s was the Home Demonstration Program. A branch of the USDA extension program, it trained interested women in research-driven methods for home management. But importantly, the Home Demonstration program had little interest in expanding the traditional roles of women, and preferred to make women better at fulfilling their traditional roles. As the main division of the USDA to engage women, this suggests a commitment to gendered values that mimic urban, rather than rural realities. When he appointed Home Demonstration agent Florence Hall to head the program, Wickard entrusted one of the most revolutionary gender-busting programs of the war to the hands of personnel who both understood the reality of the gender-myth on farms and also could be trusted to preserve it outside of wartime necessity. Unlike the WLA, the Home Demonstration program did not try to push women onto tractors or into fields, but encouraged

women to take on methods and mindsets that would make them better housewives. War temporarily reorganized priorities, but the Home Demonstration program did not lose its focus on its mission to enhance, rather than expand the role of the homemaker on farms or in town.⁵

As conservative as the administrators of the program were, they could not account for the independent initiative that farm women, urban women, and farm men all took in the course of their respective experiences with the program. Administrators created a program that they ran diligently for the course of the war, and at the end of 1945, when Florence Hall bid her state supervisors farewell, she celebrated the news that the majority of women who ran the program were returning to their roles in Home Demonstration. There was no official, organizational reordering of priorities due to the war. There was, however, a grassroots movement from the people involved with the program. Farmers still required seasonal labor especially for work that machines could not, and in some cases still cannot, do. Women continued to hire out for these jobs in the postwar years even without the motivation of wartime demand. Urban women's continued interest in farm work proves that they were not motivated solely by patriotic enthusiasm. In the absence of war and with the rise of machines, women still hired out seasonally to work on farms. The work itself had some intrinsic value for women beyond patriotic self-sacrifice.⁶

When soldiers returned home from World War II, they returned to a nation that, for the first time, did not offer land-distribution to its wartime veterans. A tradition that had held since the distribution of land vouchers in the American Revolution was dead. A nation that had once

⁵ Bowers, William. *The Country Life Movement in America: 1900-1920*. (Port Washington, NY: Kentucky Press), 1974. Bowers notes that country lifers who were so influential in the creation of Home Demonstration and USDA extension were rarely farmers themselves, but were urbanites who romanticized a rural past that they had little direct contact with; Mary Hoffschwelle "Better Homes on Better Farms: Domestic Reform in Rural Tennessee," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*. Volume 22, Number 1 (2011): 51-73, Hoffschwelle also examines the tension between urban origins and rural objectives of Home Demonstration.

⁶ Furman, Lucile N. 1953. *Status of women in the United States, 1953*. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Labor, Women's Bureau, R. J. McGinnis, "The Lady Drives a Tractor," *Farm Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1957) 61.

hoped to reward its loyal defenders with the status of farmers had turned its back on the agrarian dreams of Jefferson and envisioned a new future for its veteran sons. The GI bill, mortgage assistance, business loans, and unemployment insurance all speak to a nation determined that its veterans would not be farmers, but wage-workers and salary earners in an industrialized society. Placing citizens on land now ran contrary to a national identity that would see the National Defense Education Act emerge in 1958 to further encourage training in science and engineering, but not agriculture. The United States had not abandoned the notion of agriculture, but it had certainly abandoned the notion of a farming populace and as a result, the contributions of three million land-girls faded into the shadow of Rosie the Riveter—a symbol of industrial, not agricultural America.

The WLA program is, in some ways, a victim of its good-looking older sister Rosie the Riveter. While there is a substantial literature exploring mobilization of women into manufacturing and war industries during World War II, there is little that examines women's contributions to agriculture. It is not only very general narratives of World War II that have failed to take notice of this very important subject. Even agricultural histories appear to overlook the contributions of three million women who secured the U. S. farm sector during the war. Lizzie Collingham's 2012 study of the World War II food supply was named a *New York Times* notable book of 2012. The accolade is not wrongly bestowed—Collingham's study, *The Taste of War*, connects home-front food supply to allied and axis core strategies. Even though *Taste of War* focuses directly on the World War II food supply, Collingham only mentioned the WLA once and the British counterpart twice. This in spite of the fact that over three million U. S. women mobilized into wheat fields, fruit orchards, and cotton fields in order to secure the wartime food and fiber supply that would not only sustain the United States, home-front and

deployed military, but allied forces and European refugees as well. Though Collingham's study is a significant contribution to the role of food in the strategy and logistics of World War II, it, like other scholarship takes for granted that the United States could produce enough food to carry out a successful total global war even with its manpower deployed, and gives little attention to the drastic measures taken to assure that the United States could function as the breadbasket of the world. Collingham concentrates instead on the consequences of that prestigious role without exploring the underlying policy changes that made it possible.⁷

Stephanie Carpenter has written the most significant monograph on the subject of women in agriculture in World War II. Her 2003 *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II* provides a narrative of the creation and implementation of the Women's Land Army. Through the women's land army, Carpenter argues, women expanded their roles in the wartime United States, responding to a nation that called on them to serve, rather than carving out a space for themselves as had been more near the case in World War I. Carpenter's study is the first and presently only monograph on the WLA, and deserves accolades for that. My study departs from that scholarship by examining the tension between the conservative organizational structure and the radical women and farmers both willing to negotiate a new space for themselves in the wartime and post-war United States.⁸

Cecilia Gowdy-Wygart's *Cultivating Victory, the Women's Land Army & the Victory Garden Movement* devotes a chapter to the U. S. Women's Land Army in World War II, though it forms only a small part of her larger women's history on wartime mobilization in food production. Her trans-Atlantic history attempts to connect the Women's Land Army of Britain and of the United States, and correlates the Women's Land Armies of World War I and World

⁷ Collingham, E. M. *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food*. New York: Penguin Press, 2012. 79.

⁸ Carpenter, Stephanie A. *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003.

War II, depicting the entities as intertwined across time and space. While the studies make a bold argument, the WLA of World War II, because of its three-way negotiation between farmer, worker, and Washington, D. C., has much to be offered as a separate field of study, exposing, as it does, rural rejections of nationally endorsed gendered ideologies. While certainly the World War I program and the Victory Garden movements have significant overlap with the WLA, the Victory Garden movement, it could be argued, represented a return to gendered expectations, where urban women became cultivators of kitchen gardens as an extension of their role as guardians of the health of their families. The WLA, this study argues, diverges from this in that, while the WLA still catches women up in food production, to take on commercial farm labor is to feed strangers, not to feed family. It is an act of public, commercial activity rather than private, family-nurturing activity. Though the WLA will co-opt some ideas of the nurturing maternal to justify its programming, the work women did in fields for wages and to the ultimate profit of farmers represents a very different kind of social activism than planting a Victory Garden in the name of improving family nutrition.⁹

In examining the Women's Land Army and the victory garden in tandem, Gowdy-Wygart examines a broader range of agriculturally-based contributions to the war effort, but also can, at times, obfuscate the significant differences in gendered ideologies of the two programs. The kitchen garden had long been the provenance of women—it was a role that contributed to the table and to the family, and was a space whose labor and product belonged to the household. The market-directed field whose product was intended for consumption outside of the family represents a production-oriented initiative, however, and was a labor and space that was gendered male. Women tended gardens, men tended fields. This gendering of productive versus

⁹ Cecilia Gowdy-Wygart, *Cultivating Victory, the Women's Land Army & the Victory Garden Movement*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

reproductive labor is an important distinction that must be made if the social significance of the WLA is to be fully understood. The social buy-in to a victory garden is very different from the ideological baggage of placing women in for-profit agricultural fields. The former is an expansion of women's traditional roles—a development the Home Demonstration program would advocate in peacetime or in war. The WLA, on the other hand, broke new ground. It called for women to adopt wage labor in a for-profit venture not as a support staff, assistant, or auxiliary, but as an autonomous laborer directly replacing a man in the fields.¹⁰

The woman who mobilized into fields has been conveniently forgotten in the United States, while dolls and toys are made in her honor in Britain. The victory garden was compatible with the post-war effort to drive women back into their kitchens, and it even encouraged a more conservative role for women than had been commonplace in the pre-war years. It was compatible with the expectations of the 1950s, so the Victory Garden movement held a place of honor in post-war memories of the home front. The WLA expanded women's roles in the United States, but the Victory garden re-entrenched them. Victory gardens tied women to their kitchens in the name of patriotism, and this notion of women's domestic gardening was the one that survived in ideology, in media, and in popular culture while the Land Girl faded into an age-of-consensus oblivion.

Caron Smith's 1991 *Kansas History* article on the Women's Land Army is a localized study of the use and performance of that organization in Kansas. Building exclusively on primary sources (there were no secondary sources on the subject at the time) Smith's article is a scant six pages, with over two of them reproductions of recruiting posters and ads from the Midwest. Nonetheless, Smith's article focuses on the performance of the Women's Land Army

¹⁰ Gowdy-Wygant, Cecilia. *Cultivating Victory: The Women's Land Army and the Victory Garden Movement*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013.

in Kansas, where the labor required of Land Girls was predominately skilled labor, rather than unskilled. This created a situation where the WLA recruited wherever possible from within farm families where at least a passing familiarity with farm life and processes was to be had. It does not discuss the implications of that farm labor for farm women's perceptions of themselves or for farm men's understanding of women's labor. The study is a good start, but my study will expand on the important social and political meaning of the organization beyond the narrative exposition that Smith offers. In particular, by digging into broader regional and organizational nuances, my study argues that the WLA was not a coalescent program of women obediently marching to the fields in response to Washington's demands, but rather of Washington buckling to the demands of women confident of their agricultural ability and to farmers confident that women's labor would be better than nothing.¹¹

This confidence shared by women and farmers gives a special nuance to the WLA as a pivotal moment in women's labor history. William Chafe's 1991 book, *Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* argued that World War II was a watershed for women's roles in the United States in the economic and political sectors—that the special circumstances of World War II gave women greater workplace autonomy and opportunity than they could otherwise have gained. Chafe's study does not examine rural women's roles in World War II, but my study expands on this watershed thesis to find that, indeed, in the rural sector the chaos of World War II will create opportunity for urban women to negotiate a role for themselves in the agricultural sector, and for farm women, not the war, but the WLA will serve as a watershed allowing them to re-imagine their own roles on the farm free from the burden of

¹¹ Caron Smith, "The Women's Land Army During World War II" *Kansas History* 14, Summer 1991, 82-88; Judith B. Litoff, and David C. Smith. "'To the Rescue of the Crops': The Women's Land Army During World War II" *Prologue* 25 (winter 1993): 347-361 is an excellent brief narrative history of the WLA organization. Though the study is not analytical in nature, the paucity of any work on the subject makes the article a useful introduction to the WLA program.

imposed urban gendered ideals. My study contends, however, that in farming at least, World War II did not dramatically alter the roles of farm women, rather, the agricultural sector was already in chaos, and women entered the field not because the war gave them a chance to grab at autonomy, but because the war provided connections between rural and urban that simultaneously exposed urban women to farm work and liberated rural women to admit their longtime participation in it. Chafe's watershed in this case comes not from war, but from other women.¹²

Alice Kessler-Harris's thesis in her 1982 *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, argued that World War II only continued, and perhaps somewhat accelerated a trend that predated the war—a thesis which has challenged Chafe in many areas. Where Harris's study influences this one is in her discussion of the collaboration between men and women on farms. Though Harris's study does somewhat abandon farm women after the early 19th century, she does expose a simple reality that my study builds on—farm women and farm men did divide labor by gender, but prioritized completing tasks over gendering them. “In the division of responsibility, women got the bulk of internal domestic chores . . . Yet interaction never stopped” Harris argues. Men helped with weaving and spinning, and women worked in shops and learned the family business. So men and women on farms shared tasks based on priority, rather than gender. On the other hand, where Kessler-Harris's study swings to the urban industrial sector during World War II, my study argues that agriculture was in a very different kind of flux than the industrial sector when the war struck. On farms, men and women were both withdrawing from the workforce and flowing into cities as opportunity arose until the war demanded increased production. While, as Kessler-Harris has pointed out, women had been

¹² William Henry Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 133.

factory workers for over a century by the time the United States entered World War II (Lowell Mills opened in 1821 and depended on women for nearly all of its operations.) the agricultural sector was more resistant to hiring outside, non-family women than factories had been. As farms mechanized they might have facilitated women workers in theory, but farms were not heavily mechanized at the beginning of World War II. My study fills in that missing gap to examine how rural women and urban women in the rural sector experienced the farm during the chaos of World War II.¹³

Katharine Jellison examined the relationship between women and agricultural mechanization in her 1993 *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963*. Though the thrust of Jellison's research is not analysis of the Women's Land Army, she does briefly discuss the program's relationship to farm mechanization. Jellison argues that the mechanization of agriculture empowered women to act as producers even though marketing entities recognized farm women as consumers rather than laborers. Jellison's emphasis is not on the influence of World War II in its own right, and yet the rapid mechanization that the war facilitated did, in her argument, act as a watershed for women in the agricultural sector. She contends: "Farm women's activities . . . had never strictly taken place within the farmhouse. Women's involvement in wartime field work, therefore, actually represented an expansion of the farm duties they had known before the war." When mechanization allowed more work to be done with fewer hands, it was often the hands of farm women that took on the new work. Jellison is relevant to my study in another way as well, in that she recognizes the significant disconnect between what women were doing and what women admitted they were doing.¹⁴

¹³ Stephanie Carpenter, *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II*, (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press) 4.; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 273-275.

¹⁴ Jellison, *Entitled to Power* 131.

Reaching into the historiography on the mobilization of wartime resources, Keith Eiler's 1998 biography of undersecretary of War Robert P. Patterson, *Mobilizing America: Robert P. Patterson and the War Effort 1940-1945*, was never intended to be a study of women's labor. Still, the biography provides an interesting explanation for the entry of women into the work force during World War II. Eiler's perspective on the resources, controversies, and philosophies of the U. S. home front suggests that the war was a context for increased, and government sponsored, volunteerism. Patterson favored volunteerism, Eiler argues, over a more heavy-handed approach that demanded service of civilians in support of allied war efforts. Eiler contends that this ethos of voluntary service appeared to be the product of grassroots patriotism, but it was actually the object of careful cultivation in Washington D.C. The grassroots volunteerism strategy won out over more aggressive strategists who were willing and eager to coerce, rather than wheedle service from Americans. My study demonstrates, however, that there were limits to Washington's machinations. Though there were early, eager campaigns to draw women into factories, the idea of drawing women onto farms did not receive such enthusiastic approval. Whether this emanates from a notion of farms as inferior, more rugged, or perhaps even more dangerous than their industrial counterparts, in the case of the WLA, Washington at first rejected, and only under presser accepted the idea of a WLA. Still, Eiler is not entirely without applicability. Volunteerism formed a core part of the WLA's recruitment campaigns, but it was an absurdist role because WLA women were not volunteers. They applied for and were accepted to positions based on their own initiative, health, and merit and they were compensated for their labor as workers, not as volunteers. The WLA used the rhetoric of volunteerism in a nod to conservative values that made WLA workers appear to be doing a patriotic service, but the program shrewdly demanded that farmers pay a prevailing wage. The

language of volunteerism played a symbolic role, but did not define the objectives or operation of the program.¹⁵

The Women's Land Army engages such a wide variety of issues pertinent to modern scholarship that a number of tangential topics can contribute to its analysis. Histories of Agriculture, suspiciously silent on this subject, could benefit from an examination of the role of these temporary workers in shaping the strategies and practice of agriculture in a global economy. Joan Scott's call to wield gender as a category for analysis demands attention in this field. That women could be mobilized in factories in and in fields, and yet be immortalized for only one of the two demands consideration, as does the fact that. Political historians studying agricultural policy should find much to discuss in the administrative hesitations to mobilize women even as policymakers loudly called for foreign laborers, and women called for the opportunity to work. There is much to be done with this topic, but first, it must be exposed—the existence and contributions of three-million women in feeding the allied world can then serve as a lens to explore these other fields.¹⁶

My study examines the recruiting, deployment, and significance of the Women's Land Army of World War II. It examines the relative chaos agriculture was in as of the beginning of the war, and explores the labor shortages and tensions as a moment of opportunity for any new labor source, as well as for some old ones. It looks at the private and highly political programs that came before the WLA and examines the organizational structures and philosophies that attempted to keep the program conservative and emergency-driven. It also looks at the impressions of farmers and workers themselves—both of whom were often somewhat more

¹⁵ Keith Eiler, *Mobilizing America: Robert P. Patterson and the War Effort 1940-1945*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075.

radical than the program, with women rankling against protective policies and farmers committing to hiring women because they were good farm hands, not because they were the best of a bad situation.

Chapter two of my study examines the position of United States agriculture as a resource of the allied forces at the beginning of World War II. The United States was uniquely positioned by a combination of large population, relative to other allied countries at least, large arable landmass, and minimal domestic contact with enemy forces. In short, the United States was better positioned than any of its counterparts to supply food to allied forces. Other countries improved production as much as they could, but the United States became a crucial source of food and fiber for the war. The next chapter examines precedents both in World War I and World War II. The WLA was unique because of its federal overstructure, but it was not unique in anything else. Women worked through their own organizations, and even coordinated with government organizers in World War I but retained autonomy in self-management. State and private programs recalling the success of World War I launched local efforts in 1942 to help farmers through the first crop year of war. Chapter four examines the federal reckoning of 1942 that finally culminated in the creation of a federal program that first took to the fields in 1493. Beset by bureaucratic complications, the federal government argued for months about the rightness of the program, but when faced with working models on the private and state level, had little choice but to include a WLA in a larger emergency farm labor program. Chapter five looks at the deployment of the program, examining the types of labor that women did and the systems that the program used to assure that the limited supply of labor was used efficiently enough to satisfy cooperating farmers' needs. In addition, this chapter looks at some regional differentiation, examining especially the regional distinctions in size and labor of the WLA.

Chapter 6 is a regional study that looks in particular at the very under-examined and misunderstood WLA of the South. While prior studies have argued that the WLA was a minor presence in the South due to cultural barriers, my study finds that, in fact, the Southern states deployed some of the largest contingents of women in the United States, and it is overlooked because southern people saw little that was remarkable about women doing farm work. Chapter 7 examines the many ideological experiences of the WLA, looking at the conservative ambitions of program administrators, and the relationships the connection formed between rural and urban women's organizations, as well as examining the way that farmers and WLA workers, often far more radical than program organizers saw the program and engaged the opportunities it presented. In the Conclusion, the study explores the legacy of the WLA in the rural sector where women continued to negotiate wage labor in many regions as independent, rather than government linked workers. My study concludes with an examination of the modern era, where girls outnumber boys in FFA programs, and 30% of U. S. farms have woman operators. In the wake of World War II, farms grew larger, and farm families grew fewer as the country turned increasingly to industry at work and suburbia at home. On farms, properties grew larger and more mechanized, and farm women increasingly claimed their stake in this gargantuan era not as farm wives, but as farmers.

Chapter 2

The U.S. role in wartime food supply

The story of the WLA must be appropriately couched in the story of agriculture at mid-century. Even without a war and its accompanying labor crisis, the farming sector struggled under the strain of its own success. Agricultural research, the proliferation of agricultural education, and the rise of improved methods and varieties made farms at once more successful and less successful. Farmers could reasonably expect higher yields per acre, and had access to a range of pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers to improve overall productivity. The paradox of farm improvement programs, however, is that they undermined the success of farms. By improving productive potential to the point that markets could become saturated, farm improvement programs caused collapses in commodity prices, casting farmers into a downward economic spiral. With prices of farm products falling, farmers faced the difficult choice to produce more of the same crops or to change their approach entirely and produce something else, neither of which enhanced farm incomes in the troubled inter-war decades. Urban people benefitted from a cheap, plentiful food supply, and rising industry meant city work was easier to find and the allure of predictable income drew workers out of the countryside. It was the late 1930s when the war in Europe finally edged farm incomes upward and created a new demand for farm labor. By that time farms had suffered two decades of abysmal incomes, which led to underinvestment in farm equipment, and a shortage of labor. The WLA entered an ailing farm sector that, under a combination of low prices and failed policies, was not prepared to meet its productive potential. At the same time, farmers were primed for a change and willing to take some risks to change their fate.

Falling prices and collapsing demand in the wake of the Great War meant that the Great Depression came earlier to agriculture than it did to other sectors. Farmers benefitting from a greater productive potential found themselves struggling to compete in a market saturated by mono-cropped commodities. Though this rural economic struggle went largely unnoticed until the larger stock-market collapse in 1929, policymakers did realize that the farm sector was troubled and that it might benefit from well-thought-out intervention. The Great Depression gave rise to a new type of farm policy that engaged farmers more directly, encouraging them to shape planting and production goals around federally dictated targets rather than personal interest. Prior aid had typically leaned on propping up farmers to help them compete in a free market, but in 1929, hoping that repairing the agricultural sector would prop up the rest of the United States economy, Congress created the Federal Farm Board (FFB) which introduced price supports that directly manipulated agricultural commodities markets by acting as a speculator, buying up farm products at floor prices and counting on the artificial shortage to equalize the market. It is difficult to evaluate the efficiency of the program very well because the unprecedented length and depth of the Great Depression undermined the market forces that underpinned the basic strategy. In the 1920s, the FFB might have been enough to prop up the farm economy, but in the 1930s, the half-million dollar budget was not robust enough to make a difference. Still, the FFB established a new paradigm where government technically helped farmers help themselves, but also directly intervened in agricultural markets to manipulate commodity prices.¹⁷

¹⁷ Walter Wilcox, *The Farmer In the Second World War*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973. 8-9.; Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929; Gerhard Peters; John T. Woolley. "Herbert Hoover: "Statement on the Enactment of the Farm Relief Bill and on Plans for the Federal Farm Board.," June 15, 1929". The American Presidency Project. University of California - Santa Barbara; David Hamilton's *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) Hamilton does not accept the notion of a farm sector in full scale depression in the 1920s, but he does acknowledge that there was a growing sense among government leadership that Agricultural Policies should become somewhat more involved.

With Hoover's direct intervention as a precedent, Roosevelt's aggressive New Deal programs extended government and farm cooperation even farther, expanding federal regulation and management of farm products and prices, and inadvertently drew the United States government into the cause of farm labor. This first was achieved through the New Deal program the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). This act was intended to directly manipulate forces of supply and demand by establishing optimal production quotas and reducing supply to those optimal levels with the hope that scarcity would drive demand, prop up prices, and reduce or eliminate the need for direct aid to farms. The reality, it turned out, was somewhat more complicated than it might initially seem. The program hinged, of course, on gaining cooperation from farmers themselves, but farmers were understandably hesitant to reduce production on faith that a series of economic charts would manifest in a better return on a lower investment. It defied conventional wisdom. To encourage dubious farmers' cooperation with production limits, the AAA offered price supports that would mitigate the potential damage farmers risked if the market did not in fact self-adjust. So long as farmers agreed to produce only their permitted acreage in subsidized crops, the Federal government guaranteed a floor price for those key commodities. So in short, if farmers agreed to reduce the supply, the AAA promised to assure a safety-net floor price. Though there were a number of complications attached to engaging farmers as a unified citizenry, the Depression did create new paradigms in farm policy. The AAA established a relationship that encouraged farmers to look to Washington for recommended

Emergent policies through the twenties and thirties, however, he argues, exposed the extreme disconnect between policymakers and farmers. This divergence is present in the WLA as well, as farmers are less hesitant to accept women's labor than the federal government is willing to deploy it.

crops and quantities—a relationship that would be perpetuated through “production targets” in World War II.¹⁸

Many farmers enjoyed the short-term benefit of subsidized prices for farm products, but unadjusted prices for farm commodities fell throughout the Great Depression, which encouraged farmers to continue their participation in reduced-production programs. While the AAA provided immediate supplements to meager farm incomes, it did not balance supply and demand well enough to heal markets, which augmented farmers’ dependency on the program as commodity prices continued to slide. By 1939, with Europe already embroiled in conflict, farms in the United States still produced more than a wartime foreign market could absorb at reasonable prices. In 1939, a decade after the stock market crash, corn and wheat both sold for less than half of their 1929 prices per bushel. Cotton fared little better, selling at 9.9 cents per pound, 55 percent less than the 17.9 cents the sovereign crop demanded in 1929.¹⁹

Compounding the income lost in domestic markets, farm exports also fell sharply through the thirties, so foreign demand could not make up for saturation in the domestic market. Though part of this decline could be related to AAA incentives to reduce production, falling foreign demand was also a significant concern. Foreign trade partners of the prior decade returned to their own farm fields, relieving dependence on imported grains as their domestic production rose back to pre-war levels. In addition, the expense of war left few countries any surplus income for imported goods from abroad even if there might have been some demand. In addition, when the United States passed tariffs against imported farm goods during the Hoover Administration, it

¹⁸ Rasumssen, *A Short History of Agricultural Adjustment, 1933-75*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 1976; Pete Daniel *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Culture since 1880*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984) Fite points out that the design of AAA programs disproportionately advantaged larger landholders, and that tying benefits to acres under production, or, more to the point, removed from production, would best benefit those with acres to spare.

¹⁹ Walter Wilcox, *The Farmer In the Second World War*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973. 8-9.

resulted in retaliatory tariffs against U. S. product, so foreign markets that were so important to prosperity in the nineteen teens were lost in the thirties. By 1939, the value of United States farm exports was only half of what it was in 1929. Foreign demand for United States cotton production in 1937 was only 200,000 bales. Ten years prior, it had been 2 million bales. This collapse of cotton markets was exacerbated by falling international demand, and consequent falling prices in foreign markets. Even when there were overseas buyers, they bought at lower prices than in the past.²⁰

Farm technology improved in the Depression years, and some farmers took advantage of AAA loan programs to invest in mechanization that would relieve the need for so many farm hands. This was not the typical farm experience, however, as can be seen in census reports on farm equipment. While some farmers did invest in newer technology, the total dollar value of farm equipment owned nationally in 1940 was lower than the value of farm equipment owned in 1930 by 240 million dollars. Farmers were not even investing in new equipment at a pace that kept up with depreciation. Farm size did little to offset the difference. Small farms owned little to no farm equipment, and large farms owned fewer dollars worth of equipment in 1940 than they had a decade before. In 1930 the average farm that owned implements and machinery claimed an average of \$3.35 worth of farm equipment for every acre, with the average farm that owned machinery owning \$525 worth of equipment. By 1940, even though total number of farms and total acreage under cultivation both fell, farms that owned implements claimed only \$2.89 worth of equipment per acre, and only \$502 worth of equipment per farm. This loss in value may be attributable in part to more efficient use of existing equipment. Of course some farmers shared equipment cooperatively, so the number of mechanized farms was not always

²⁰ State Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1940). Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Agriculture, Abandoned or Idle Farms, United States Government Printing Office Washington: 1943.

equal to the number of machines. The census accounted for this cooperative sharing by requiring that implements shared by more than one farm be counted on the farm where the equipment was located at the time of the census count. This 1930 assessment of total farm equipment provides a momentary picture of the quantity of implements on farms, but Depression conditions sometimes led to greater cooperative sharing, so some farmers had access to implements without actually owning them. Still, while the later years of the Great Depression appear to have been a good strategic time to industrialize, the reality, based on raw investment, is that farmers made do with what they had or what they could borrow rather than take the financial risk of investing in new equipment for a sector that incentivized restraint in production. As a result of this conservative investment, the United States entered World War II very undermechanized.²¹

The Depression depleted incomes and opportunity in most sectors, but while jobs and wages slowly recovered in the private sector, farmers' free-market incomes, before subsidy adjustments, were in a backslide that showed no sign of slowing. In 1939, industrial incomes reached 68 billion dollars, which was a 169 percent increase over the lowest period of the Depression in 1933. Farm income, on the other hand, increased a mere 10 percent in that same period. Though subsidies somewhat offset the lost income, dependency on those subsidies encouraged farmers to limit, rather than expand their productive potential at least in the subsidized crops that formed the backbone of U. S. agriculture. By curtailing production, the AAA disincentivized the kinds of investments that would expand acreage or productive potential. Farmers had little reason to add acreage, labor, or updated equipment to their estates

²¹ 1945 Census of Agriculture, *Special Report, Farms and Farm Property*, 13; Technology on the Farm, USDA 1940, 80. This conclusion of farms making only modest investments in machinery has been contested. David Danbom's *Born in the Country* and Walter Wilcox's *The Farmer in the Second World War* both argue that farmers invested in new equipment in the late Depression, but neither provides citation for that specific information. While census data does not identify farm implements by specific types, the fall in total value in the inter-census years suggests that, while implement makers made new equipment available, farmers invested only modestly before the war began.

when they did not anticipate the opportunity to cultivate more acres. This placed the United States at something of a disadvantage entering into World War II, as farms were undermechanized, understaffed, and outdated from a decade or more of limited reinvestment.²²

In addition to disincentivizing technological investment, the AAA was a devastating blow for farm laborers. Because the program paid subsidies directly to land owners, it favored owner-operators, and left sharecroppers, tenants, and wage-workers out in the cold. Farmers who chose to produce fewer crops needed less labor, and dismissed surplus workers as unnecessary under the new system. The structure of the AAA distributed subsidies to landowners directly, and expected land owners to share money fairly on little more than a poorly-monitored honor system. So this shortfall of the AAA was destined to bring Washington D. C. into farm labor concerns once again. Farmers released sharecroppers and either turned out tenant farmers or forbade them to produce cash crops on rented land. Though AAA provisions were intended to create stability for all farmers, it favored land owners and disadvantaged landless farm workers. As farm labor organizer H. L. Mitchell recalled afterward “Many of the sharecroppers got evicted from their land because there were too many, and because the land owners wanted to have a greater share . . . even those who remained weren’t getting their share of the government money.” The AAA called for land owners, tenants, and sharecroppers to share subsidy payments, but county agents tasked with overseeing those subsidies often worked more closely with landowners than with subsidiaries, and with fewer crops and less work, many landowners dismissed workers and pocketed the subsidies for themselves.²³

²² Walter Wilcox, *The Farmer In the Second World War*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973. 8-9.

²³ Mitchell, H. L. "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 32 (1973), 349; Kester, Howard. *Revolt among the Sharecroppers* (1936). Knoxville: University of Tennessee, As an organizer of the STFU, Kester’s position that the AAA displaced farmers and exacerbated rural poverty is part biography and part organizational history; David E. Conrad, *The Forgotten Farmers: The Story of Sharecroppers in the New Deal*. Conrad illustrates the shortcomings of the New Deal for non-landholding farmers, and David Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* and Jared Roll’s

Dismissed sharecroppers and tenant farmers became among the most desperately disadvantaged people of the Great Depression, losing their homes at the same time that they lost their livelihoods. Landlords and policy makers alike conflated the concepts of farmer and landowner, and neither gave much concern to the plight of workers who tilled, but did not own the land. When acreage reduction programs rendered these landless farmers redundant, land-owners dismissed them. These displaced workers organized and formed the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), an organization revolutionary for its integration of white and black farmers in the same organization, its inclusion of women, and its application of socialist and unionist principles to farming. As farmers terminated now-superfluous workers, the STFU petitioned Washington for redress. Citing their ouster from AAA benefits, the STFU brought a lawsuit calling for the Federal government to enforce sharecroppers' rights under the AAA and protect them from displacement. Investigators acknowledged the situation, but ultimately favored land owners over landless farmers, and the end solution preferred to relocate displaced sharecroppers rather than compel farmers to share subsidy money. The Resettlement Administration, later the Farm Security Administration, approached farm labor seemingly the same way that the Farm Board did, by manipulating supply and demand, relocating displaced farmers to new areas. Predictably, the Farm Bureau, largely influenced by wealthier landowning farmers who would lose out in any depletion of labor supply, objected to the FSA. In this instance the United States addressed the

Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South both take on the difficulties Southern farmers in particular faced in losing tenancy or sharecropping contracts under the New Deal, as well as the legal wrangling to gain concessions from the Farm Security Administration; Jeannie Wayne's *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas* examines the emergence and agency of the STFU in Poinsette County Arkansas as an outgrowth of tensions between occupants of high ground and of delta lowlands; Paul E. Mertz. *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* examines the deeper connections to relocation efforts and economic development, but finds the AAA to blame for displacing farmers who were not adequately served by other stopgap programs.

labor needs of farmers not by supplying workers, but by helping to dispel them. It was a new foray into managing not just farms, but farm workers.²⁴

Abandoned and Idle Farms

Even as bad luck beset farms and incomes failed to rise, farmers looked away from farms and toward other options. The withdrawal from farming only occasionally represented a voluntary fulfillment of farmers' own wishes, but was more often a result of farmers bowing to the inevitable after years of continued pressures. In 1940, for the first time, the United States census included questions about abandoned and idle lands to try to account for land that had been used for farm purposes in the prior census but were no longer as of 1939, and were not expected to be farmed in 1940. Evaluating this data provides a basic snapshot of the challenges of farming in the 1930s. Not all of these troubles are of the sort to be alleviated even by wartime demand.²⁵

The number of farms and partial farms abandoned in the 1940 census count were staggering, and they spoke to a rising agricultural crisis in the United States. The 1940 reports showed that 76,704 farms, totaling nearly 6.5 million acres fell idle in the decade of Depression. Some of these abandoned or idle farms might be attributable to acreage reduction programs that encouraged farmers to grow less, but that is not the sole cause. In many cases entire farms, rather than individual fields were abandoned. Though the size of fallow farms varied greatly by region, they were still typically large acreages that fell out of cultivation in the 1930s. The Pacific, Middle Atlantic and East South Central regions saw the smallest average sizes in abandoned estates. The average idle farm in those regions was just under 60 acres, suggesting that family farmers were selling out or walking away from farming. In the Mountain region,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1940). Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Agriculture, Abandoned or Idle Farms, United States Government Printing Office Washington: 1943.

where abandoned farmers were the largest, a typical abandoned farm averaged 329 acres. These properties, dependent on irrigation technology to thrive, were simply unable to compete in an economic downturn²⁶.

Though these were large farms left idle, the average farm continuing operation was nearly always even larger, suggesting that the age of the family farm was already beginning to wane. Nationally, the average farm that was operational in the 1940 census was 174 acres. This varied substantially by region, of course, but in all cases, the average size of operational farms remained substantially larger than those that were abandoned, suggesting that farms were already entering the get-big-or-get-out phase that would later dominate the 1950s. Left to eke out a meager living from an increasingly narrow-margin industry, small farmer had to choose, and many chose to get out. Fallow properties came slowly back under cultivation in the war years, but farm size also continued to grow, with large landowners further consolidating properties, and smaller farmers struggling to just hold on.²⁷

Land condition was the single largest reason that farmers gave for abandoning their farms, with over one third of all abandoned farms given over to this single condition. By 1940 it was possible to shore soil up against simple infertility with fertilizers, or to protect against environmental threats with pesticides and herbicides, but even these new innovations could not protect land against erosion or drought. In 1940, the Soil Conservation Service reported that at least 50 million acres of cropland was at the end of its usable life, and an additional million acres of cropland had lost half or more of its topsoil. Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace argued for continuation of conservation programs regardless of war status. Defending continued support for farms, he said “If we can restore employment and restore world trade the only farm program

²⁶ Ibid., John Opie discusses the relationship between irrigation technology and large-scale farming in *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land* (1993).

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

necessary would be a conservation program.” Wallace recognized that for farmers walking away from farms because of land condition concerns, a restored sector would never replace basic support of the land. Though conservation began as a serendipitous opportunity to mobilize Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) youth, it would ultimately restore millions of acres of land that could be turned back to cultivation when war demanded it. After land condition, the most common reason for abandonment was a change of occupation by farmers. With war raging overseas and industrial jobs on the rise, farmers took stock of their less promising outlook, and chose to seek work elsewhere. Though the census classified farmers changing occupation as a completely separate category than financial crisis, but this only represents farmers’ self-reporting on the reason farms lay fallow. It is likely that, in many cases, farmers sought outside work because their financial situation demanded it. The same could be said of unavailable tenants or employees. While this accounted for a significant number of abandoned farms, it is likely that the concern was as much one of low farm pay as of genuinely unavailable workers. By the end of 1930, there were 38 million fewer acres under cultivation in the United States than there had been 10 years prior. Much of this was in abandoned or idle lands, but even for farmers who remained on their land, fewer and fewer acres came under the plow. Between planting quotas, low profits, and conservation programs, farmers just didn’t cultivate on the level they had in the twenties.²⁸

Even as the number of farms fell, the rural population became volatile, growing, and then shrinking again in the course of only a few years. Until 1930 the rural share of the U. S. population declined steadily from one census to the next. The Depression slowed and complicated this process. The census counts of 1930 and 1940 show rural populations that are

²⁸ Ibid., 4; Secretary Wallace quoted in Wilcox, *the Farmer in the Second World War*, 9; Annual Report, Soil Conservation Service, 1940.

nearly identical. Though the population nationwide grew, rural people made up just under 44 percent of the total U. S. population in both decennial census counts. The 1935 census of agriculture shows an even more convoluted story than a stagnating rural sector however. As the Depression began, urban-to-rural migration brought city people back to the countryside. In 1935, there were more people living in the rural United States than in either 1930 or 1940. The Depression created a migration pattern typically seen only in periods of national crisis. Wars, depressions, and political instability are typically associated with urban-to-rural migration flows. As industry recovered in the late 1930s, people left the countryside again, and made for urban centers once again. By 1940, the rural population returned to its 1930 levels, and the number of farms fell to a 40 year low.²⁹

In addition to wages, opportunity, and predictability, daily life was more primitive in rural than urban areas, and farm life could be austere even by rural standards. The conveniences that urban people took for granted by 1940 were still out of reach for many farm families. More often than not, farm homes used pumps to obtain water for daily use, and homes that lacked a kitchen sink also wanted for toilets, bathtubs, and other niceties. As of 1939 only 30 percent of rural homes had running water, and fewer than one third had electric lighting. Of these, far more were in small towns than on farms. These conveniences were ubiquitous in even modest urban locales, and for a farmer already besieged by perishing soils and plunging prices, enticements like running water and electricity only incentivized a departure to a more urban setting. For families trying to provide for their children other concerns prevailed as well. Farm children were more likely to be enrolled in school in the 1930s than in decades preceding, but rural schools kept different hours and shorter school years than their urban counterparts, and were still often

²⁹ United States Department of Agriculture, *Census of Agriculture 1940, Chapter 1 – Farms and Farm Property*, Government Printing Office, 1943, 23.

far away from remote farms, forcing farm children to travel farther than their town and city counterparts for schooling. When children's work was essential to keeping farms operational, this time investment forced families to judge the relative value of education against farm work. And though farming is fraught with dangers, hospitals and doctors were far more available to urban folks, and when medical care could be had, rural people paid more than city folks for doctors' visits. For farm families, many of the improvements in daily life that reached cities in the first decades of the twentieth century still had not reached farm homes. As a result, leaving the farm often promised a marked improvement in basic quality of life.³⁰

Some promise

In the mean time, even with farmers severely pressed by low incomes, high operating costs, production quotas, and environmental degradation, there were some small developments in the late 1930s that helped pave the way for better wartime productivity. Scientific advancements in crop varieties and farming methods combined to make many crops more productive by the acre. Since production quotas were by the acre rather than by the pound or bushel, farmers encouraged to cultivate a bit less ground saw fit to invest in hybrid seed, and to invest time in methods tested at land-grant experiment stations and proliferated through county agents. As such, per-acre productivity of several crops improved substantially. Though there were fewer acres of most crops in the late 1930s due to AAA restrictions, many of those crops were more productive by the acre. With a decided incentive to limit cultivated acreage, there was new incentive to experiment with approaches that would improve per-acre yields. AAA subsidies did not restrict total productivity, only acres under cultivation. So with fewer acres to work, it began

³⁰ Interbureau Committee on postwar programs, *The Farm Housing Problem*, United States Department of Agriculture, 1945; M. Davis, *Problems and Issues of Medical Service*, Julius Rosenwald Fund, 6-8.

to make sense for farmers to invest their time and money in higher efficiency production methods instead. Cotton productivity increased from 175 pounds per acre on average in 1928-1931, to approximately 240 pounds per acre in 1938-1941. Tobacco and corn saw more modest increases in per-acre productivity, but the potential was there that, once acreage quotas were lifted during the war, farms had greater productive potential with new varieties and new methods. By forcing farmers to reconsider their approach, AAA acreage allotments opened the door for greater long-range productive potential.³¹

One of the important developments in overall efficiency was increased use of soil-corrective inputs in the late 30s. In that decade, farms consumed more than six times the tonnage of lime that they had used in the prior decade. Lime, judiciously applied, corrects soil acidity and improves the growing environment for most food and fiber crops. In addition, many farmers began to correct for nitrogen shortages in their soil by planting legumes or adding nitrogen rich fertilizers. Because legume acreage was not limited under the Agricultural Adjustment Act, farmers could plant as many acres as they could spare for the crops and count on better balanced soil for their trouble. The result of this combination of improved soil quality and improved crop varieties led to production that far exceeded demand. For farmers in the moment, this was not promising, as an excess of supply correlates to a fall in demand, and therefore a fall in prices. But that is in normal circumstances, not wartime emergency circumstances. Improved efficiency meant that there were vast carryovers of product that would not sell for market acceptable prices. So in 1940 the United States had a back-log of over 120 million bales of cotton, and 230 million tons of feed grains ready to feed into some new market. By the time the United States entered the war, these feed grains would prove important. The United States produced a bumper hog crop in 1942, and, though they depressed the hog market and adjustments to future years led to a

³¹ Census of Agriculture 1945, and Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War*, 10.

more conservative crop, these feedstuffs made it possible to produce a great deal of low-cost pork quickly and efficiently for wartime use.³²

Paradoxically, in light of what was to come in the latter years, farms in the United States were a bit overstaffed. This calamity would be a more tolerable one of course if there had been some opportunity for a comfortable living in agriculture, but as it was, the underemployment of farm folks coincided with significant poverty. Of the roughly six million full time farmers reported in the 1940 agricultural census, over 2.7 million of those farmers earned less than \$1000 in 1939 before expenses. Even though some reckoning puts this at only part-time labor for a farmer, the prevalence of underemployed farmers created a farm sector with the potential to achieve more should there be some incentive to do so. AAA programs valued the opposite, but when international affairs reversed circumstances, the labor available would filter into the military, into industry, and a few even back into farming.³³

As the United States saw increases in industrial opportunity, fortuitously enough, Henry Wallace saw fit to revise some of the USDA's original 1940 production plans. With a greater number of people employed in the United States, and with wages on the rise, perhaps the market would tolerate a bit more luxury from the farming sector. In particular, while the original 1940 plan called for a significant reduction in hog production for 1941, Wallace revised this, and asked producers to continue to grow hogs. While he appears to have been anticipating a domestic increase in demand linked to defense industry spending, the reality was still that the USDA opened the door to increase production of hogs, which would end up overseas in lend-lease sales to allied forces. The Lend-Lease program would not be finalized until after hog production already increased, but by March, 1941, still well removed from U. S. entry into the

³² United States Department of Agriculture, *Census of Agriculture 1945*; Wilcox, *Farmer in the Second World War*, 12.

