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SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY?:

THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE OF WORLD WAR II-ERA WAR BRIDES IN MONTANA

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 2006

Thesis

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Sentimental Journey?: The Immigrant Experience of World War II-Era War Brides in Montana

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During and after World War II, over one hundred thousand American servicemen married women they met in the course of their deployment overseas. In early 1946, these women, commonly known as “war brides,” began to immigrate to the United States to join their husbands. Over one hundred of the women settled in Montana, in both urban and rural areas of the state. This thesis examines the women’s lives in Europe, Australia, and Asia before their immigration, and the unprecedented nature of their immigration to the United States, which the United States Army both arranged and paid for. Additionally, the thesis utilizes interviews with twenty war brides in Montana to analyze the process by which war brides initially adjusted to life in Montana, and how the women eventually assimilated.

The women adopted a hyphenated ethnic identity that involved both an identification with the United States and a continued feeling of loyalty to their countries of origin. Scholarship in history, sociology, and anthropology indicates that this type of hyphenated ethnicity has become the norm in the United States since the mid-twentieth century. The thesis contradicts the findings of other academic histories of the war brides in arguing that the women have assimilated to life in the United States. Their ties to their heritage overseas, and their insistence upon maintaining certain ethnic customs and traditions, places them squarely within the mainstream of twentieth century American society.

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## Introduction

Queen Elizabeth II arrived in Sheridan, Wyoming, by Royal Air Force jet on the morning of October 12, 1984. The Queen's visit marked the last leg of a three-week trip to North America, during which she dedicated a memorial to Tories who fled from the United States to Canada after the Revolutionary War and visited a horse breeder in Kentucky. Elizabeth II traveled to Sheridan to vacation with distant relatives, Lord and Lady Porchester, who lived on a ranch outside of the city. Among the approximately three hundred locals who gathered at the airport to greet the Queen were the five members of the Sheridan chapter of the Transatlantic Brides and Parents Association. Four of the five women, all natives of England, were war brides.<sup>1</sup> They had married American servicemen stationed throughout England during and after World War II and immigrated to Sheridan in the late 1940s and early 1950s to join their husbands.

War brides settled throughout the Mountain West in the months and years after the war, and residents of Montana and Wyoming found the women fascinating when they first arrived in the area. In early 1946, reporters wrote dozens of articles in Montana newspapers about the initial group of arriving war brides, and the interest of journalists in the women had not diminished over time. Upon news of the Queen's arrival, both the *Sheridan Press* and the *Billings Gazette* featured the women in at least half a dozen stories and photographs. By 1984, many of the war brides had lived in Sheridan for almost forty years, but they expressed their excitement over Elizabeth II's visit and their continued feelings of loyalty to Great Britain. Lucy Stafford Conant, who interviewed the women several times, reported that "[a]lthough the five

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<sup>1</sup> While some scholars, most notably Ji-Yeon Yuh, a historian of Korean military brides, criticized the term 'war brides' because it "emphasizes the women's dependence on men...conferring an identity on them as human war booty" (*Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, p. 1), the women themselves prefer this term and use it or 'G.I. Bride' to refer to themselves. Therefore, this study will also refer to the women as war brides.

women love Sheridan, they feel that England will always be home.”<sup>2</sup> Press coverage of the group of war brides caused the Queen to stop and chat with them when she made a public visit to downtown Sheridan. Jean Doyle, who immigrated to Sheridan in early 1946, was overjoyed: “I thought I must be dreaming. I can’t imagine the queen actually spoke to us.”<sup>3</sup>

The Sheridan women’s expression of loyalty both to their country of origin and to the community they had called home for decades was typical among war brides. In *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, Jenel Virden’s study of British war brides in the United States, sixty-eight percent of the one hundred and five women who responded to a survey in 1989 about ethnic identification reported feeling “both” British and American. Nearly all of the others reported a specifically American ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup> Based on her notion of “conceptual assimilation,” or “the immigrants’ views of their own ethnicity,” Virden argued that the women were not fully assimilated immigrants.<sup>5</sup> According to Virden, a hyphenated ethnic identity prevented complete assimilation; women who identified themselves as British-Americans had not completed the full process of assimilation because they resisted taking the step of identifying themselves exclusively as Americans.

However, a wide body of historical and sociological scholarship on the formation of ethnic identity in the mid-twentieth century offered another analysis of the development of a hyphenated ethnic identity among the war brides. Cultural and social assimilation occurred among many immigrants in this era who did not adopt an exclusively “American” ethnic identity. During the period in which war brides adjusted to life in the United States, American society moved away from the ideal of the melting pot, and toward a sometimes grudging

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<sup>2</sup> Lucy Stafford Conant, “British Natives Aglow over Royal Visit,” *The Sheridan Press*, October 11, 1984, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Conant, “Elizabeth Tours Sheridan...,” *The Sheridan Press*, October 15, 1984, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jenel Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly: British War Brides in America*, (Urbana & Chicago: University of

appreciation of the diverse ethnic backgrounds of many Americans. According to Warren Kimball and David Harrell, Jr., who wrote the forward to Susan Estabrook Kennedy's study of working class American women, "all Americans...have, in some sense, remained hyphenated."<sup>6</sup> The immigrants themselves first asserted their ability to identify as ethnic Americans in the Progressive era, but American opposition to fascism and Nazism in the 1930s greatly enhanced the appeal of the pluralist approach toward race and ethnicity, especially among intellectuals and government bureaucrats. During World War II, liberals in the federal government "envisioned domestic group conflict as a national weak point that fascists could potentially exploit."<sup>7</sup> For many observers, cultural pluralism became crucial to the American war effort. Post-war European immigrants, many of whom were unaccustomed to the ethnic diversity of the United States, noted the continuing impact of ethnic identification in the lives of other immigrants and native-born Americans