³³ Phillip Hammer and Robert Buck, "Idle Man Power," *Land Policy Review*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 9-18.

war, allied forces began making requests of U. S. agriculture, and the farm sector began gearing up to meet its productive potential. By 1941 the USDA negotiated higher production and guaranteed prices for tomatoes, eggs, canned vegetables, and dried beans. These latter had been so productive that there were already overages from prior years ready to ship out almost immediately. Also in 1941, realizing the impact that an international war would have on imported agricultural goods, Wallace called for U. S. farmers to increase their output of flax, hemp, and castor oil. Though the United States had still not yet entered the war, the convergence of circumstances served to shake the farm sector out of its years-long malaise, and placed U. S. farms on a course to meet their productive potential if farmers could be persuaded to stay the course.³⁴

Why the USA?

Indeed, of all of the allies, the United States alone was in a position to overproduce food on the level that would be essential for wartime effort. Britain rallied its resources to best advantage, drafting available citizens, often young women, into farm service, and clearing and cultivating new lands to expand domestic supply. But the entire Isle of Britain is a bit smaller than Oregon, and its population was about one third of the size of the United States population. Russia, though gifted with vast physical territory, suffered the impediments of productivity that accompany the occupation by a foreign power, combined with the short growing season and environmental inhospitabilities of the high latitudes. Australia, roughly the size of the continental 48, rallied its resources, but the bulk of Australia's vast interior is the inhospitable Great Victoria Desert. Only narrow strips of the continent's coastal land is suitable for food crops, and with a population barely over seven million, both land and labor resources were limited. Australia achieved heroic food outputs during the war, but its land and labor resources

³⁴ Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War*, 37-39.

were limited and sheer distance complicated transportation networks. China was in a situation not unlike the worst of Russia and Australia combined. China's raw size was comparable to that of the United States, but its productive potential was circumscribed by a far larger population, a primitive agricultural sector, an occupying army, and the vast Gobi desert that rendered the interior inarable even if it was traversable.

The demands placed on the United States began even before Pearl Harbor. Europe was embroiled in war by 1941, and while the country did not jump directly into the war, the "Cash and Carry" program did open the door to supply farm products to the allies. As cash ran out in allied countries, and U. S. commitment grew, the "Cash and Carry" program was replaced with a "Lend-Lease" program that opened the door to even greater production as allied forces no longer needed a means of remuneration to get the supplies that they desperately needed. Fortuitously, the Lend-Lease program created a perfect outlet for somewhat overproduced pork in early 1941, as well as creating demand for eggs, canned vegetables, and shelf-stable dairy products. As a result of Lend-Lease demand, wartime production grew away from parity supports. In 1941, farmers started larger flocks of laying hens than they had in previous years even without the promise of increased price supports. Slowly, the war was turning farms around, and farmers were responding to market demand rather than price supports. Though other products did not have such a fortuitous rise in demand, as the war continued, more and more products followed the same course. As prices stabilized on the open market, price supports receded, slowly releasing farmers to compete on the open market again.³⁵

So the United States was in an enviable position entering the war. Other allied countries rallied their resources and produced as well as they could, but none had the combination of a high ratio of arable land per capita, a modern agricultural sector, a cooperative landscape, and the

³⁵ Wilcox, 38, 136-137.

relative security that comes of having an Atlantic or Pacific ocean between itself and the enemy. So the United States' agricultural sector, though emerging from something of a malaise, was the best hope to feed allied forces and refugees for the duration of the war. Farmers coming out of a Depression were eager for the income associated with wartime demand, but they also faced the challenge of feeding the allies with fewer farms than the country had in 1920, and with fewer laborers than in 1930. The lend-lease program would conservatively consume at least 10 percent of the foodstuffs produced in the USA, and that does not include goods shipped overseas to U. S. military forces. Wartime circumstances offered economic opportunity for farmers and industry alike, but farmers, never effective at competing with industry, would have to forge new and more cooperative relationships with the government and with the urban civilian sector in order to leverage fewer farms and fewer workers to produce the largest crops the country had yet seen. U. S. agriculture had tremendous untapped potential on the eve of World War II. Its productive potential had been stifled through policy and attrition as farming grew from a family business to a corporate scale operation. The war would test the limits of U. S. farms, but would also usher farms through the transition from a deliberately underproducing, poverty-ridden sector to the productive force that would make the United States the breadbasket of the world.³⁶

³⁶ Wilcox, *The Farmer in the Second World War*, 11-12; United States Census of Agriculture 1945.

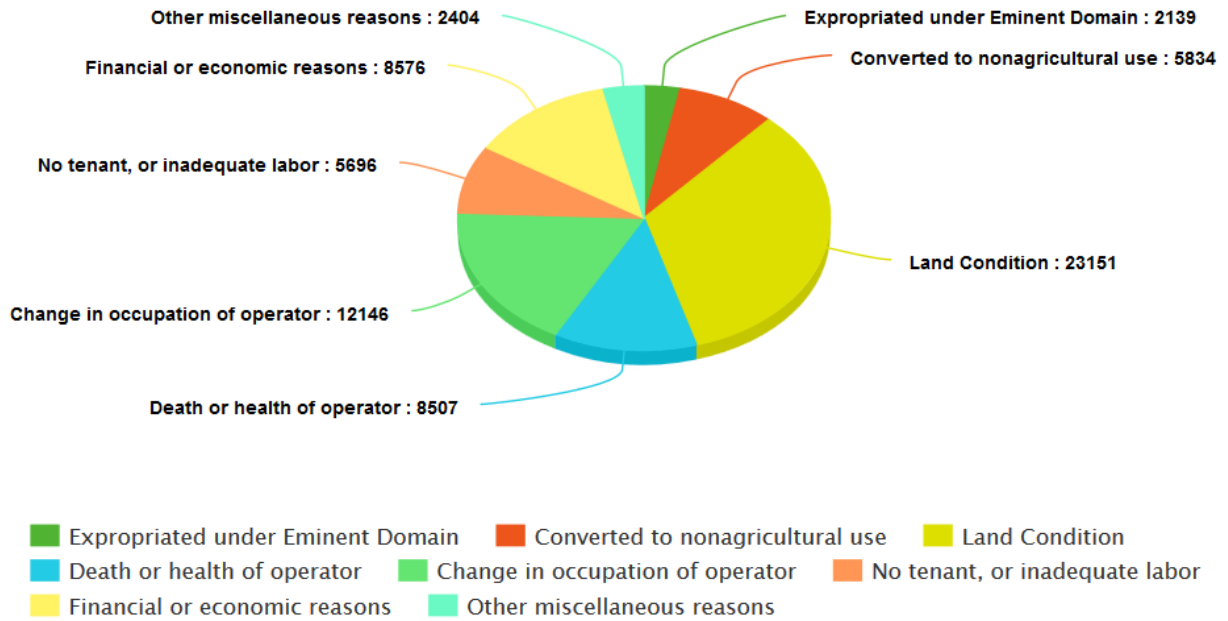


Figure 2.1 Reasons given in 1940 census for idle or abandoned lands. Land Condition—a situation not entirely reparable even by demand.

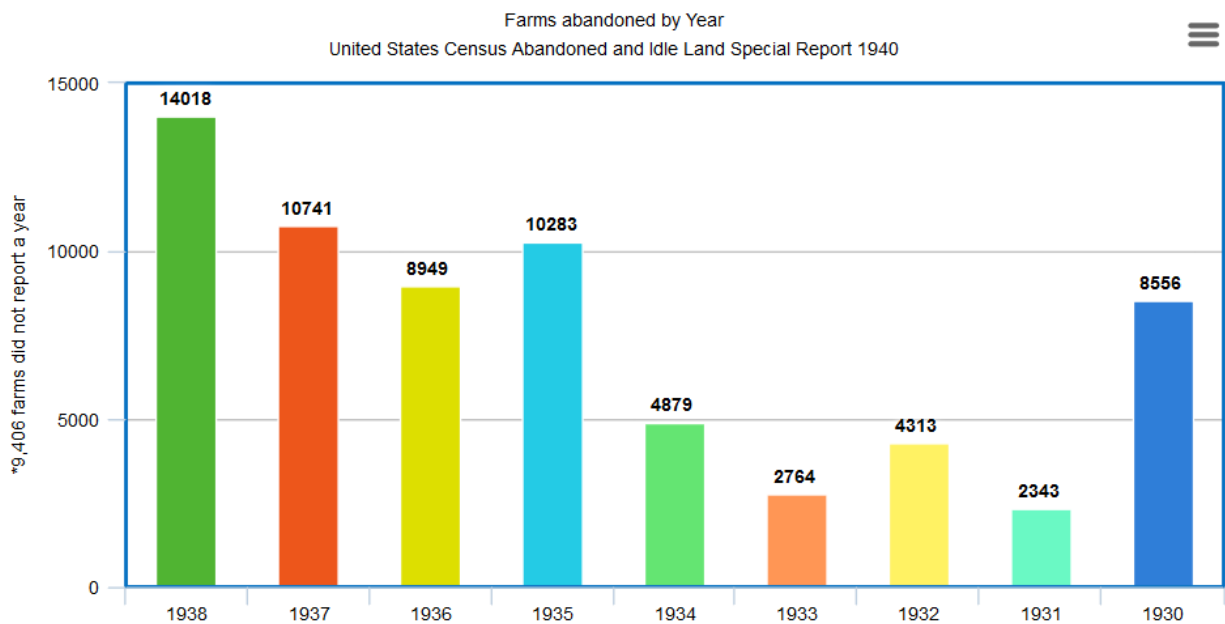


Figure 2.2 Commencement of non-operation by year. Farmers were growing desperate in 1938.

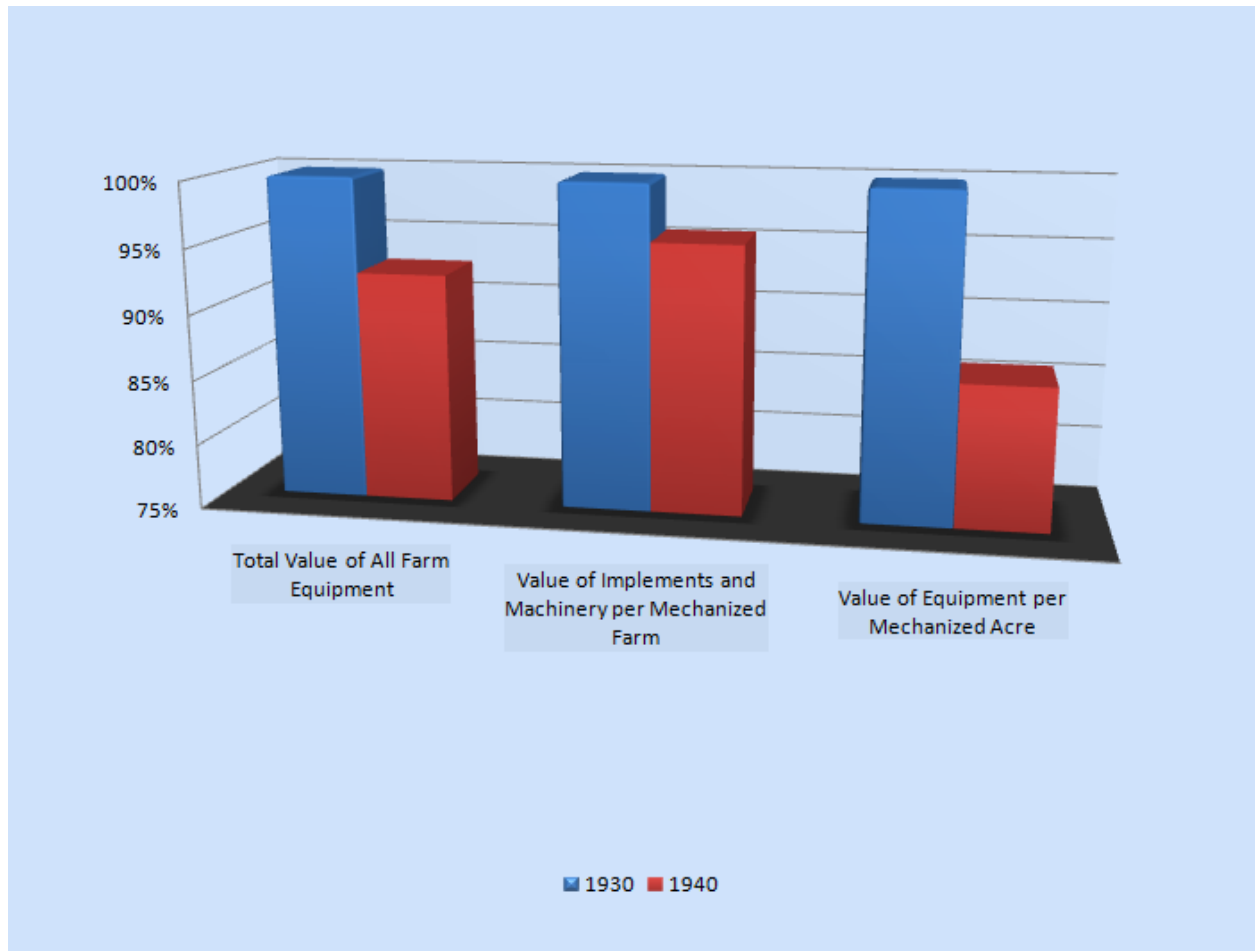


Figure 2.3 Value of Farm Equipment in 1940 as a percentage of 1930 numbers. By each measure, value of farm equipment falls during the AAA.

Chapter 3

Fits and Starts: farms, women, and war 1917-1942

An examination of the experiences of women in the World War I and early World War II is illustrative of both the interest urban women had in agriculture and the flexibility with which farmers viewed women workers. Women wanted to work on farms, and farmers were at least willing to be convinced of women's ability. The success of these early precedents justified a larger, federally supported program, and also demonstrated that farmers and workers were both willing to experiment. Though women's presence on farms threatened urban interpretations of gender, wartime chaos created an opportunity for farmers and nonfarm women to negotiate at least a temporary rearrangement of those roles so long as the experience was mutually beneficial. Farmers could simply have opted out of hiring women if the programs failed, and women could have ceased to volunteer if their experiences were unsatisfactory. But from the creation of the first national women's farm worker program in World War I, to youth programs that fielded teen girls in World War II, urban women and the rural sector showed a durable coalescence of interests. Women wanted to work on farms, and farmers wanted work done. Experiments that fielded urban women undeniably challenged entrenched gender roles, but the success of early programs showed that women were not only very capable farm hands, but that women and farmers alike valued the new opportunities offered by women as farm workers more than they valued traditional gender roles that would circumscribe agricultural productivity.

Women in the United States had a long and proven relationship with the agricultural sector long before World War II, but that relationship was largely subsumed within the private sphere, where few saw or realized what farm women contributed to commercial as well as

domestic productivity. Though their persistent presence in poultrying and egg production demonstrates that women did control some facets of market-directed agriculture, United States policy from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century envisioned farmers as men, and farm women first and foremost as wives rather than farmers. This may help to explain why the Federal Government hesitated to mobilize women as commercial farm hands during World War II, even though the same government had no compunctions about immediately calling for women to come work in factories. In spite of this federal reluctance to engage women as farmers, women organized and mobilized at the private level during World War I to enter into wartime service as farm hands, proving that they required no federal supervision and, when opportunity emerged, they resisted federal integration and chose to collaborate with, rather than subordinate themselves to, federal management.³⁷

That U.S. entrance into the “Great War” in April, 1917, stimulated a food-production boom is in itself a signal that the U.S. had departed from its isolationist tradition. There was no domestic shortage of agricultural products. In fact, oversupply created a situation where prices had plummeted and many farmers descended into poverty. Those farmers found some relief when Congress passed the Food Production Act, which set aside funding to assure that every county had a USDA extension agent even if citizens had not raised funds for (or requested) the program. This network of agents had responsibility for, among other things, allocation of farm inputs like seed and fertilizer to assure productivity remained high. In addition, Congress passed another, somewhat more controversial provision in 1917 that established a precedent for federal management of the movement and allocation of food. The legislation, "An Act to Provide

³⁷ Joan M. Jensen’s *Loosening the Bonds: Mid Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* discusses the rise of gendered separation of work in agriculture. Jensen’s other study, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land*, also explores the process of confining rural women to urban interpretations of public and private.

Further for the National Security and Defense by Encouraging the Production, Conserving the Supply, and Controlling the Distribution of Food Products and Fuel", often called the Lever Food Act, gave the federal government power to dictate food distribution. For farmers this was a mixed bag, as it forbade the consumption of foodstuffs for alcohol production, which limited demand for grain products, on the other hand the bill also paved the way for floor prices for wheat, somewhat offsetting the effects of the artificially depleted demand. Farmers complained that the floor price of \$2.20 per bushel was too low, but wrangling in Washington, DC prevented it from changing in 1918. Washington took clear charge in this sweeping legislation of distribution, supply, and pricing, establishing a precedent for government management of the farm sector.³⁸

The United States created the War Food Administration (WFA) committed to supplying food to allied militaries and civilians in 1917. This created a demand for food that bolstered prices for the duration of the war and for a brief period beyond. Broadcasting the slogan "Food Will Win the War" across posters, murals, and newspaper advertisements, the Committee on Public Information drew distinctly unsubtle connections between the U.S. Agricultural sector and patriotic duty. It recommended such measures as victory gardens and food conservation as well as promoting various measures to provide labor directly to farmers. In short, it divided its attention between conserving available agricultural products and increasing production. In addition, Congress passed the Lever Food Control Act in 1917, which endowed the Federal Government with authority to directly manage the prices and distribution of crops relevant to the war effort. Proposed by Asbury Francis Lever, of Smith-Lever Act fame, this act was welcomed

³⁸ Public Law 65-41, 40 Stat. 276. August 10, 1917, Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture 1900-1930*; Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy Five Years of Cooperative Extension*, 70-95; Also see Nancy Berlage, *Farmers Helping Farmers: The Rise of the Farm and Home Bureaus 1914-1935*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016) 126-127.

by temperance activist women, many of whom would go on to serve in the Women's Land Army of America (WLAA), as it fiercely restricted directing any grain crops to distilleries and breweries, funneling them instead to foreign and domestic food interests. With production and distribution more directly concentrated into Federal hands, the problem of farm labor would necessarily also become a matter of federal rather than personal concern.³⁹

The WFA promoted its cause mostly through educational campaigns using printed literature and educational speakers. The movement intersected quite obviously with broader women's movements when Hoover appointed Harriot Eaton Stanton Blatch, daughter of famed suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Blatch was an influential member of both the Women's Trade Union League and the National American Woman Suffrage Association, and, significantly, she was head of the Speaker's Bureau of the Food Administration. In addition to her militant suffragist activities, Blatch was also a member of the Women's Agricultural and Horticultural International Union. This brought her into contact with British counterparts who had, in substantially more dire straits than the United States, created a national registry of women capable of agricultural work. The WFA balked at Blatch's early recommendation for a similar program, but Blatch knew from her horticultural club experiences that women had an interest in farm work, so she sought other avenues to mobilize woman volunteers.⁴⁰

³⁹ "16,000 Women to Aid City Food Campaign," *New York Times*, 1 October, 1917. Herbert Hoover, *Herbert Hoover: An American Epic: Famine in Forty-Five Nation Organization Behind the Front, 1914-1923* (Chicago: Henry Regency Co., 1960), 59. Frank M. Surface and R. L. Bland, "American Food in the World War and Reconstruction Period (Stanford: Stanford university Press, 1931), vii, 189; "C. D. Gibson's Committee for Patriotic Posters," *New York Times*, 20 January 1918, 63; Public Law 65-41 40 Stat 276, "An Act to provide further for the national security and defense by encouraging the production, conserving the supply, and controlling the distribution of food products and fuel."

⁴⁰ Penny Martelet, "The Woman's Land Army, World War I," in *Clio Was a Woman: Studies in the History of American Women*, ed. Mabel E. Deutrich and Virginia Cardwell Purdy (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1980), 136-45.

World War I created a situation where women who had no previous experience in agriculture were asked to consider working on farms when the opportunity arose. These efforts eventually culminated in a national program that existed somewhere between the public and the private sectors, recruiting and deploying women as part of a collective national effort. Even before the large-scale program was established, however, women's organizations often recognized the need and opportunity that the war presented and mobilized women into the fields ad hoc. In New York a, bastion of club-women's activism, several programs emerged. Ida H. Ogilvie, a geology professor at Barnard College who would later serve as an officer and key contributor to the Woman's Land Army of America, pioneered a program that trained college students in farm work on a dedicated "experiment farm." So successful was this initial program that Ogilvie spent the following year traveling the country and sharing the stories of her students' successful training to promote a national program to recruit women for wartime farm service.⁴¹

While Ogilvie was still training women in basic farm skills, elsewhere in New York, club ladies organized in early 1917 for farm work under the Mayor's Committee on Women in Defense (MCWD). Inspired by the prospects the British program suggested, The MCWD set up a separate committee to consider the role of women in agriculture and raised money to recruit workers. They also purchased automobiles to move teams of five to six women around New York, meeting demand as it shifted from one site to the next. The MCWD volunteers proved especially useful to truck farmers who used the women to harvest and sometimes process or preserve garden truck. Organizers and participates agreed that they were motivated more by patriotic spirit than any hope of significant financial gain. Though the MCWD required farmers to pay the workers, the privately organized group was unable to fund housing or board, and

⁴¹ Martlet, "Women's Land Army" 136-137; Stephanie Carpenter, *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), chapter 1.

docked participants' pay for it instead. One team deployed in and around Milton, New York, averaged piecework pay of \$31.07 for their first five-week deployment. Of that, the women were each responsible for board and transportation costs that totaled \$16.95, leaving women on average a weekly pay of \$2.82—hardly the stuff that dreams were made of even in 1917. Railroad workers and industrial workers could easily anticipate \$15 to \$25 per week. But women's wages were typically lower than men's wages in the early 20th century, and for college girls looking for a way to spend their summer, or for clubwomen volunteering for a cause more than for a paycheck, the compensation was adequate if not lucrative. Of course there were also less tangible compensations as well, like patriotism, or commitment to creating horticultural opportunities for women in the future.⁴²

On the other side of the country in California the reality that agriculture would suffer without some new source of labor was clear, but growers there were guardedly optimistic that women could, if properly supplemented through technology, satisfy as makeshift farm hands. “The man with the hoe is gone” crowed the *Los Angeles Times* in April, 1918. “Six hundred thousand of him left the fields of America last year. The woman with the tractor must take his place.” In the Northeast, Louisa King, president of the Women's National Farm and Garden Association, (WNFGA) extorted her readership of the importance of the same problem. “If this nation is fortunate enough to escape war with an external power” she wrote “we must still organize effectively all our agricultural resources to fight the high cost of food.” The same sentiment was echoed in the suffragist *Woman's Journal* in 1917 “All over America today suffragists are leading a back-to-the-land movement in response to the nation's call for greater production of foodstuffs ... They have put their hand to the plow and are not turning back. The

⁴² “Placing Women on the Land” 1, 3; Maurine Greenwald, *Women, War, and Work: the Impact of World War I on Women Workers in the United States* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1980), 32.

woman with a hoe is easily discernible just back of the man with the gun.” The war created opportunities for women that had not existed before, but once women entered the farm sector, by all appearances, the United States found them more novel and noteworthy than iconoclastic or offensive.⁴³

The Women’s National Farm and Garden Association found significant opportunity in this crisis. No hobbyist’s organization, the WNFGA provided training, encouragement, and information for women in, or interested in, horticultural professions, and provided training and education intended to increase the number of women in professional agricultural positions. When wartime emergency called for supplementary farm laborers, women recognized it as a golden opportunity for an organization oriented to ushering women into horticultural circles. In the first year of organized service the WNFGA did not create a WLAA per se, but jointly coordinated with other women’s groups to create what they called a “Land Service League” that unapologetically linked participation in agricultural service with the suffrage movement. Alice Stone Blackwell promoted the Land Service League in her suffrage newspaper, *The Woman Citizen*, reminding would-be-volunteers that contributing to the war effort would demonstrate the commitment of women to assisting the nation during war emergency and the value they placed on national interests. Hilda Loines reminded readers of the *Woman’s Journal* that “all over America today suffragists are leading a back to the land movement in response to the nation’s call for greater production of foodstuffs.” In addition, the New York Women’s Suffrage Party advertised training camps for young women who wished to learn farm labor as early as 1917, drawing many young suffrage-minded women to farm work before the first Land Army was even fully established. The Land Service League and its accompanying regional programs had only a

⁴³ “Women to Till Thousands of Southern California Acres,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1918; “An Army for Agriculture,” *Women’s Journal*, April 11, 1917, 1.

small geographic scope each, but at the end of 1917, members of many of these small organizations met to discuss a more comprehensive program for 1918. The outcome of that December meeting was the Women's Land Army of America.⁴⁴

In early 1918 the WNFGA teamed up with Ida Ogilvie, sending the New York club phenom on a tour through the Northwest to promote the idea of a formal and large-scale Woman's Land Army similar to the British program. They called for regionally organized programs that could be largely self-sustaining and independent administratively so that timelines and practices could be tailored to the immediate agricultural needs of the community. They reached out to college campuses and women's groups to find recruits for the 1918 crop year. Their goal was to place groups in eighteen states in time to assist with the planting season in April 1918, and to add units to an additional nine states by June. The combined program, the WLAA, was committed specifically to providing substitutes for farm hands diverted by the war effort. While Hoover's WFA hesitated to support a WLA when initially proposed by Harriot Blatch in 1917, Woodrow Wilson praised the idea to Mrs. Henry Wade Rogers, a regional organizer. "I am gratified to hear of the plan of the Women's Land Army to help increase the food supply of our country and the Allies through enrolling active and patriotic young women . . . I trust that our farmers, like the farmers of Great Britain and Canada, will avail themselves of this aid to the fullest extent practicable and that the response of our loyal young women . . . will be generous and complete." The organization in a single statement assigned responsibilities to both farmers and farm workers. Young women were expected to volunteer in the name of

⁴⁴ Reprinted in Elaine Weiss, *Fruits of Victory: The Woman's Land Army of America in the Great War*, (Washington, D. C. Potomac Books) 2008. 36-37.

patriotic responsibility, and farmers, conversely, were expected to follow the example of farmers abroad, and to give these new workers the opportunity to prove their mettle.⁴⁵

Though Wilson approved of the program, he specifically objected to the idea of any federal money or national oversight of the program. For Wilson the WLAA's proper role was as an auxiliary organization rather than a nationalized program. The founders of the WLAA sought, from the beginning, to create regionally controlled and administered programs, so without any federal interest to bind them together, units in various states took on different organizational structures. In some states they filed for incorporation and became fully independent but coordinated entities that worked closely with government agencies as they deemed appropriate, but each branch ultimately organized according to its own regional interest and preference with no rigorous control from above. While the program did ultimately coordinate with the War Labor Board, they were never absorbed into it. For women who lacked a formal voice in government via the franchise, this separation from federal oversight allowed them to retain greater control over concerns like working conditions and wages, and provided opportunity, in theory at least, to refuse working arrangements that did not meet their expectations.⁴⁶

Recruitment and training strategies varied according to regional resources. Broadly, though, colleges proved to be important resources, supplying qualified instructors and modern facilities. In addition, in many regions, colleges supplied many recruits with summers and

⁴⁵ Martlet, "Women's Land Army" 136-67; Stephanie Carpenter, *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), Chapter 1; "Plan Land Army Work: Women from Sixteen States Meet to Consider Harvest Program," *New York Times*, 26 June 1918; "Land Army Praised, President Writes in Appreciation of Women's Farm Work" *New York Times*, 11 April, 1918. WLAA, with two A's, is a name given only to the World War I program. World War II programs drop the second A.

⁴⁶ "Land Army Incorporates," *New York Times*, 24 May 1918; "Plan Land Army Work" *New York Times*, 26 June, 1918.

weekends available for service. In addition to the training offered through Barnard's geology faculty, the University of Virginia offered courses such as "Plowing, Harrowing, General Land Tillage, and Preparation of Land by Horse-Drawn Implements" in spring of 1918. The course took 4 weeks and required trainees to live on campus for the duration of the class. The cost of \$20 offset the expense of room and board for students. Wellesley College developed similar programs, along several other institutions: Blackburn College, in Carlinville, Illinois; the University of Wisconsin, Massachusetts Agricultural College; Cornell University. Other schools and organizations developed similar residential programs. In Washington, D. C., "women who work in offices [could] register for late afternoons" in half-day courses offered on a large cooperative training farm that targeted working women who might spend weekends or vacations doing farm labor. Smith College actually developed its own independent unit of the WLAA that it trained on sight and deployed in the surrounding community in 1918. One college-age recruit recalled her time in a training unit with humor "We had to be taught several things, among them the difference between a nice little tomato plant and a weed. Since we could not learn all the plants and weeds, our rule was 'anything growing in rows is plant, anything growing at large is weed.'" While hardly a scientific approach, this pragmatism served most trainees satisfactorily enough to get started at least.⁴⁷

Though far smaller than the Women's Land Army of World War II would eventually become, the WLAA provided a working model of a flexible organization that deployed volunteer women on an as-needed basis in a sector with varying and highly specific labor needs. Units

⁴⁷ Sophia Smith Collection, College Archives of Smith College, Northampton, Mass., Box 130; (digital images supplied by request); Training Brochure, Women's Land Army Training Camp, Emma L. George Papers, 1915-1920, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection, Box 1, folder 1; Women's Land Army of America inc., Progress Report, Emma L. George Papers; Helen Kennedy Stevens, WLAA member, New York Times, 24 February, 1918. Stevens recalled one unfortunate time that a "farmerette" as the girls were called, fell victim to a particularly symmetrically arranged column of plantain weeds, and nurtured them for weeks while plucking pesky lima beans from the surrounding ground mistaking them for weeds.

preferred to be mostly autonomous in operation, but the organization was loosely administered and standards basically set by a board of directors that examined broad concerns like pay and treatment. With its roots in the WNFGA and the suffrage movement, it is no surprise that the WLAA's *Handbook of Standards*, ironically published in 1919 as the war wound to a close, demanded that volunteers receive pay for their labor and that ideally no individual woman should be stationed on a farm without WLAA supervision unless there were another woman living in the household to act in the role of chaperone. Whether the concern was that women could not be trusted with men, or that men could not be trusted with women, the WLAA avoided even the perception that they were violating any social, rather than economic norms. Women could do farm work with respectability only so long as there were boundaries between the professional and the personal. The program's stated ambitions, to advance women's opportunities as professional botanists and horticulturalists depended ultimately then on making farm women guardians of the WLAA's reputation. The WLAA considered the presence of a farm woman an endorsement of the moral fortitude of a job site, and burdened farm women with guardianship of the conduct of male farmers and female WLAA workers alike.⁴⁸

At the same time the WLAA established that labor needs could be met, they also established, importantly, that farmers could and would accept woman workers. The most common way for WLAA workers to deploy was in small or large units, the smaller groups living in host farmers' homes with WLAA supervision available. This perfectly replicated the relationship that many farmers had to more traditional hired hands who became a part of the farm household, taking meals at the farm table and sharing in family activities and responsibilities. Larger units established as "camps" of 10 -50 women living under the watch of a resident

⁴⁸ Women's Land Army of America, *Handbook of Standards*, 7-10.

WLAA supervisor. Girls living in these supervised arrangements typically paid for their own room and board out of their own earnings. The board of directors argued that this “place[d] the worker in a more intelligent and responsible relationship to the unit.”⁴⁹

Fielding over fifteen thousand women recruited from over twenty states, the program met agricultural needs as they arose, with WLAA supervisors authority to write contracts that restricted hours and articulated wages, and released the WLAA from liability if the farmer should, for any reason, find his WLAA help unsatisfactory, and authorized, indeed required, supervisors to inspect living quarters and conditions before deploying WLAA women to any site. The seasonally fickle nature of farm work made housing and logistics one of the key complications of the WLAA. Women could be deployed as temporary or seasonal workers as particular crops demanded, but generally the organization expected an eight to ten hour work day, but this latter was only acceptable if tasks were diversified. The organization was careful to protect workers from extensive spans of unbroken repetitious activity, stipulating that “the 10 hour day should not be allowed except when the work is varied and intermittent.” Repetitious tasks such as detassling corn or pitching hay could threaten a worker’s health if not properly moderated. Regardless of diversity of tasks the board of directors demanded that no work day exceed 12 hours.⁵⁰

This protectiveness of the workforce was not entirely misplaced for the WLAA. Though club women spearheaded community initiatives and raised funds for men serving abroad, there was little national framework to cover volunteer women in support of a foreign war, but compounding the difficulty, club women tended to come from the middle and upper classes, and

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

had little experience with the physical rigors of a work day in manual labor. The WLAA was built on the foundation of the Women's Club movement, and while some rural and lower-class women sometimes participated in some women's clubs, they tended to be underrepresented. Lower class women had other demands on their time, and were often financially unable to participate in clubs that required dues or fees. Ironically, then, lower class women who worked as factory laborers or domestics before the war and would have had the best experience with long, repetitious physical labor did not typically have strong ties to the clubs and colleges that fed into the WLAA. The WLAA allowed underemployed middle and upper class women to use the wartime emergency to challenge ideas that linked class and labor, but they also eschewed those women whose abilities best matched the mission of the program.⁵¹

While the clubwomen making up the WLAA had workforce ambitions—remember the Farm and Garden Association aimed to make women professional horticulturalists—clubwomen's actual presence and experience in the workforce was severely limited, and especially so in unskilled labor. At the outset of World War I the relationship between government and labor was not one to be sought after if at all to be avoided in general, and for an untested labor force like clubwomen, there was little government interest in nurturing or bolstering the program. In actuality, though, the Federal government took little to no interest in managing agricultural labor before the war regardless of sex. There was funding for research

⁵¹ Mary I. Wood, *The History of the Federation of Women's Clubs, For the First Twenty Two Years of Its Organization* (New York, 1912). Wood describes early women's clubs as very much dominated by urban elite women. This is echoed in Jane Cunningham Croly's study, *The History of the Women's Club Movement in America* (New York: Henry G. Allen, 1898). Later histories include Eleanor Flexner's, *Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980); And for a small-town and rural perspective that illustrates the class linked components of rural women's clubs, see Stacey Hortsmann Gatti "In Their Own Backyard: The Local Imperative of Small Town Women's Citizenship 1896-1930" *New York History* 88 (Fall 2007) 419-452.

and extension activities that would directly improve farm yields, but that did not extend to managing farm labor, perhaps because before the war that labor was never in short enough supply to create any great tension. It would perhaps, in light of these precedents, have made little sense for the WLAA to seek a relationship with the Federal Government at all. Indeed, WLAA women were typically characterized as doing their “patriotic duty” or deriving “benefit physically, socially, and financially from a few months’ work out of doors.” by most voices chiming in on the subject. They were certainly not often characterized as working primarily for purposes of career development.⁵²

Perhaps in no small part because the communities they served in were desperate, the WLAA was able to gain significant concessions from employers, including a guaranteed wage of no less than twenty-five cents per day, and with an eight hour work day. Any additional hours an individual woman performed was considered overtime, and work days were to be no longer than ten hours per day. These concessions may seem relatively small by modern standards, but in 1918 federal regulations for wages or working hours were still a decade and a half away. When they did finally pass, those regulations were applied more rigorously to industrial than agricultural sectors. These guarantees secured by the WLAA on behalf of its workers represented a significant concession in a sector that would be exempted from many of these regulations in the future.⁵³

Though the WLAA created opportunity for college girls, office workers, and middle-class club women to work together, there were limits to the egalitarianism of the organization. While white women overwhelmingly dominated membership, the organization’s newsletter

⁵² “Placing Women on the Land: Experiments in the Eastern United States” *Women’s National Farm and Garden Association Monthly Bulletin* 4 (February 1918): 2.

⁵³ Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 113.

openly favored the relationship between farming and the “Americanization” of non-white members. The California branch actively recruited within African American organizations, with the California Civic League actually running its own separate recruiting drive, and at least one African American newspaper called on its readership to enlist. In keeping with many other community improvement and volunteer organizations of the day, WLAA leadership sought to shape values of all members to reflect those of the white middle class. In at least one case, Ida Oglivie, now a WLAA branch president in New York, argued that “What the WLA emphasizes is that the women we send out are intelligent, not the class of cheap labor supplied heretofore where three Mexicans were required to do the work of one white man.” Oglivie’s pride appears to be somewhat misplaced, however (in addition to being condescending and profoundly biased), as the United States, in spite of the WLAA’s success, continued to choose Mexican labor over domestic female workers after the war. Though that could reflect cultural preferences for male, and non-white agricultural labor in the United States, Oglivie’s boast appears over-critical, since Mexican workers remained sought-after as farm workers in the post war years.⁵⁴

The WLAA of World War I appears to have been at least a moderate success. Evaluating the 1918 crop year, recruiting director Ida H. Oglivie argued that women had, through their wartime experience, proven their value to agriculture in any circumstance, not just wartime ones. “[T]he Land Army has another and higher duty in the reconstruction period that is at hand. To it is presented the supreme opportunity of giving to large numbers of women the chance to do out-of-door work under conditions which afford the chance for the working out of one of the most interesting of experiments in Democracy. “The WLAA, in Oglivie’s view at least, was the manifestation of the very ambitions of the Great War itself—a living example of the superiority

⁵⁴ Gowdy-Wygart, *Cultivating Victory: The Women’s Land Army and the Victory Garden Movement*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013) 57; Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 113, 254.

of the great political experiment of the United States. “The Spirit of the Land Army” she declared “is the true substance of the democratic idea.” A year before women secured the right to vote—an amendment that Woodrow Wilson attributed in part to women’s staunch support of the war effort -- Ogilvie argued that women had, through agricultural labor, proven their political loyalty to the democratic ideal.⁵⁵

Washington policymakers were not entirely adverse to continued use of women as farm workers after the war ended, but it was the independent-minded WLAA itself that resisted a close working relationship with Washington, D. C... They were perhaps concerned, at least in part, by a lack of precedent in 1919, that Washington might not make the best cooperative partner for women seeking progressive opportunity in the workforce. Then again they may have been responding to sluggishness in Washington regarding the 19th Amendment, which was being argued in January, 1919. While Washington wanted the WLAA to submit to federal oversight, the WLAA believed they could achieve their objectives under self-management without surrendering their independence to a federal authority that excluded them from basic political participation. So while the WLAA maintained a cordial relationship to federal authority, and acknowledged the “unparalleled opportunity for usefulness” that Washington offered, the organization’s leadership maintained a professional distance from Washington, and argued that “the actual efficiency which the [WLAA] may attain rests on the cooperation of the State Divisions and on the spirit of the landworkers.” So in 1919 it was the WLAA, and not Washington, that terminated the tentative partnership that the two had enjoyed. Realizing that they were likely better able to manage State and local relationships themselves, the WLAA avoided further entanglement with the Department of Labor. The organization hadn’t lost its

⁵⁵Ida Ogilvie “The Spirit of the Land Army,” *The Farmerette*, December 1918, 1.

purpose, but leadership simply didn't see a role for the Federal Government in advancing WLAA interests.⁵⁶

The decline of the program cannot reasonably be attributed to the willingness of women themselves, however. It is clear that for many women deployed during World War I the ambition was to remain on the land even after peace returned in November 1918. Indeed many young women expressed significant ambition to continue their agricultural involvement beyond the war. Rachel Karn, a Santa Monica recruit to the WLAA, was stationed at Arden Dairies, outside of El Monte, California, argued that she was capable of putting “my good muscles to work on the farm. I know how to milk and I can learn to plow, drive a team, or any other kind of work of the kind.” Moreover, she saw a future for herself beyond the war, declaring in 1918 “I am determined to put all my practical knowledge of farm work to the fore, and believe me, I expect to be in charge of a big ranch before the war is over.” Karn's career ambitions exactly matched the stated goals of the WNFGA. And in New York, even with the ceasefire, the WLAA office began receiving applications from women eager to serve in the 1919 crop year. Mrs. Otto Eichel, chairman of the New York State WLAA reported in May 1919 that “For weeks past now many . . . girls have been coming into the state headquarters and the local headquarters of the New York Land Army asking how early in the spring they can go out on to the land. ‘When will the first camp open?’ is the question one hears in this office day after day.”⁵⁷

Even as the program dissolved, suffrage activists saw the WLAA as an important linchpin in women's greater participation in agriculture. Alice Stone Blackwell's *The Woman Citizen* featured a story on the future of the Land Army in the May 1919 issue in which the

⁵⁶ *Farmerette*, Vol 1, No 2, Jan 1919.

⁵⁷ “Placing Women on the Land” 1-4; “Santa Monica Girl Joins Land Army,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1918, 115; “The Future of the Land Army,” *The Woman Citizen*, May 17, 1919, 1096.

chairman of the New York State Woman's Land Army argued for long-term continuance of the program. The program was, she argued "not only unique, but revolutionary, because it had solved so many problems in the rural life of our state that it had not planned to solve in the beginning." The program had, she argued become "one of the greatest reconstruction movements which is today developing in this country." By sending young women into the countryside to work during peak seasons in agriculture, the program reversed a trend of declining land under cultivation that had characterized the pre-war peacetime years. Though that declining cultivation reflected falling pre-war crop prices and a declining rural population in the early 20th century, the program created a model for urban and rural cooperation in agriculture. For some New Yorkers the WLAA promised a peacetime solution to the problem of rural-to-urban migration. By capitalizing on women whose summers became "periods of enforced idleness" they could potentially restore agricultural production to the countryside.⁵⁸

Unfortunately this was not to be. New York analysts may have been unfamiliar with the agricultural context of the 1880s to 1920s, but falling prices associated with over-production likely contributed as much to the declining number of acres under cultivation, and a ready supply of labor did not necessarily equate to a ready and robust peacetime market. In the 1930s, the Great Depression then delivered a double-damaging blow to women in the agricultural workforce. Programs designed to bolster farmers' pay encouraged substantial crop reductions resulting in a lower demand for labor at the same time that a tremendous backlash against women in the workplace in general emerged. While women's more traditional jobs did not come under threat, women working in male-dominated fields faced harsh criticism from the frustrated masses. Though women from coast to coast were eager to participate in the 1919 planting

⁵⁸ Eichel, , *The Woman Citizen*, May 17, 1919. (Mrs. Otto Eichel was the Chairman of the New York State Woman's Land Army"

season, by September the camps had disbanded, and women workers had gone home. For all of her successes, the farmerette of World War I was no more. Individual states would have the flexibility to hire or not hire women in the coming years, but the national program ended its relationship with the federal government, which considered the employment of returning soldiers a more important priority.⁵⁹

The Great Depression did many things to undermine the presence of non-farm women in agricultural fields, but it ultimately also set an interesting series of precedents that would change the relationship between farmers and the federal government in the coming years, and laid a foundation for greater cooperation between the Bureau of Labor and volunteer women in the Second World War. Scientific agricultural practices developed in Experiment Stations and disseminated through Extension Agents would begin to influence an unevenly distributed but expanded relationship between farmers and the federal government. When the Agricultural Adjustment Act encouraged reductions of planted acreage in exchange for subsidies and price guarantees, even many who had been hesitant to embrace federal monies in the past began to at least grudgingly cooperate for the sake of guaranteed floor prices for their crops. These programs created greater cooperation, if not genuine trust between farmers and extension agents. In the meantime, extension agencies tended to view women not as farmers, but as farmers' wives. Though they were beneficiaries of Home Demonstration agents and canning and preservation programs, women were not treated as farmers under Agricultural Adjustment Administration programs. The Extension model encouraged greater distinction between men as farmers, and women as homemakers in spite of readily observable contributions that wives and

⁵⁹ In spite of the decline of Federal cooperation, women did continue to seek employment independent of the WLAA, and in New York and California they continued to serve as seasonal pickers for the next crop years, and in Pennsylvania farmers hired women well into the 1920s. Gerald D. Nash, *The Great Depression and World War II: Organizing America, 1933-1945* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1979) 131-32.

daughters made to cash crops as well as kitchen gardens. On the other hand, the Extension model also created a highly flexible and decentralized structure that allowed for regional and local nuances essential to agricultural production across a wide range of climates and crops. This structure that made men the main representatives of farm families would at once help to create a de facto network through which farm labor could be deployed, but also so confounded the role of women on farms that they would be hesitant to consider a Land Army in the coming War.

World War II Precedents

By the time the United States entered World War II, the Women's Land Army of America had faded far from the minds of policymakers, but the precedents it established would resurface in state-level experiments that once again established that farmers and women, given wartime incentives, were willing to challenge gendered labor expectations without a great deal of fuss. In Vermont, a coalition of Harvard and Dartmouth alums spawned the idea of a youth program that would recruit and deploy urban teens to become agricultural laborers. The program was not originally intended to be a wartime labor program, but was conceived as an extension of the Civilian Conservation Corps where "all young men from every part of the country, the rich and the poor, the Jew, Catholic, and Protestant, the white man and colored man, would spend a year of their lives doing hard manual labor on jobs the nation needed." The supporters of this project believed that agricultural labor would be the avenue through which people from different backgrounds could learn "broader sympathies for different types of people". The original intent

of the program was more to impart the values of farm life to youth than to impart the labor of youth onto American farms.⁶⁰

Though founded on principles of diversity and understanding, the program found its legs in the face of labor scarcity rather than lofty idealism. Dorothy Thompson (of newspaper column fame) became an active part of the recruiting initiative for the Volunteer Land Corps (VLC), as did social activist and reformer Dorothy Canfield Fisher. The organization was less focused on recruiting exclusively women, and instead drew on urban youths of both sexes, determined to meet farm labor needs in its immediate surroundings while waiting for federal response to the crisis. “When the program was started” a 1942 report said “We were told at every turn that the government must do the job. We agreed that a national program must be undertaken by the government, but that since the government was not doing it yet, we, and groups like ours, would have to undertake the job.” So the VLC emerged in a situation where, at the state level, it was clear that farmers needed help, but the Federal government had not yet created any framework for coordinating that help. Rather than wait for federal instruction, this state level program set about building a program that would become a model for many WLA initiatives. The underlying framework that could call up a non-farm population and deploy them seasonally or as-needed to perform any duties from seasonal picking to full-time dairying help proved to be a useful model. Because it recruited among teens it called for parental consent, but it also required letters of recommendation, an interview, and a physical exam to guarantee robust physical and mental health and good character. Importantly, the VLC had no stipulations as to

⁶⁰ Arthur Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps*, 5-6. Root says “On the surface it would appear that the Land Corps was organized as a war emergency measure to harvest the nation’s crops . . . But it is not true... The Land Corps started before we were in the war[.]”

sex. Boys and Girls were both encouraged to apply and, if they met program criteria, could expect to be deployed to do farm work.⁶¹

Especially for youth too young to enlist, the VLC created an opportunity to contribute their own labor to the war effort. According to recruiting pamphlets recruits were expected to be “willing to undergo the disciplines and rigors of hard manual labor, and [be] willing to adapt themselves to the ways of living and the points of view of the farm people whose helpers they will be and whose daily life they will share.” Within the first few weeks of opening applications, the VLC received over 2500 applications for only a few hundred spots, and began returning additional applications unopened. The organization settled on 626 youths who entered the corps for the 1942 harvest year. Considering the assault on Pearl Harbor happened only in December of 1941, the swiftness with which the organization succeeded in filling its ranks was impressive. Vermont was eager to participate, and the Farm Labor Committee gave its blessing as well. The VLC signed a formal statement of working relations with the Vermont Extension Service and the Vermont branch of the United States Employment Service on April 1 of 1942 articulating the policies governing the working relationship between the VLC and those supervisory bodies. Youths were to be paid a minimum of \$21 per month, and receive room and board in addition. The contract made clear that this was not a standardized wage however, and that farmers were at liberty to pay higher wages.⁶²

Like the WLAA of World War I, the VLC expected full administrative control of its workers. They would coordinate with the United States Employment Service (USES), but the

⁶¹ Ibid. VLC organizers also created “Camp MacArthur” for boys 14 & 15 to live in a residential camp and hire out as a day labor team. MacArthur boys worked 8 hour days, and most recruits hailed from prestigious prep schools such as the Horace Mann school for boys, Phillips Andover, the Fieldston School, and the Taft School. Parents paid the camp for room and board. Organizers considered this a tremendous bargain for parents, pointing out that Camp MacArthur cost less than half the price of a typical summer camp.

⁶² Root, 10.

VLC carefully selected and monitored its young charges, and did not fancy any arrangement that placed the youth out of reach of VLC oversight. Indeed, the program defied even the state Extension Service, demanding to maintain complete control over young workers and their assignments. To protect USES and Vermont Extension Service from any consequences of this policy, the VLC agreed to be responsible for all direct rejection of farms. Labor contracts between VLC included the clause:

It is definitely understood by all parties to this arrangement that the Volunteer Land Corps shall have sole responsibility for determining the suitability of any farm as applied to the referral of Land Corps volunteers, and should rejections of any farm orders be found necessary because of unsuitability as indicated above, it shall be the responsibility of the appropriate area representative of the Volunteer Land Corps to make the necessary explanation to the farmers involved.

The agreement makes it clear that there was an intense negotiation between organizations that on one hand protected the Employment Service and Extension Service from alienating farmers, but assured that final placement decisions belonged to the VLC. Importantly, in addition to simply hiring and fielding girls as well as boys, the VLC establishes a precedent for USES to manage farm labor, and for state extension to participate in the coordination of that labor.⁶³

Working conditions and hours were a significant concern for the VLC, and farmers, like recruits, had to meet fairly rigorous standards. Homes and farms had to be well kept, farmers had to pass through interviews and receive endorsements from neighbors. Still, working hours, recruits were told, would be between 12 and 14 hours per day during the summer. The organization didn't see this as excessive however, in light of the type of labor involved, and argued that so long as recruits were "muscle up gradually" that "twelve to fourteen hours of work on a farm, with many changes of activity, out in the open air, is quite different from, and

⁶³ Ibid.

much less taxing than, eight hours of work in an office or factory.” Indeed, the VLC argued the superiority of farm labor, saying “the outdoor work tends to build up health while the factory work tends to tear it down.” And when a parent complained of working hours in excess of 6-8 hours per day, the VLC field worker fired back: “I do not know how William and George could have gotten the idea they were to work a 6 or 8 hour day. All our interviewers stressed the fact that a 12 or 15 hour day was average during the summer months.” Recruits who did not feel they could handle that environment were, by VLC policy, discouraged from pursuing service, or rejected at the interview level. Indeed, at the end of the 1942 season the VLC queried recruits themselves and found that, of 200 questioned, the majority worked 12-14 hours per day, but only 2 of those youths described the work as “too strenuous.” Importantly, the argument that long hours were not only tolerable, but superior because they were undertaken on a farm suggests that farm labor was romanticized in a way that allowed working conditions that would not have been tolerated in an urban setting.⁶⁴

Especially importantly, the VLC expected food to be of good quality and adequate quantity, though the program also emphasized to recruits and parents alike that Vermont farmers’ diets were not likely to be familiar to urban youth. This proved a particular area of concern for one parent who wrote to the VLC field agent on behalf of his son and a fellow recruit; “The food . . . was of very inferior type and quality and insufficient with the result that after two weeks they showed a loss of about ten to twelve pounds in weight each.” The field agent, after completing an investigation that involved interviews with the boys and their host farm, replied back “The stories about food at the [farm] seem to differ. I have never eaten there so I have no first-hand information. I do know that Vermont farmers have an entirely different sort of diet from that of

⁶⁴ Letter from a field agent printed in Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps*, Summer 1942, 41-42.

city people and while it is overbalanced with starch and is certainly not recommended as a steady thing, it will not hurt any boy or girl over the comparatively short period of summer.” The program was protective of its youth, but it seemed to stop short of coddling. It would intervene where conditions were unsuitable, but the program also clearly expected youth to make reasonable accommodation for the differences in rural and urban life.⁶⁵

The Victory Labor Corps did not exist solely for the advancement of women in agriculture, but it still championed women’s access to labor. The program did not make any duty distinction between boys and girls placed in the program. Youth volunteered for opportunities to do farm labor in support of the war, and as such, the program prioritized labor directly abandoned by young men entering the military. The organization did take special care, however, to select families which could be relied upon to be patient with inexperienced, typically urban help. Sex appears to have been far less of a concern when dealing with youth volunteers than urban versus rural experiences. Still, VLC administrators admitted, “Even where all sorts of investigations are made and the farmer is visited and the house seen and so forth, there have been mistakes in placement.” The organization considered farm labor a valuable enough resource that farmers, though in need of work, were expected to accommodate the needs of workers as much as workers were expected to accommodate farmers. In particular it recalled a situation where a boy was placed on a farm upon good recommendations from the County Agent and neighbors, but without a personal inspection by a VLC field agent. When, the day after the boy’s placement, the field worker did visit, he found the place “filthy” and “the boy was removed at once.” In one instance the VLC placed a girl on a farm without first inspecting the facilities, but it was a rare occurrence that the organization defended in its summer report. A field agent

⁶⁵ Letter from an angry parent, reprinted in Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps, Summer 1942*, 40-41, and Letter from a field agent printed in *Ibid.*, 41-43, 46.

visited the girl on the first day after her arrival, the report explained, and assured that her situation met all VLC standards. The unnamed girl finished the year so satisfied with her placement that she requested to be returned to the same farm the following year, and the farmer she worked for, described as “aged” was “delighted with the girl’s work and [felt] that she saved him from having to sell the place.” In addition to being high praise for the VLC worker’s drive, the farmer’s statement makes it clear that his VLC volunteer’s contributions were not just homemaking, but contributed to the commercial goals of his farm.⁶⁶

This was apparently the type of work that girls preferred in the VLC. As when, early in her assignment, one recruit found herself relegated mostly to housework, she complained to her field agent. “My feeling was that we had been promised that we would be practically replacing a man who had gone to war . . . and that we would be naturally deriving the satisfaction of not too indirectly forwarding the war machine.” When relegated to what she called “women’s household jobs” she reported the situation to her field agent representative, saying “[I] couldn’t help feeling at first rather bitterly that I had been lured up to Vermont under false pretenses.” The field agent immediately intervened on behalf of the Shanghaied young lady and persuaded the farmer to accept the young woman’s labor in the fields. Afterward the recruit suggested “a girl indicate on her application . . . how much outdoor work appealed to her and how much of the indoor she would tolerate, and that a farm be found for her accordingly.” From the actions of the field agent and those of the recruit it is clear that there had never been any intent that VLC girls would be confined to traditional gendered roles.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps, Summer 1942* 13; Letter from a Recruit, printed in Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps*, 82.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 13. Letter from a Recruit, printed in Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps*, 82.

Women only made up a bit over 12% of the total workforce fielded by the Volunteer Land Corps in 1942, but their performance was, in a number of areas, definitively above the averages skewed by their male counterparts. Just over 25% of boys (125 of 550) left their assigned positions before the completion of their jobs in Summer 1942. This statistic included “all those who left before completing their jobs, whether for legitimate or illegitimate reasons,” a legitimate reason being: getting sick, getting married, being drafted, etc.) but for girls that number was only six percent, and three of those departures, while not specifically justified, were classified as “legitimate reasons or reasons beyond their control”. The statistical breakdown showed that, with 87 young men and only 2 young women who departed for “reasons that were their own fault or weaknesses.” young women were more likely to persist until the end of their assignments than young men were. One Vermont farmer who had lost his son to military service praised his Smith College recruit: “She’s the finest girl I’ve ever known. I don’t know what I’d do without her.” Another farmer reported at the conclusion of his first season with a Land Corps recruit reported on his recruit “she has worked in the garden, planted, hoed, and harvested vegetables. Does chores, gets cows, runs milking machine, milks, and in fact, there isn’t a thing around the barn that she cannot do or isn’t willing to do. She also can pitch hay with any of them. From what I have seen of her and heard her say about the other Land Corps girls near here, give me a girl every time.” These performances suggest that, of all of the outcomes of the Volunteer Land Corps in 1942, one of the most significant surprise outcomes was that women (for women they were with a minimum applicant age of 18) proved the more reliable and successful of job placements even though training and deployment reports show no distinctions of job expectations on the basis of sex.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Ibid. 18-19. The VLC divided those failed recruits (those who did not complete terms of service by their own

The opinions of farmers may be the most important facet of the VLC program. After all, any program that tried to position non-farm youth on farms demands at least moderate agreement from farmers as to the value of the program. As prior performance statistics suggested, most farmers were satisfied with the labor received from VLC recruits. While the greenhorn mistakes and lack of awareness of even simple farm tools could be frustrating to farmers, at the end of the summer 1942, the consensus among the substantial majority was that the VLC was a worthwhile program. At a series of meetings between VLC representatives and farmers, one of the subjects given particular analysis was the impression farmers had of their “Land Corps girls” as they were called. Reports from the meeting reveal that “the girls were generally excellent with both the indoor and outdoor jobs they were given.” Respondents admitted that “they succeeded beyond all expectation and . . . as a whole had made a better record than the boys.” The real test of this impression may be in the power these recommendations had to influence farmers who received male rather than female recruits. Meeting minutes said that overall “As for farmers who did not have girls, . . . they still preferred boys, but in view of present experiences with girls, they might be disposed to use more girls next year.” Use them they would. As the war dragged on, the federal government created a national youth program mimicking the VLC and fielding young women in greater numbers in subsequent years. Farmers were open to violating gender roles so long as it was necessary for them to get their work done. It would be necessary, incidentally, for a few more years.⁶⁹

fault) in a number of ways. “Bad” recruits were considered “inept, worthless, Lazy” etc., “Misfits” who may have good intentions but who ultimately proved unable to master the tasks. (These, the report notes, were often given many chances at placement before being removed.) Loneliness and Homesickness, “bad farmers or bad conditions” and “personality clashes”. Of these categories, only the “misfit” category articulated inclusion of female recruits, and the categories of “Bad recruits” and “bad farmers or conditions” specifically used the term “boys” rather than “recruits”; Letter from Land Corps Farmer, recorded in Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps*, 60.

⁶⁹ Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Army*, 68.

While the program proved to be a reasonable success, with nearly 80% of recruits completing their summer jobs, the Volunteer Land Corps tended to de-emphasize pay, and even, to an extent, the importance of the work volunteers were doing. Rather, the program emphasized the intangible benefits of farm labor, preferring to talk about vigor, exercise, and character more than wages or skills. “For the majority of the recruits” the VLC argued “the discovery of this new part of America was the greatest experience. It was a discovery of human as well as of work relations.” The recruits may not have entirely disagreed. Martha Bothfield, one of the VLC volunteers, expressed the same sentiment in a letter to her field agent in autumn of 1942. “My summer under the auspices of the Land Corps was one of the most enjoyable I have ever spent. Although the work was hard and unaccustomed and the hours long, the friendship of all the community compensated in full.” She continued “The summer would have been so uninteresting if it had not been for the friendship of all the neighboring farm families.” This would continue to characterize other wartime agricultural programs as well. The value of agricultural labor as it was marketed to urban people at least, was not in the completion of tasks, the production of crops, or the earning of wages, but in the building of relationships and of character through contact with what were increasingly cast as exotic rural people.⁷⁰

Partly because of its broader social mission, the VLC attracted significant supporters, including that of Eleanor Roosevelt, who recommended the VLC model to other states, and even provided donations from her own personal funds to support the cause. Mrs. Roosevelt became a staunch supporter of the WLA program as well, and argued that the success of young women in the VLC proved that women were a viable agricultural workforce, and that a program made up entirely of women, properly managed, would also succeed. Mrs. Roosevelt also persuaded at

⁷⁰ Letter from Martha Bothfeldt to Field Agent, reproduced in Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps*, 47. Ibid. 20.

least one other organization to support the VLC financially, endorsing the VLC as a worthwhile cause to the American Friends Service Committee. On her prompting, that organization donated \$500 to the program at the end of the 1942 growing season. Extension Service Director E. L. Wilson also took note of the value of the program, and cited the VLC in congressional hearings through 1943 to a congress skeptical that urban volunteers were capable of successful agricultural labor. He said that if the Vermont experiment, working with inexperienced staff and inexperienced youth could produce an intended-return rate of 80% as the VLC had done, that a well-executed program run with the knowledge gleaned from the VLC could be even greater.⁷¹

In the final chapter of the year-end report of the Volunteer Land Corps, Arthur Root included a series of recommendations for future programs. Some of these recommendations revolved around the grand ideals of the VLC spawned in peacetime. Building connections and understanding and broadening sympathies of rural and urban people through prolonged contact, improvement of society and uplifting of the impoverished through job placement programs, building of character through hard manual labor, etc. But alongside those lofty ideals, Root recognized the immediate wartime need for increases in agricultural labor. It was this, and not lofty ideas about social improvement that made government offices and rural communities so eager to participate after all. Included in Root's many recommendations was the expansion of the program to include thousands, rather than merely hundreds of youth, expansion across the country with offices in every agricultural state, and the formation of what he called a "for-the-duration woman's land army" with a "training program instituted in the care and operation of farm machinery, in dairy work, poultry, and other vital farm activities where women can very well be used." The performance of the 65 young women placed on farms throughout Vermont

⁷¹ Eleanor Roosevelt to Dorothy Thompson, 20 February 1942, box 1665, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; House Committee, Farm Labor Program, 1943, 207-212.

established women's ability, and even desire to perform agricultural labor. Root's recommendations for training make it abundantly clear that what he envisions in a Woman's Land Army is not a staff of housekeepers or cooks, but regular wage-working farm-hands. The structural organization of the VLC, in the meantime, provided a working model for a program both centralized and flexible to meet local needs for farms large and small. It would be a valuable structural lesson.⁷²

From World War I through 1942 urban women, sometimes very young ones, established their interest in and ability to do farm work, and they did so without federal prompting, funding, or oversight. Programs fielding women and girls were grassroots efforts that explored creative solutions to local problems by using available resources—namely female labor. Though the United States government would need far more prompting before ultimately grudgingly endorsing the formation of a Women's Land Army, these precedents established a number of principles that would become important for the ultimate formation of the WLA. The WLAA and the VLC established that women and girls were interested in doing farm work and were not particularly offput by gendered traditions in labor. The programs also established that women and girls, properly trained, were capable of doing farm work well. They also established that farmers were no more impeded by traditional gendered labor ideology than urban volunteers were. The programs established that farmers were willing to pay inexperienced volunteer workers a prevailing wage and provide them with suitable working conditions if market conditions favored it. With all of these pieces in place, the reality of a WLA for World War II was well established. Women and farmers were already past the negotiative stages, and were

⁷²Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps, Summer 1942*. VII Conclusions for the Future, 91.

prepared to work together in a larger framework. The only question that remained was, what role, if any, would the federal government take in its operation?

Life Goes to a Land Corps Party (continued)



Dorothy Crow, 21, husks corn with little Sandra Edson. Dorothy has a fellowship in International Relations at New York University, is writing her master's thesis.

Figure 3.1
Cultural Exchange, a VLC worker husks corn with her host family's daughter. *Life Magazine*, September 21, 1942.

By the time the younger girl is grown, women's profit-driven farm work, thanks to programs like the VLC, will no longer be a source of shame.

Chapter 4

Federal Reckoning

The Federal government's involvement with the WLA was complicated. The notion of fielding women as farm hands was not a new one by World War II, but the project was undertaken in previous years as a private or state level initiative that did not require the federal government to become entangled either in defining the role of women on farms, or in directly acquiring or deploying labor on behalf of farmers. Though ultimately the federal government did create a national program, long hesitations in Washington, D. C. betrayed deep federal inhibitions regarding women as federally recruited and deployed farm workers. This is especially surprising in light of the strong precedents that demonstrated women's aptitude for farm work. The Federal Government would be the most hesitant of the three components of the WLA program. Neither farmers nor women hesitated as long before choosing to participate in the experiment. Still, while the WLA was a new step for Washington, it was also, in some ways, a very natural next step. Over the previous half century, connections between federal government and farm deepened just as they did between federal government and citizen. Though the new program was a step farther than the government had gone before, it did not come out of the blue; rather, it was a progression of a relationship that had grown closer and more entangled for several decades. The WLA extended federal authority into farm labor concerns, and tested the federal appetite for challenging gender roles that government had no particular wish to change.

In the country's infancy, United States farm policy was fairly distant from farmers' daily lives and could be better described as land policy than farm policy per se. Though creating a landed, farming demographic was an embedded principle of Jeffersonian political thought, what

farmers did with their land and what kind of living they made from it was beyond the scope of policy if not of concern. So when, after the American Revolution, the borders of the United States expanded to the Mississippi River, the United States confronted two immediate problems. The first was how to address concerns of territorial integrity, especially between the individual states with conflicting claims to western land. The other concern was how to systematically place land in the hands of citizens. Regarding the first concern, the states ultimately agreed to a solution that retained pre-war borders. Regarding the second, the Continental Congress needed a process that would protect the integrity of the first decision, while still assuring that interested citizens could get land. The subsequent legislation in the Ordinances of 1784 and 1785 set out rules for an orderly survey and dispersal of land, and for the formation of states. Conveniently, the ordinances also included a land dissemination process engineered to generate income and dispel federal debt. Land speculators and prospective farmers could purchase land on largely the same terms, and men released from the military could claim land as a part of their remuneration. The objective, though, was less to create a nation of farmers than to dispel a national debt, employ a policy focused on systematic distribution, and institute a statehood process.⁷³

In the wake of the Constitution, Thomas Jefferson rooted his support for agriculture in the belief that small farmers, from the nature of their work, were natural patriots and protectors of liberty. "Cultivators of the earth" he said, "are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds." Jefferson argued, moreover, that this moral relationship with the land was essential to the future of the United States itself, and suggested that only rural people would ever be capable of protecting their government from corruption. "I

⁷³ Woody Holton's *Unruly Americans and the Origin of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008) lays out this process, and discusses the dynamics of land vouchers and land speculators in the post revolutionary period.

think” he said “our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe.” Strict constructionist though Jefferson wanted to be, he ultimately justified his Louisiana Purchase on these grounds, reiterating his belief that farming was preternaturally moral, and that supporting farmers would, in turn, support the country. This notion of the yeoman farmer as the moral guardians of American society became the guiding inspiration for future legislation as well, and survived to the recruiting and deployment of youths and women more than a century later.⁷⁴

In the wake of the Louisiana Purchase, the federal government acted, for a time, largely as a land broker, organizing and disseminating land on installment plans that required four years of payments from farmers, but also assured the establishment of farms in the western territory. This measure was politically expedient for the fledgling political party that forged it, as expansion to the interior assured that the Federalist opposition with its increasingly coastal orientation had little chance of growing its influence in the interior. The party of farmers became, after John Adams, the party of the United States until the rise of Andrew Jackson. With political resistance quelled in the Era of Good Feelings, the United States modified its land policy—not yet farm policy even per se—with the Land Act of 1820, which reduced the floor price of public land to \$1.25 per acre, and allowed individuals to purchase lots as small as 80 acres. So for as little as \$100, a person could buy land and give farming a go in the West. As far

⁷⁴ Thomas Jefferson to John Jay, 1785. ME 5:94, Papers 8:426; Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1787. Papers 12:442;

as individual citizens were concerned, the federal government was vested largely in creating farmers, not particularly in supporting, advising, or controlling their production.⁷⁵

With the Relief Act of 1821 the United States made accommodation for farmers needing to escape prior land purchases. The Panic of 1819 left many unable to pay for their land. Transportation networks and markets were both poor, so even a good crop year might not guarantee a profitable return. The Relief Act gave defaulted farmers economic relief from their sometimes sizeable debts in two ways. It gave credit against borrowers' debt for land returned to public status, allowing them to reduce the size of farms, which could be especially prudent in the rich land of the Ohio River Valley where harvests could overwhelm manpower. It also discharged interest owed to the United States by September of 1821, and offered retroactive discounts on public lands already purchased. This reduced money owed on public land by twenty five percent so long as the original purchase price was less than three dollars per acre, and by thirty-three and one third per cent for land purchased at over three dollars per acre. Though this policy did not reduce defaults in the long run, it does demonstrate a shift in federal perspective. With this new legislation, Washington showed that it was no longer sufficient to create farms, but that it would now also create policies to preserve them. This shift shows a growing adaptation of federal expectations to new realities as the country grew into the fertile West.⁷⁶

Significant change made 1862 a watershed year for agricultural policy. On May 15th, Congress established the United States Department of Agriculture designated to “acquire and to diffuse ... useful information on subjects connected with agriculture ... and to procure, propagate, and distribute among the people new and valuable seeds and plants.” The USDA

⁷⁵ Land Act of 1820.

⁷⁶ Relief Act 1821.

would, by its very foundational intent, deepen the relationship between government and farmer, committing public resources to influence daily approaches on the farm. Five days after creating the USDA, the Republican-majority legislature continued the Jeffersonian mission of putting land into the hands of Yeomen through the Homestead Act, guaranteeing a continued expansion of the farming community for the coming decades. In July, congress signed the Morrill Act, creating land-grant colleges tasked with providing research and education in “such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts.” Products like the mechanical binder-reaper and the moldboard plow showed that innovation was relevant to farming as much as to industry. The Morrill Act, together with the formation of the USDA, marked a shift in priorities from creating and preserving farmers to advising and steering their individual processes. Before 1862 policies were unconcerned with what happened on the farm so long as farmers stayed on them. Morrill colleges did not have the power or inclination to compel farmers to heed their teachings, but their existence marked a new era for federal farm policy, and changed the nature of the relationship between farmers and government.⁷⁷

Economic depression returned to the agricultural sector of the United States in the post Civil War era. The United States resumed the gold standard, and farmers, suffering under widespread competition and exorbitant marketing costs, organized with the hope of benefitting from the power of collective bargaining. When the Grange established its headquarters in Washington, D. C. in 1868, there can be little doubt that they intended to negotiate directly with the federal government rather than with the warehousing and railroad companies that were their chief antagonists. The Grangers did gain some concessions from the United States. In the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, railroads are required to limit rates to what was “reasonable

⁷⁷ An Act to Establish a Department of Agriculture, May 15, 1862; Homestead Act, May 20, 1862; Morrill Act July 2, 1862.

and just". Though the rule is subjective, the sequence of events demonstrates a much closer collaboration with farmers than previous examples offered. Even the Relief Act was ultimately an act of self-mediation. But in the post Civil War age of agricultural depression, the United States mediated private corporate interests on behalf of farming citizens.⁷⁸

The achievements of the late 19th century made the early 20th century better for farmers. Incomes stabilized, and urban growth created strong markets and bolstered incomes. For a moment, industry, urbanization, and agriculture all rose together and farmers, together with their urban neighbors enjoyed a wave of prosperity after decades of financial difficulty. In the midst of this, states, following the Texas model established by Seaman Knapp, hired agents to take the knowledge gleaned from Morrill colleges directly to farmers. These "county agents" were funded through an ad hoc series of private and state resources and brought significant agricultural diversification to the South just as the boll weevil threatened the cotton that had a stranglehold on the region. Responding to national interest in the program, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, channeling federal funding to agricultural extension programs to pay for extension and home demonstration agents.⁷⁹

The Smith-Lever Act is important to the rise of the WLA in no small part because it established more direct contact between government and farmers. Though the legislation was

⁷⁸ Ezra Slocum Carr (1875). *The Patrons of husbandry on the Pacific coast: Being a complete history of the origin, condition and progress of agriculture in different parts of the world; of the origin and growth of the order of Patrons, with a general and special grange directory, and full list of charter members of the subordinate granges of California. Also, of the foes of the farmers, or monopolies of land, water, transportation and education; of a protective tariff, currency and banking.* A. L. Bancroft. p. 105; Atkeson, Thomas Clark. *Semi-centennial history of the Patrons of husbandry* 1916; Interstate Commerce Act 1887; In addition, the Populists rose during this era to challenge the increasing political marginalization of farmers. McMath's Populist Vanguard: A History fo the Southern Farmers' Alliance, speaks to farmers' attempts to negotiate for government involvement in regulation of services essential to farm production. John D. Hicks's *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the Peoples' Party* explores the western and southern movement as well. Women's role in the Populist movement has been examined by Julie Roy Jefferey in "Women in the Southern Farmers' Alliance: A Reconsideration of the Role and Status of Women in the Late-Nineteenth Century South," *Feminist Studies* 3 (fall 1975).

⁷⁹ William E. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900 – 1920*, David Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*, 171-178, and also *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture 1900 – 1930*; and Roy V. Scott *The Reluctant Farmer: The Rise of Agricultural Extension to 1914*.

intended to help farmers improve their productivity, farmers themselves were not universally supportive of the program, as can be seen in the many counties that did not fund an extension agent in the pre World War I years. Smith-Lever programs were advocated often by urban progressives who wanted to impose their version of prosperity on farmers. This is not to say the program was one-sided. Farmers often benefitted from extension programs and land-grant colleges, but the programs remained a project of distant, often urban elements that took time for farmers to embrace. Farmers themselves used infrastructures like the Grange, local Chambers of Commerce and Farm Bureaus that were of their own creation. So many farmers were distrustful of urban meddlers from faraway colleges trying to impose newfangled varieties of farming, and sometimes took offense at the insinuation that the advice was needed. Still, Smith-Lever was pivotal for relationships between rural and urban sectors. The program extended government fingers right down to the county level, using land-grant colleges to administer extension and home demonstration agents to reach farms household by household.⁸⁰

Another reason the Smith-Lever Act is important to for the eventual rise of the Women's Land Army is that, for the first time, farm policy has a separate mechanism for engaging women. The Home Demonstration program did not challenge gender stereotypes, and in fact in many ways it attempted to impose urban ideas of gender-appropriate labor and home management on rural women, but it was also a bona fide woman-specific connection between federal farm policy and farm women. If farm families were to be successfully transformed into the idyllic rural bastions of urban ideals, women would have to be the mechanisms of that change. So at the

⁸⁰ Danbom, *Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture 1900 – 1930* (Ames, Iowa University Press, 1979); Danbom notes that farm women resented the urban biases reflected in Home Demonstration objectives, as they tended to originate more in Country Life movements than in farm communities, and consequently trivialized the commercial contributions farm women made on their own farms. He also points out that USDA extension programs were as much a tool of urban interests in low food and fiber prices as they were assets of farmers. Though the program aided farmers in modern production, the objectives of the program were more caught up in urban than in rural prosperity.

same time that the Smith-Lever Act created a new framework to engage farm men for the purpose of improving profit-driven productivity, the presumption was that a branch of the program for women would revolve around domestic, rather than commercial affairs. The Home Demonstration program presumed that farm women, like their middle-class urban counterparts, confined their interests to domestic homemaking, and never appears to have engaged even the possibility that farm women might in fact be women farmers. Of course many farm women were not middle class. This is a reality that urban Country Life enthusiasts should have recognized through their own observations of declining quality of life in rural America. But somehow that observation did not translate into a class-sensitive approach, but a class-transformative one that confined farm women to the role of farm wives, rather than farmers. So peculiarly, at the same time that the Federal Government took a definitive step toward directly engaging farmers and farm women through Home Demonstration, it did so through a program underpinned with expectations that farm women would adapt to the gendered expectations of the urban middle class.⁸¹

World War I precipitated a massive rural-to-urban migration with large numbers of laborers and sharecroppers fleeing the countryside for military or defense jobs at the same moment that international demand escalated farm prices. In this labor shortage those workers who did stay behind had the bargaining power to assure good conditions and wages, but also saw themselves supplanted by machines. With farm incomes strong and labor weak, farmers invested in gasoline engines, tractors, and generators to relieve some of the daily drudgeries of a rural sector that was not yet on the grid. Facing wartime demand for food, the United States

⁸¹ Ann Elizabeth McCleary, *Shaping a New Role for the Rural Woman: Home Demonstration Work in Augusta County, Virginia, 1917-1940*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 1996), 6. Erin Hogue, *To Create a More Contented Family and Community Life: Home Demonstration Work in Arkansas, 1912-1952* (PhD Dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2017), 4.

Department of Labor temporarily took a role in coordinating farm labor to assure that wartime food and fiber needs were met. That organization coordinated with the Women's Land Army of America as well as creating and promoting a foreign worker program. It was an important precedent. The federal government had now dipped its toes into supplying farm labor, albeit in context of wartime emergency.⁸²

In the inter-war years agricultural aid expanded significantly, with new laws, new agencies, and higher expenditures than in the past. Donald C. Horton argued that this was attributable, at least in part, to what he called "agricultural fundamentalism" that touted the intangible social and moral benefits of farming reminiscent of Jeffersonian thought. In the 1920s, the USDA extension programs funded under the Smith-Lever Act matured, and farm policy revolved broadly around finding ways to help farmers help themselves through scientific approaches. These programs were no longer concerned with placing people on farms at all. The focus shifted, likely permanently, away from the idea of placing people on farms, and instead emphasized the optimization (or micro-management, depending on your perspective) of farm activities. In addition, the Federal Government supported cooperatives and lending organizations that served farming interests, and established a Farm Loan System that would give farmers trustworthy mortgages on better terms than the open market. For a sector transitioning to mechanization, these loans could be the difference between modernizing or selling out. Additionally, government loans supported irrigation technology, and emergency aid in the form of loans and direct aid to relieve feed and crop crises. Though farmers did not take direct advantage of these loans on the scale that could be expected, and mechanization remained a

⁸² Ibid., Gowdy-Wygart, *Cultivating Victory: The Women's Land Army & the Victory Garden Movement*. Chapter 2.

distant goal for many farmers, it is still clear that federal policy toward farmers was becoming more entangled with quality of life and productive potential rather than simple access to land.⁸³

By the time the United States entered the Great Depression, the USDA extension program, bolstered under World War I emergency legislation, was well entrenched throughout the United States. In addition, the wartime precedent for federal regulation of farm prices provided some justification for federal policies that would prop up the agricultural sector in future. Though Hoover's presidency is not typically associated with progressivism per se, his agricultural policies built on the precedents of preceding decades to increase, once again, federal involvement with farms. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act was intended to drive up farm prices and encourage domestic consumption. The Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929 likewise was not as effective as it could have been, but for Hoover it was a fairly progressive piece of legislation that affirmed government's ability to intervene in agricultural crisis. The program's intent was to manage crop surplus by strategically buying, selling, and storing food crops, managing market saturation in a way that made government a middleman, but that also ultimately allowed the market to somewhat manage itself. The half-a-billion dollar budget was too little too late, and it did not effectively draw the United States out of the Depression, but the Hoover administration established a precedent that Roosevelt would use for his larger, more hands-on Agricultural Adjustment Act.⁸⁴

When Roosevelt's Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) offered farmers floor prices in exchange for reduced production, it was a culmination of federal and agricultural engagement a

⁸³ Donald C. Horton, "Federal Aid to Agriculture Since World War I," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 19, No 2 (April 1945) 115-116.

⁸⁴ Joan Hoff Wilson, "Hoover's Agricultural Policies 1921-1928", *Agricultural History*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Apr., 1977), pp. 335-361; also "A Reevaluation of Herbert Hoover's Foreign Policy" in *The Hoover Presidency: A Reappraisal*, edited by Martin L. Fausold, George T. Mazuzan, 185; Herbert Hoover, Statement on the enactment of the Farm Relief Bill and on Plans for the Federal Farm Board, June 15, 1929, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California – Santa Barbara.

century and a half in the making. USDA extension agents functioned as federal representatives at the local level. Few agencies had such a deeply entrenched mesh of operatives able to carry out federal policy so closely. AAA policy provided special challenges because it called for a management of the behavior of individual farmers. The entrenched network of representatives in farming counties throughout the United States made it possible to actually monitor and encourage compliance with production quotas in exchange for guaranteed subsidized floor prices for farm goods. AAA programs did not initially seem to comprehend the nature of farming in vast parts of the United States, engaging, as it did, land-owner farmers more directly than tenants or sharecroppers. Policy would eventually adjust itself, and ask farmers to share AAA earnings with tenants and sharecroppers, but the reality remained that reductions in productivity meant reductions in labor inputs, and farm employment, like employment elsewhere in the United States during the Depression, fell. Still, in terms of the relationship between farmers and the federal government, the AAA marked a pivotal moment where USDA agents, whose role for a long time included advantaging the urban sector through management of farm production, had a set of goals intended to drive up farm prices for the sake of farm people. The complicated relationship between USDA extension and farms was becoming somewhat less complicated as federal policy considered the support of farms for the sake of farms as important as the support of farms for the sake of cities.⁸⁵

These developments in farm policy as the United States grew help make sense of the federal WLA program of World War II. The inter-war years established a series of precedents that suggested government had a genuine role to play in the management of farms and farm

⁸⁵ Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution*, Danbom points out the urban origins of USDA Extension and argues that the infrastructure was designed to secure urban interests in a stable supply of food and fiber more than as an act of philanthropy toward a struggling rural sector, and that rural interests were most successfully served when they coalesced with urban interests.

policy. The infrastructure of the USDA extension program assured that most counties had one, and often more than one federally connected representative to act as liaison between distant government and local farmer. Though this may not have been the intent of the USDA extension program in the beginning, by the time the war in Europe drove up agricultural demands, county agents were acting as *de facto* administrators of federal farm programs. As early as October 1939, long before the United States entered the war, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics suggested the possibility of a farm labor shortage. The army asked that bureau to estimate the number of workers that could be siphoned off of agriculture to meet an international crisis. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics optimistically reported that the agricultural sector could, by applying similar measures to those in the Great War, spare around 1.5 million men for war duty. So the Bureau of Agricultural Economics already saw the potential for the coming crisis, as the Army Industrial College had made clear that the military saw farm men as a viable resource to be drawn from for military use as needed. This would appear to be a positive development in 1940, as Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace told a Senate Committee on the National Farm Labor Problem that farms had a superabundance of labor, and that the labor need had declined by 1.6 million workers since 1930. On the surface, then, there did not appear to be any impending crisis. Farms had too many people, and the Army Industrial College was confident it could make use of them. In 1940, for farm labor, war could have been a macabre serendipity.⁸⁶

The USDA responded to the warning with a bit of planning, establishing a USDA Labor Committee that would strategize solutions for the problem that, in March 1941, did not exist yet. Still, Chairman Roy Hendrick called on the committee, including members from the AAA, the Agricultural Marketing Service, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, as well as representatives

⁸⁶ Memorandum, John R. Fleming to Administrative officers of the Department, "Labor that Might be Transferred out of Agriculture into other channels in a War Emergency,"

from the Extension program and the Farm Security Administration. The group acknowledged the potential scale of the problem, but it was also short-lived. In October, 1941, shortly before its disbanding, the committee did recommend, among other things, recruiting underemployed women for farm labor. But the committee was dissolved a few months after it was created, and potential farm labor concerns were lumped in with other, broader hypothetical future emergencies under consideration by other bureaus and the USDA's early support for a WLA became irrelevant.⁸⁷

In the mean time, Eleanor Roosevelt, who took a great deal of interest in the roles women played in the war effort abroad, approved of the idea of a Women's Land Army. In early December, 1941, days before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Office of Agricultural Defense Relations cautioned of a looming labor shortage if "all possible means of conserving manpower and utilizing it efficiently" were not employed. In response the First Lady, who also happened to be Assistant Director of the Office of Civilian Defense, proposed the creation of a Women's Land Army for the coming year. Though the OCD sponsored program did not manifest on the national scale, Roosevelt did support state-level programs, many of which flourished in 1942 and created a foundation of experienced workers who would take to the fields under the Federal program the following year. In Connecticut, Roosevelt's cousin, Corinne Alsop, organized and managed the state level program in 1942. The following year Roosevelt visited England and saw the British WLA at work. She took note in her October 26, 1942 diary of the "women who drove the tractors". Roosevelt returned home more convinced than ever that the program would

⁸⁷ Ibid., Also discussed briefly in Carpenter, *On the Farm Front*.

be useful, saying “The regular supply of farm labor might be greatly helped over here by the organization of a woman’s land army. Ours would have to be a voluntary enlistment.”⁸⁸

So when, in autumn of 1942, with Pearl Harbor nearly a year behind her, a frustrated Charlotte Goodwin, of Vermont called for government to take a role in creating a federal program to field women as farm hands: “There are hundreds of young women . . . anxious to get into service . . . We . . . would rather be an organized body under the government.” But she also warned that “We want to join up quickly in the farm production army. We are waiting to go. But we will not wait long, because there is too much to be done and we will find farms for ourselves.” Goodwin’s impatience demonstrates a significant shift in perspective and priority since the Great War when women organized and deployed without a federal overstructure. In the prior emergency, organizers deliberately kept the federal government at arm’s length, working in cooperation with, but separate from, federal encroachment. In the interim, public attitudes shifted, and hundreds of women like Goodwin, including Eleanor Roosevelt, called for federal oversight in creating an encore program for the present crisis. Before the WLA was even formed, for many, the vision was of a national organization operated under the auspices of the federal government.⁸⁹

The Federal Government did not get involved with the WLA quickly however. In spite of World War I successes, and proven precedents in private and youth programs, the WLA lobby met with a surprising level of resistance. Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard did not approve of a federal farm labor policy at all, believing that state level committees would be

⁸⁸ *Carrollton Chronicle*, December 5, 1941; Corinne Alsop to Eleanor Roosevelt, 8 April, 1942, and Eleanor Roosevelt to Corinne Alsop, 16 April, 1942, Box 1628, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. Cited in Carpenter, *On the Farm Front*, 165; Eleanor Roosevelt, *Diary*, October 26, 1942, in Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, Columbian College of Arts & Sciences. The British program allowed for healthy young women to be drafted into the WLA and other civil service functions, but Roosevelt seemingly felt this was a step too far for the USA.

⁸⁹ Charlotte Goodwin, Letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 24 October 1942.

better equipped to address labor shortages through the U. S. Employment Service. In short, Wickard bowed the USDA neatly out of farm labor concerns. But this meant, in spite of the dozens of bureaus, subcommittees, committees, and organizations that had their hands in the farm labor question, no one organization had control of the concern. Nearly immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor the Inter-bureau Coordinating Committee formed a subcommittee dedicated especially to evaluating the labor situation broadly, and the USDA emphasized concerns about farm work at that time, but did so without claiming any authority to address the problem. The subcommittee agreed that there was concern, but recommended sharing labor teams on a cooperative model for the coming year as well as recruiting youth and men too old for military or factory work. The attitude is telling. Farmers, the subcommittee concluded, would make do with sharing what scraps remained of the labor supply after the military and industry had their fill.⁹⁰

In the mean time, throughout 1942 women undertook public letter-writing and editorial campaigns to rally support, but Washington, DC stalled, unwilling to consider a federal program that challenged so many ideas of urban femininity and rural masculinity. The only significant intersection of rural life and women in public policy was the Home Demonstration program, and that program, heavily influenced by urban country lifers, tended to impose urban interpretations of women's labor onto farm ladies, encouraging them to be homemakers and child minders, albeit in the modern and research driven sense. In spite of the fact that women *did* work on farms throughout the United States, the mechanisms that negotiated the relationship between government and farms saw women as auxiliary to, rather than part of, farm work. It is not that women's labor on farms was not valuable—local and federal support for the program defy such an interpretation—but rather that home demonstration programs focused on quality of life and

⁹⁰ Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program*, 15-23.

social improvement goals rather commercial agricultural production. “[The Home Demonstration Agent] has the satisfaction of helping rural families to achieve richer, fuller lives; assisting in bringing about improved health and living conditions; seeing happier and more contented families in convenient and livable homes” explained one Home Demonstration manual. USDA outreach to women, then did not emphasize farm production, but productivity in homemaking. This priority was in direct opposition to Charlotte Goodwin’s vision of women wielding hoes, driving tractors, and milking cows.⁹¹

In 1942, with the labor shortage becoming acute, Secretary Wickard proposed some of his own preferred measures to the House Committee on Agriculture. He supported the replacement of men with machines—an option that proved impossible since implement manufacturers had largely re-tooled for the war effort, and new machinery could not be had. Wickard also endorsed importing Mexican labor, echoing the preferences of the Farm Bureau and Landowners who preferred not to negotiate with local farm labor that now had significant bargaining power. He also asked for, and was granted, a special deferral status for farm men drafted into the military. But this would prove a difficult path since men had to request exemptions from commanding officers and the stigma of being a healthy young man at home in wartime was more than many young men were ready to voluntarily take on. So Wickard too preferred an option that found men to work the fields.⁹²

Federal sluggishness on the WLA is surprising in light of the public enthusiasm for the project. Farm magazines and popular media were flooded with stories of the British and Australian Women’s Land Army. *Labor Information Bulletin*, *Country Gentleman*, and *Wallace’s Farmer* all discussed the possibility of a women’s program, and mainstream

⁹¹ United States Department of Agriculture, *The Home Demonstration Agent*, July 1951, 5.

⁹² House Committee on Agriculture, *Farm Labor and Production: Hearings before the Committee on Agriculture*, 77th Congress, 2nd session, 1942.

magazines like *McCalls*, *Time*, and *Independent Woman* enthusiastically endorsed a U.S. version of the program as well, but the federal government still hesitated. It was only in April of 1942 that Secretary Wickard suggested that women could register with their local War Boards and eventually be called on for work assignments. Wickard's instruction exposes a complicated relationship to the matter. He had stopped short of recommending a WLA to the House Committee on Agriculture, but here, the same year, he encourages women to register with a non USDA program in quest of farm work. Perhaps he was trying to avoid entanglement with urban people altogether, or perhaps he did not want responsibility for a program that he still considered controversial or prone to failure. When he gave this advice it was still not particularly clear who had responsibility for administering farm labor. Wickard did not send women to the embedded USDA county agents who already had an idea of regional labor conditions and needs. He sent them to the War Board, which had little to no working knowledge of regional agricultural needs for labor or anything else. So long as farm labor was a responsibility of the War Labor Board, Wickard had to wait on other bureaus to meet farm labor needs.⁹³

In spite of Wickard's optimism, the War Labor Board, which held official control over all emergency labor programs at the time, balked at using urban women as farm workers. In fact, the War Labor Board never did accept that idea, and obstructed the mobilization of women in favor of mechanization. States began examining their own programs when, in 1942, the United States Employment Service told the western states that the service would be unable to address farm labor needs and advised the states to innovate their own solutions. And innovate they did! Though the government was slow to come aboard, many states did encourage whatever farm

⁹³ "Women: Without Fuss of Feathers," *Time*, 12 January, 1942, 16. Esther Colvin, "Another Women's Land Army" *Independent Woman*, April 1942; *Labor Information Bulletin* 9 (October 1942), 4-5; *Country Gentleman* 112 (September 1942), 44; *Wallace's Farmer and Iowa Homestead* 21 February, 1942; *Independent Woman* 21 (September 1942) 270; *McCalls*, (May 1942) 64; *Time* 12 January, 1942, 16.

labor they could muster, including women's labor. By the end of 1942 the *Saturday Evening Post* estimated that 14% of farm work in the United States had been done by women even without federal oversight.⁹⁴

In September 1942, Elizabeth Spence wrote an article for *Independent Woman* that endorsed the formation of a federal program, but also provided a perspective that deemphasized the labor perspective and instead focused on the patriotic dimension of the Food-for-Freedom campaign. Spence argued that women were already doing a great deal of farm work regardless of federal support, and emphasized the morality and patriotism of women's agricultural contributions. She provided a new script—one that did not call for women to break through a glass ceiling and claim jobs in fields and in barns. Spence supplied a narrative of patriotic women setting aside their preferred (and government prescribed) homemaking activities and present themselves as living sacrifices making inroads, not for women in agriculture, but for the United States in a time of crisis. Spence called women's labor "the decisive factor in America's food production campaign" and touted their successes, but she also supplied a new motivational narrative that would be easier for even resisters to swallow. Women were not taking up farm work out of personal interest, but out of patriotic sacrifice. And this in turn assuaged a broader fear that women would try to claim their place in the workforce—temporary sacrifice does not threaten entrenched systems the way that social change can.⁹⁵

In spite of popular journals' support for a WLA, and in spite of the success of the privately run program of the Great War, at the policy level, United States officials remained unconvinced that women would be a suitable supply of farm labor. In some cases this is an idea

⁹⁴ *Denver Post*, 10 April, 1942; 2, 21; *Saturday Evening Post*, 25 July 1942. This dynamic also discussed in Stephanie Carpenter's *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II*. Chapter 2.

⁹⁵ Spence, "War Time Harvest" 270-271.

that USDA county agents actively endorsed. In fact, H. L. Mitchell, of the STFU argued before a Senate Committee on Emergency Farm Labor that USDA county agents were essentially in the back pockets of the Farm Bureau, which, in turn, represented wealthy landowning farmers who did not want to cooperate with their neighbors. The hostilities between the two groups had not abated with the rise of the FSA, and Mitchell argued that those farmers tried to leverage county agents to petition for a foreign worker program in order to avoid negotiating with the plentiful local labor supply. Labor was available, Mitchell argued, but landowning farmers who made up the bulk of the farm bureau pressured USDA extension agents to overstate the desperation of the shortage in order to sidestep the logical solution of negotiating with the community of organized local workers. Doubling down on these statements, Mitchell pointed out that Arkansas had such a robust labor supply that the STFU, ever vigilant of opportunities to find gainful employment for their members, organized groups of workers and sent them all over the country picking crops as far west as California, and sending workers as far East as the truck gardens of Florida. The United States had labor to spare, Mitchell argued, but the Federal Government needed to intervene to assure that it was deployed and not supplanted.⁹⁶

Mitchell's testimony appears to have fallen on deaf ears though, as it was submitted at one of dozens of committee and subcommittee meetings on the subject of food supply and farm labor. Lost in the bureaucratic shuffle, it was clear to Washington, to Farmers, and to urban women that farm labor was an essential concern of the war. The Women's Bureau came out in support of women as farm workers, and published a booklet of advice for farmers entitled *Guides for Wartime Use of Women on Farms*. There was no particular program the booklet was intended to supplement, but it is a tacit recognition by the Women's Bureau that women were

⁹⁶ Senate Committee, Farm Labor Program, 1943, 245-248.

working, and would work on farms as long as the war made labor scarce. The booklet recommended clean housing, required that toilet facilities be “sanitary” (but without prejudice for a capacity to flush), called for at least one day off per week, and wages similar to war industry work. But the Women’s Bureau, like the USDA, did not have the authority to form a Women’s Land Army, and the booklet proliferated, but the program languished uncreated.⁹⁷

Secretary of Agriculture Wickard had little taste for labor policy anyway, and likely did not relish the idea of cooperating with the Women’s Bureau, but by bowing out of the emergency farm labor question, he handed control of farm labor over to the War Manpower Commission (WMC), created by President Roosevelt by executive order to manage the increasingly complex labor needs of a twentieth century industrially supported war by balancing the needs of the armed forces, industry, and agriculture. The WMC imposed blanket terms for the many sectors it was responsible for, calling for fair wages, reasonable hours, adequate housing, and attention to safety. The WMC did this, moreover, and still ultimately handed responsibility for the program back over to the USDA. The WMC directed the USDA to assure that workers placed in agricultural settings receive all of the same protections and benefits as those workers placed elsewhere in war service. When the WMC fielded complaints about unfair or inadequate treatment on farms, the USDA pointed out, accurately, that hiring and deployment were handled by the U. S. Employment Service or other federal bureaus, so the USDA was not to blame. In the mean time, Wickard’s distance from the farm labor program was making him powerful enemies, and in testimony before the House Committee on Agriculture, Selective Service director General Lewis B. Hershey and several congressmen denounced Wickard’s inaction on

⁹⁷ Colvin, “Another Women’s Land Army”; and Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program*; Guides for Wartime Use of Women on Farms, Women’s Bureau, Special Bulletin No. 8 (q1942); Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith also discuss this in “To the Rescue of the Crops” *Prologue*, Winter 1993, Vol 24, no. 4.

the farm labor crisis. Wickard dodged, arguing that it was not his responsibility. The WMC responded by handing control of farm labor back over to the USDA in January of 1943. So in spite of his commitment to state level intervention, and in spite of his aversion to the labor policies of the WMC, Secretary Wickard found himself over a year into a war with no departmental programs in place, and a number of powerful opponents in Washington.⁹⁸

In an ironic demonstration of rural versus urban notions of gendered labor however, it was only when responsibility for farm labor shifted to the USDA that, despite Wickard's original hesitations, the Women's Land Army got off the ground. In Fall of 1942 the USDA neither endorsed nor denounced a Women's Land Army, but was clear that it had no departmental plans to sponsor any such program. In early 1943, after some shifting between bureaus, farm labor became a direct responsibility of the United States Department of Agriculture, and State extension directors mobilized to develop a comprehensive plan for a Women's Land Army. Anticipating this possibility, Wickard began meeting in early January with representatives from women's organizations and farm organizations to discuss plans and concerns about the program. Later that same month he met with State extension directors to consider the program. With the USDA now clearly responsible for the program, and with Washington watching closely, Wickard assigned the State Extension service to develop and supervise a "program for the organized recruitment and utilization of non-farm women for appropriate types of farm work wherever practicable." There was officially a WLA.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Rasmussen, 25-30; Executive Order 9139; Carpenter, *On the Farm Front*, Carpenter points out that the placements in this War Manpower Program were very small, with only a few dozen placements in specific industries.

⁹⁹ Letter, R. L. Webster, Assistant to the Secretary to Marjorie A. Landon, Director, the Chandler Schools, Boston, Mass, Dec 24, 1942; Memorandum, Claude R. Wickard, to M. L. Wilson, Director of Extension Work, Feb 17, 1943. (Reprinted in Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program*, 139.); Carpenter, *On the Farm Front*, 46.

As it would turn out only after creation of the program, putting a program on paper is simpler than putting it into the fields. The program had no appropriations or funding and no recruits, and the Emergency Farm Labor Program that encapsulated it also included programs for foreign workers and high school students. All of these programs were subordinated under the administrative umbrella of the United States Crop Corps, which was the national term that identified workers in food or fiber production whether in farms or in food processing facilities. Though the USDA had a plan in place, they would not receive any funding to operate the program until appropriations committees in the House and Senate approved it. The appropriations hearings exposed some significant concerns within the United States for the use of farm women. The Grange and the Farm Bureau in particular both called for military service deferments instead. Men in other essential industries, they argued, could get exemptions from military service. If food production is a war industry, the logic flowed, then farm men should also be exempted from military service. Though the exemption strategy did not gain any traction, it does demonstrate that farmers much preferred the labor they were used to, and preferred to use farm labor to keep sons and neighbors' sons home from war. This lack of enthusiasm was reflected by congress, but with the WLA bundled into other Crop Corps programs, it survived the House floor, and passed on to the Senate for funding.¹⁰⁰

At the Senate level, with a military deferment for farm men now off the table, the Grange and the Farm Bureau changed their respective positions even as Secretary Wickard remained demure in his defense of the program. Realizing that the chance to keep farm men home had already passed, the Grange and the Farm Bureau pivoted, asking the Senate to approve the House funding resolution and guarantee the availability of some kind of farm labor for the coming

¹⁰⁰ House Committee, Farm Labor Program, 1943, 208-210.

season. For the House and the Senate the funding discussions must have been strange. Women's competence or lack thereof was not a matter of congressional legislation, but somehow a simple appropriations task turned into a broader debate on the capacity of women to perform farm labor. Though there were supporters, and especially from those states where women had mobilized so successfully on their own the year prior, had the funding decisions hinged solely on that argument, the WLA would likely have died of bankruptcy. Fortunately for the organization, though, the greater question was, did farmers want something or nothing? Were they willing to accept adequate rather than optimal help if the alternative was no help at all? The answer to that, the subdued endorsement of the Grange and the Farm Bureau tell us, was yes. Farmers would accept even undesirable help if it would get them help.¹⁰¹

The House and Senate did both ultimately support the project, though in a predictable pattern, not at the financial level that the USDA would have appreciated. Having requested 65 million dollars for the 1943 crop year alone, the Senate, perhaps swayed by a lack of enthusiasm from key farming organizations, and an eerie reluctance from Secretary Wickard, appropriated less than half that amount. The final appropriated amount sat at 26 million dollars. Lest the amount appear too scant, the program was not intended to operate as a charity. Farmers were expected to pay workers the regional prevailing wage out of their own coffers—the Crop Corps was not a charity, so that 26 million dollar appropriation covered only recruiting and administrative costs. It did not have to stretch to cover workers' wages.¹⁰²

Once the comprehensive USDA Crop Corps program cleared the Senate, the women's contribution that had commanded so much attention at the funding level was largely forgotten.

¹⁰¹ Senate Committee, *Farm Labor Program*, 1943, 90-104.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, *House Committee Farm Labor Program* 1943. Also Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program*.

According to the New York Times, the budget dedicated to the WLA was a scant \$150,000 of six million dollars requested. The Victory Farm Volunteers—the version of the program that recruited male and female high school youth, received more than twice the funding that the WLA did. Even within the USDA, if investments are any indication, there was little to no faith in the viability of women’s labor in that opening year. The USDA hoped to recruit between fifty and sixty thousand women through the WLA branch of the Crop Corps for the 1943 season. They recruited nearly half a million but budgeting decisions would never reflect the value that WLA women brought to the Crop Corps. In 1944, the program requested \$600,000, but was granted only a fraction of that. The Victory Farm Volunteers received 1.3 million the same year.¹⁰³

In spite of budget woes and federal inhibitions, on February 14, 1943, the USDA officially announced the creation of a program that would coordinate farm labor for volunteer women, and appointed Florence Hall, previously a Home Demonstration Supervisor, to head national operations. The United States officially entered the business of directly brokering farm labor, but implemented a leadership structure that would support a conservative interpretation of women’s roles on farms rather than challenge the presumed rural performance of urban gendered ideals. Placing women on farms marked an evolution of farm policy from a distant land policy intended to create farms, to a deeply integrated system where federal representatives acted as brokers of farm labor, moving urban women and youth as well as foreign workers onto individual farms to guarantee wartime productivity.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Ibid., 139; WLA State Farm Reports 1943; House Committee, *Farm Labor Program, 1943*, cited in Carpenter, *On the Farm Front*.

¹⁰⁴ Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-1947*, 136-138, 139.

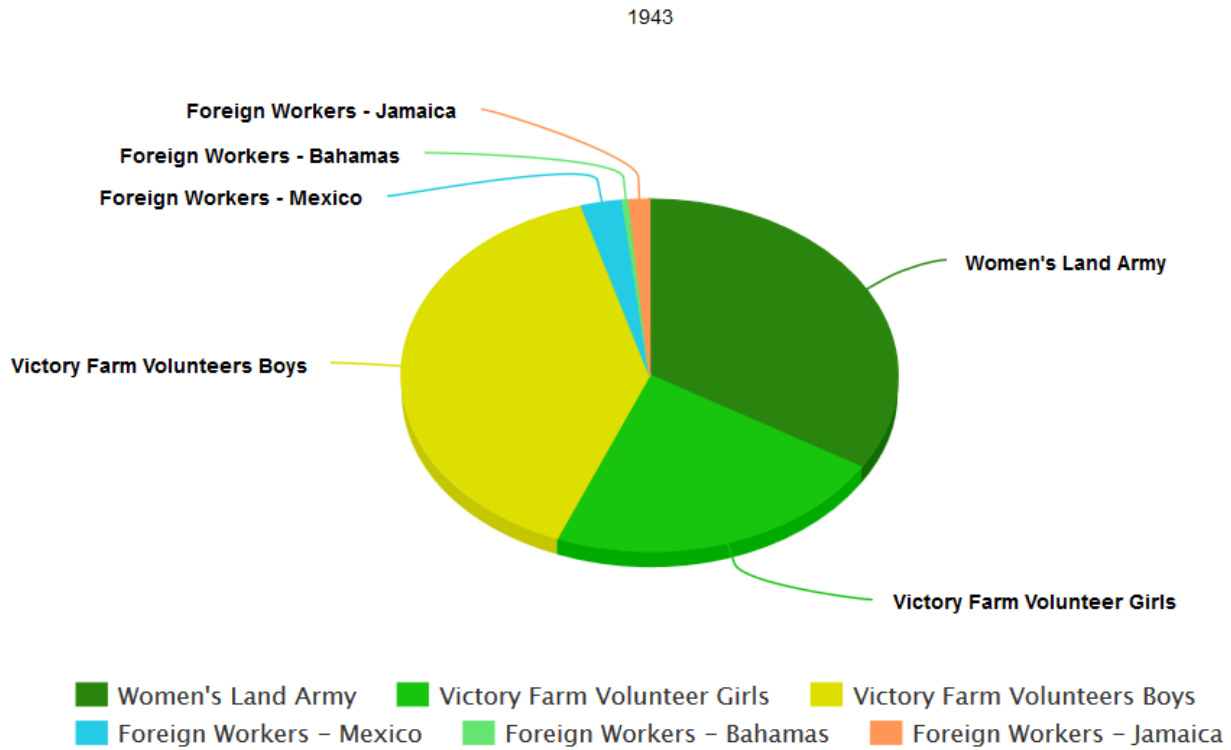


Figure 4.1 Breakdown of Emergency War Labor Program Workers by Program 1943
Data from Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program 1943-1947*.

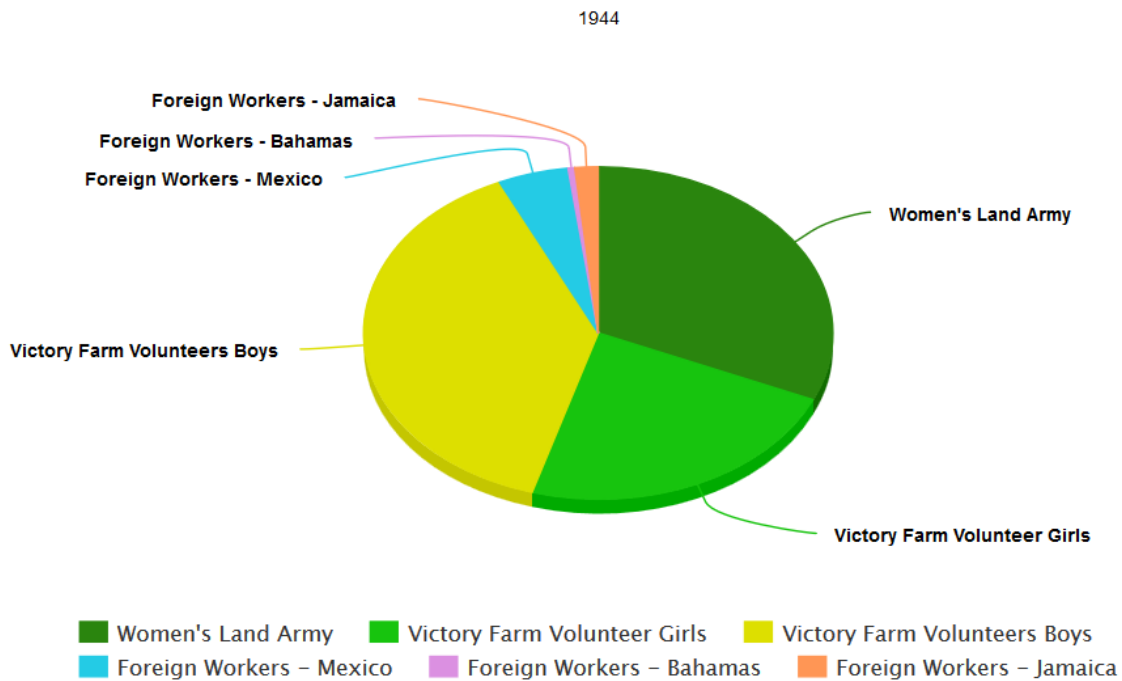


Figure 4.2 Breakdown of the Emergency War Labor Program Workers by Program 1944
Data from Rasmussen

Chapter 5

“Fruit Furloughs and Victory Vacations”

The WLA program’s main objective was to supply enough labor to farms so that farmers could keep up with high production targets in the absence of the young men who traditionally worked as farm hands. With military service and wartime industry enticing typical laborers away from farms, farmers had to compete with many other sectors for workers that had been abundant and cheap only a few years prior. The USDA opted out of competing with industry at all, and resigned itself to using labor that biases of the period considered less than ideal. Youths, older men, women, and foreign workers were not necessarily what farmers preferred, nor were they what the USDA preferred, but they were what farmers and the USDA could get. Pragmatic in the face of necessity, farmers adapted to their situation faster than the USDA and deployed large cohorts of local women in their fields in 1942. By the time the USDA took charge of fielding women for farm work, their main concern was not selling the program to farmers as much as selling the program to urban women. This was achieved through recruiting programs that emphasized the relationship between farming and patriotic service, and promises of carefully regulated working and living conditions and a guaranteed wage, and by appealing to women overlooked or underemployed by other sectors. The program would quickly find that rural demands were not always compatible with urban workplace ideals, but workers and farmers found the program rewarding enough to continue participating as the USDA adapted its expectations to the realities of rural labor.

However resistant farmers might have wished to be, particularity was an impractical luxury and, object though they might, farm operators had to accept what labor was available if

they hoped to harvest and market crops in the midst of a labor shortage. The outcomes were far better than expected. Women took to the fields in various sectors under several different organizational structures and, though their experiences varied according to crop, the overall effect was improved bottom lines for farmers and improved productivity for states. Year-over-year increases in crop yields, even in the face of equipment, rubber, and fuel shortages suggest that the WLA's recruiting, training, and deployment strategies were effective even if they required some renegotiation as the program wore on and the incompatibilities between rural demand and urban labor ideals collided in a wartime space ripe for renegotiation.

Because the WLA program was created and funded in early 1943, there was little time to recruit a workforce for the planting season that year; nevertheless the organization dramatically outperformed expectations in that first year. Many women took to the fields outside of the program, working through local women's clubs, helping rural relatives informally, or even hiring themselves out directly. In their initial plan for the WLA program, the USDA called for 50,000 seasonal workers and about 10,000 year-round workers for 1943. Year-round placements fell a bit short that first year at only 6,349 women, but the organization exceeded its overall goals, recruiting over 448,000 seasonal workers in 1943. With the program only formally authorized in February of 1943, first-year participation numbers show that the WLA's call for help fell on eager ears. In subsequent years, the WLA exceeded its year-round placement goals as well as continuing to recruit hundreds of thousands of seasonal workers.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ USDA Census of Agriculture 1945 for data on crop yields; Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program*, 135-137 for participation data; *WLA Newsletter* April 23, 1943, and United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Appropriations. *Farm Labor Program, 1943: Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee On Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventy-eighth Congress, First Session, On H.J. Res. 96, a Joint Resolution Making an Appropriation to Assist In Providing a Supply And Distribution of Farm Labor for the Calendar Year 1943...* Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1943. for first year recruiting goals. Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service*, 10. Valentine mentions the deployment of refugee women in the Pacific Coast, but the

Who were WLA women?

One of the most important features of the USDA farm labor program in general was that it shrewdly built its labor force around workers who were unable to take military or industrial jobs. This could be a factor of location, family status, or even occupation. In the first Women's Land Army newsletter, Florence Hall outlined the minimum requirements for WLA workers, saying any candidate "Must have reached her eighteenth birthday and must furnish a doctor's certificate as to her physical fitness to do hard work." It was hardly a high threshold. Hall rigidly enforced membership restrictions of the program though, insisting that only women who had passed their 18th birthday could be members of, or purchase the uniform of, the Women's Land Army. Girls who had not yet reached their majority, she said, would be part of a youth program instead. Camps and day haul programs often used both groups simultaneously, but Hall's vision for the WLA included supervisory responsibilities that she did not wish to share with youth. The Newsletter did not stipulate any organizational expectations for physical fitness, and relied on women's physicians to have enough knowledge of farm work to evaluate potential candidates. In some cases, doctors worked with the WLA to provide health certificates at work camps. One San Francisco camp's recruiting advertisements plugged the services of a woman physician who would provide physicals for the recruits for \$1.50 each. The requirements for WLA work were far less stringent than for the WAACS or WAVES, but still, one Virginia newspaper reported that nearly half of applicants in the first year were denied on the basis of health, "rejected as unfit for farm work". Women did not have to provide personal references or agree to an interview for farm labor unless they were applying to be live-in farm help. In those

context suggests that they were mixed in with other WLA women. There is no indication that they were recruited as a bloc or that they served in dedicated units.

instances, additional criteria were established at the state level, but adults in good physical health could, without other typical restrictions, serve in the WLA.¹⁰⁶

Farm work, unlike other wartime sectors, is inherently seasonal. For farms in the North, typical need was for people to plant, harvest, or process truck crops. On the Pacific Coast these seasonal needs were considerably different. Temperate year-round conditions allowed farmers in that region to grow a greater variety of crops, so while need remained seasonal for each crop, that variety meant there was demand for seasonal workers in some crop or other nearly year-round. The adage that many hands make light work was never more true than in seasonal farm work, where entire counties often needed labor at approximately the same time. Unlike a munitions factory, ripe produce does not patiently await its turn for harvest. Large gangs were essential to sweep through orchards and truck fields quickly to pick, grade, sort, and process crops before the moment of opportunity passed and the crops rotted in the fields. On Southern farms, seasonal work meant planting or harvesting cotton, tobacco, or peanuts. Though processing was less involved for these crops, fields tended to be larger, and especially for cotton, the harvest process was slow and repetitive. Outside of the Midwest, the greatest need was for short-term, high volume labor gangs trained to do one or two similar tasks on multiple farms across their region. Paradoxically, outside the vague understanding that labor need would be for a large force for a short time, the specifics were difficult to predict until a few weeks before harvest, when farmers could reasonably predict what yields they could expect. In 1943, informed by some mishaps of grassroots programs, the WLA developed a more scientific approach. “[T]he effort was made to base recruiting on actual needs reported, rather than a general cry for help. Where definite information as to time, place, work cost, and probable

¹⁰⁶ *Southside Sentinel*, Volume 48, Number 14, 5 August 1943; *WLA Newsletter* April 23, 1943; *WLA Newsletter* December 17, 1943.

earnings could be given, better results were obtained.” This policy forced farmers to work closely with the WLA or with county agents at least throughout the growing season if farmers hoped to get workers when the time came. Farms that played well with USDA representatives, and carefully calculated predicted harvests and planned realistic wage budgets were more likely to get help when they needed it.¹⁰⁷

Rather than fight the unusual requirements of seasonality, the WLA capitalized on it to secure labor from exclusive sources. Women with prior time commitments were often excluded from other wartime service, but they could be ideal candidates for the WLA. School teachers, college women, homemakers, and even store clerks and office workers, were ideal candidates for seasonal labor. They could give a few weeks or a few months time in the fields during school breaks and contribute to the war effort without abandoning their educational obligations. The seasonality that made farm work low paying in peacetime was exactly what made it possible for many urban women to participate in the WLA. Seasonality was logistically complicated, but Florence Hall and other WLA organizers realized that the temporary nature of seasonal work gave the WLA access to a pool of talent unavailable to other war industries. By recognizing this logistical liability as an asset, Hall and other WLA organizers appealed to women who were already excluded from factories and military service. By moving women around a region strategically, many farms could share a fairly large group of laborers and complete their seasonal work on time, and still only employ a fairly large gang of women for a few weeks to a few months. Women who had only a week or two to spare could join a labor crew for just that short

¹⁰⁷ House Committee, Farm Labor Program, 1943, 38-41; Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service*, 10. Wickard and the senate discuss which expenses should rightly belong to the farmer and which to the USDA, with Wickard defending a USDA program that absorbs transportation costs only when workers are brought from more than 200 miles away from the host farm, with farmers responsible for regional transportation. Where labor camps were used the USDA still supplied regional transportation, but where no regional camp was available, county agents coordinated, but farmers typically funded short-haul transportation.

time, and leave the crew as others were stepping in. Women with school aged children could work during the day while their children were in school, and office workers could spend their vacation days on farms. College women, both students and faculty, could work during the summers or the weekends, and all could return to their primary occupations undamaged by the lower wages, and unencumbered during the time demanded by their primary occupations. This strategy of drawing on scraps of time forced the WLA to recruit more aggressively, but also opened the door to a labor resource that other war services overlooked entirely.¹⁰⁸

Homemakers were particularly useful for WLA work. Women home with children or extended families were encouraged to give their time in increments of a few hours or days rather than for the duration of the war. “Of course many women don’t have much time to work outside their homes” one radio spot on Homemakers’ Chat suggested. “But any amount of time—whether it’s the two weeks you’d ordinarily spend on your vacation, or a few hours while the neighbor looks after Junior—whatever time you can work on a farm will mean just that much more food for the coming year.” The broadcast took clear aim at women who were already otherwise occupied—pleading for scraps of time rather than exclusive commitments. Farm work would be a little something on the side. The WLA had an advantage in recruiting women who were too conservative to enter the military or factories. Because the program offered so many part time and short term opportunities, it could appeal even to those women who did not want to challenge pre-war labor ideologies.¹⁰⁹

The program could not offer wages competitive with industry. This meant that it would have to promote benefits other than high wages if it was to lure women away from shipyards and

¹⁰⁸ Hall encouraged state directors to evaluate, among other things, the child care needs in the regions they served, and recommended the establishment of child care facilities where mothers could be easily recruited.

¹⁰⁹ Transcript, Homemakers’ Chat, Friday, August 27, 1943. USDA.

aviation plants. To that end, the WLA tended to emphasize patriotic duty and wartime necessity over wages. Where the program's recruiting was most successful, however was in choosing to recruit women whose occupations prevented them from taking industrial work. School teachers, office workers, businesswomen, college ladies, and mothers of young children could not easily take full time factory jobs, but they made fine candidates for seasonal work. One Texas newspaper, running a multi-page photo story on the program boasted: "Teachers and college girls often spend two or three summer months in farm work. Business women work part of their vacation time, evenings, and weekends ... Homemakers also answer the local call for peak-season harvesting." The program thrived on labor that competing industries did not have the flexibility to accommodate. At least occasionally European refugee women provided farm labor on short notice as well, and a California observer reported that: "occasionally, there was a well-to-do older woman who had lived for years on 'income' and now felt an obligation to help in the great emergency." One camp in Maryland boasted of married women, career women, school teachers, and munitions workers all serving in the same camp. For the WLA this was typical. The flexibility of WLA policies, coupled with the peculiarities of seasonal labor made it possible for women to plan farm labor around other obligations, and allowed the resourceful WLA to harvest a few hours here and a few hours there from women who had them to spare.¹¹⁰

School teachers, by virtue of both their leadership skills and their predictable seasonal work schedule made optimal WLA recruits. In Oregon, every county had at least one farm labor assistant hired by the Extension Service to help coordinate workers. Several counties had more than one, and in those cases the annual supervisor's report said "In many cases one of these [supervisors] was a woman—a school principal or a teacher--who helped in recruiting women

¹¹⁰ Ibid.; *Palacios Beacon* (Palacios, Tex.), Vol. 38, No. 23, Ed. 1 Thursday, June 7, 1945.

and children.” Teachers had the advantage of being known and respected within their local communities by children and women alike. They also had proven leadership skills from their classroom management training, they had the ability to teach others, and so could train recruits in the work expected of them, and they were free during the busiest season of the year. Since Florence Hall envisioned a WLA that was not only self supervising in the field, but that could also supervise other workers, these teachers’ experience was valuable to the program’s goals.¹¹¹

In the WLA’s first year, policies, and especially camp policies, favored women who “were free enough of home responsibilities to stay away for at least a week, preferably longer.” Virginia recruited workers to serve in what they called “fruit furloughs” or “victory vacations”. The terms did not necessarily convey the physical rigor of farm work, but they did convey the value of even fairly short periods of available time. Some states were sincere in their intent. Connecticut’s State Supervisor chose locations for WLA camps based on “vacation appeal.” In 1944, a large group of older homemakers took seasonal work at a camp in Erie County where they explained “We came for two reasons ... a longing for a holiday from our daily routine, and a desire to help with war food production.” But there was real work at the Erie camp. A 53 year old homemaker explained that her husband encouraged her to go. “Go ahead and have a vacation while helping your country, I’ll keep the house going” he told his wife. While “vacation” might have more than one meaning, his wife became the champion prune picker at the Erie camp, picking, on average, 75 pecks per day. The vacation mentality seems to have been popular among some sets. Planning for the 1945 crop year, Florence Hall said “it is important to consider possibilities for recreation. Swimming is very popular.” Though farming

¹¹¹ Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 21.

and recreation may not appear to be natural bedfellows, Hall saw the value in selling the notion of a farm vacation, however separate it might be from the actual experience.¹¹²

Though the program subsisted on slivers of labor that could be trimmed here or there, that first year did not have accommodation for homemakers with young children. After 1943 when the program proved its usefulness, subsequent years saw greater flexibility in working with homemakers to create day-haul programs that allowed farmers to take advantage of the few hours that mothers had free while their children were at school. A Texas newspaper recalled the heroic efforts of over 500 homemakers who, in 1944, saved the local bean crop by taking day haul work. “Each day they boarded the ‘Housewives Special’ buses leaving for the field at 8:30 a. m. and returning at 3 p. m. This gave them time to do the family breakfast before leaving and to market for supper in the late afternoon.” By addressing very basic concerns like the rhythm of the school day and transportation networks, the WLA brought a large untapped group of workers to the fields without overtly undermining or challenging the sacred maternal roles that wartime society so valued. It challenged the entrenched expectation by operating within the constraints of expectations of mothers.¹¹³

Though vacationers made good short-term seasonal workers, the WLA furthered its commitment to leveraging overlooked labor by continually reevaluating ways to accommodate women who could not be spared for days at a time. Mothers were an especially desirable demographic for a program that relied on scraps of time. If mothers could be accommodated, they would often take work that other WLA women did not particularly relish. Strawberry

¹¹² *WLA Newsletter* July 12, 1944; *WLA Newsletter* October 12, 1944; *WLA Newsletter* January 17, 1945. The USDA estimates that a health peck of prune plums should weigh approximately 15 pounds, meaning this farm woman harvested over half a ton of prunes per day during her “vacation”.

¹¹³ *The Jacksboro Gazette* (Jacksboro, Tex.), Vol. 66, No. 1, Ed. 1 Thursday, June 7, 1945; *WLA Newsletter* July 12, 1944.

picking was considered especially undesirable for most workers, as they were slow picking, but workers received a standard per-pound wages for all types of berries. Women with young children quickly became a significant factor in strawberry fields, bringing their children and working as a family. The WLA delighted in the opportunity to put more women to work, and was also pleased to preserve higher paying work for camp girls who typically had to earn enough to pay for their board. Championing for mothers' potential as seasonal workers, Florence Hall built on it, recommending to state supervisors that they might develop child care strategies and resources so that women with young children could participate in the program. Homemakers made perfect local laborers who could be free on short notice so long as children could be looked after. For Hall's combination of Home Demonstration experience and pragmatic use of hidden labor hours, day care services just made sense. And with a large supply of volunteer women serving in the WLA, mothers could easily rotate turns caring for each others' children and working in the fields. At the same time, by holding over higher paying jobs for camp women, and assigning mothers to lower-paying piecework jobs like berry picking, the WLA celebrated the economic potential of mothers, but also exploited them, funneling them into lower-paying work and preserving higher paying labor for women unencumbered by family obligations.¹¹⁴

Recruiting

The World War I program was only a recent memory for many in the United States, and long before 1943 there were drives to draw women into the industrial sector and military service. So the WLA reaped the benefit of a country primed to shift women into new sectors, and advertised to them with an emphasis on the patriotism and honor of farm work. The United

WLA Newsletter August 1943. Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 25. The "housewives special" buses were likely school buses doing double duty, taking children to school, and mothers to work, and reversing the process in the afternoon.

States asked something of all civilians during the war years, so the WLA did not have to break new ground in that regard. Women answered the call to industry, to the WAACS or WAVES, or to volunteer at canteens, buy war bonds, donate, ration, or conserve. Since agricultural wages could not compete with industrial pay, WLA recruiting campaigns relied on promises of sunshine, fresh air, patriotic service, and warm fuzzies. Posters featuring smiling, overall-clad debutantes implored women to “Pitch in and Help” and “Join the Field Artillery” or “Fight on the Farm Front.” The not so subtle wordplay was engineered to emphasize the relationship between farm work and military action. In so doing, the WLA created an inclusivity that affiliated the food supply with the broader war effort, and thereby the WLA with the military. The very name “Women’s Land Army” strengthened this projected military affiliation to reinforce the relationship of food to fighting. Though the WLA remained a civilian operation, the nomenclature and rhetoric was engineered to emphasize women’s contributions to the war effort.¹¹⁵

In addition to appealing to patriotic spirit, recruiting campaigns reassured urban women that they were capable of the work the WLA asked of them. As one missive read, “even if you can give just a month of your time ... the job you can do will be truly vital” said one pamphlet. “There’s a place for you in the Women’s Land Army this year—a place where you can help yourself, and your country, too.” The campaign emphasized the patriotic duties and the opportunity to help, but also assuaged urban anxieties about rural service. The USDA created most recruiting material, but regional differences in crops, labor demand, and seasonality meant that the materials had to be vague or had to be modular enough to allow regional adaptations. Reassurance and patriotism were the common denominators in these recruiting tools. In one

¹¹⁵ Recruiting Posters, National Archives Digital Collections.

1944 radio spot, a host (specifically a host agreeable enough to follow a pre-scripted dialogue) interviewed county agents.

Last year thousands of women from all walks of life—teachers, housewives, college girls, and office workers—did emergency farm work on a part-time or full-time basis. Most of those women had never worked on a farm before. But, they were eager to learn. And when the story of last summer was written—well, they'd really done a job. America's farmers must have thought they were pretty good—because this year there's a need for 750,000 women. Our special farm labor problems in _____ County this year include an urgent need for (insert special local needs here). The peak season for these crops can be expected around (approximate time). When that peak season arrives, the farm people in _____ County are going to face a major crisis.¹¹⁶

The script was the same from Washington to Florida. On cue, county home demonstration or farm agents across the country boasted the national success of the program, and then promoted their specific regional need, assuring urban audiences that they could contribute something meaningful to the local farm community.¹¹⁷

The WLA also recruited through language and images that stressed and occasionally somewhat romanticized the health benefits of farm work such as wholesome exercise, fresh air, and sunshine. One Virginia newspaper interviewed local medical experts who promoted the WLA as an opportunity for urban women to get more outdoor physical activity. “The average indoor worker is likely to limit this type of activity to an occasional late afternoon or at best a week-end.” Dr. I. C. Riggin, Virginia State Health Commissioner mourned. “Therefore it is fortunate” he pivoted “that a universal war-time opportunity exists for young women office-workers to improve their physical condition and at the same time contribute definitely . . . to defeat this country's enemies. This chance comes through the Woman's [sic] Land Army.” Riggin didn't acknowledge the pay WLA workers received, but emphasized the value of the

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ *Sound the Call to Farms! Helps for Recruiting Local Farm Workers in 1945*, War Advising Council, USDA, n.d.

physical experience. “[Participation] deserves serious consideration . . . as one of the best ways to make the most of the two weeks’ leave in terms of vim, vigor, vitality.” At the time of publication, Riggin also called for nearly 500 volunteers for immediate deployment in surrounding counties for fruit and truck harvests. He did attempt to recruit full time workers, or even women with financial need. Instead, he called for women who were already financially independent to trade their labor for improved health.¹¹⁸

Campaigns targeting homemakers assured women that town and city women were capable of farm work. These campaigns did not address the agricultural abilities of all women, but very specifically reassured urban women that their contributions would have value, acknowledging in this clarification that both the WLA and their urban audience did not believe urban and rural women had the same skills. “A ‘green hand’ can do a lot of jobs on a farm” one radio broadcast assured. [J]obs a beginner can do are gardening, caring for poultry and cows and horses, delivering milk . . . Even with no previous farm experience . . . they learn to run milking machines and separators, to spray and prune fruit trees, to handle poultry incubators, and other advanced farm jobs.” The pitch steered far away from rural women, who would already be all too familiar with these tasks, but also acknowledged, as it articulated a target audience of “town and city women” that society at that moment viewed the skills and abilities of rural women as inherently different than those of urban ones.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *Rappahannock Record*, Volume 28: Number 39, 6 July 1944.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Motives

Few women participating in the WLA program appear to have participated solely for the money. The WLA required participating farmers to pay workers the “prevailing wage” for farm laborers in their respective regions, but agricultural wages remained far below industry wages, and the program emphasized patriotic duty, physical health, community aid, and personal satisfaction over compensation. This appears to have been effective. In March, 1944, a Michigan college student explained her motives in a letter to WLA chief Florence Hall: “I would like to be one of the 800,000 women needed this summer to work on our Nation’s farms . . . My fiancé was killed in this war, and I feel that perhaps I, by helping to produce the food so vitally needed by our soldiers, can in some part make up for the loss of at least one of our fighting men.” This same connection to the war effort persuaded a 60 year old Texas woman to enlist too. After picking over 3 tons of beans she said “I’m glad to do it . . . I have a son in the Air Corps.” For this woman, her son’s presence in the military and her work in agriculture were so intertwined that she considered her connection to the military adequate explanation for her own presence in Texas bean fields. And for the mourning bride-to-be of a too-soon passed fiancée, farm labor was a way of fortifying the military for battle in an act of vengeance for the loss of her would-be future husband. Both women were paid, but neither seemed to consider it a noteworthy feat compared to the symbolic importance of their very presence in the fields. They fulfilled responsibility to male relatives through their labor.¹²⁰

Farmers using WLA workers often commented on the women’s intelligence, ability, trainability, and attention to detail. Though the initial tendency may be to dismiss these remarks

¹²⁰ Re-printed in Florence Hall, *WLA Newsletter*, March 25, 1944, War Food Administration Extension Service (Washington: 1944) 1; *Jacksboro Gazette* (Jacksboro, TX), Vol. 66, No. 1, Ed 1 Thursday, June 7, 1945.

as pandering or flattery, it is worthwhile to remember that these labor forces were made up, because of the WLA's recruiting strategies, of women with more education and workforce experience than a typical male farm hand. Women without college ambitions or professional obligations were able to take full time work in factories or war support industries. But factories demanded year-round commitments in exchange for their high wages, leaving them inaccessible to college women. These peculiar circumstances skewed the WLA labor force toward a higher education level than typical agricultural day labor. While few of the women deployed were trained in agriculture per se, the program did boast of botanists and biologists among their ranks and highlighting the achievements of these professionals in farm work.¹²¹

Organizational options

Laborers fell broadly into two categories the first year. There were those women who lived on-farm with a farm family and functioned much as a full-time farm hand would have in pre-war times. These were the least common laborers throughout the United States, but every state deployed at least a few full time live-in WLA workers at some point during the war. Dairy and poultry farms in particular benefitted from year-round live-in help. The other option was for seasonal help for a few months of the year when crops were at their most labor intensive. The WLA initially met this second, larger demand by forming centrally located labor camps in high demand areas, and then required farmers to arrange transportation for the women from the camp to their own farms. This second category quickly expanded to include day haul workers as well. These day haul workers were local women who kept living in their own homes but who spent a few hours a day at farms as seasonal demand required.

¹²¹ Frances Wadsworth Valentine, *Successful Practices in the Employment of Nonfarm Women On Farms in the Northeastern States, 1943* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1944) 14. Valentine particularly rhapsodizes about the skill and pride of 2 biologists learning to castrate chickens.

Migrant workers filled a lot of seasonal farm positions before the war, but with steady wages available to unemployed men in other wartime industries, many of them left farm work altogether to join the military or take factory jobs. Women became the new seasonal workers for the duration of the war. As one report said afterward “Nonfarm women undoubtedly were employed in greater numbers than ever before. In the seasonal crop harvests, the percentage of women and youth is constantly increasing and that of men decreasing.” Because the need for labor was acute, and because men were nowhere to be had, necessity forced even stalwart opponents of women in the workforce to accept what seasonal help they could get, and assuage their conscience with the profits of their crops and the idea that the arrangement was temporary.¹²²

Training

Since the WLA grew out of extension and home demonstration work, it is not surprising that the program planned to supply training to workers before sending them afield. For the extension service in general farming was skilled labor that could be done in right and wrong ways. As such, emergency farm workers would be more useful if they were given the training to do their jobs well. Hall’s original vision for the WLA included close cooperation with land grant schools that would provide training. “Women placed on farms for year-round work will receive from 3 to 6 weeks’ training in one of the agricultural short courses offered by State agricultural colleges or similar institutions or equivalent training on the farm. . . . The recruits for seasonal work will not require so much training but will be given some preliminary instruction.” Though

¹²² Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 24. Women had, in some instances, worked alongside men as migrant workers, but in those instances they tended to be hired as families, with husbands and fathers to collect wages and act as primaries on contracts. So women were not unheard of in seasonal work, but women acting in self-interest and exercising individual agency was.

the reality sometimes worked out differently, Hall's early intent was that WLA workers would act as liaisons, bringing modern farming methods to labor-stricken farmers.¹²³

Individual training programs varied substantially, with regional specializations largely dictating content. In the Midwest, women learned to drive tractors and combines, and in the Northeast, fields like dairy farming and poultrying took priority. The WLA provided these programs to trainees without charge, but did expect women who completed training to commit to at least 3 months of full time service. The schools were unable to maintain continuous enrollment in the first years in particular, likely in part because WLA recruiting initiatives emphasized women who could not dedicate an extended period of time to service, and as such were not eligible to attend the in-depth training schools. For women who had only a few weeks or weekends to devote to offer, any time spent in training was time not spent in the fields. Since there were so many jobs in truck farming and seasonal picking that required only cursory training, for a lot of WLA workers, attending the training school was unnecessary. With paying work waiting in the fields, many women found the training superfluous, and for women with limited time to commit, the training schools would exhaust valuable that could otherwise be spent doing hands-on farm labor.¹²⁴

The limited participation in the training schools appeared to the WLA to be a shortcoming, but farmers themselves did not necessarily see it that way. Many farmers were used to having to train local hired hands every season. Even if a worker came to the farm with some prior experience, farm owners generally had their own sense of how things should be done on their own farms to accommodate peculiarities of crops, equipment, or preference. Moreover,

¹²³ WLA Newsletter April 23, 1943.

¹²⁴ Frances W. Valentine, *Successful Practices in the employment of nonfarm women on farms in the Northeastern States, 1943* (Washington: U.S. Gov. Print. Off., 1944), 23.

the training schools were typically on the campus of land grant colleges or on experiment farms where the latest in technology and methods were on display. Workers might come to the farm trained in the latest technology, but few privately owned farms were as well equipped as these institutions. Pre-war prices contraindicated farm investment, and wartime re-tooling created shortages, so farmers feared that women trained in experiment farms would be unfamiliar with the older, or less sophisticated technology in place on working farms. Whether it was due to particularities of method, or peculiarities of equipment, farmers often preferred to train hired hands, be they women or otherwise, themselves, and the WLA, though it intended otherwise, typically accommodated.¹²⁵

What was the work itself like?

The basic purpose of the Women's Land Army was to supply a new source of farm labor to replace men taken away by military service or war industry work, and to bolster production to meet increased wartime need. The most obvious application of the organization, then, was to send women directly to the fields. This was the very direct solution prior programs chose. If there was a shortage of people to do field work, supplementary labor would come to the countryside and do field work. Florence Hall's background made the WLA different than these prior programs. In addition to working as general farm hands, Florence Hall believed that there were times that WLA women would be more productive working in farm homes. With WLA workers to take over cooking, cleaning, laundering, and child care, farm wives and daughters already familiar with seasonal work could be freed up to work in the fields. Hall's flexibility was a marked departure from pre-government programs, which officially frowned on this use of volunteers, and in at least a few cases organizations intervened on behalf of volunteers who

¹²⁵ Ibid 22.

complained of being given housework instead of farm work. But Hall's program was not intended to break glass ceilings, and her background in the Home Demonstration program made her value women's traditional labor in ways that other programs perhaps did not. For Hall there was nothing secondary or inferior about homemaking, so there was no wrong to be righted should WLA workers be asked to do it.¹²⁶

Previous programs had little to no interest in allowing volunteers to be relegated to housework. In Vermont, young women could be removed from deployments if families insisted on confining them to traditionally feminine labor. The Victory Labor Corps volunteers, male and female, were trained as farm workers, and the VLC that all of their members be deployed as such. This harkens back, in part at least to the origins of these youth volunteer programs. The WLAA, of World War I, used their program to advance the broader goal of making horticulture a viable career field for women. The program took advantage of wartime opportunity to demonstrate women's suitability for such labor, but that goal could only be achieved if women were allowed to do field work. The philosophy of the program was that women deserved a stake in the agricultural workforce. The pre-federal programs deployed in 1942, especially in the Northeast, were the heirs of that ideology. Victory Farm Volunteers surrendered their summers (albeit for compensation) to do farm work, and the organization insisted that girls, like boys, be given the opportunity to do what they signed up to do. "Farm Work" in the VFV's mind, was outdoor, market-oriented labor attached to livestock and crop production. This chauvinistic perspective that "farm work" meant men's work was not a part of Hall's philosophy. The WLAA and the VLC saw homemaking and child care as something separate from farm work—

¹²⁶ Arthur Root, *Report On the Volunteer Land Corps: Summer 1942* (New York: s.n, 1942), 13, 82. Root discusses the importance of seeing that even VLC girls be given the chance to work the fields. When girls were asked to do primarily housework, the VLC program removed girls from that assignment and reassigned them to a farm that would assure that girls had the chance to do the market-driven labor they signed up to do.

something inherently inferior and beneath the efforts of their programs. That interpretation depicted women's labor as auxiliary—as not really farm work, but as housework taking place on a farm.¹²⁷

Hall's ideology challenged that notion, and though the program deployed millions of women as field laborers, it did so without denigrating or dismissing the unpaid labor that typically fell to farm wives. Most women deployed by the WLA did in fact do seasonal field work, but Hall's WLA did not require it. She was clear that "Women of the Land Army may also work in farm homes to relieve farm women who are skilled in farm work to work in the fields. Such tasks as preparing meals, caring for children, canning surplus fruits and vegetables, washing, and cleaning will be done by the members of the Women's Land Army." By taking this broader perspective on what constitutes farm labor, Hall showed that she understood and valued the flexibility of farm women, and appreciated that WLA women, especially those lacking farm experience, were still able to provide essential labor that kept farms operational. Hall's egalitarian interpretation of farm work included a belief that women's labor on farms had value, and such labor was also worthy of WLA help. She also recognized that farm women played flexible roles on their own farms, and were experienced in the fields as well as in the kitchens. Though the Home Demonstration program did not cultivate these skills directly, Hall's policy recognized and celebrated the diversity of skills farm women possessed.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps*, 27-30.

¹²⁸ *WLA Newsletter* April 23, 1943.

Dangers, Complaints, and Concerns

Farm work, like any other work, came with its special occupational hazards. Though farmers and their families endured these with the same general stoicism that others endured the hazards of their occupations, when the possibility emerged of bringing urban women into farm work, many of these hazards became a source of concern. Sunburn was commonplace, and somewhat to be expected, but recruiting strategies that touted the abundance of fresh air and sunshine did little to alleviate this particular concern. In addition, insect bites, falls, and muscle strains and sprains were common complaints, so the WLA recommended “A Red Cross first-aid kit should be supplied in the fields and someone who is a qualified first-aider should be on hand and known to other workers as the person to go to with cuts, scratches, and other minor injuries.” These minor concerns were easy enough to address in the field, but in many work sites the WLA noted that there was no accommodation for these trivial and common concerns, and many work sites lacked even a basic wash station where wounds could be cleaned with soap and water.¹²⁹

At the end of the 1943 harvest year, a Washington farmer recommended that “volunteers should be disillusioned about what harvest work means [.]” Organizers agreed, remarking that “the women have no idea what the work is going to be like and how hard physically it will be for women whose muscles are soft from lack of physical exercise.” Misunderstanding on this part led to many women working for only a day or two before they succumbed to aching muscles and refused to return. Organizers admitted that the rigor of the work was not properly emphasized in the first year, and recommended two courses of action for future years. The first was that women who were athletic or “fond of sports” should be specifically targeted for future deployments, and the second was that recruiters, farmers, and supervisors should try to explain

¹²⁹ Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 34.

the physical exertion and rigors more fully in order to preemptively weed out women who were unprepared.¹³⁰

For apple picking, women's strength, and familiarity with specialized equipment were a cause for ongoing concern. "The objection of farmers to having women on tree crops" one Extension Service official explained, "was the moving of ladders, but he could not say that it was justified." Ladder work was a bit particular in fruit crops, as the 3 legged ladders had to be positioned so that they were steady, and gave access to fruit, but did not damage the trees. These ladders came in eight and sixteen foot lengths, and moving them and positioning them was something of a skilled task. In some orchards, the men who could be hired worked with the larger ladders and picked the highest branches of the trees, with women working the smaller ladders picking the lower branches. In Oregon, and likely in other states, men picking in this arrangement were given an hourly, rather than a piecework wage, while women working the lower branches continued to be paid by the bushel. Women in fruit production complained particularly of the insecticidal and fungicidal sprays that farmers used on their fruit trees, saying that it dried out their skin and could be irritating to breathe.¹³¹

In some cases farmers had valid concerns about women's ability to keep up with the most physical demands of farm work. However, the extent of concern was dependent upon the type of work at hand. Even farmers who were satisfied with the work ethic and attention to detail that they saw in WLA workers had to accommodate for a deficiency of strength or experience. In New Hampshire, poultry farmers admired the women's superiority to men in delicate work like sexing chicks, grading eggs, and keeping good records. "Women are more conscientious, do a

¹³⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹³¹ Ibid., 23-24, 33.

more thorough piece of work and are more dependable” one New Hampshire farmer boasted. But this expertise did not forgive all ills. Another New Hampshire farmer worried that the more physical demands of the job were more than most women could handle. Poultry pens were large and cumbersome, and farmers argued that moving and cleaning them was heavier labor than most women could do. WLA administrators advised farmers to adapt their practices as much as possible to accommodate women’s shortcomings, pointing out that small adjustments, like giving workers smaller pails instead of large, heavy buckets, and keeping the ground in orchards cultivated and smoothed would speed production and make it easier for women to do jobs previously reserved for men. The WLA was cautious about safety, and generally encouraged lighter work where it could be done, but this was consistent with the ideology of the extension service and home demonstration programs anyway. They typically encouraged attention to safety and good technique over brute strength. The presence of women might have made the advice more resonant, but since the underlying message was at the heart of so much that the extension service already endorsed, the WLA did not encourage women to exceed their physical comfort zone, and instead pressured farmers to accommodate.¹³²

Women did adapt to the physical rigors of farm work though. As one college student explained “If you have never threshed you don’t know what hard physical labor is! . . . Two people toss the bundles with pitchforks to the man who pitches them into the [threshing machine]. I helped load 100 pound sacks of barley into wagons.” In apple orchards many landowners, who were, after all, responsible for workman’s compensation costs, worried that large apple bags, once filled, were too heavy for women to carry up and down ladders. The pouches, at capacity, carried between twenty-five and thirty pounds of apples. A Maine grower

¹³² New Hampshire Emergency Farm Labor Annual Report, 1943.

recommended that women just fill the bags part full, which slowed labor, but prevented accidents. Oregon growers responding to the suggestion grudgingly accepted the practice, but pointed out that this made more trips on the ladder, slowing work, and increasing opportunities for falls. At the same time, growers admitted that “Picking [apples] requires very careful handling of the fruit not to bruise it, and women general were more careful than boys.” There were jobs that farmers had to make accommodation for, but where WLA workers were most appreciated was not for their ability to substitute for male labor, but for their own unique strengths in areas that male labor was often lacking.¹³³

Processing

Throughout the country WLA women were asked to process as well as plant and harvest crops. Canning technology, a special cause of the Home Demonstration program for home use before the war, became essential to the war effort as fruits and vegetables could be preserved at the peak of their nutritional content and shipped to the front lines. For some crops, such as apricots, this was simple and straightforward. The soft fruits were cut in half and laid out in the sun to dehydrate. Some women preferred this processing work. Processing also provided a better margin of error for women learning to handle delicate produce with adequate care. “Many of the berries picked in the Pacific States are canned or made into jams.” One report said. “Where that is done the berries often are picked into pails and emptied into barrels, requiring much less careful handling than . . . for consumption fresh.” In this environment canning was an ideal start. Women could learn the art of picking without bruising or harming fruits in a low-stakes environment since the produce was to be processed instead of shipped.

¹³³ *New York Times Magazine*, 15 August, 1943; Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 12; Maine WLA State Supervisor Annual Report 1943.

Independent canneries, like other businesses, lost vast numbers of their workers in wartime adjustments, so WLA workers often filled that gap as well. In Oregon, canneries were so swift in recruiting women that children were left to do most of the 1943 harvest. “It should be remembered” one report claimed, “that by far the greater part of the harvesters recruited were school children.” The canneries and the farms worked hand in hand, as fruit, once picked, must be processed swiftly. In some cases, rather than transport fruit or vegetables to processing facilities, the WLA set up mobile processing produce on or near the property where they crops were picked. Many canneries had company owned farms where they grew produce for their own facilities and integrated WLA workers through their production and processing facilities. This further processing gave the WLA a deep stake in the value added process and also made them essential to the flow of shelf-stable foods to the front lines. Though they were not producing munitions or navy vessels, the WLA’s was involved in secondary economic activity, processing, as well as growing agricultural products.¹³⁴

In some cases food processing operations, frustrated with the pace of USES and Extension delays, directly hired their own workforce, often monopolizing the time women would otherwise have dedicated to the WLA. While the WLA would ultimately have deployed women to processing facilities, these direct hires reduced the theoretically available workforce to the chagrin of the WLA. Though the women were ultimately propping up food outputs for the United States, they also removed women from the government-managed labor pool, and forced the WLA to compete with these private industries for women’s time and attention. Frances Valentine, of the Women’s Bureau evaluated the situation: “Competing with agriculture for women workers were the huge canning industry and the fruit-packing houses. Their peaks come

¹³⁴ Valentine discusses this in her, *Women’s Emergency Farm Service on the Pacific Coast in 1943*, Bulletin No. 204, U. S. Women’s Bureau, Department of Labor, 1945, 2, 12.

at about the same time as the harvest peaks, and the bigger the fruit and vegetable crops, the more workers are needed to see that all this produce is taken care of and not allowed to spoil.” Though these businesses could have requested women workers through the Extension service, they cut out the middleman and brought their case directly to the public. “At the same time that women were being sought for harvest work” Valentine explained, “there was a high-powered publicity campaign going on to get women to come into the canneries.” The need was so great that women could come for any time they chose. An evening shift of 4 hours—morning or afternoon shifts—“come any time as long as you come.” Washington canneries sought women “by press, radio, sound machine, telephone calls, and personally written appeals”. While the WLA asked women to supply reports on their availability, and preferred that women dedicate several weeks at a time to service, the canneries recognized the value of a self-made schedule, and created a policy that gave women more freedom and control over their time than even the WLA, with its penchant for squeezing spare hours out of an already-employed population had been able to do.¹³⁵

Camp Life

Many seasonal WLA workers lived in “camps” or tent cities constructed by the WLA program itself, often with camp cooks and directors who managed a combined force of WLA and VFV women and girls. The WLA expected housing to be safe and of reasonable quality, though conditions could still be spartan. One particular camp described as “comfortable” boasted that “Sleeping quarters consist of large tents with floors.” That particular camp also had a separate building with showers, laundry facilities, and even toilets. These were comfort levels that farm hands could not always take for granted, and accommodations that, left to his own devices,

¹³⁵ Ibid., 29.

Wickard may not have insisted on. But with housing conditions first set by the United States Employment Service, and then organization of camps handed over to leadership from the Home Demonstration program, there was little chance to revise high standards for housing, and this would remain a key consideration for WLA workers that farm help had not been able to rely on in the past.¹³⁶

In addition to housing there were a number of other standards that the WLA established for women living in and working from camps. The Adult Harvest Camp manual outlined five areas of importance for WLA camps that outlined standards for health and nutrition, medical oversight, and the aforementioned housing standards as well as safety concerns. Accident prevention and transportation safety were of particular concern. Sanitation standards extended not only to housing but to the management of kitchens, with particular attention to the quality of drinking water, dishwashing, and the storage of milk to prevent food borne illness. Garbage was to be managed carefully to avoid attracting vermin, and the manuals set drainage standards for latrines, showers, and other facilities that created water runoff. Employment conditions too, including expected working conditions, supervision, and wages were standardized in manuals by various WLA supervisors. These standards were, of course, somewhat idealized. The food supply was a matter of national concern for reasons other than social advancement, so while the WLA did have high expectations, the reality was that some standards were met better than others in various locales, but the standards gave camp directors, workers, and farmers all guidelines to strive for, if not to expect.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ *WLA Newsletter*, Florence Hall, July 2, 1945.

¹³⁷ *WLA Newsletter* August, 1943; Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast In 1943*, Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1945, 6-8

Several early experiments in camp organization provided lessons in good operations. Some pre-WLA models established, for instance, emphasized the importance of supplying good supervision and training for incoming workers. Those farms that offered careful demonstration and training fared far better than those camps that sent women into the fields before their first exposure to expectations. It was also important to balance the amount of work and the number of workers so that women could earn enough to pay their room and board. In one tomato picking camp, women were carted in from Los Angeles, but the combination of a poor crop and green workers meant that workers paid by the bushel did not earn enough money to pay for their board. The girls worked only short days, and seemed to enjoy their time at the camp, but the model was not sustainable if women did not make enough money to break even. Future California camps advised planters that women were likely to be unprofitable the first day, but advised careful systematic training to assure long-term productivity.¹³⁸

A California farmer with no independent camp close by established his own housing facility to assure that he would get a team to come and pick his apricot crop. The Women's Bureau representative reporting on the program in California recalled:

He could provide a beautiful camp site with fine water piped in to it. Tents with stoves, tables, and chairs were furnished and beds with springs (but no mattresses) or canvas cots. Outdoor showers were provided and the hot sun warmed the water in the metal pipes. Drinking water was hung in water coolers. Outdoor privies, inclosed [*sic*], but not roofed, were supplied, three for women at the camp, and some out in the orchards. The women bought and prepared their own food.¹³⁹

The pickers worked seven days a week, picking and processing the apricot crop and earning a bit over \$3 per day. Because the landowner supplied housing privately, the women did not have to

¹³⁸ Ibid., 6-8.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

pay for housing out of pocket, and had only the expense of their food. Another camp established to harvest grapes in California's San Joaquin Valley converted box cars into housing, and hired a janitor, cook, and camp director. Women paid \$8.75 a month for their room and board in this camp, and had the use of a utility building that included flush toilets, showers with hot and cold running water, washtubs for doing laundry, and a separate common area for games and socializing.¹⁴⁰

At Camp Mil-bur, in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, the program housed a combined force of VFV and WLA women who deployed to regional farms as day laborers. The official schedule called for girls to rise at 6:00 the first year, but later volunteers recalled rising by 5:15. Work days were supposed to run from 8:00 – 5:00, with an hour for lunch, but organizers admitted that the demand for work often superseded the idealized schedule, with lunches sometimes cut short, and days often run long to accommodate. Back at the camp, the girls enjoyed swimming, baseball, and outings to Washington DC or Baltimore. Strengthening the Home Demonstration influence on the program, Maryland WLA director Dorothy Emerson, a childhood 4-H member, worked for Maryland Extension for 20 years before the camp opened. Steeped in the importance of nutrition and proper training, Emerson hired a number of experts, from cooks to swimming instructors to aid the camp, and even called on University of Maryland nutritionists to aid with meal planning. This was a continuation of a World War I custom, where the WLAA of Virginia placed their entire University of Virginia camp under the management of Mary A. Wilson, described by one local paper as a “world famous culinary artist.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 5-6. Women in AWVS camps, by contrast, who paid for cooks and board averaged closer to \$1.50 per day for these services.

¹⁴¹ Maryland Women and the “Call to Farms” During WWII, University of Maryland Libraries, Special Collections; Big Stone Gap Post, Volume 27, Number 28, 9 July 1919.

Food was an important component of morale in general, and observers noted that savvy recruits chose camps with good living conditions if they could. Camps that charged full board were expected to provide a hot breakfast, and either prepared a lunch for workers to carry into the fields, or prepared a hot lunch and delivered it to work sites. A Women's Bureau representative and advisory committee observer sampled a camp lunch in February, 1944. It included "soup, meat, potatoes, two vegetables, bread and butter, tea, coffee, milk, and choice of two kinds of dessert." The meal is conspicuously consistent with the nutritional guidelines promoted by the USDA nutrition standards advocated by the United States in wartime—a clear benefit of the integration of farm labor and USDA. Camp cooks were sometimes shared with non WLA workforces, delivering meals to other programs doing nearby field work. California observers were somewhat flippant about the rare food complaint, dismissing them with the remark that "it takes experience to gage the appetites of vigorous farm workers, whether men or women."¹⁴²

Women living in camps enjoyed good food, reasonable conditions, and often recreational opportunities, but this came at a cost to the women directly. The camps were not operated as charities, and were expected to fund their own existence. The cost of establishing and maintaining the camps was shared between farmers and workers, with workers expected at least to pay for their board, and in many cases also to help shoulder the cost of the establishment and operation of the camps, and in some cases also to pay the cost of her own transportation to and from the camps from her home. Farmers were asked to pay the cost to transport women from the camps to their individual work sites. A Washington University examination of apple picking showed that, for the 1943 season, a camp girl would make about \$1.50 to \$2.00 for a four-day

¹⁴² Valentine, Frances Wadsworth. *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast In 1943*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1945.

work deployment after expenses for board and railroad fare. These two expenses typically ranged from \$15 to \$17 for an individual worker, meaning that the girls spent almost everything they earned on that single deployment to just get themselves to work each day. This extraordinary expense passed on to the workers may help to explain why patriotic responsibility took precedence over earning potential in recruiting campaigns. Any women who entered WLA camps for the pay would certainly be disillusioned quickly with the extraordinary expenses of simply showing up to work.¹⁴³

The WLA gleaned what information it could about camp management from pre WLA camp style programs. They learned the importance of maintaining high morale if women were to maintain a strong work ethic. The best camps were organized enough to both provide good service to farmers and to keep workers happy, healthy, and hard working. Camps were placed under the care of a camp director whose entire responsibilities lay in coordinating daily operations of camp including deployments, and negotiating the relationship between any organizations with a sponsoring interest in the camp such as businesses, school districts, churches, or women's organizations. Such sponsors often helped to secure space or provide services for the camps, and their interests had to be coordinated on top of the needs of farmers and workers. At camps of more than 50 women, supervisors assisted the camp director.¹⁴⁴

Farmers contracting for camp workers had to agree to a contract that defined the number of workers required and bound farmers to limits on work days and hours. An ideal scenario was for women to work eight hour days no more than six days per week, but the reality quickly became that those were idealized, rather than expected standards. In some instances when

¹⁴³ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 8; Harven Levinston, *Paradox of Plenty; a Social History of Eating in Modern America* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003), 65.

women were accustomed to a 9 hour day they objected to the imposition of a shorter day as it cost them an hour's pay. Crop needs and labor demand did play a large part in these terms, and ten to twelve hour days were not uncommon during busy seasons. Camps could be requested by individual farms and ranches, by corporate entities like canneries or company-owned farms, or by a community of cooperating farmers. Those sponsors became responsible for establishing facilities, hiring supervisors, and supplying insurance for facilities, including buildings that women occupied as housing or for work. The contracts, like the manuals of health and safety standards, were more idealized than realized, and while communities did often make a great effort to make WLA women comfortable, a California camp operator observed that there was no way for either side to enforce the provisions of contracts. There may be too few available recruits, or a crop might not turn out, alleviating the need for workers at all, so while the WLA established a wish list of idealized standards, they functioned more as a testament to the vision administrators had for the organization than as a biographical account of lived experiences.¹⁴⁵

All in all, women appear to have enjoyed their time in WLA camps, in camp Mil-Bur in Maryland, women wrote their own newsletter, swam, and put on plays. In some regions, communities arranged for entertainment or outings for camp women on Sunday afternoons. For some women at least, and in particular for low-paying crops, camp life appears to have been the primary draw to the WLA. One observer pointed out that “where at best the earnings would be small, after women had earned their board there was a tendency to ease up and not work the full day.” While this did not hold true for higher profit crops, the fact that women would stay and work in an environment that did not promise any significant profits suggests that camp life was at least diverting enough to justify investing time and labor simply for the pleasure of

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 8-9, 16.

participating. This experiential reward appears to have been more diverting even than patriotic motives, as the latter would not allow for such a slowing of pace.¹⁴⁶

The Pay

Pay varied according to the individual sector, but the WLA did insist on some degree of pay regulation. Rather than setting one standard wage for WLA workers, which had the potential to be too high or too low according to regional variance, the program required that Extension agents determine and enforce whatever was the prevailing wage typical for the particular crop and region. In the seasonal labor that dominated WLA demand, this typically meant pay by piecework. Bean pickers in the Pacific Northwest received 2 and ¼ cents per pound, with a ¼ cent bonus paid at the end of the season for women who stayed for the whole season. An average adult woman picked about 190 pounds per day, with an average of 8.3 hours per work day. Berry pickers typically earned 3 to 4 cents per pound, and, depending on the conditions, sometimes earned as little as \$1.50 for a full day's work. Tree fruits yielded better pay, with inexperienced cherry pickers earning \$6 - \$8 per day, and experienced hands earning up to \$12. Pears, Apples, and Walnuts would yield anywhere from \$4 to \$8 per day at piecework rates. Pay in other industries could vary widely, but one report said that girl truck drives earned \$9 per day, and hourly wages for other work ranged from 60 to 95 cents for laborers.¹⁴⁷

Clearly wages were highly varied, and with women responsible to fund their board out of their personal earnings, take-home pay could be far lower than daily wages might suggest. But for comparison, a WAC of the lowest military rank, after September of 1943, when the Auxiliary

¹⁴⁶ Valentine, F. Wadsworth. (1945). *Women's emergency farm service on the Pacific coast in 1943*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off. 35.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 24-27.

program expired, received the same pay as men of the same rank. For the lowest-ranking private this was \$50 per month (but with board included, rather than billed separately). While agricultural earnings were widely varied from one crop to the next, women working in sectors with higher prevailing wages could easily out-earn their counterparts in the military during the harvest season.¹⁴⁸

Though it did not go so far as to establish a minimum standard, the prevailing wage was progressive in its own way, as it required women to be paid the rate that men would have received had they been available. Pay was widely varied from crop to crop and region to region, but women had the same theoretical earning potential as their male counterparts, with piecework rates prorated only as much as a woman's own physical limitations demanded. Wartime circumstances, of course, meant that in reality, women were not competing for equal wages, as men were simply not available. But the fact that the WLA demanded equal pay was symbolically significant, representing a demand that farmers recognize the value of women's labor even if it was not the labor they would have preferred.¹⁴⁹

Regulating Women

The WLA tried to impose protective regulations on women workers that would assure that they took regular breaks, had quality housing, had clean drinking water, and other safeguards intended to assure that women's jobs did not undermine their health. These regulations, like so many peacetime recommendations that emanated from the Home Demonstration Program, may have been ideal in theory, but they broke down under the realities

¹⁴⁸ Melissa Ziobro, "Skirted Soldiers": The Women's Army Corps and Gender Integration of the U.S. Army during World War II, *On Point: The Journal of Army History*, June 2016; Malvern Hall Tillitt, "Army-Navy Pay Tops Most Civilians' Unmarried Private's Income Equivalent to \$3,600 Salary, *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly*, April 24, 1944.

¹⁴⁹ Valentine, Frances Wadsworth. *Women's Emergency Farm Service*, 25.

of farm labor and individual agency. WLA workers often defied regulations and asserted their right to determine their own working conditions. The WLA “recommended” that women take frequent breaks, but did not demand or require them. Likewise, though the program recommended one hour lunch breaks, these breaks varied according to the demands of the work of the day. While some Maryland women recalled dining and then napping or playing games in the shade of trees during their hour long lunch, women doing piecework in the Northeast routinely took only 15 minutes for their lunch. One supervisor abjectly explained “Few if any piece workers would take the one hour universally recommended for women doing hard physical work.” If piecework was the deciding factor, clearly workers valued their own earning potential more than they did the WLA recommendations for break time. They asserted their independence and rejected these protective regulations, in much the same way factory women rejected protective regulation, in the name of higher earning potential.¹⁵⁰

Technology – perception and reality

Just as importantly for recruiting purposes, a great deal of recruiting information revolved around the idea (not to say the actual implementation of) technology. Tractors, trucks, and other mechanized equipment featured heavily in Crop Corps recruiting artwork. The reality was that women would rarely get the opportunity to use such sophisticated equipment. Tractors were expensive, and due to wartime retooling, they were also very difficult to replace. The WLA was well aware of this, with one 1944 observer pointing out that “[women] were employed in the pruning and tying of berry canes; in the cultivation of vegetables; in training hops, in haying, in helping (rarely) with combines or pea viners, or in tractor driving.” The report found so little overlap between modern, mechanized farming and the WLA that it deserved pointing out that it

¹⁵⁰ Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 26

was rare. Tractors and other technology would not be a defining experience for most WLA women, but nonetheless recruiting campaigns suggested modern, mechanized, civilized agriculture to volunteers weighing farm labor against glamorous sectors like the WASPS, WAVES, or even riveting in factories.¹⁵¹

This technologically advanced vision of farming was not to be for most WLA workers. The events of the early 20th century combined with quirks of the Great Depression to create vast machinery shortages in World War II. The production boom of the Great War inspired a peculiar combination of rural out-migration of those who had no stomach left for agricultural work, and rising crop prices that benefitted those who remained in the rural sector. With rising prices and disappearing labor, farmers invested in farm equipment through the nineteen teens, and farmers who chose to stay and ride out the agricultural boom bought up departing neighbors' land leading to larger farms and, for many industries, less dependence on human labor. As prices soared, farmers invested. When the inevitable bust came, those farmers were over-invested and under-protected.¹⁵²

The 1920s saw more farm foreclosures than the 1930s would, and used equipment left over from the recent boom, could be easily found at foreclosure auctions. New Deal programs of the following decade incentivized reduced production, which disincentivized investment in equipment. While it was prudent for farmers to use what fertilizers and other measures they could to maximize the per-acre output of Agricultural Adjustment Act allotments, there was little need to invest in new equipment. Outputs were falling, and human labor was cheap. Though the Farm Security Administration made farm improvement funds available, many farmers chose not

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵² ¹⁵² Rasumssen, *A Short History of Agricultural Adjustment, 1933-75*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 1976; Pete Daniel *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Culture since 1880*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984)

to take advantage of those opportunities in a situation of reduced production finding that their aged tractors were adequate for a reduced work load.¹⁵³

While the tractor had become a recognized symbol of modernity and civilized agriculture, the reality in the 1940s was different from the ideal. Even in the heavily mechanized Great Plains farmers were more likely to own horses than tractors, and farms that operated solely on tractor power were less common than farms that possessed only manpower. In 1940 national averages showed 247 tractors for every 1000 farms, the vast majority of those, too, were pre-1930 models. So WLA workers entered an agricultural sector that suffered from chronic under-mechanization at a moment in time when production needed to increase. Trucks were somewhat more common, and WLA accounts suggest women drove them often, but like tractors, they tended to be older models leftover from before the Depression.¹⁵⁴

In September 1942 Claude Wickard called for strict rationing of farm equipment requiring certification from a county board before a purchase could be authorized. The plan was intended to assure that scarce equipment found its way into the most productive hands, but the net result was still to fiercely limit the amount of labor that could be off put onto machines. Only horse-drawn equipment and hand-tools were not subject to the new restrictions. The Farm Bureau, which brokered and encouraged cooperative buying and selling previously, called on farmers to share equipment in order to meet the shortage as the fall harvest approached. E. K. Dean, President of the Kansas Farm Bureau, warned “[W]e must bring cooperation more and more into the farm picture. We must increase the exchange of labor, co-operative use of farm machinery...” He entreated farmers to take advantage of Farm Security Administration funding,

¹⁵³ One area of discrepancy here would be those farmers who chose to invest in non AAA crops such as soy and milo. Though they were new to the U.S. market, they were not subject to AAA quotas and those who chose to plant them sometimes invested in equipment for this purpose.

¹⁵⁴ 1940 Census of Agriculture 1940 3-6, 452.

which promised, in what was probably not deliberate irony, to provide low-interest loans to farmers to purchase equipment apparently oblivious to the relevant shortages. By fall 1942 even used equipment, when it could be had, fetched exorbitant prices. A Colorado newspaper reported:

“Some items of second hand minor machinery are being as much as eight times their cost when new.” and cited examples such as “A kerosene refrigerator that cost \$169 three years ago sold for \$330 . . . a gasoline engine that cost \$5 19 years ago brought \$36—and the purchaser was glad to get it. . . . a tractor plow six years old that cost \$5 when new brought \$42. . . . an engine and pump jack that cost \$43 when new two years ago was auctioned for \$68 . . . a seed drill that was new last year brought . . . \$60 more than its original cost. Wire fencing . . . is hard to get and rolls of second hand material that the average farmer wouldn't have looked at a couple of years ago is now being eagerly sought. Wire that when new cost about 43 cents a rod sold at auction for 92 cents a rod[.]”¹⁵⁵

Some implements, tractors, balers, combines, corn pickers and corn binders were in such heavy demand that they were subjected to price ceilings even used, but those ceilings were of little use when factories simply weren't producing implements. What few implements were produced, the United States shared with allied countries under the lend-lease program, including several thousand supplied to allies in 1944 while U.S. farmers were working out cooperative machine sharing and refurbishing horse-drawn equipment.¹⁵⁶

While WLA recruiting ephemera frequently featured tractors and other modern marvels, there were few to actually be had, and even fewer farmers who were eager to share them with inexperienced help. In 1939 and 1940, right before World War II, farm labor, not equipment remained the greatest single expense for farmers across the U. S., followed closely by livestock feed. Implements and machinery came in a safe third, averaging only seventy percent of what

¹⁵⁵ "Wickard Orders Rationing for Farm Machinery," *Wyoming Eagle*, September 17, 1942; "Share on Farms," *Salina Journal*, October 29, 1942; "Second Hand Farm Implements Once Ignored Are Now Bringing Fabulous Prices at Rural Sales," *Rapid City Daily Journal*, March 15, 1943.

¹⁵⁶ *Southern Argus* (Port Elliot, SA) Thu 20 Jul 1944, Page 3 "Facts in Brief"

was spent for labor. Much of this is because equipment, once purchased, is an expense only for repairs and fuel costs. With few people purchasing new equipment, the cost of existing equipment became negligible, where laborers required pay every season. So the expense of labor is not a testament to rising wages, but of stagnation in the implement industry.¹⁵⁷

Investment in equipment sounded good in theory. The country-life movement called for it for decades, hailing mechanization as the panacea of American farming that would make every family farmer a gentleman farmer. But on the ground, farmers had reason to fear investments that would take years of ideal markets to repay. While they did eventually invest in machinery, farmers were stereotypically fiscally conservative, and by 1939 few were investing in new equipment. While there were increases in mechanized farming in the 1930s, it was slow. Mississippi doubled its tractors in the ten years prior to World War II, but still had only about ten thousand in the entire state. In North Dakota, a Great Plains state where farms tended to be large and the prevailing wage for farm help was nearly double that of Mississippi, there was still only approximately one tractor for every three-hundred fifteen acres. Furthermore, there was less investment in farm improvements leading into the war. Nationally farmers spent 143 million fewer dollars on farm machinery in 1939 than they had in 1929.¹⁵⁸ This came at a cost during the war, as WLA hand-threshed grain though patented combines had been available in the United States in the early 1920s.¹⁵⁹

In the Midwest, where farming revolved more around mechanization than elsewhere in the USA, farmers showed little interest in turning green city women loose with expensive (and in wartime irreplaceable) tractors. In addition, in Midwestern farms, wives and daughters typically contributed field labor at least seasonally, meaning farm women had some experience with

¹⁵⁷ 1940 Census of Agriculture 3-6, 447

¹⁵⁸ Census of Agriculture 1940, 3-6 447, 450.

¹⁵⁹ Carpenter, 107-108.

tractors, combines, and other machinery. Many farmers concurred with the farmer from Jones County, Iowa who said “If I have to have a woman helping me in the field, I want my wife, not some green city girl.” So amid concerns practical and lascivious, farmers in the Midwest entered 1943 distrustful of urban women’s agricultural skills, but cautiously willing to use WLA workers to cook, clean, and care for children so that farm women could be free to contribute in the fields. Farm wives had already proven themselves in the fields, and where farm equipment was expensive and nearly impossible to replace. The faith farmers placed in their wives shows us that it was not the fact that urban women were women, but the fact that urban women were urban that worried them.¹⁶⁰

In the Northeast, dairying was a similarly technology dependent sector, but refrigerators, separators, and milking machines did not seem to generate the same level of concern for farmers. New England dairymen became among the first groups to request live-in WLA workers. Oregon also deployed many women to their dairy sector. But the labor of dairying is different inherently, involving smaller, largely immobile machinery, and a number of tasks such as separating and pasteurizing milk that resemble cooking, and others, such as sanitizing and soaking, which resemble household cleaning. Whatever broke down the barriers, dairy farms became one of the key fields that relied on live in WLA workers. Some of these workers worked year-round, and others hired on seasonally to allow farmers to spend more time in hay fields during the summer season. Whether seasonal or permanent, dairy farmers were impressed by WLA workers’ ability and work ethic. “[The girls] compare very favorably with young men without previous dairying experience, and are very much superior to boys in the 12-to-16 age group.” Another commented “Their strong points have been willingness to do whatever they

¹⁶⁰ “When Town Girls Help,” *Wallaces’ Farmer*, 19 June 1943, 15.

were asked, cheerfulness, and sticking to the job until it was finished. They are much more intelligent than the boys we have had, and have not wasted time or shirked as the boys have a tendency to do.” While farmers may not have considered hiring women outside of a wartime emergency, the women had the opportunity to prove themselves and farmers were willing to concede a job well done.¹⁶¹

Seasonal Workers

Also in the Northeast, truck farms hired WLA women en masse to harvest and process fruits and vegetables. Canning technology allowed the United States to ship this produce to the front and supply needed vitamins to allied forces as well. Since New York and Vermont had been at the forefront of private and state level organization in the early war years, the WLA had an experienced workforce to draw from and several northeastern states fielded very large forces even in the first year of operations. Maine struggled to field a large enough force with just state-wide measures however, and the first year that the WLA allowed interstate cooperation, the state requested out of state seasonal workers to assure that the states’ fruit crops did not go to waste. In Portland, the Women’s Emergency Farm Service, Maine’s organizational name for the WLA, set up camps to house workers coming into the state from California, Florida, and Kentucky, and deploy those workers throughout the State to harvest apples and potatoes. Absent a federal program the year before, Katharine Potter reported that Maine farmers had actually reduced their production for fear of having to let crops rot in the ground. With enough federal labor in 1943, Potter happily reported that farmers were talking of increasing production for the 1944 crop year. In support of this, Hall and Potter both reassured farmers of the competence and reliability of the

¹⁶¹ Frances Wadsworth Valentine, *Successful Practices in the Employment of Nonfarm Women On Farms in the Northeastern States, 1943* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1944), 14-15.

workforce. In 1944, with an abundance of labor from in and out of the state, farmers invited WLA workers to assist with the hay harvest and care for livestock. When the federal program took advantage of the national labor pool, it quelled any concerns about labor shortages and eliminated talk of reduced production. Whatever feelings farmers may have had about women as farm workers, those feelings did not interfere with productivity once the labor supply proved stable.¹⁶²

In Massachusetts tobacco growers began the 1943 season with mostly Victory Farm Volunteer labor but shifted their preferences quickly to the WLA. High school girls did not have the stamina, farmers argued, that the older girls did. “What has been seen of the younger groups working indicates that, except for special individuals, the younger girls are not physically up to nearly the same amount of work as the girls 18 to 21 or over, nor should [younger girls] work such long hours.” The Consolidated Cigar Company in particular deliberately sought out college women for the 1944 production year after working with high school girls in 1943. For Massachusetts the shift came at a strategically beneficial time. State extension authorities set very ambitious production goals and encouraged farmers to produce far more than they had in 1942. Like Vermont, Massachusetts struggled to get enough farm labor during the previous year, so the WLA recruited aggressively and registered as many college women and homemakers as they could, then promoted the program to farmers through county agents. Massachusetts did meet its production goals for that year, and improved on the 1943 harvest again in 1944 using WLA labor. The Victory Farm Volunteer program collapsed in Massachusetts, recruiting only about half of the youth in 1944 that they did in 1943, but the WLA grew in the same time period,

¹⁶² Maine State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Annual Report, 1944, Florence Hall to Assistant State Supervisor, 25 March, 1944. WLA records; Stephanie Carpenter evaluates this situation in *On the Farm Front*, 102-105.

and drew on women from other states to meet labor needs. In Washington, recruiters visited colleges in September, and recruited students specifically for the apple harvest.¹⁶³

Outside of regular seasonal work, many farmers in the North used day haul labor throughout winter to maintain farms and equipment and to prepare for coming seasons. Hall noted one group of over 200 workers organized in 1944 who worked Sundays on farms throughout the Washington D.C. area, chopping firewood and greasing horse harnesses. In California, a group of women stayed on in a large vineyard and learned to prune and tie grapes. Wherever farmers felt they could afford the extra labor, and women felt they could spare the time, farmers could find off-season work for women to do. This aligned nicely with extension goals, which encouraged farmers to spend the off season investing in care and improvements to crops, equipment, and facilities to make the busy season go more smoothly.¹⁶⁴

The WLA was fairly well received in the Pacific coastal states where shipyards paid so well that even farm owners sometimes left their farms to take war work. Women, albeit Japanese, Chinese, or Mexican women, were already a fairly common part of the migratory workforce that started in Southern California and picked its way North to Washington and British Columbia every year. The most immediate need on the West Coast was to replace this seasonal workforce. Few industries required year-round farm help, but they did require fast efficient workers en masse when crops, especially fruit and vegetables, as in the Northeast, that had a limited window of opportunity between the time they were ready for harvest and the time they were past help. For some crops, this window could be as short as just two to three days. In

¹⁶³ “College Girls as Farm Workers: Administration of a Labor Unit in Massachusetts, 1943” U. S. Women’s Bureau, March 1943,” U. S. Women’s Bureau, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. “Massachusetts State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Annual Report, 1943”; Massachusetts State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Annual Report, 1944.

¹⁶⁴ Florence Hall, *WLA Newsletter*, December 19, 1944; Women’s Land Army, United States Department of Agriculture Extension Service, Washington D.C., 1-2.

Washington, the bean harvest created tremendous demand for labor. As one field supervisor explained “Beans must be picked the day they are ripe or they get too large. Vines have to be gone over several times. Given a rain followed by a few warm days, and the picking crisis becomes acute” so labor had to be plentiful and quickly deployable. That same region might have little to no work before or after the harvest, but during the harvest, labor was the difference between having and not having a viable crop.¹⁶⁵

In California the labor situation was complicated by the fact that farms were often far larger than in the east. California farmers planted crops by the thousands of acres, and one farm may specialize in more than one crop, which spread out the busy season. In peacetime these farms relied on migratory workers who specialized in some particular type of crop, beet workers, apple pickers, and soft-fruit pickers mastered the nuances of their respective crafts, and honed their skills to maximize their piecework earnings. Though they were called unskilled workers, these migrant workers often mastered ambidextrous techniques that made them more efficient than a green worker. With only inexperienced and non specialized hands available, the WLA would have to supply far more workers than farmers were used to accommodating. Additionally, as Frances Valentine pointed out, the environmental conditions of the Pacific Coast favored large scale food production. “The range of temperature” she observed “is such that in every month of the year some crop is being harvested. . . . Agriculture, in California at least, is practically a year-round industry [.]” In these circumstances a single California farm could easily employ hundreds of women over the course of a single year.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 230-241; Frances W. Valentine, “Women’s Emergency Farm Service on the Pacific Coast in 1943,” *Bulletin No. 204*, U. S. Women’s Bureau, Department of Labor, 1945, 1, 3, 28.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

There were farmers who were hesitant to hire women in 1942, when the United States Employment Service registered them for service. The WLA's expectations for working and living conditions were off-putting even when the idea of working with such unconventional labor was not. Several farmers who talked with the United States Employment Service found that they could not meet basic housing requirements to receive placements of women workers. Though their housing had been used by migratory workers, it did not have sanitary or bathing facilities. The Women's Bureau called the shelters simply "not satisfactory for women" and stationed WLA workers elsewhere. Many farmers who balked at providing suitable housing or at taking on woman workers in general lost their 1942 crops, and adjusted their expectations for the following year. Though they may not have chosen to field women in a peacetime environment, with their backs to the wall in 1943, California farmers welcomed women as a last resort. Generally, farmers seem to have been satisfied with the outcomes. One land owner reflecting on the situation reported that "due to the shortage of labor last year we lost \$15,000 on our walnut crop. This year, we will not lose any. . . . I am sure you sent us the choicest women. We sincerely appreciate their help." Many others had similar experiences. In its first year of operation, California fielded almost 28,000 women in conjunction with the Emergency War Labor Program, and recruited over 46,500 the following year. Whatever hang-ups other parts of the country may have had, as women proved their value in the fields, California embraced and expanded the program to meet continually rising need.¹⁶⁷

After the first year of experimentation, the United States found the WLA a worthwhile prospect, and expanded its dependence on the program for coming years. In February, 1944, the War Food Administration, no longer in charge of any facet of farm labor, but influential in

¹⁶⁷ California Farm Labor Supervisor Annual Report, 1943; Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency War Labor Program*, 148; Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service on the Pacific Coast*, 5.

planning nonetheless, called for the creation of a mobile task force of 200,000 exceptional workers for rapid response to crisis-level situations. WFA Director Philip G. Bruton envisioned a combined force of foreign and domestic workers “who can be shifted on short notice to save threatened crops in critical labor shortage areas.” This emphasis on interstate movement of domestic labor forces was somewhat new, with discussions the previous year equating interstate mobile workforces with the Bracero program. 1944 did indeed see groups of women deploy outside of their own home states, with Arkansas sending college women to New Jersey to harvest and process garden truck, West Virginia sending women to Ohio and Maryland to work on farms, and Mississippi sending women to South Dakota to work in Sugar Beet fields.¹⁶⁸

The USA grows dependent

As the war dragged on, women became increasingly important to a still-shrinking agricultural workforce. In 1944 the Women’s Bureau reported that “Nonfarm women undoubtedly were employed in greater numbers than ever before. In the seasonal crop harvests, the percentage of women and youth is constantly increasing and that of men decreasing.” The July labor force report from the Bureau of the Census showed a net loss of nearly half a million male workers from farm fields from 1944 to 1945. In the same time period, ten thousand additional women entered farm labor. Not only did this establish that placements were available for these women, but that more and more responsibility fell to woman workers as men bled from the farm working ranks throughout the war. It is difficult to know if farmers hired more women out of good impressions or out of desperation, but whatever the motive, farmers did not reject women workers. Moreover, agricultural outputs increased year after year through the course of

¹⁶⁸ *Hattiesburg American* February 24, 1944; Mitchell, H. L. "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 32 (1973), pp. 342–369; “Mississippi 1944 Annual Narrative Report Emergency Farm Labor Program.”

the war, even as women took on larger and larger shares of farm labor in raw numbers. Kansas women who worked in 1944 reported that they worked longer hours in 1945, and well they should—the wheat harvest was twenty million bushels greater than the previous year.¹⁶⁹

If the scale of harvest in situations of wartime shortage can be taken as any indication, the WLA program was a success. The program succeeded because it identified unwanted or underused labor and leveraged wartime enthusiasm to bring overlooked workers to farms, which were eager to accept them. The program succeeded in essence by not competing. Instead of making farm labor competitive with industry, the USDA economized. The camp model was flexible enough to meet very diverse needs in many sectors across the United States. Still, the program was dependent on the psychological effects of the war for its success. Camps supplied large numbers of seasonal workers, but operation expenses for camps run to USDA standards made the program unsustainable for most sectors in peacetime. In some industries women did not earn enough to pay for their own room and board. It was just not possible to board workers, to the exacting housing standards of the WLA on prevailing wages in seasonal industries. Still, women voted with their feet, and the return of workers year after year shows that urban women were not adverse to the realities of farming even with some shortcomings in working conditions. Likewise, farmers' returned to WLA workers year after year suggesting that the program's unusual approach was effective enough to satisfy wartime need.

¹⁶⁹ Labor Force, Bureau of the Census, Washington DC, July 1945., Reported in *WLA Newsletter*, July 1945. *WLA Newsletter*, July 2, 1945; Valentine, *Women's emergency farm service on the Pacific coast in 1943*, 16.



Figure 5.1 "Bloomer Hall" a dormitory at camp Mil-Bur, affiliated with the University of Maryland, the camp was a manifestation of many WLA ambitions, with recreational activities, swimming instruction, social activities, and a kitchen directed by a nutritionist from University of Maryland.



Figure 5.2 Sanitary facilities were an ongoing concern for the WLA. The program, deeply saturated by reform-era ideology, called for all camps to have adequate toilet, shower, and washing facilities, but the costs of these facilities were passed on to workers in the form of “board fees.



Figure 5.3 Women at camp Milbur enjoyed recreational time and facilities, and even had a swimming instructor on staff. Some crops were definitely more profitable than others for WLA workers, but the allure of camp life, coupled with a sense of patriotic contribution to the war effort, could be enough to keep women participating even if they were not making great profits.

Chapter 6

The WLA in the South

The WLA has been better documented in the Northeast and on the Pacific Coast than in other parts of the United States. The eminence of the program on the two coasts can give the impression that the program was more bi-regional than truly national. This perspective does not capture the complexity of the WLA program, however, and undermines the national and trans-regional nature of the impact the WLA had on rural ideas of gender. Indeed, there was a vigorous WLA in the South. Cumulative farm labor reports demonstrate that the Women's Land Army thrived there, reporting higher participation numbers in Southern states than in many of the more visible Northern or Western counterparts. It is clear that the WLA was a truly national movement that overturned ideas of gender not only in the traditionally progressive coastal northeast and northwest, but also in the tradition-laden South.

In 1943, Southern states fielded seven of the ten largest coalitions in the country, with Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi and Georgia claiming the four largest WLAs in the United States. The following year, six of the ten largest female farm work forces belonged to Southern states, and seven the year after. Even in 1946, with federal support for the program waning, eight southern states each deployed over 10,000 women for farm work through their USDA Extension programs. Every year that the WLA existed, Texas deployed more women than any other state. These participation rates indicate that, rather than a distant, reluctant participant in the WLA, the South embraced the opportunity the WLA offered. In spite of smaller populations, those states ultimately fielded larger WLAs than many of their northern counterparts.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Rasmussen, W. D. 1915-2004. (1951). *A history of the emergency farm labor supply program, 1943-47*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics.

Labor demand was especially acute in the South because the war did not create as much industrial opportunity in the South as it did elsewhere in the country. For many Southern families, wartime industrial jobs provided incentive to migrate out of the South. The war brought economic opportunity to the United States, but not especially to the South, so enterprising southern families left their impoverished and jobless communities to take advantage of better prospects elsewhere. Military service and the industrial sector both promised good jobs and fine pay away from the crushing poverty of the rural South. Both sectors coveted the young men who made up the preferred farm-hand-for-hire set in the South. Many rural men could not meet the physical requirements to enter the military, but Alabama Extension Director P. O. Davis believed that it was industry, not military service that posed the greatest threat to the southern labor supply. “Farmers, as we all know” he said “have lost a great deal of their best labor, that is, of the right age to do the best job on farms.... My state has lost more to war industries than to armed forces. ... I think the ratio of 70 percent to industry and 30 percent to the Army is about right.” With industrial demand so high, even men who could not meet the rigorous physical requirements to enter the military often found greater prospects elsewhere in the country. In the few short years of World War II, over three million people—just over one fifth of the South’s pre-war population—fled the countryside for lives of urban opportunity.¹⁷¹

Like the rest of the country, Southern states had time to grow used to the idea of a WLA while federal and private entities worked through their respective misgivings on the matter. As happened elsewhere, Southern newspapers ran stories about the British WLA, and praised the program as a novel and efficient solution to wartime need overseas. Even before the USA

¹⁷¹ United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Appropriations., . (1943). *Farm labor program, 1943: Hearings before the subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventy-eighth Congress, first session, on H.J. Res. 96, a joint resolution making an appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor for the calendar year 1943...* Washington: Govt. Print. Off. 96; Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980*. (1984), 169-169.

created its own program, the country was besotted, with newspapers touting the resourcefulness and industry of volunteers. “This may be a man’s world” Virginia’s *Smithfield Times*, reported in 1942, “but Great Britain’s women are doing a man-sized job fighting for freedom.... “In the Women’s Land Army, 30,000 have taken over the farms of England’s countryside to swell the domestic food output.” When called to Washington, D.C. to testify about agricultural labor needs, Alabama Extension Service Director P. O. Davis praised the British WLA program to the House Subcommittee on Appropriations. “Incidentally” he said “over in Great Britain they have a Women’s Volunteer Army on the farms and they have done remarkably well.”

Acknowledging that Alabama farmers would likely hesitate to take on inexperienced urban help, Davis pointed out, “That was true over in Great Britain, where they were reluctant to take city boys and girls and women. But ... those young people and women have done remarkably good work. Farmers got themselves into an attitude using them in the best possible way. So they are getting along nicely over there; and we can do the same.” By March, 1943, when Davis offered this testimony, the WLA was already authorized, and the question was much more a matter of whether the program would be funded than of whether it would be created. It is possible that Davis’s endorsement was more a product of resignation to circumstance than genuine support for a WLA program. Regardless of his motives, Davis did use the British program to build congressional support for a similar program in the USA.¹⁷²

The Farm Bureau is a bit more complicated. That organization initially denied that there were adequate resources in the United States for a program based on domestic labor. Instead, the Farm Bureau threw its support behind a foreign worker program. Once the WLA became a

¹⁷² *Smithfield Times*, Volume 25, Number 23, 20 August 1942; United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Appropriations., . (1943). *Farm labor program, 1943: Hearings before the subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventy-eighth Congress, first session, on H.J. Res. 96, a joint resolution making an appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor for the calendar year 1943...* Washington: Govt. Print. Off. 96-97.

reality, the Farm Bureau resigned itself to the realities before it, and also cited the British program as reason for farmers to at least give the program a chance. In July, 1943, the *Virginia Farm Bureau News* reported, “English farmers tell us that city women make good tractor drivers and dairy hands, and until the war is over . . . they’ll take the women. With unskilled help, English farmers last year increased production 50 per cent, getting an average of 39 bushels of wheat per acre.” Based on that sterling recommendation the Farm Bureau News concluded “The Land Army deserves a fair trial.” Like the World War II program in the USA, the British WLA was organized as an emergency wartime measure, and the program was driven more by patriotic responsibility than any ambition to break down glass ceilings. Though women could be drafted into the British program, it was not intended to threaten or modify existing power structures the way that the World War I program had been. Instead, advocates presented the WLA to farmers as an emergency measure that would be better-than-nothing, and advocated it to women as an opportunity to make a patriotic contribution to the war effort. Neither program encouraged the notion that women could be, or should be permanent stakeholders in agriculture.¹⁷³

Like their Pacific Northwestern neighbors, the South was accustomed to some women doing some farm work. Especially on farms too small for hired help, it was perfectly normal to see women work in fields at least during the busiest seasons. With many Southern families caught up in sharecropping or tenancy, potential earnings could often take precedent over middle-class protocols of gendered labor. As Rebecca Sharpless said “[C]otton ruled the South, its needs shaping daily life in all of the areas where it grew.” For people still caught up in the front lines of cotton production, namely landless families and small farmers, the demands of the crop superseded middle-class notions of social propriety. Neither was this farm labor contingent on race. Sharpless points out “the statistics clearly illustrate the reality: the majority of adult

¹⁷³ *Virginia Farm Bureau News*, Vol. 3, Number 7, 1st July 1943.

women of all ethnic groups performed at least some type of field labor every year, providing a significant portion of the labor force.” This left Southern women torn. Field labor was not necessarily an act of revolutionary liberation, but an obligation that tore women away from traditional roles without regard for the social change that may follow. . . Indeed 1940s expectations for nutrition, health, and sanitation demanded more meticulous housekeeping than in the past, so many farm women were torn between housework that grew more complex, and field work that demanded their presence. Nonetheless, Alabama’s 1943 Annual Report boasted that Alabama supervisors did not have to recruit among farm women because “In Alabama, farm women have always worked. . . . they work at the same field jobs as the men.” The net effect is clear nonetheless. Southern farmers were more open minded about women in the fields than in many other regions. A 1943 Gallup Poll showed that 49 percent of Southern farmers reported that they accepted the notion of women as farm hands. This is far higher than for the Midwest or even for the Far West where women were common in migratory or seasonal labor.¹⁷⁴

Though the idea that some women did farm work was accepted in the South, there were definite class elements to the prospect. Enslaved women worked in southern fields for over two centuries, and then took to fields again as sharecroppers until the outbreak of World War II. Meager pay and declining soil fertility drove every hand to the plow in sharecropping and tenant homes, so poor women took to the fields to bolster overall family productivity. Homemaking as an exclusive occupation was a privilege of the middle class, not of the poor. At the same time, the fiercely scripted notion of ladylike conduct that permeated the South made women avoid, deny, or under-represent their role in field work. In the sharecropping South, women of color in particular develop informal labor exchanges within their communities and sometimes even held

¹⁷⁴ Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, UNC Press Books, 2005, 158-162; *Washington Post*, 13 February, 1943; Annual Report of Emergency Farm Labor Program in Alabama, 1943, Box 1, AR, NARG 33.

jobs off of their farms to augment family earnings. Poor white women did not develop such traceable cooperative networks to share farm labor, but they did still take to the fields as circumstances demanded, and especially for women whose husbands took wage-work off of farms, field work became an accepted responsibility. Within this reality however, there remained a tension between the entrenched missives of the southern belle, and the fiscal and agricultural realities of farming in an impoverished region. As Oscar Lewis said “[I]t is considered degrading for a woman to do this type of work. However, there is a discrepancy here between theory and practice. It is not uncommon for old-line American women to work in the fields, but in conversation they will not readily admit to picking cotton, and it is a point of pride with a husband to be able to say that his wife does no heavy work on the farm.” So the South was comfortable at once with women doing field work out of necessity, but also espoused a duplicitous denial of that reality for fear of undermining the prestige of a homemaking farm wife. Since the South was accustomed to seeing women in the fields, the WLA had to wrangle more with concerns of class than of sex. Where family farms were commonplace, women often worked in the fields at least part of the year, so there was not a serious rejection of the notion of women as workers, but rather an objection to non-family women entering the farm as paid laborers.¹⁷⁵

These class tensions fed into a more complex set of labor tensions that grew out of the Great Depression. Farmers in the South called on the USDA and the War Labor Board to create a foreign-worker program, claiming that there was no sufficient local alternative. While some farmers may well have believed this to be true, there was a greater underlying motive for farmers to reject local laborers. Sharecroppers suffered mightily under the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

¹⁷⁵ Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, UNC Press Books, 2005. Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985) 28-31; Lewis, O. (1948). *On the edge of the Black Waxy: a cultural survey of Bell County, Texas*. Saint Louis, 24-25.

The program tried to balance market prices by limiting supply, which meant reducing production in order to drive up demand. Land owners received guaranteed floor prices for their crops only so long as they complied with production quotas of subsidized crops. Reductions in production resulted in wanton dismissal of sharecroppers and renters, and sent the poor of the South into a ten year spiral of worsening poverty and unemployment. When wartime demand diminished the need for subsidies and restored demand for cheap southern labor, relationships between workers and landowners had severely deteriorated. Landless workers unionized, but their attempts at collective bargaining were met with violent, sometimes deadly retort. This so undermined relationships between landowners and local workers that farmers tried to bypass local labor options and asked the Extension Service to create an alternative. Even before the United States entered the war year, Farm Bureau representatives, who often had the ear of USDA extension agents, lobbied for labor programs to make foreign agricultural laborers available for the duration of the war. Claiming a very large membership of dues-paying members in the South, the Bureau claimed to speak for the southern agricultural majority.¹⁷⁶

The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) had a very different perspective on this issue than the somewhat wealthier Farm Bureau, and they also petitioned Washington, D. C. for a labor program. Even in 1943, with production steadily improving and prices on the rise, the STFU's ranks were full of people still living in the South, and still living in poverty. General Secretary H. L. Mitchell traveled to Washington, D. C. to testify in opposition to any program that would undermine employment of displaced tenant farmers. Mitchell's testimony fell immediately after that of Father John O'Grady, of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.

¹⁷⁶ Farm Labor Program, 1943, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventy-eighth Congress, first session, on H.J. Res. 96, a joint resolution making an appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor for the calendar year 1943, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1943, 109.

His testimony unwittingly stripped the Bracero program of a great deal of its southern appeal. A longtime observer of the Bracero Program, O'Grady encouraged federal involvement in a future program, but also acknowledged that gasoline rationing made it difficult to move large groups of cheap laborers around the country efficiently. In addition, O'Grady pointed out that foreign worker programs could become prohibitively expensive as county agents and farmers alike tended to over-estimate their labor needs. In Washington the year prior, O'Grady pointed out, the state began with a request for 10,000 workers, and ultimately settled for something closer to 800-1000. Failure to keep up with "saturation" as O'Grady called it, created underemployment for Mexican workers, and bred dissatisfaction among foreign workers. Citing the cultural change wrought in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, O'Grady unwittingly struck a nerve for Southern farmers. "The Mexican of today is different from the Mexican of 15 years ago" O'Grady pointed out, "He talks about his right; he talks about the division of the land . . . I understand sometimes they even strike. I have heard there have been as many as 200 [strikes]. The very concern that Southern farmers had of their neighbors, O'Grady indicated would not be averted with Mexican workers.¹⁷⁷

With the Congressional committee alerted to the expense and complexity of a foreign worker program, and Southern landholders disabused of a notion of docile, servile Mexican workers, H. L. Mitchell testified on behalf of a domestic, rather than foreign worker program. Mitchell explained that the STFU represented a large number of people already living in agricultural regions who were desperate for work, and would be glad to take on wartime farm labor for fair compensation. In defense of his position, Mitchell pointed out that the STFU had over 20,000 members, but only about 15-20 percent of those members could afford to pay their annual dues of \$3 per year in 1943. Pressed on the matter by Senator McCarran, Mitchell

¹⁷⁷ Farm Labor Program, 1943, 108-112.

clarified that those three to four thousand who paid their dues for 1943 were an indication of economic improvement. An even smaller percentage had been able to pay in the past. These workers were already in the United States, already spoke the language, already had agricultural experience, and were eager to earn. Mitchell's testimony exposed a fundamental disconnect between the Farm Bureau's position that there were inadequate laborers available, and the demographic realities of the South. The STFU merely held out for fair treatment, and in particular, guaranteed wages. Mitchell called for a "prevailing wage" rule that would determine the local market value of farm labor and remunerate mobile workforces accordingly. There were workers available in the United States, Mitchell argued, but they were unwilling to be underrepresented, underappreciated, underestimated, and underpaid anymore. The STFU already managed a large body of people in the South who wanted work, and knew how to work. The labor force was present, but, as Mitchell pointed out, strained relationships between landowners and landless farmers undermined cooperation. Landowners preferred not to engage unionized laborers who made demands of their employers.¹⁷⁸

Mitchell exposed the hypocrisy of the Farm Bureau and other organizations calling for foreign labor when he cited his own organization's labor experiments over the previous two seasons. Mitchell had often encouraged STFU members to take out-of-state jobs in order to balance supply-and-demand in the South. Black farm families in particular had a long history of cooperating with each other in farm labor, so they were not struggling to get work done under the recent shortage. As national labor demand escalated, this tradition of cooperative labor sharing allowed some family members to take out-of-state work, lowering the labor supply at home, and also earning a few extra dollars. The STFU organized employment opportunities for members in

¹⁷⁸ Mitchell, H. L. "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 32 (1973), pp. 342–369.

the long interim between cotton planting and harvest. In 1943, Mitchell argued that the STFU's actions were essential because USDA extension agents preferred not to acknowledge that a large force of available labor existed in their states. Pointing to tensions brewing since the AAA, Mitchell argued that Southern landowners preferred an expensive bracero program to import foreign workers because it would allow them to sidestep calls to negotiate with the poor community landowners alienated in their own home states.¹⁷⁹

In spite of these class linked difficulties, Mitchell proved the South did have an adequate workforce for a domestic labor program when he testified about the organizations wartime experiments with migrant labor. Without any federal oversight, the STFU organized and deployed over 10,000 workers in cooperation with regional and national labor unions in 1942, including groups of men and women who harvested cotton in the Southwest and teams of women who harvested citrus fruits in Florida. The unionized workers bargained collectively for pre-negotiated wages at prevailing rates, and imposed additional standards such as reasonable working hours and decent housing. Southern workers, Mitchell argued, were readily available if pay and working conditions were reasonable, rendering a foreign worker program unnecessary and imprudent. Southern farmers favored the expensive and complicated foreign worker system, Mitchell argued, because they did not want to cooperate with displaced workers or provide living and working conditions competitive with those of other states. The assertion is especially troubling considering that many of these living and working conditions that Arkansans found

¹⁷⁹ Senate Committee, Farm Labor Program, 1943, 245-248; For discussion of cooperative farm labor see Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985) 28-31; Also Melissa Walker, "Home Extension Work among African American Farm Women in East Tennessee, 1920-1939," *Agricultural History* 70 (Summer 1996): 488-89.

superior to home offerings in the Southwest were still so sub-standard as to provoke criticism from Women's Bureau and WLA officials the following year.¹⁸⁰

Mitchell's testimony exposed an embarrassing conflict of interest between USDA extension agents and poor tenant farmers. The success of STFU migrant labor programs established that underemployed farmers, with their small allotments, rendered even smaller by AAA programs, were readily available and eager for labor if they could get it. They would not require any of the administrative complications associated with moving foreign workers into the country or across state lines. With little access to wage-work at home outside of the few weeks required in cotton fields, small tenant farmer families were an ideal untapped labor resource that Washington D. C. did not realize existed. With farm allotments often cut down to 4-6 acres under the AAA program, even combining home and local wage work did not provide much of a living for landless farmers in the South. USDA extension agents and Farm Security Administration agents were unlikely to admit to any surplus labor in their own counties, as such an admission might disqualify them for whatever aid might become available. It was up to the Senate, Mitchell said, to recognize the domestic labor force and see that it was mobilized to best possible effect.¹⁸¹

Though the STFU did not outwardly endorse the creation of a WLA, its endorsement of a domestic labor program paved the way for the WLA. In addition, by the time the United States formed its official war labor program, the STFU was experienced at recruiting, organizing, contracting, and deploying Arkansas labor outside of Arkansas. With the rise of a formal WLA

¹⁸⁰ Mitchell, H. L. "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 32 (1973); Valentine, F. Wadsworth. (1945). *Women's emergency farm service on the Pacific coast in 1943*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., critiques of housing and conditions included complete lack of "sanitary facilities" as restrooms were euphemistically called, as well as lack of drinking water, no washing facilities, and insecure, shoddy, and run-down housing.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

the STFU continued to take an active role in recruiting and deploying its own workers. In one instance in 1944, the STFU organized young college women under the auspices of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union and flew them to New Jersey to harvest and process produce at Seabrook Farms, the largest truck farm in the United States at that time. While Washington, D. C. wrangled with high production targets and low labor resources, the STFU, set a precedent, identifying, recruiting, and deploying, in this case at least, the same demographic the WLA later relied on, and they did it while securing union approved wages and housing for their workers. While those who preferred a foreign-worker program tried to cast doubt on Mitchell's claims, participation numbers bear out his claims. The Southern States recruited large enough numbers to put any doubts to rest—Southern women were willing to take farm work, whether for the enticement of “prevailing wages” or for patriotic duty are hard to say, but Mitchell was correct at least in his fundamental assertion that the South did not have a labor shortage – it had a cooperation shortage.¹⁸²

A spatial analysis of the Women's Land Army in the South shows that the organization was well represented in Southern states, but not all of them stayed in the South. Examining the opening of new farmland and reduced fallowed land during the war years suggests that, in addition to farming available acreage, WLA workers brought previously fallow land back into production in many states. From 1939 to 1944 United States farmers reduced their total fallow land by nearly 18 million acres. (17,907,611 to be exact.) But not all states saw a reduction in fallow land. Those which saw an increase are telling. Six states showed an increase, rather than a decrease in fallow land in the course of the war, and five of them were in the South. Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida combined lost over seven hundred forty thousand

¹⁸² Ibid.; Mitchell, H. L. "The Founding and Early History of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 32 (1973), pp. 342–369.

acres between 1939 and 1944. This was at a time when demand for agricultural goods soared. Florida citrus and Southern cotton were in high demand, but that did not appear to be enough to bolster production if the land simply had nothing left to give. It is more likely that the “prevailing wage” rule laid out by H.L. Mitchell in his meetings with the senate created an enticement for impoverished Southern states to send WLA workers out of state to take food production work where prevailing wages were higher than in the sharecropping South.¹⁸³

The Virginias

In Virginia and West Virginia, WLA operations remained small, and the organizational priority never separated very far from the Home Demonstration programs that the program grew out of. West Virginia recruited only thirty-one women for its own WLA in the first year, and sent those women to Ohio to work rather than keeping them in state. Additional West Virginia women joined the WLA in other states, some of them working at camp Milbur in nearby Maryland. While the program encouraged farm women to contribute to their household farm labor, the program never had a robust recruiting program for non-farm workers. In 1944 West Virginia’s 211 person WLA was the largest that the state would ever claim. WLA supervisors provided support and advice to farm women, but appear not to have officially inducted them into the WLA program. In Virginia, Governor Colgate Darden drew his Farm Labor expertise from the Extension program. He tapped extension conservationist H. L. Dunton for state farm labor supervisor, and Miss Maude E. Wallace, assistant director of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute Extension, Division, to recruit and train a Women’s Land Army. Virginia deployments were

¹⁸³ Farm Labor Program, 1943, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, Seventy-eighth Congress, first session, on H.J. Res. 96, a joint resolution making an appropriation to assist in providing a supply and distribution of farm labor for the calendar year 1943, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1943; United States Department of Agriculture, United States Census of Agriculture> 1945: General Report.

quite flexible. Some women worked in truck and tobacco fields, but the WLA placed a significant emphasis on domestic work in Virginia as well, and assigned workers for that purpose. 17 year old Anne Norton, a high school student from Danville, VA, was one of the first live-in WLA placements in her state. Mrs. P. A. Stutts, the farm woman Anne worked for, reported to Virginia supervisor Nancy Tyree that “[Anne] is now looking after the baby chickens which I got last week” and “Anne also helps me with the house, garden, and canning.” In Virginia the program substantially blurred the lines between field work and housework, and provided insights and advice to farm women as well as providing labor to farm fields. Virginia WLA leaders suggested, for instance, that “farm women can well take a lot of short cuts in their housework in these busy times” and suggested streamlining by eliminating tasks, organizing workspaces intelligently, using both hands, using proper tools and equipment, and suggested that farm women “sit at work whenever possible.” The advice, though sound, shows a substantial influence of Home Demonstration priorities on the WLA program in that particular state. Virginia’s WLA remained a smaller one throughout the war, and this emphasis on the domestic rather than the commercial may have been more difficult to promote to farm women and volunteers alike.¹⁸⁴

In stark contrast to Virginia and West Virginia, South Carolina appears to have emphasized traditionally male labor in their ranks, but also registered a good number of women who already lived on farms as “live in” farm hands. Farm wives and daughters, often already doing field work, received the title of WLA and the privilege of purchasing a uniform if she chose. In addition, South Carolina scripted a formal induction ceremony for women who took seasonal positions. The first recruit, a Selma Lisenby, was the first live-in farm hand assigned in

¹⁸⁴ West Virginia State Supervisor Annual Report 1944. Virginia Farm Bureau News, Volume 4, Number 8, 1 August, 1944; *Virginia Farm Bureau News*, Volume 3, Number 6, 1 June, 1943.

the program. She served on a farm run by Mr. H. C. Lisenby—likely her father. Lisenby the elder was happy with Selma’s work, saying she “worked regularly at all sorts of farm work ... and was a might good worker, too.” This approach was at once conservative, making easy enrollees out of women who would be doing the same work with or without the program, but also more assertive in some ways than the Virginia program, as it encouraged women to take on farm jobs that did traditionally belong to men, and registered women with the intent that they would do field work rather than house work..¹⁸⁵

But only 303 of the 14,933 women who took farm work through the South Carolina Farm Labor Program were registered as “live in” WLA workers. The rest were designated as “seasonal” workers. The first year, self-conscious organizers fearful of creating a disdainful reputation, would only allow white women to register as WLA workers. But women of color did also accept job placement on farms through the Extension Service, serving in WLA infrastructures regardless of formal designation. Administrators were afraid that the program might scare white women away if it was too closely associated with black women. After 1943 the WLA abandoned this policy and took on recruits of all races. Enrollment continued to climb. The program fielded 22,692 women in 1944, suggesting that, if white women were in fact off put by the presence of black women, new enrollees more than accommodated for the loss. By 1944 there was enough demand for workers that six counties added their own assistant WLA supervisors to manage the workload.¹⁸⁶

Farmers do not appear to have been overly alarmed at the idea of women of color working in the fields any more than enrollees were. 1944 Survey of South Carolina farmers

¹⁸⁵ South Carolina Annual Report State Extension Farm Labor Program, 1943; *WLA Newsletter*, September 27, 1943.

¹⁸⁶ *WLA Newsletter* October 12, 1944. Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program 1943-1947*. 148-150.

made it clear that they were eager to get WLA workers if they could, and they did not appear to be distressed by the decision to admit women of color to the program, and were often quite happy with the results. In 1944, a Richland County labor assistant reported that “Farmers in Richland County who have used women emergency workers ... are high in praise of the fine work that women have done. ... In doing farm jobs such as, grading sweet potatoes, peaches, and truck crops, women have learned the details involved and have followed them more closely than men, according to farmers with whom these women were placed.” Whatever hang-ups South Carolina administrators had to work through in their first year, enrollments and continued high praise of workers combine to suggest that neither farmers nor volunteers were as uncomfortable with a mixed-race workforce as program administrators were. Subsequent years’ annual reports do not betray any of the anxieties that the 1943 report did.¹⁸⁷

Kentucky

Kentucky’s State supervisor had similar concerns to the directors of the South Carolina program. In the first year of operation Kentucky recruited 2738 women for to their Women’s Land Army. WLA administrators in the state pointed out that farm laborers in Kentucky had been primarily black men, and that the prospect of women replacing black men did not sit well with local farmers. “It is not in keeping with the Southern tradition to think of women replacing negroes.” The 1943 farm labor report explained. Kentucky administrators do not appear to have attempted education or persuasion, but accepted farmers’ prejudicial positions much as the Midwest had. “[T]radition does not tolerate the employment of women for usual farm work. In the main, women who seek employment on farms for heavier work are negro women and white women of rather low type.” Explained State WLA supervisor Myrtle Weldon, but she also

¹⁸⁷ Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program, 1943-1947*. 148-149; South Carolina Annual Report Emergency Farm Labor Program, 1944.

pointed out that some narrow sectors were exceptions to this class perception. “A pretty high type of woman is willing to work in such pressure crops as strawberry picking. Custom has given approval to that[.]” she said.¹⁸⁸

There would be less and less of woman-friendly work in Kentucky fields as the war dragged on. Since the organization was unwilling to challenge existing biases, as Kentucky shifted production away from small fruits, women remained a marginalized workforce. In contrast to states of the Lower South, where there was a longstanding tradition of women working in cotton fields at least during labor-intensive times of year, Kentucky’s farms tended to be “general farms” as the state supervisor called them. Most wartime agricultural growth in Kentucky was in livestock feed crops. Acreages planted in cotton, berries, tree fruits, sweet potatoes, and other crops that would have used seasonal WLA labor all shrunk in Kentucky between 1940 and 1945. While most grain and cotton acreage declined or stagnated between 1940 and 1945. States specializing in small fruits, garden truck, and cotton all had large, robust WLAs. But Kentucky did not meet that definition. Through the war acreage in hay and sorghum—primarily feed crops—grew, making Kentucky’s wartime agricultural profile become similar to that of the Midwest, hay and sorghum did not require as many seasonal hands as cotton or garden truck, and equipment and labor exchanges between neighbors were adequate to meet most labor needs in this environment, keeping the WLA quite small. WLA administrators accepted this paradigm and did not attempt to change it. “So long as year-round workers can be supplied form men and boys, we will not worry too much about placing women in these jobs.” reported Weldon. “If the need increases, the attitude which now prevails against the employment

¹⁸⁸ Rasmussen, 148-149; “Kentucky Emergency Farm Labor Annual Report, 1943” Box 4, AR, NARG, 33.

of women for year-round workers may change.” Weldon did not challenge these ideologies, but acquiesced to them, and the Kentucky WLA remained small.¹⁸⁹

Arkansas

Compared to Virginia, Arkansas fielded very large contingents of volunteer women. In 1943 the state estimated its total need at between 25,000 and 30,000 workers for the autumn harvest. Of those, L. A. Dhonau, a state extension service agent, estimated that only 5,000 – 6,000 could be supplied by in-state available workers. The remainder, *The Blythville Courier News* reported, would have to come from less conventional sources. The Women’s Land Army far exceeded that minimum expectation in Arkansas. Wartime labor reports show that over 74,000 women served in Arkansas’s WLA in 1943. The program was so successful that it sent some women out of state to assist with seasonal work across the country. With farm labor scarce and prevailing wages guaranteed by federal policy, Arkansas women took advantage of the opportunity to earn when and where they could.¹⁹⁰

Mississippi

Mississippi fielded a consistently large Women’s Land Army from its first year of existence. The 43,148 women who took Extension assignments in 1943 was enough to make Mississippi home to the 3rd largest program in the United States, behind only Texas and Arkansas. Mississippi did not have any particular hang-ups about their first-year image, and recruited women of all races to participate in the program. Though it did not explicitly target women of color, State WLA supervisor Kate Lee did say “Of course any women who used to live on a farm will naturally feel more at home when she signs up for the Women’s Land Army.”

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.; United States Census of Agriculture: 1945, Part 19, 5.

¹⁹⁰ *Blytheville Courier News* August 5, 1943, page 2; Rasmussen, W. D. 1915-2004. (1951). *A history of the emergency farm labor supply program, 1943-47*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics 148.

For Mississippi, with a population that was 49.2 percent black, and 80.2 percent rural, a campaign targeting experienced farm women targeted black women. While Mississippi is no South Carolina, the magnolia state was confident from the beginning that farmers, properly motivated by scarcity and potential profits, would accept the program regardless of the regional complexities of gender. This confidence paid off. “The present farm labor shortage” Mississippi WLA Supervisor Kate Lee reported “has changed materially all past procedures, customs, and thinking of farm people.” Though the program challenged past practices, farmers gave the WLA a chance, and were generally satisfied with the results. “Women laborers are found to be dependable, require little supervision, given to punctuality and details, work systematically and with little or no confusion, all of which tend to please the fancy of the farmer.” claimed the 1944 annual report. Mississippi’s dependence on cotton meant that by far the greatest demand was for seasonal workers.¹⁹¹

The state’s dependence on sharecropping also meant that there were many underemployed and indebted families who eagerly took advantage of the opportunity for work at prevailing wages. This can be seen in the demographic makeup of WLA workers in Mississippi. While other states drew largely on professional and college women to fill seasonal ranks, over three quarters of women who joined the Mississippi WLA reported that they were homemakers. While this may partly reflect Mississippi demographics, it also suggests that Mississippi homemakers wanted employment when it was available to them. The state estimated 1944 labor needs at 3,567,448 man-days of labor to meet state needs. This burden did not fall on the WLA alone, but the scale of need encouraged the state to recruit aggressively. In 1944, the State was so successful that it shipped teams out-of-state to fill labor shortages elsewhere, including large

¹⁹¹ Mississippi Farm Labor Annual Report 1945; United States Census Bureau publications, compiled and discussed in Lowry, Mark. "Population and Race in Mississippi, 1940-1960." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61, no. 3 (1971): 577; Mississippi Farm Labor Supervisor’s Annual Report 1945.

teams sent to South Dakota in 1945. The Midwestern states were notoriously sluggish about recruiting their own WLA, but Mississippi women enjoyed access to higher wages and an extended labor season by deploying to regions that, though unhurried to recruit women, were seemingly willing to hire them.¹⁹²

Scholarship on the WLA has argued that Texas did not have a WLA. One study argued that “Texas, New Mexico, Nevada, and Arizona did not initially, if ever, organize a WLA organization within their boundaries.” Carpenter supported the claim arguing that “Farmers in these states ... did not consider women for their labor needs during the war.” Recruiting numbers call that assertion into question, however. Carpenter to acknowledges this, recognizing that some women did take farm work in Texas, but, she argues “they were not recruited by the WLA, instead falling into such other demographic categories as Mexican nationals, Spanish Americans, migrant labor, or farm women.”¹⁹³ Membership in the WLA can be notoriously difficult to parse, but this research calls these previous findings into question. One 1944 study of the WLA said that “Every woman who took part in the agricultural work of the country would be given a certificate of membership and participation in the Women’s Land Army.” And a Texas newspaper described the WLA as “not a program, but a movement” wherein all women who contributed to food and fiber production during the war emergency were members. This broader interpretation opened the door for women hired privately or fielded through state level programs to claim the WLA title for themselves.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Mississippi Farm Labor Annual Report 1945.

¹⁹³ Carpenter, Stephanie A. 2003. *On the farm front: the women's land army in world war II*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 113. This text is the first monograph ever on the WLA and

¹⁹⁴ Valentine, Frances Wadsworth. *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast In 1943*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1945, 7; WLA Newsletter, 1943; The Jacksboro Gazette (Jacksboro, Tex.), Vol. 66, No. 1, Ed. 1 Thursday, June 7, 1945; Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 22. In particular, State WLA Supervisor Reports often report a different number of women participating in their state than Rasmussen’s summative post-war reports, and Florence Hall’s reports supplied in the WLA Newsletter sometimes

Compiled Federal data on Farm Labor reports coupled with very public recruiting campaigns make it clear that the state did indeed participate in the WLA, and that Texas farmers accepted women's labor. Moreover, in true Texas fashion, the lone-star state fielded more women in farm labor than any other state every year of the war. In 1943, the Texas USDA Extension Program deployed 75,707 women, 758 of whom were classified as "live in" farm hands. In conservative states this "live in" designation was sometimes given to farm women registered as workers on their own farms, rather than to strangers who boarded with a farm family as hired help. Even if Texas was too conservative to tolerate non-family women as boarding farm hands, this still leaves over 74,000 women who took seasonal work on farms that were not their own homes.¹⁹⁵

These women have not previously been believed to be part of the WLA, but they were not Braceros, as that program recruited only men, and the United States did not permit border-crossings for day labor during the war years. They also do not appear to have been prisoners of war. Moreover, 9 days after the formal creation of the Women's Land Army, the College Extension Service at Texas A & M announced recruiting campaigns for the Victory Farm Volunteers, for youth, and for the Women's Land Army. The February 23 *Timson Daily Times* announced that state and college officials had "mapped a program involving the recruiting and placing of local rural labor ... and the placement of non-farm youth in the victory farm volunteers, and the proposed women's land army composed of non-farm women." There was some hesitation. Not all counties may need a WLA, state officials believed, but "where the farm labor situation is very serious there may be organized local battalions of the Women's Land

reflect different numbers than the state level reports as well. Discrepancies in defining WLA workers may be more to blame than clerical error.

¹⁹⁵ Data from Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program 1943-1947*. 147-148.

Army” While Texas did not throw open the doors to WLA workers everywhere, like in other states, the WLA was promoted where there was greatest need. The state had not yet appointed a supervisor for the WLA in Spring, 1943, but it began recruiting campaigns a mere 9 days after the program was formally approved, calling for non-farm women to register with their local Extension Agents or with the United States Employment Service and await their call to farms. Later in 1943, Williamson County Home Demonstration agent Ms. Vogt displayed the Women’s Land Army Uniform at Home Demonstration meetings, and promoted the program to Texas clubs. This very early recruiting campaign coupled with the large number of non-farm women deployed on Texas farms in the course of the war demonstrate a marked interest in Texas in the WLA.¹⁹⁶

In April, 1944, the *Shamrock Texan* referred workers to local USDA extension agents to register for employment again, declaring that “women drove farm trucks and tractors and served as supervisors of youth farm workers.” In addition, it said “a few hundred women have been placed in general [year-round] farm work, and there is a growing acceptance of the Women’s Land Army program.” Shamrock’s need must have been exceptionally acute in 1943 to have formed a WLA that year, but the 1944 recruiting initiative in suggests that the county was satisfied enough to run the program again the following year. Just as importantly, perhaps, for Texas, even if some of the 74,000 women deployed by the Texas USDA extension program in 1943 were affiliated with some labor program other than the WLA in title, the definition of the WLA itself evolved to the point that it became inclusive of women working in farm production regardless of nomenclature. “All women who help in the wartime product of food, feed, or fiber

¹⁹⁶ *Timson Daily Times*, February 23, 1943; *Rusk Cherokeean*, May 13, 1943; Farm Labor Program, 1943, Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, 114, Father O’Grady points out that the border crossings which had supplied southwestern labor in the past were prohibited by law by 1943; *Bartlett Tribune*, November 26, 1943.

are a part of the Women's Land Army" explained the *Smithville Times*. It was an abbreviated version of Florence Hall's own definition, which continued with "This applies to both nonfarm and farm women performing agricultural tasks as well as those women who, by performing household duties, relieve a farm woman for agricultural work." The same paper told women how to get farm jobs. "A woman who can work for the entire summer or for several weeks should consult her county extension agent or local farm employment office immediately" it instructed. It is clear then, that whatever administrative over structure existed in Texas, the state considered all women doing agricultural labor a part of the movement, if not the program.¹⁹⁷

In July, 1943, in time for autumn harvests, Fayette County laid out its farm labor program in the pages of the *Schulenburg Sticker*. Based on conversations with the County Victory Agricultural Council, Fayette County created 5 labor exchanges headquartered at key points within the county, and farmers registered their labor needs with these exchanges as far in advance as possible. County agents asked the local community to appoint, elect, or otherwise acquire "some individual to maintain and operate this local labor exchange with the cooperation and supervision of the county agent in accordance with the labor program." Local people who could spare time to work on local farms registered with community labor centers so that the most affordable option of fielding local workers could be the first choice. Farmers needing help did likewise. They registered their needs with the local labor centers so that labor exchanges could match them to an available workforce. As the county agent explained "This labor program is referred to nationally as crop corps, with branches or sub-divisions such as Victory Farm Volunteers, Women's Land Army, etc..." This may be what lends the impression of a Texas without a WLA. The localized labor exchange system flipped the script, registering workers based on location, rather than age and sex, and then deployed workers according to local need,

¹⁹⁷ *Shamrock Texan*, April 27, 1944; *Smithville Times*, June 7, 1945; WLA Newsletter February 9, 1944.

likely mixing VFV and WLA workers based on who was available rather than deployments based strictly on age and sex.¹⁹⁸

The sheer volume of acreage in Texas may have contributed somewhat to the size of the workforce in Texas. Even though overall acreage under cultivation fell during the war, and in particular, cotton acreage and fruit trees—two sectors where a large WLA force would be expected, both fell between 1940 and 1945, there were increases in garden truck acreage during the same time period, with over 100,000 more acres harvested in 1945 than five years prior. The greatest increases were in sweet potatoes, tomatoes, beans, and corn. Even with these declines, 1944 recruiting campaigns encouraged workers to re-enlist. “Farmers are urging U. S. Crop Corps Volunteers who worked for them last year to come back to the same jobs this year . . . With their training, these workers will be able to work more effectively this year.” However imperfect the program may have been, the prospect of experienced workers, even women and children, elsewhere in the country WLA workers were especially useful in harvesting garden and farm truck, and Texas deployed between 50,000 and 75,000 women every year of the war. No state fielded a larger group of women anywhere in the country than Texas did.¹⁹⁹

It is clear that the WLA was a significant factor in the South, and that the South was not more resistant to the idea of women doing farm labor. Like elsewhere in the United States, the South was merely resistant to acknowledging women doing farm labor. This self-conscious rejection of an obvious truth may be the reason that the WLA gets little coverage or credit in the South. The regions that celebrated women’s agricultural entrance into farm labor as heroic did not have to overcome centuries of class-linked insinuations about the meaning of such labor. Since women in the Pacific Northwest took work on others’ farms, there was a perception,

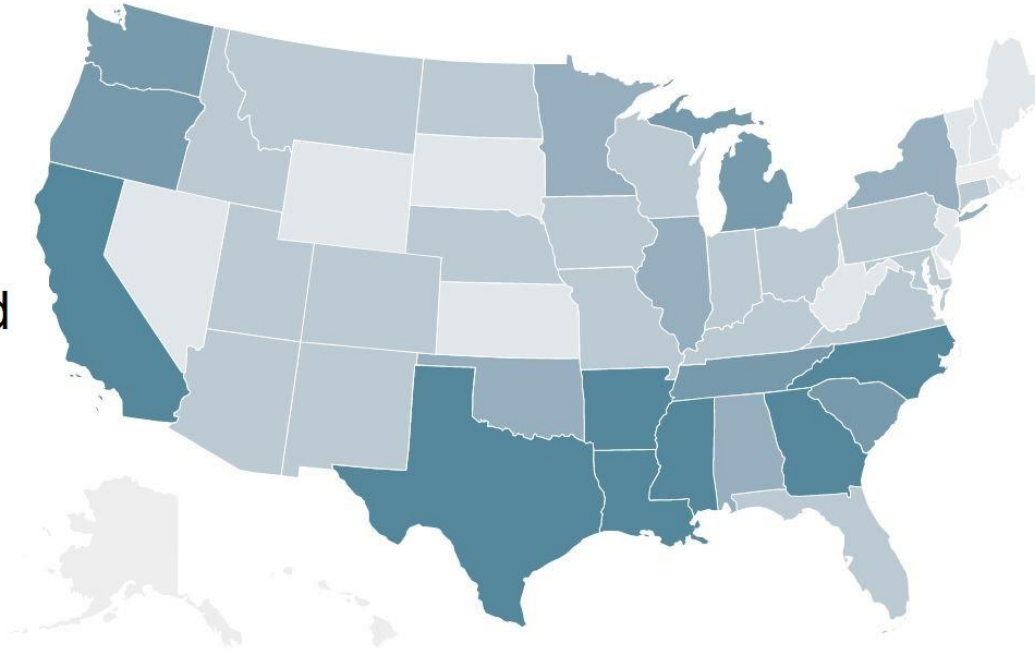
¹⁹⁸ *Schulenburg Sticker*, July 2, 1943.

¹⁹⁹ United States. 1946. *United States census of agriculture, 1945. Volume 1. pt. 26* Volume 1. pt. 26. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 3-5.

rightly or otherwise, that taking such work was for extra money, or for pin money, rather than an essential contribution to keeping the family farm afloat. When women worked on their own farms in the South, neighbors did each other the kindness of looking away, of pretending not to see, to preserve the masculinity of farm men who took pride in needing no help from wives, and to preserve the perceived ladylike reputation of women whose commitment to their families drew them into the fields at the expense of her own projected class. When the wartime program provided plausible social acceptance of women in farm fields, it unleashed what may have been the largest contingent of experienced farm workers in the country. With the allure of prevailing wages and monitored working conditions, Southern women deployed all over the country doing seasonal work for pay that they had done in years past for survival. When Southern ideas of gender entered the crucible of chaos that was wartime farming, they became subject to renegotiation in the South just as they did elsewhere. The WLA was not, contrary to other scholarly assertions, a non-contender in the South. Rather, far away from shipyards and factories, local people took little official notice. They had seen it all before.



Total WLA Deployments (Seasonal and Year-Round combined) 1943

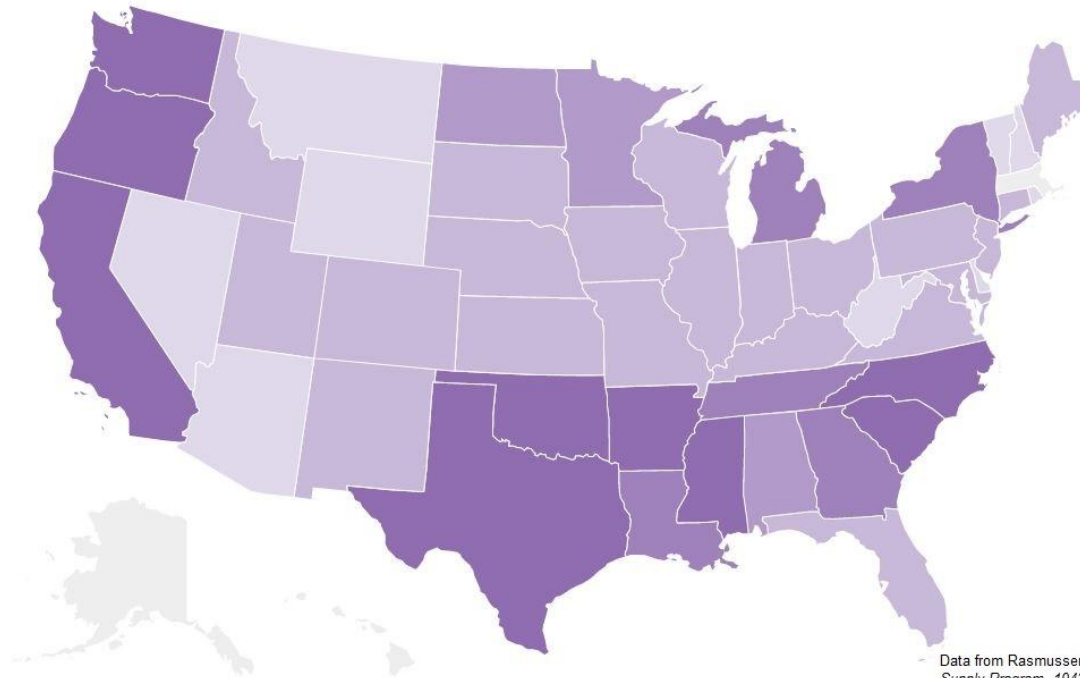


Data from Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program 1943-1947, 1951*. Map by Denna Clvmer

Figure 6.1 Total WLA Deployments by State 1943



Total WLA
deployments by
State, seasonal
and year-round
combined, 1944

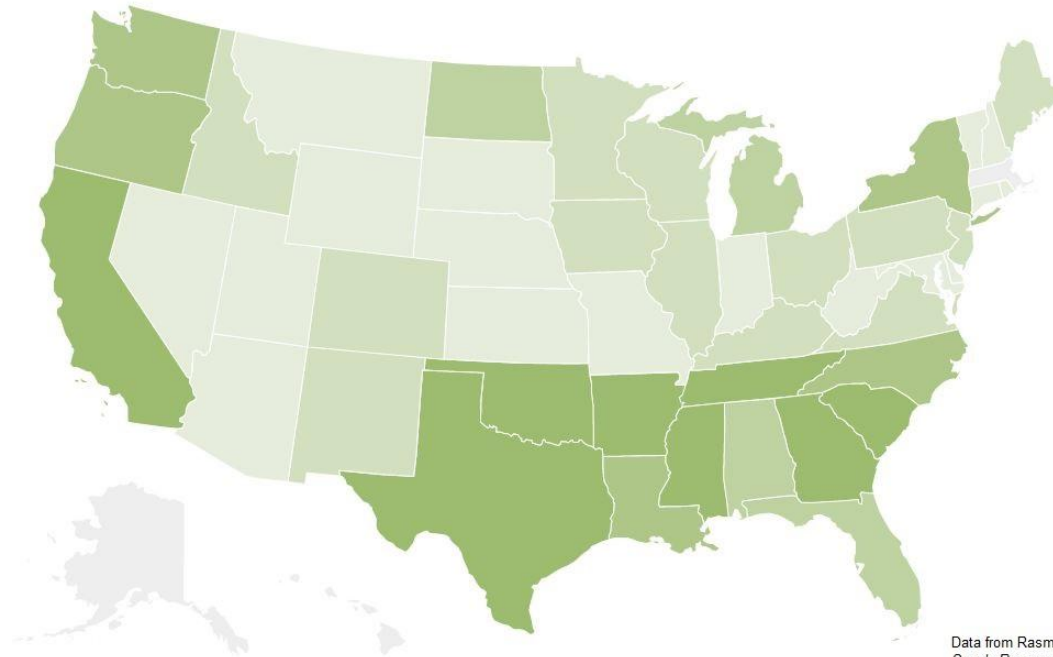


Data from Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program, 1943-1946, 1951*. Map by Denna Clymer.

Figure 6.2 Total WLA Deployments by State 1944



Total WLA
deployments by
State (year-round
and seasonal
combined) 1945.

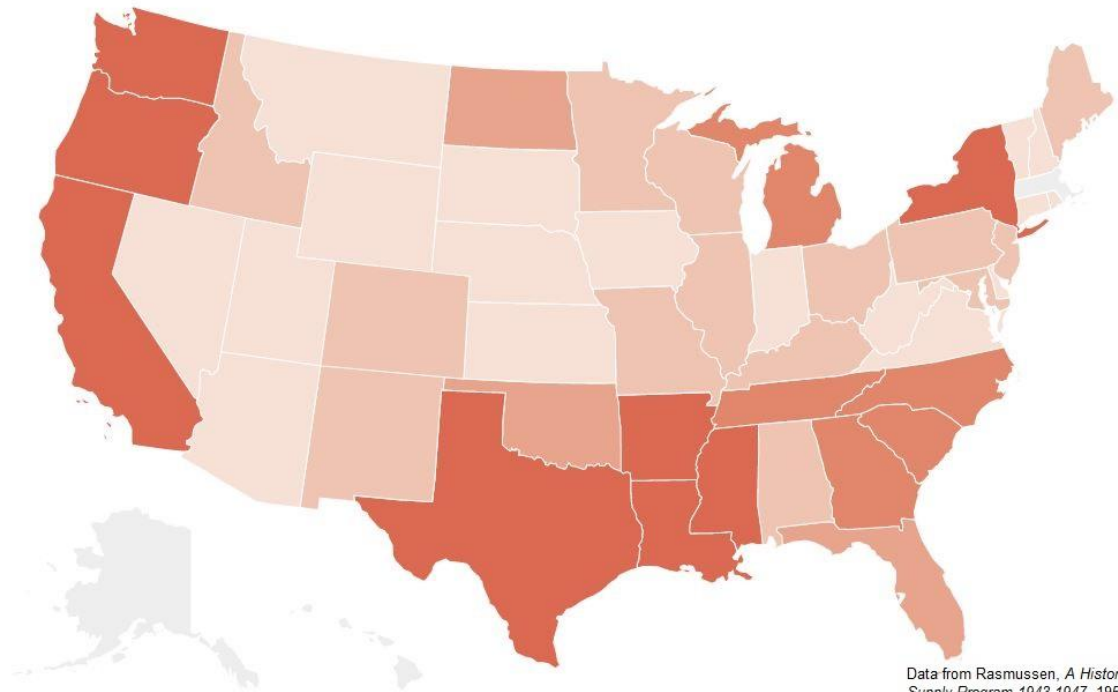


Data from Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program 1943-1947, 1951*. Map by Denna Clymer

Figure 6.3 Total WLA Deployments by State 1945



Combined (seasonal and year-round) WLA deployments by state 1946.



Data from Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program 1943-1947, 1951*. Map by Denna Clymer

Figure 6.4 Total WLA Deployments 1946



Figure 6.5 Locations of Labor Exchanges in Fayette County, TX. County farmers registered for workers at these exchanges and used them for pick-up and drop-off locales for day laborers.



Figure 6.6 Rosa McKinney, pictured (believed right), served at Camp Milbur in Maryland, but hailed from West Virginia Like many West Virginia women, she came to the Maryland camp to work. (Photograph by G. W. Ackerman, Extension Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture.)

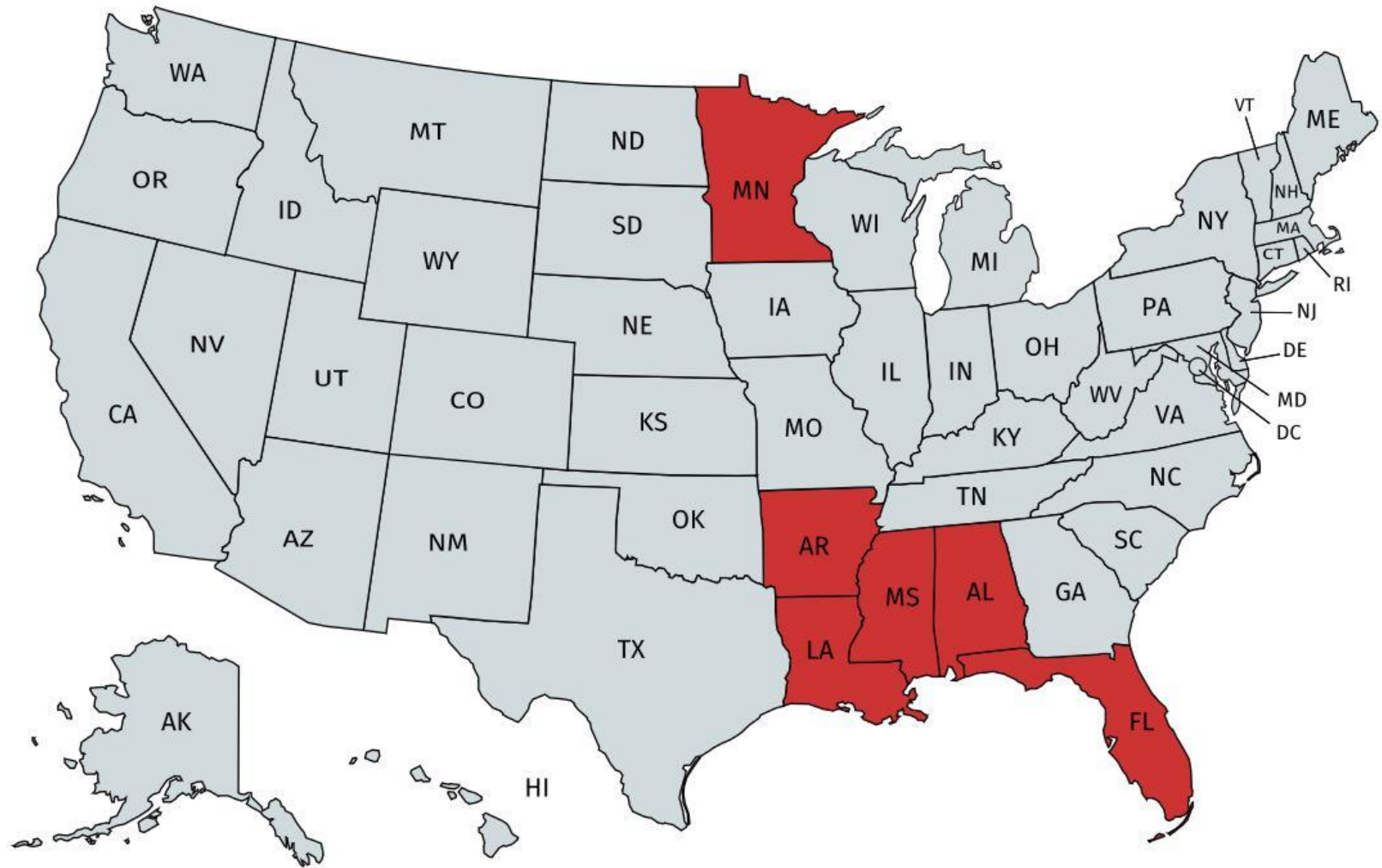


Figure 6.7 States reducing cultivated acreage 1939 – 1944 (Data from 1945 USDA census of Agriculture)



Figure 6.8, H. L. Mitchell, rear left, sees off a group of Arkansas College women going to New Jersey to work at Seabrook Farms



FOOD FOR THE NATION'S CAPITAL—Mrs. Bryant Smith of R.F.D., Culpeper, is farm-grading eggs for the Culpeper Cooperative Farm Bureau to send to Southern States Marketing Cooperative in Washington. Note the egg cooling table on the extreme right and egg scales between the table and the packing cases.

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Figure 6.9 A Virginia Woman sorts and grades eggs in 1943.



Figure 6.10 Maybe some tension between rural and urban interpretations of gender?
(From the *Shamrock Texan*, July 27, 1944. Page 4.)

Chapter 7

The Confines of the Rural Feminine: Ideology in the WLA

The WLA asked women to do something that was unapologetically unfeminine by public standards. Women doing field work was not a part of imagined rural life even though it was a reality for many farm women. Until World War II, the Federal Government was a part of this imagined division of labor, and it traditionally avoided labor programs, that overtly challenged gendered labor roles. Even in the Great Depression, though a few New Deal programs hired women, it was only done along strictly gender segregated lines. These were not CCC jobs that challenged the notions of “men’s work” and “women’s work” but in artistic, scholarly, clerical, and community-based jobs that society tolerated for women. Even Eleanor Roosevelt’s “she-she-she” camps prioritized forest nurseries over forest fires. With the demands of war, circumstances called for the Federal Government to cross lines that it had not crossed before. The Federal Government and designed the WLA in a way that minimized social friction. There are a few indications that some WLA leaders might have appreciated shifting the farm-labor paradigm, administrators never confronted the idea head-on. At the grassroots level, however, the mood was quite different. In a development that would have made the WLAA proud, farmers and WLA workers alike ultimately rejected the apologetics of administrators. Women serving in the WLA were proud of their newfound freedom and skills. They respected the physical demands of farm work, but also recognized their own potential as genuine farm hands. Farmers, too, rejected apologetic contingencies and lavished unqualified praise on WLA

workers. Whatever the program's administrative insecurities, at the grassroots level, the WLA changed the way farmers and urban women regarded rural labor.²⁰⁰

Florence Hall was an interesting choice for a WLA director. She had a proven administrative track record from her years of Home Demonstration service as well as good federal connections and an understanding of rural cultures. Where the WLAA of the Great War strove for new professional and political opportunities through wartime service, the WLA of World War II had no such revolutionary ambitions. By naming Hall, a Home Demonstration Supervisor in the Northeast since 1928, to head the Women's Land Army, the USDA infused the WLA with ideology that preferred to preserve and elevate women's existing roles, rather than expand them. There were still members of the WFGA, the organization that created the WLAA of World War I, alive and active in public circles. Instead of drawing on that available, experienced talent pool, the USDA gravitated toward its own programs for leadership. Hall's appeal no doubt came in part from the fact that her bona fides derived from a program that emphasized women's domestic role on farms. In spite of the WLA's mission, when compared to the WLAA, the World War II program was far more conservative, and respected the theoretical boundaries between men's and women's labor even as it violated them. Patriotic necessity, not social advancement motivated the program. This new WLA had no ambition to threaten systems or draw women permanently into the public sector as previous programs had.²⁰¹

Hall's leadership was only the beginning of the WLA's connections to the Home Demonstration program. Each state appointed its own full time or part-time WLA director.

²⁰⁰ Blanche Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933-1938*, New York: Viking Press, 1999, 88-91; David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in the Depression and War, 1929-1945*: new York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 144; Happy Days, "Camps to be Opened for 5000 Girls will be Similar to CCC", December 4, 1936,

²⁰¹ *Current Biography Yearbook*, 1943.

Most states followed Wickard's lead and appointed women from Home Demonstration or Home Economics programs as WLA supervisors. This supplied exceptional ideological cohesion among leadership, and since it used people already embedded in their state farm infrastructure, it smoothed the integration process. On the other hand, this unilateral Home demonstration integration also imbued the WLA with shared ideologies that considered women's responsibilities sacrosanct and deserving of elevation, rather than restrictive and ripe for expansion. Home demonstration programs emphasized women as stakeholders in economic and technological advancements, but still adhered to traditional roles. Home demonstration programs encouraged women to modernize their homemaking in the same way that field agents encouraged men to rotate crops or adopt new fertilizers. Agents promoted electricity, gas engines, and home canners, as modern marvels that revolutionized farm women's roles, but those same agents stopped short of encouraging women to drive tractors or plow fields. The wartime emergency demanded that women transition from the home to the fields, but the programs administrators tempered their mission with messages of wartime necessity and frequently reminded farmers and workers alike of the liabilities of feminine fragility, cautioning women to be mindful of overexertion, and warning farmers against working them too hard.²⁰²

Because Hall respected traditional women's work, the WLA took a more flexible approach to actual work responsibilities than either the VFV or the WLAA. Housework was a perfectly valid occupation for women in WLA reckoning, so she did what no other program had done before her—she encouraged WLA workers to take on housework as needed. Hall's training gave her an appreciation for the value of housekeeping, cooking, child care, and other

²⁰² *WLA Newsletter*, December 23, 1943; Frances Valentine, Valentine, Frances Wadsworth. *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast In 1943*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1945; For more on the social history of rural women and technology see Katharine Jellison's *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1919-1963*.

traditionally feminine pursuits, and informed her understanding of farm family dynamics. Though the Home Demonstration program did not always encourage it, Hall knew that many farm women were experienced field hands. “Volunteers for work in farm homes can do much for the war program by releasing an experienced farm woman for work in the field. This is familiar work—taking care of children, cooking ... cleaning ..., canning ..., marketing, ...sewing, or keeping farm and home records.” Without any chauvinistic derision for housework, the WLA accepted that urban workers could be just as useful in homes as in the fields. While the VFV guaranteed assignees traditionally masculine, non housework responsibilities regardless of sex, Hall’s egalitarian perspective conceded that sometimes the most efficient use of a WLA worker was in the house, freeing farm wives to do field work they already knew how to do. This approach tacitly endorsed the importance of rural women’s contributions to farm productivity in a way that other programs did not. When VFV workers complained of being given housework, coordinators stepped in to renegotiate or reassign them. While the program insisted, on one hand, on breaking gendered labor barriers, this perspective also insinuated that the work farm women did was simply not as important to the war effort as the work farm men did. While Hall’s program was more conservative, it was also less chauvinistic.²⁰³

Overlap between the WLA and Home Demonstration missions was clear in Virginia, in particular, where WLA leaders blended the two missions regardless of job title. In addition to recruiting and deploying women for field work, supervisors recommended ways for farm women to improve efficiency to “get around the present shortage of help.” Administrators recommended that women streamline their workloads, organize work areas, use correct and efficient

²⁰³ Arthur Root, *Report on the Volunteer Land Corps*, 81-82; WLA Newsletter April 10, 1943, 2; July 15, 1943.

equipment, and to sit whenever possible. The advice was not wrong-headed by any means, but was reflective of the Home Demonstration Program's emphasis on scientific homemaking more than on field labor. Some advice must have seemed overly simplistic to already overworked farm wives. "[L]eave sheets un-ironed" appears an unnecessary concession during a wartime emergency, and "rinse dishes in hot water to avoid having to wipe them dry". Surely busy women had already forgone the ironing of bed sheets or wiping of dishes as needed. But the advice gently affirmed that farm women were dividing their time in new ways, and granted rural women subtle affirmation of these realigned priorities. It was acceptable for farm women to leave out a few homemaking tasks in the name of increased production. That this advice was issued under the auspices of the WLA instead of the Home Demonstration Club suggests that the two programs were not well separated in Virginia at least. Hall encouraged this close collaboration between programs. She was deeply concerned about farm women taking on the double-day. In December, 1943, at the close of the first year of the federal program, she asked her state supervisors to "be on guard for problems arising as a result of double job of farm women." It is the responsibility of WLA supervisors, she said, to "anticipate these problems and to plan ways to help, including persuasion to accept outside labor." Hall anticipated the greatest overarching concerns of working women in the 21st century, and called on her staff to mitigate, as best they could, the unavoidable crush of conflicting responsibilities.²⁰⁴

Bridging the Urban and Rural Divide

World War II increased cooperation between urban and rural sectors. Labor shortages, industrial jobs, and escalating demand for processed farm products all increased and intensified interactions between the two areas. This was not just the inadvertent blundering of a nation at

²⁰⁴ *WLA Newsletter*, April 10, 1943; *Virginia Farm Bureau News*, Volume 5, Number 4, 1 June 1945.

war. Many organizations, including the WLA, saw this as an opportunity to build bridges uniting the urban and rural sectors. In December, 1943, Florence Hall wrote to WLA supervisors throughout the country and listed 12 points that she considered important for the coming crop year. Among them, she cited the “Recognition that this program has unlimited possibilities for developing a better understanding between rural and urban groups.” While Hall was silent on her motives for these “better understandings,” the WLA’s first-year recruiting initiatives benefitted from the infrastructure of urban women’s clubs. Women’s clubs initiated local farm-labor programs before the creation of the WLA, and those clubs shepherded workers into the federal program after February 1943. The federal program took note of the role Women’s Clubs played during World War I, and found a way to secure those clubs for recruiting and deployment without sacrificing federal control. Washington’s entire organizational structure relied on civilian organizations. In 1943, the first year of the WLA, one organizer reported:

State-wide recruitment for peak loads was accomplished by various organizations, such as the State Federated Women’s Clubs, the Business and Professional Clubs, the Altrusa and Zonta Clubs, the State Department of Education, the Federal Works Agency, and so forth. These organizations were very responsive to the program and pledged support in the recruitment and development of the farm labor program in local communities for the harvesting of farm crops.²⁰⁵

These clubs legitimated the WLA to urban women, and also provided a practical infrastructure that was already in contact with vast numbers of women in local, state, and national branches.²⁰⁶

The General Federation of Women’s Clubs, held a writing competition in 1944, calling on members to regale one another with stories of their WLA experiences the year prior. The prize for the writing the best essay on “My Experience Doing Wartime Farm Work” was a war

²⁰⁵ *WLA Newsletter* December 17, 1943; Rasmussen, *History of the emergency farm labor supply program, 1943-1947*, 141; Valentine, *Women's emergency farm service on the Pacific coast in 1943*, 29.

²⁰⁶ *WLA Newsletter* December 17, 1943.

bond. The competition was so successful that the organization repeated the program the following year. In New York, the state supervisor noted “Seventeen WLA camps operating in New York State. . . . Local organizations are doing much to make newcomers welcome, i. e., swimming parties, visits to county fairs, free tickets to the skating rink.” The Virginia Federation of Home Demonstration Clubs raised money to buy WLA insignia to present to women in camps throughout the state. These vast networks of women became essential cogs in the WLA machine. Outlining her 1944 recruiting plans, Hall asked state supervisors to establish contact with schools, colleges, and women’s organizations and place “emphasis on organizations recruiting units . . . from their membership.” Nearly budgeted out of existence, the WLA co-opted women’s organizations to do their recruiting and public relations work, sparing the program budget for operational costs. The organizational relationship did not stop with recruiting either. Women’s clubs recruited, supplied transportation for day-haul workers, and organized and operated camps in areas where there was significant demand for seasonal workers.²⁰⁷

Even in 1941, with prices rising and jobs returning, some California farmers hired women to harvest fruits and vegetables without any institutional involvement. After 1941, the state’s labor supply depleted quickly. Farmers often left their own fields for better paying industry work. Some forward thinking farmers recognized the impending crisis and began working with local women’s clubs to find an alternate labor force. In June, 1942, A Vacaville, CA farmer asked his local branch of the American Women’s Voluntary Services (AWVS) to help him find workers and run a women’s camp. The AWVS was interested, but told him they did not have the funding to create a camp from their own budget. Local farmers agreed to

²⁰⁷ *WLA Newsletter* December 17, 1943; *WLA Newsletter* August 4, 1944; *WLA Newsletter*, September 11, 1945.

shoulder the expense if the AWVS would manage the administrative dimension, and each participating farmer contributed \$100 to establish a local camp with the promise that the camp would supply seasonal workers to harvest their crops. Some of these contributing farmers happened to serve on the local school board as well, and they arranged to use the local high school for housing, and school buses for transportation. The school already had a home economics classroom that served as a kitchen, and the gymnasium, outfitted with cots, became a dormitory. Far from being opposed to women's labor, these Northern California farmers were eager to get what labor they could. While these measures may have been driven more by desperation than revolutionary sentiments, the men had enough faith in women's potential to invest their time and community resources to bring women into the fields. The model these men established was successful enough that subsequent WLA camps borrowed the model. Where possible, they set up summer workers' camps in schools and contracted school buses in a similar fashion.²⁰⁸

Recognizing this new convergence of women from the urban and rural sectors, the Associated Women of the American Farm Bureau Federation hosted the first rural-urban women's conference in Washington DC in May 1944. The list of attendees supplied in the *Virginia Farm Bureau News* included heavy hitting organizations like the American Federation of Labor, the American Legion Auxiliary, the American University Women, Business and Professional Women, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Junior League, the National League of Women Voters, the National Home Demonstration Council, and the Women's Land Army. A number of members of the House of Representatives expressed interest, with Senator Bankhead of Alabama, and Mrs. Caraway of Arkansas both accepting invitations, and

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

congressmen Cannon, of Missouri, Starnes of Alabama, and Pace of Georgia, among others, pledging to attend.²⁰⁹

Panel discussions at that meeting covered very traditional women's concerns. There were no panels on employment, discrimination, or other edgy topics that would become the foundation of women's movements in later decades. Though headlines beamed "Farm and City Women Say Their Problems Are Same" panel conversations suggested that, in many cases, urban women were surprised to learn that rural women often got the short end of the stick. In the Health panel, for instance, urban women expressed surprise that rural families paid more for a physician's house call than urban women had to. The longer distances traveled justified the cost, perhaps, but did not ease the burden of the bill. On the other hand the Home Demonstration Clubs were a reversal – where urban women "liked the idea so much they announced themselves as on record for organizing a similar extension service for city women." The WLA was the only organization present that was already involved in brokering relationships between rural and urban, and guest speaker of the food panel, Mrs. W. C. McLeod, of Madisonville, KY, acted as a de facto recruiter at this conference. "Both city and country women applauded as they heard . . . what happens on the farm when war takes the man of the family . . . and hired help is impossible to get." Though the meeting was ostensibly at the behest of the Farm Bureau, the topic of the meeting and Mrs. McLeod's featured speech both leave little doubt that the WLA benefitted from the event. It drew together organizations that went on to promote the organization and recruit its own members for wartime farm service. This initial meeting was a big step toward fostering stronger ties between country and town. In January, 1945, Florence Hall reported that

²⁰⁹ *Virginia Farm Bureau News*, Volume 4, Number 5, 1 May 1944.

many states capitalized on the new relationships, and began hosting joint meetings of urban and rural folks in their own towns.²¹⁰

Because the WLA organized only in 1943, many other programs had established precedents that were useful and instructive for the new program. California's programs organized under the American Women's Voluntary Service, and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) both provided guidance. They had published manuals associated with the fielding of women and girls as field hands, including information on housing and training, and those organizations had also operated successful recruiting campaigns that the WLA could draw on for experienced farm workers. The United States Employment Service, the Pacific Camping Association, and the San Francisco department of education had all shared information on the organization and operation of harvest camps as well. The Sierra Club launched a co-ed camp where volunteer men and women, most of them married couples, roughed it in the California wilderness at night and worked on farms during the day. The literature from these organizations helped the WLA launch more successful first year camps than many private organizations had done. By learning from the mistakes and successes of grassroots programs, the WLA avoided pitfalls typical of first year camps and launched exceptionally successful camps even in their first weeks of operation.²¹¹

After the USDA took responsibility for the placement of farm labor, in many states the United States Employment Service (USES) recruited and registered women and handed the resultant rosters over to the WLA. In addition, Chambers of commerce across the country created committees dedicated to the farm labor project, and many of these committees had

²¹⁰ *Virginia Farm Bureau News*, Volume 4, Number 6, 1 June 1944; *WLA Newsletter* January 12, 1945.

²¹¹ Valentine, Frances Wadsworth. *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast In 1943*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1945, 8.

dedicated women's committees or advisory panels that helped USES reach women through local networks. These networks, though private, recruited women in their communities and funneled them into government programs. The coalescence of respected women's clubs contributed sheen of respectability to the WLA. The organization was, after all, posing an internal challenge to existing proscribed gendered expectations, and was doing so when the United States was at war. With disruptions abroad, there seemed to be little appetite for revolutions at home and the unification of urban women's clubs and rural women's Home Demonstration infrastructure meant that the WLA, in spite of its profoundly unconventional mission, co-opted the legitimacy of existing women's roles to justify wartime farm labor as an acceptable and even honorable occupation for women.²¹²

What did Women think?

For workers and farmers alike in some corners of the United States there was already a consensus that women were suitable workers in a temporary situation or in an exceptional need. In Washington, women and children became a key labor force in the berry industry in the 1930s. As the Depression collapsed the berry market, farmers planted fewer crops, which drove migratory workers away. "For the last few years migrants have not come" reported a Women's Bureau observer in 1944, "more and more dependence has had to be placed on local women and children for harvesting." Farmers did not necessarily prefer women workers, but they preferred to have crops harvested, and women and children, by virtue of availability as much as suitability, were the natural successors to those migrant workers. However farmers dealt with the situation

²¹² Ibid., 28-29.

on a personal level, it is clear that women were at least adequate for the task or farmers would not have continued to hire them. Whatever the economic, social, cultural, or psychological cost, it was not too high, as farmers continued to plant and to hire women and children as harvest workers. By the time the war began, farmers, and seemingly farmers' wives in Washington were at least comfortable *enough* with women as farm workers, and women in the region were satisfied enough with the arrangement to continue to return to the fields year after year.²¹³

The opportunity the WLA offered to US women clearly resonated in one way or another. That much is clear from participation numbers far in excess of recruiting goals every year. For urban women entering a rural environment, there was something of a mystique about the work itself. "Just 7 short days ago fruit and vegetables seemed to us to grow on stands where we purchased them" editorialized a New York Camp Newsletter. "We never consciously noted the existence of the farmer, the mainspring of our Nation." The "understanding" Hall sought between rural and urban manifested, in this case, in a simple awareness of the rural role in the machinery of urban life. H. B. Knapp, Director of the Institute of agriculture echoed this belief. Recognizing WLA workers in 1944 he called the women "ambassadors of goodwill" and said "You girls can do a great deal carry understanding both of farm economics and of farm peoples' way of life to people in your home towns and cities. Better understanding between farm and city people means better working together and living together. This means a fuller life for both." This blending of lines between the rural and urban paved the way for the post-war era, as rural people migrated to cities, and city people migrated to the peripheries, parlaying these newfound understandings into suburban living.²¹⁴

²¹³ Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 28.

²¹⁴ *WLA Newsletter* November 18, 1944.

In addition to life-lessons, urban workers developed skills they never knew existed, and took pride in learning to do them well. “If you have never threshed you don’t know what hard physical labor is. . . . you have to watch out for pitchforks, and it is the filthiest job I ever encountered.” The Mount Holyoke student had no frame of reference before joining the WLA, but she took fierce pride in her accomplishments there. “[Loading bundles] is a job of skill.” She boasted. “You have to keep moving and put the bundles in the right places so that they won’t fall off when the load gets eight feet high. There is an art to it. On the first wagon I worked with Bernie . . . topping a load is tricky, and Bernie told me I was smart and learning how to do it fast—regular farm girl I was.” While “farm girl” might have many connotations in another context, there was a distinct ring of pride for amateur and pro alike in claiming and administering the title. It was recognition, from a rural worker to an urban one, of a hard-won new skill.²¹⁵

Some women weighed farm work against other genuine opportunities. One dairy worker from New Hampshire explained that “I decided not to join the WACS or the WAVES, but to do farm work and help in food production. I believe this is just as important to the men in the armed forces.” This particular 21 year old woman worked full time as a dairy hand, and managed to hire a Canadian man to take her place on her father’s dairy farm so that she could take work elsewhere. For her, the WLA was a valid full time alternative to military service. Unlike many farm girls, she had the option to leave home if she wished, but she genuinely considered farm work a worthwhile full time occupation.²¹⁶

WLA women were in some cases more radical than the program itself. Farm work, especially in a situation of shortage, provided workers with the chance to advocate for

²¹⁵ *New York Times Magazine*, 15 August 1943.

²¹⁶ *WLA Newsletter* October 12, 1944.

themselves and to claim autonomy in negotiating for working conditions defined by the women themselves, not by the program. In some instances women took advantage of their position to set terms for farmers or even for the WLA before they would agree to register for farm work. It should perhaps be unsurprising that women who were adventurous enough to take on unfamiliar, unconventional work would also be assertive enough to set terms for a federal program, but their success is telling. In Washington, colleges established minimum standards for working conditions, and expected those conditions to be guaranteed before students accepted deployments. In many cases farmers found those terms reasonable, or at least reasonable enough to be worth meeting in order to secure a guaranteed labor supply. In cases where students' expectations could not be met either by farmers or by the WLA itself, workers, organizers, and farmers negotiated to define mutually agreeable terms. For college women, the WLA loomed not just as an opportunity, but also as a potential despot that could grow exploitative without proper restraint. Regardless of patriotic enthusiasm, college women recognized the value of their labor not as a factor of their patriotism, but as a means to an end for farmer and WLA alike, and the women leveraged the value of labor to protect themselves from exploitation.²¹⁷

Protective Legislation

The WLA was an unapologetically protective organization that favored policies that acknowledged special conditions of women's employment and accounted for them through careful regulation of labor, conditions, and working hours. On the other hand, when Rhode Island farmers resisted a first-year WLA program arguing that "the work was too heavy" Hall retorted that this was "inconsistent with the fact that women members of the farm family are frequently working in the dairy and the hayfield." The organization demanded safe working

²¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

conditions, regular breaks, and respect for limitations, but those protective measures did not extend so far as to enable farmers who would make them an excuse. Still, Hall recognized that women answered to a different series of demands than men did, and like many reformers negotiating women's access to the workplace, she endorsed special accommodations. One of these was child care. Realizing that mothers of young children often could not participate in farm work, Hall asked her state supervisors to consider developing shared day care centers to allow more young mothers to participate. The program did not overtly intend to challenge the sacred maternal role the United States so valued, and yet it did. By identifying and addressing the obstacles that prevented mothers from earning an independent income, the WLA publicly celebrated the economic power of women unfettered by contemporary expectation. By creating opportunities for mothers to take wage work in traditionally male-dominated sectors, the WLA allowed young mothers to reconsider their own economic roles in their families and their communities.²¹⁸

For workers and farmers alike however, there was sometimes a sense that there was no need for, or desire for, interjection of federal authority that impeded the free negotiation between farmers and individuals, and most especially when that organization restricted women's freedom to work beyond what they felt were unnecessarily restrictive regulations. "In these states" a 1944 pamphlet said, of the Pacific Coast "the theory that adult women are free agents able to take care of their own working conditions seems in some cases to have had acceptance over the idea that to secure a new group of workers in an industry care must be taken to see that working conditions are such as to attract and hold them." The WLA was not happy about it, but workers themselves rejected the notion of protective policies when it suited them, and while

²¹⁸ *WLA Newsletter*, September 23, 1943; *WLA Newsletter* December 17, 1943.

women benefitted from WLA requirements of prevailing wages, they ultimately chafed at the idea of excessive restrictions on working hours, mandatory breaks, or other impediments that undermined workers' ability to invest their own time without restraint.²¹⁹

What did farmers think?

Farmers had reasonable concerns about the physical labor they asked women to do, but generally appear to come away impressed with women's strengths as farm workers in most settings. "The women are picking cleaner than any group that ever worked for us" reported one Contra Costa California nut grower. "The spirit of the women is excellent . . . we sincerely appreciate their help" he said. Another, a vineyard foreman who supervised a crew of women in 1944 said "I hate to admit it, but they do a better job than the men did." This particular grape grower hired hundreds of WLA workers through the year, and was so happy with their work that he placed some women in supervisory roles on his ranch. He paid women the same wages that he offered men, and reported that he considered hiring women a good business decision that he would continue even after the war. His commitment was not a resignation to wartime necessity. After 3 years of hiring women, he knew that it was in the best interest of his own bottom line.²²⁰

Many farmers praised the WLA workers for their attention to detail, their work ethic, and their demeanor. Whatever expectations farmers had of urban women going into the program, they ultimately did come to appreciate the skills that women brought to the table. A San Joaquin farmer praised his WLA workers highly

"In the packing shed" he said "women are superior to men. In onions the women seem to grasp and understand the work better than the men and are faster with their hands. In the field the women saved the crop, for which I had a Government contract,

²¹⁹ Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 35.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

though it was hard work and women shouldn't have to do it. A woman takes more pains, takes pride in her work, and she is very cooperative, does what she is told and doesn't argue."

The farmer appreciated the women's attention to detail. He did not sacrifice his underlying idea that women and men have different sectors of work, as evidenced by his continued belief that women "shouldn't have to do" field work. His praise, moreover, emphasized passive traits of cooperation and obedience. He didn't appreciate the contributions of the WLA because the workers proved their mettle in the fields as much as he appreciated the value of women's talents in a circle previously shut off to them. The Greenville Delta Democrat Times showed WLA women with similar praise, lauding the reliability and industriousness of WLA workers, and, in a compliment that can only be a product of some awful previous experience, one farmer bragged that WLA workers "don't get drunk and smash up the machinery." High praise indeed.²²¹

A Sonoma county farmer said "We couldn't have harvested our crop without these women. They have saved my crop from the picking through the drying process." In Kern County a farmer reported that "The women do excellent work. Volunteer labor was satisfactory in saving a large portion of many of our crops. We believe that this type of labor is successful, and that the use of such labor is essential to the saving of a large part of California's crops." Contra Costa county, following their first experiments with the WLA, reported "Last year the food losses in Contra Costa County, due to labor shortage, were heavy. This year, we anticipate none. We appreciate the fine contribution he women have made [.]". And a lemon farmer in Orange County found the women less productive than men, but still was grateful to have them. "For the past 8 or 9 months we have been using a crew of women as lemon pickers" he

²²¹ Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 19; *Greenville Delta Democrat Times* May 24, 1944.

explained. “Their work has proved very satisfactory on the whole and I would estimate that they can put out just about three-fourths as much as men.”

The WLA Newsletter of October 12, 1944, included anonymized excerpts from farmers and their wives:

“Good work begins with attitude. These girls came here to work first and play afterward. They put their best energy each day on producing food.”

“The WLA girls working here have to pull their weight just like our regular farm help. These girls are good workers, so they do good business for us, for themselves, and for the war effort.”

“I’ve seen now that city girls without farm work experience can be a real help, and I’m doing everything I can to keep some of them on our place as long as we have work in the fields and orchards”

“Fine help. Couldn’t ask for better!”

“Don’t know what I’d have done without these six girls to help get in my bean crop. They sure know how to work, and they’re fun to have around. Even got me to singing with them, picking beans!”

“WLA workers rate high with us, Don’t know what we’d have done without them!”

“Certainly glad to have the girls’ help. Had it last year and hope to have it next.”

These farmers all shared an appreciation for the work that women did, but they also recognized that the labor of WLA women was rarely an alternative to some other labor source, but rather the only available option. Prior years saw crops destroyed, so for many farmers accepting female labor was less a matter of social change than of fiscal desperation. Nonetheless, even though there were differences in the strengths of female versus male laborers, farmers on the whole were grateful to have WLA help, and tended to appreciate at least that, whatever the women’s limitations, they stood between farmers and failed crops.²²²

²²² Ibid. 19-20. *WLA Newsletter* October 12, 1944.

One of the overarching concerns for the WLA was persuading farm wives that WLA workers were worthwhile. Though farm women realized their own labor potential, they did not necessarily trust that urban women would have the same potential. Farm girl pinups and glamorized glossy magazines that posed made-up models next to bushel baskets did little to alleviate farm women's concerns. Florence Hall herself expressed concerns that farm women would have to be persuaded to accept help from urban women. A *Wallace's Farmer* poll on the subject of woman farm hands in 1943 exposed a lot of underlying concerns with urban farm hands. Of the farm families surveyed, 59% of farm women most favored help in the farm home, freeing themselves up to work the fields. "If she is young, she can stay in the house and do the work there. I'll help in the field." One woman insisted. "It doesn't require any mechanical training to wash and wipe dishes or scrub the floors" said another, "but I think these 'land army' women would have a hard time running a tractor." Some farm men provoked their wives' concern. Asked his perspective on the subject, one farmer decided "I'd have to have a look at the girl first, before I decided whether she'd better stay in the house or go out in the field." Some women were willing to give the WLA a chance, but they were more pessimistic than not:

"If we can get city women and girls who can live two weeks without bathrooms and nail polish, who can pump and carry water and use it carefully, who can work on a hot range all day, who can eat at a table with sweaty men in dirty overalls, who can take directions from a housewife as graciously as they can from a man in the office, who can do work until 10 p.m. if the job isn't finished, and who can feel as patriotic doing all of this as a soldier earning \$1.30 a day, we can use them in our homes."²²³

That Iowa farm wife was eager to give women a chance, but she was cautious of the "victory vacation" narrative. Farm life was not a vacation for her, and she didn't need city girls underfoot sunbathing on her watch. But one Minnesota farmer pointed out that "When it rains, Alice helps

²²³ Carroll P. Streeter, "Can Town and City Women Help?" *Farm Journal and Farmer's Wife* (July 1942): 32–33, 43.

in the house, which is more than any hired man will do.” Tellingly, few complaints about WLA workers come from women who worked with them, but rather from women who rejected the prospect of WLA workers before giving them a chance.²²⁴

Co-opting the maternal

In the fields the lines between the WLA and the Victory Farm Volunteers could sometimes become somewhat blurred. Because of the residential component of both programs, some communities housed high school girls working under the auspices of the VFV in the same accommodations as the WLA. In some instances these young women appear to have petitioned for membership in the WLA instead of the VFV, and Florence Hall addressed the concern in an early WLA newsletter, choosing to keep a firm line drawn between her adult WLA workers and the teens who volunteered in the VFV organization.

Florence Hall’s early plans for the Women’s Land Army called for the WLA to serve as a supervisory body overseeing youth workers from the Victory Farm Volunteers. Volunteers in the VFV program enjoyed the flexibility of gendered expectations that youth provided, and were less confined to the strictures of gendered expectations that adult women were. Hall herself seemed to largely accept the rightness of these strictures, and suggested that the WLA train and supervise these youth. So boys and girls alike would supply field labor for the Emergency War Labor program, but WLA women would function as supervisors—de facto mothers—replicating the accepted power structures accepted by rural and urban communities. In that paradigm the program would have violated gendered expectations even less than the program’s industrial counterpart. Women taking to the fields under the guise of pseudo-mothers met the basic

²²⁴ WLA Newsletter October 12, 1944; “When Town Girls Help,” *Wallaces’ Farmer*, 19 June 1943, 15.

performative criteria of keepers and supervisors of children, and thus conformed to traditional gendered expectations in a way that wielding a plow might not. Such an arrangement was compatible with Home Demonstration philosophies that edified and elevated women's farm work, because it did not violate men's place in the fields. Instead, it co-opted the sacred maternal bringing children to the fields as laborers, and women to the fields as protectors of children. The actual labor was admittedly a bit unconventional, but less so than other wartime measures justified in the name of patriotic service.²²⁵

This plan was carried out in several places, though not to the full deployment of the WLA. There were still far too many WLA workers for VFV supervision to become their sole occupation. Still, for many states, this was the entry point—the idealized job, rather than the real work.

Oregon school and farm authorities had realized that young workers are much more effective when working in rather small groups under the supervision of a responsible and trained adult. Women were sought for these jobs. Often they were teachers, members of parent-teacher associations, or mothers of children going out. [for volunteer farm work] These platoon leaders were paid by the farmers a dollar an hour. They not only watched the work of the children, saw that they kept at work, but on occasion drove the buses.²²⁶

The WLA would never consist mainly of this specialized occupation, but the organization emphasized the importance of these roles, playing up the importance of the women who took on supervisory roles even though they sometimes represented a fairly small percentage of the total WLA workforce. In Washington, women did not necessarily want to supervise children, and yet it was a role that farmers and farm labor organizers especially coveted, arguing that women were better suited to it than anyone else. “It has been found in every State that uses children” one

²²⁵ WLA Newsletter

²²⁶ Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 24.

report said “that only when well supervised is the work they do satisfactory. Someone is needed not only to take instruction from the farmer as to what he wants done, but to see that the children pick fruit properly without damage the trees and do not indulge in fruit fights.” The role is unapologetically maternal. Supervisors were needed to train and enforce good behavior. Women were considered the ideal candidates. The same report dismissed men as either lacking the capacity to understand children, or as willing to openly exploit them. In one instance, a land owner cheated children out of their berry picking pay. He “insisted that the children fill the berry baskets heaping full, instead of level as they must be for shipping. The grower then skimmed off the extra mound and got several crates of berries during the day’s pick for which he paid nothing.” Without any qualification beyond their identity as women, Washington organizers saw women as the ideal managers for children. The women could bestow training and discipline on their young charges on the one hand, and protect them from insensitive field supervisors or exploitative land owners on the other.²²⁷

The WLA was far too large for supervision to ever be the primary function of the majority of workers; it was still an important role in several states. The 1943 WLA fielded nearly half a million women, and the Victory Farm Volunteer program fielded a total 832,916 youths that same year. So while the VFV was larger, it was not so much larger that it could absorb half a million middle managers. Some WLA workers did serve in exactly that capacity though, and to good outcome for themselves. Women who worked as field supervisors on farms received pay of \$1 per hour paid by the farmer who hired the crew. Those who were placed on camps as supervisors received \$7.50 per day from state Farm Production Council funds in addition to their field pay. There were few management positions of this kind available, but

²²⁷ Ibid., 31.

there is still importance in women taking on management roles in a field so traditionally male dominated. That those management roles were acquired through, rather than in opposition to, home demonstration values is a testament to the complexity of the program's relationship to gender in the 1940s.²²⁸

The war undoubtedly created opportunity for women to take leadership roles in other settings as well. On one Washington farm, the wife of the farm foreman took on new roles, driving the farm tractor to spray fruit trees, but more importantly perhaps, took on full management of the Asparagus fields, including hiring workers, supervising the sorting and packing process, and ultimately also selling the asparagus. "Naturally," reported a Washington observer "she had much farm knowledge and experience, but took active part in all this work only in the war emergency." The foreman's wife (the report does not give her name) had the skills to make her a valuable contributor to farm operations because she lived and worked on the farm before the war. Wartime crisis did not endow her with new skills, but did create an opportunity for her to claim those skills in her own right instead of subordinating them to someone else's oversight. In short, the war allowed her to do farm work openly that she had learned to do privately.²²⁹

There are some indications that at least for the Women's Bureau, the WLA did have the opportunity to challenge existing trends in women's labor. In particular, an Oregon report pointed out that, though women did often do some types of seasonal work, sometimes even bringing children into berry fields with them in summer months, the jobs reserved for women and children were not on par with the jobs available to men. "There are certain jobs ordinarily

²²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²²⁹ Ibid., 30.

delegated to women and often given the name of ‘women’s and children’s jobs’. They are, unfortunately, likely to be jobs with the lowest earning possibilities. Whether that is the reason they are women’s and children’s jobs or whether they are natural jobs for women and children is of little importance.” Though Valentine was careful to avoid the controversy surrounding what might constitute a woman’s or a man’s job, the fact that the author pointed out the controversy before refusing to engage it makes clear that there was some animosity there on the subject. That she calls the condition of low wages “unfortunate” suggests that she objects to this division of labor. She did not, however argue her position on the controversy at that time, suggesting that, though there was a brimming conversation about women’s roles, that conversation was not a wartime priority.²³⁰

Was the WLA Revolutionary?

In spite of the care the WLA took to ground its mission in language of patriotism and an inherently temporary necessity, it was still brokering the labor of women in a decidedly unconventional way. In addition to dealing with the interpersonal concerns, the WLA, by its very existence, argued against entrenched notions of feminine frailty, and tested the possibility that women were capable of physically rigorous labor, and it was a success. Though farmers and workers alike had to accommodate for some differences, the year-over-year crop increases, and farmers’ positive reports of WLA suitability combined make it clear that, whatever the program’s intentions, it did in fact pose a legitimate challenge to masculine control of agricultural labor.

Rural gendered labor is complicated in that the sharp spatial divisions that defined urban middle and upper class women’s spaces are necessarily blurred in agriculture. The few steps

²³⁰ Frances Valentine, *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast*, 22.

between kitchen and crop were more easily traversed than those between kitchen and factory. Urban notions of strict separations of labor filtered into the rural sector through the Country Life movement, the Home Demonstration program, and even through popular entertainments like radio and print media. But ultimately farm women navigated tensions between expectation and necessity in an environment where reputation and survival often could not coexist without cooperation. Because providing for a wife without dragging her into the fields was a mark of pride for men, the act of helping husbands achieve a harvest forced wives to undermine their husbands' masculinity. This did not bend necessity. Crops still had to be harvested and bills paid, but the gendered dynamics meant that women did not often acknowledge their field labor. It was an embarrassment to their husbands. Husbands likewise often denied that their wives did field work, but surveys often showed otherwise. In regions where women often did field work, this created a community enforced veil of invisibility. Fields might be in plain view, but women could not acknowledge each other's labor without inviting the embarrassment that comes of an admission of inadequacy. This meant there could be no mutual reinforcement or support within the community, and no normalization of women's field work even though it was, by the nature of fields, conspicuous.²³¹

At the same time that women's field work challenged the masculine ideal, it also defied contemporary feminine expectations. Rising expectations on homemakers meant that women might not feel deserving of compassion even for selfless support of imperfectly masculine husbands. The age of reform called for homemakers to give greater attention to hygiene, sanitation, scientific child rearing, food preservation, and endless other tasks placed pressure on

²³¹ Oscar Lewis, *On the edge of the Black Waxy: a cultural survey of Bell County, Texas*. Saint Louis.24-25; Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900 – 1940*, 159-162, Jellison, *Entitled to Power*, 139-142.

women to accomplish more in their homes and to a more exacting standard than existed before. This meant a woman who found time to work in the fields was likely slacking in her housekeeping responsibilities. These expectations were contingencies of femininity more than of class, so even poor women whose market-oriented labor was desperately important to family survival faced increasing pressure to iron her bed sheets. Farm women had the additional concern of undermining their own reputations not only as ladies, but as homemakers. This in turn threatened her reputation as a wife and a mother—the two archetypes that defined the feminine ideal.²³²

In the South in particular, the notion of “ladylike”, a vestige of a South dominated by an upper, rather than a working class, was in flux during the early 20th century, but before World War II it underwent more significant renegotiation in cities than in the countryside. Elizabeth Fox Genovese has argued that poor farmers did not have the option to renegotiate gender conventions in keeping with their class. This meant that, as economic structures imposed by the upper classes forced sharecropping and poor women into the fields or even into the workforce, women who bent to their realities did so at the cost of their respectability. “Ladies” did not work in the fields in the South. At the same time, as Rebecca Sharpless has pointed out, by the early 20th century, this hegemony was beginning to stretch thin, especially in urban areas. While there was still controversy on the subject, rising schools of thought respected women who “would rise to any occasion and do what was necessary to help her family.” If motives were pure, there was increasing flexibility in the definition of “ladylike” even in the South.²³³

²³² Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900 – 1940*, 159.

²³³ Fox-Genovese, “Between Individualism and Community: Autobiographies of Southern Women” in *Located Lives; Place and Idea in Southern Autobiography*, edited by J. Bill Berry, 20-38. Athens: University of Georgia Press; Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, 159-161.

The WLA created a viable, selfless justification that allowed urban women to do farm work as an act of patriotism. The movement did not change what farm women were doing, but it allowed farm women to shed the veil of secrecy and take pride in work that they were already doing. New interpretations of feminine ideals, ushered into the countryside by urban professionals, college girls, and even urban homemakers, allowed farm wives and husbands alike to publicly accept the role that women played in market-driven farm practices. +The chaos of war allowed a new interpretation of women in the fields that was neither an admission of tradition nor a break with it, but that pretended to a new custom. Draped in the sheen of patriotic duty rather than personal ambition or family necessity, women became visible in the fields. Farm men and women alike shed the cloak of indignity associated with women in the fields. Where sending a wife into the field was an admission of either greed or inadequacy in the past, making optimal use of labor in wartime was just patriotic. Likewise, women were not neglecting homemaking to indulge in unladylike displays; rather, they were making selfless sacrifices for the greater cause of a country's call to war.

So the WLA itself was organizationally conservative even as its mission was somewhat revolutionary. It challenged entrenched notions of women's labor, but couched those challenges in apologetics. Growing out of the Home Demonstration program gave the WLA a healthy respect for the traditional labor women contributed in kitchens and laundry rooms. Indeed, the Home Demonstration program set exacting homemaking standards that demanded much of farm women's time. At the same time, Field Agents were very aware that most farm women across the country did profit-driven field labor as well as homemaking. It was not the fact of women's labor that was unacceptable in farm communities so much as the admission of women's labor. As Oscar Lewis explained, a wife who did no heavy work was a mark of pride for husbands. So

when a woman took to the fields she could do so under the guise of pretended privacy. Farm fields are not truly private. They exist in the open. Women did not have to admit that they did farm work for the neighbors to realize that it happened, but like so many indelicate functions that threaten our pride, mutual respect, coupled perhaps with a dose of mutual respect, encouraged women to live in denial of their agricultural roles. What the WLA provided was not an opportunity to perform those roles—women were already performing them. But it did provide a new narrative—a plausible plot that enhanced a woman’s own prestige instead of undermining her husband’s by offering a motive of selfless patriotism instead of looming agricultural or financial crisis. The WLA did not allow women into farm fields. It only allowed them to publicly admit that they had been there all along.²³⁴

²³⁴ Lewis, Oscar, *On the Edge of the Black Waxy, a Cultural Survey of Bell County, Texas*. Saint Louis, 1948, 25; Melissa Walker, *Home Extension Work among African American Farm Women in East Tennessee, 1920-1939*; Annual Report of the Iowa Farm Labor Supervisor (1943).

Land Army Garb: 1918 and 1943



Modern overalls are the uniform for the women's Land Army being formed to help plant and harvest U. S. crops. Ann Douglass of Greenwich, Conn., models the 1943 garb while her mother wears the Land Army uniform she wore 25 years ago.

Figure 7.1 Heirs to disparate legacies. Mother and daughter serve in the WLAA and the WLA 25 years apart. The World War II program was self-consciously apologetic of its most radical implications, and steered far clear of challenging traditional roles even as they placed women into perceptibly masculine roles. Participating women, on the other hand, challenged ideologies on their own, and many returned to farm fields as seasonal workers long after the program dissolved. Image from Northwest Arkansas Times, April 23, 1943. Page 6.



Figure 7.2 An AWLA worker harvests apples in Summer of 1944. Now why would farm women be bothered by a thing like that?

Conclusion

The WLA program declined in 1945 in vast parts of the United States. Men who enlisted at the beginning of the war began returning home from military service that year, and women found themselves on the receiving end of a massive government campaign to return them to households. In Massachusetts, though farmers enjoyed great successes with the WLA in the previous two years, fewer than five hundred women served in 1945. Farm productivity remained high, but the WLA was no longer the difference between having and not having a harvest.²³⁵

As the organization grew out of extension work, many women, Florence Hall indicated in her farewell newsletter, would return to extension work. But Hall departed from the work with optimism that, even without the Women's Land Army, women would continue to work as farm hands, especially in a seasonal capacity, in the years to come. "It is not probable" Hall remarked in 1945, "that there will be need for a nation-wide Women's Land Army program in 1946, although it is expected that thousands of women will continue to be placed in local farm jobs in many areas, especially for seasonal work." Hall's optimism was for others, not for herself. She acknowledged that women were likely to continue doing farm work, but she herself did not appear to have or want any role in advancing that cause. Still, Hall was right. In 1946, 48 states continued to support farm labor programs that included women. Nationwide, nearly four hundred thousand women took farm work placements through their state extension programs in 1946. That was the last year that emergency farm labor programs continued, however. The

²³⁵ "College Girls as Farm Workers"; Massachusetts State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor annual Report 1944, 1945.

following year farmers returned to their old system, making do, sharing labor, and hiring outside help when they had to.²³⁶

For Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard, the Women's Land Army seems never to have been a priority. Wickard was fixated on the idea of bringing foreign labor to the United States, and made that his primary talking point in discussions of federal policy in spite of the availability, proficiency, and successes of Women in farm labor. In 1943, defending his request for a 65 million dollar appropriation for the emergency farm labor program, Wickard touted what he framed as a great success: "We have broken the log jam on the recruitment of Mexican workers and the latest word I had was that a load of 600 Mexican workers was to have left Mexico City today for southern California for work in the citrus-fruit area." While six hundred workers in a time of labor shortage are helpful, California fielded thousands of women in this same industry in 1942 and again in 1943. But Wickard doggedly promoted his foreign worker program and ignored the far larger and already proven program in place in California. Wickard's ambivalence was not driven by ignorance of the WLA's potential. In February, 1943, he acknowledged that he expected the first-year Women's Land Army to include at least fifty thousand seasonal, and over ten thousand year-round workers, so he already knew the program had the potential to be far larger than the six hundred workers that commanded his braggadocio.²³⁷

Wickard's attitude appears to have been shared at the state level. Though WLA supervisors oversaw labor programs many times the scale of the Braceros, and fielded tens of thousands of women, often managing the logistics of sending and receiving out-of-state workers,

²³⁶ *WLA Newsletter*, December 10, 1945; Rasmussen, *History of the Emergency War Labor Program 1943-1947*, 146-148.

²³⁷ Memorandum, Claude R. Wickard to M. L. Wilson, Director of Extension Work, Feb 17, 1943. From Rasmussen.

many states appointed only a part-time WLA supervisor. In the three Pacific Coast states, though the WLA supervisors were all appointed to full time posts, they were expected to act as assistants to Far Labor Supervisors, and were excluded from higher level planning in their first year. In many cases, moreover, WLA supervisors received only an additional title, but did not get relief from previous responsibilities. “at first the real magnitude of the WLA job was not always foreseen” one observer remarked. And “leaders sometimes were carrying the double burden of an old plus a new job, the importance of the job became increasingly apparent to all. It was a job where ‘the more you do, the more you have to do’ and where the success and enlargement of the program would depend to some extent on the interest, ability, and enthusiasm of the WLA leaders, and on the support and interest of other members of the Extension Service staff in the program.” Supervisors often continued to work in home demonstration or other extension programs at the same time that they managed the behemoth farm labor program, and the success of their work often ultimately fell to collaborative, rather than individual interest.²³⁸

Though the citizens of the United States demanded a federal program, and the government ultimately, if belatedly, complied, the federal program was never the only source of labor that farmers relied on, and contemporary estimates suggested that fewer than half of the non-farm folks who served in the fields during the war hailed from government sponsored programs. Women, men, and children alike sometimes found their own way to agricultural work through their communities or through non government organizations. From the beginning WLA chief Florence Hall said that the WLA was a “program not an organization,” suggesting very temporary intentions for WLA activities. By 1945, however, the definition shifted dramatically, with a full-page story reprinted in newspapers across the country advising that “The Women’s

²³⁸ Valentine, Frances Wadsworth. *Women's Emergency Farm Service On the Pacific Coast In 1943*, Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1945, 7.

Land Army is a movement rather than an organization.” This latter definition argued that “All women who help in the wartime production of food, feed, or fiber are a part of the Women’s Land Army.”²³⁹

Part of the administrative complication of the program undoubtedly comes from the fact that there was never a single appointed head of wartime food matters. Instead, various departments had a role in administering different aspects of the food supply from rationing to war labor to distribution and nutritional advising. Food policy belonged to as many departments as had a stake in food production, distribution, or consumption. Even without a single structure to oversee food concerns, production thrived. In the face of wartime shortage, equipment rationing, labor deficiencies, and transportation woes, the total value of all farm products sold or used in the United States in 1945 was more than double that of 1940. The Women’s Land Army contributed to an 18.1 billion dollar agricultural sector and they aided in bringing over 90 million new acres under cultivation, and nudged previously fallow land back into use.

Though the program showed no outward intent of drawing women into professional farming, it still did. In Vermont, where early programs encouraged women into the fields, many college girls who worked summers in the program pursued agricultural courses in their subsequent college paths. The State’s annual report for 1944 highlighted one student from Brooklyn who spent her summer doing farm work in Vermont and afterward enrolled in Cornell’s agricultural program as a graduate student. Another woman left her Washington, D.C. job for a few weeks to work on farms, and was so enamored of farming and of Vermont that she enrolled in the Agricultural College at University of Vermont. The program did not have any

²³⁹ For one such example: *Arkansas State Press* (Little Rock, Arkansas) December 17, 1943. Hall’s statements in the first issue of the Women’s Land Army Newsletter, Washington, DC, 1943; This story printed in *Jacksboro Gazette* (Jacksboro, TX), Vol 55, no 1, Ed 1 Thursday, June 7, 1945. But is also printed in many other papers June of 1945.

stated goals of breaking glass ceilings or collapsing gendered notions of farm labor, but the wartime emergency exposed these young women to sectors that a peacetime United States would never have offered them, and they took it on themselves to challenge those societal norms because of their experiences in the Women's Land Army.²⁴⁰

Farmers appear to have been convinced as well. Having seen the value of a domestic labor force satisfied with seasonal work, many were enthusiastic about the possibility of hiring women again regardless of what happened with the war. "I'll continue to hire women after the war" said one Bristol County poultry farmer in Massachusetts. "In an incubator room they find dirt where a man never would." Farmers, seasoned by the custom of mothers, daughters, and sisters doing farm work in secret, already knew that women could be competent farm hands. Once the WLA created the opportunity for urban women to try their hand, farmers found them suitable enough to continue hiring them long after the war made it necessary. In the post-war era farmers were no longer answering to desperation or necessity. Farmers were not guardians of traditional gendered labor. Farmers were revolutionary, hiring women because women made good farm hands.²⁴¹

The number of farms in the United States continued to fall throughout the war, and in 1945 the United States had more people than it ever had before, and fewer farms than it had had since 1880. The promise of wartime demand was not enough to stop the march toward larger, integrated farms. But these integrated farms would include women as operators in larger numbers than ever before. The rural to urban migration trend that began as the Depression lifted never stopped. The 1950 saw a continuation of the most common paradigm in the WLA, local

²⁴⁰ Vermont State Supervisor Emergency Farm Labor Annual Report, 1943.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

and regional women doing seasonal harvest work, especially in truck and fruit crops. The Home Demonstration program returned to its rhetoric of farm women as housewives, but farm women rejected this much as urban women rejected those WLA policies that did not suit them. “The right kind of wife will help her husband outdoors. Anything is a woman’s duty if the need arises.” One woman declared in *Successful Farming* in 1947. She was not ready to return to the pre-war situation where she still did farm work, but was not allowed to admit it.²⁴²

The WLA brought some women to farming who never subsequently left it. In 1947, Mae Ramer reported having worked for her boss for more than fifteen years in California. That would make her one of the early hires in the 1942 programs that formed before the rise of the WLA. Ramer was an older woman; she had grandchildren, and was married. Her employer, Henry Allemand hired large numbers of hands for his mixed-produce farms, but praised Ramer, and women in general for their farming aptitude. “Women are better than men on cultivating . . . They’re more particular, and they don’t waste as much time.” He praised her driving ability on a wide range of equipment, and said that she was, in addition to an excellent driver, very good at keeping tractors in repair. The post-war era did not send Ramer back to her kitchen, nor did it send Allemand scurrying to replace her. While he may not have been typical of all farmers, it is clear that women who proved themselves during the war crisis had opportunities to continue their work as they saw fit during the post-war era as well. The WLA brought Ramer to the fields, but Ramer and Allemand agreed that she should stay.²⁴³

²⁴² 1945 Census of Agriculture, USDA, Government Printing Office, 1945., 4; David Jeremiah Vail, “women and Small Farm Revival: The Division of Labor and Decision-making on Maine’s Organic Farms” *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 13 (Winter 1982): 23; “The Farm Woman Speaks on the Farm Woman’s Job” *Successful Farming*, March 1947, 122.

²⁴³ “The Lady Drives a Tractor” *Farm Quarterly*, Summer 1957, 61.

Ramer was not alone. In the 1950s women's stake in farm employment grew steadily. A 1951 study found that of women who were employed as "farmers and farm managers" that year, most claimed an average time on the job of 7 years. Women titled "laborers and foremen" averaged 5 years. These women came to United States farms after World War II, not in the midst of the wartime crisis, but in 1946, and never left. Though some of these women may have been farm wives and daughters working on family farms, 63% of them were employed full-time, demonstrating that, whether true hired help or stakeholders, women were more visible and more open about their roles on farms than they had been in the past. In 1953, the Women's Bureau reported 730,000 women as farm workers in the United States, and most of them had held their jobs longer than their counterparts outside of agriculture. The WLA was not just a wartime measure to be swiftly forgotten. The changes it brought to the workforce were permanent and lasting.²⁴⁴

The WLA was created at a moment when the agricultural sector of the United States was in chaos. The inter-war years created first a massive immigration to the countryside and then a massive emigration back out of it as jobs disappeared and reappeared elsewhere in the country. In the interim, farmers suffered crop losses, soil erosion, unpredictable labor situations, and government programs that encouraged decreased production. The combined result was that many farms were abandoned or simply not cultivated in 1939 and 1940. When the war began it did create demand, but it did so in a sector jaded by two decades of struggle and distrustful that any improvement would be a permanent one. Farmers may have been stereotyped as some type of moral guardians of society, but when women's labor was the only available labor, farmers accepted it.

²⁴⁴ McGinnis, "The Lady Drives a Tractor" *Farm Quarterly*, 10, 17. Women's Bureau study cited in Carpenter, *On the Farm Front*, 2003, 188.

Women who served in the WLA during the war were not always eager to return to their old domestic lives, as evidenced by the hundreds of thousands of women who enter the agricultural workforce in the 1950s. In spite of the Home Demonstration Service's insistence on treating the WLA as a temporary program rather than an organization with any semblance of permanency, the fact that women returned to the fields unaided by the infrastructure of the WLA makes it clear that women wanted to be on farms, and farms were willing to hire women. This is not a surprising finding. It took a groundswell of pressure from below, after all, to persuade the United States to create the federal program in the first place. There was never a federal drive to compel women to serve on farms, but rather a federal acquiescence to a request coming increasingly from all directions, including from the First Lady.

By the 1960s the most important impact may have been on farm wives, who were now able to claim their rightful place as stakeholders in the family farm rather than as accessories to it. Treating farm as office was always a flawed framework. Agriculture does not answer to an 8 hour work day or to typical interpretations of wages or conditions. By allowing the lines between kitchen and crop to blur, farm women were able to admit their role in farm production without undermining themselves or their husbands. A 1960 issue of Wallace's Farmer celebrated the arrival of farm women into plain view. "Farm women have always helped with outside work—chores, chickens, and gardens. But today's farm women are doing more outside work than ever before. Many put in long hours in the fields on a tractor or other machinery throughout the growing season. Wives plus machinery have taken the place of hired men or other outside help." The article admitted that women's farm work was nothing new, but that it could be celebrated as integral to the success of farms in the United States marked an acceptance in 1960 that women still struggled to gain in the factory or the corner office. In 2012, the United

States Department of Agriculture released a report on women in farming showing that today, women operate 30% of farms in the United States today, and are principal operators on 14%. While farms and factories both accepted women workers during the wartime crisis, women and farms proved eminently compatible. Women, farm and urban, have continued to claim larger and larger shares of the post-war agricultural sector. The Future Farmers of America organization, an organization committed to educating the next generation of farmers in the United States, barred girls from membership until 1969. Today, 41 percent of all FFA members are girls, and over 50% of state and national leadership roles are held by young women. Through wartime emergency, women found their way into agricultural fields at a time when men were leaving. With continuing decline of the rural population, and continued interest from future generations, women's stake in agriculture has not yet shown any inclination to a postwar decline.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ "Women Who Work in the Field" *Wallace's Farmer*, 3 December 1960, 28; National FFA Membership Statistics and Facts, 2106-2107, National FFA Organization, ffa.org, accessed 9/28, 2017; 4-H Frequently Asked Questions, Des Moines County Extension, Iowa State University. Extension.iastate.edu, accessed 9/28/2017.

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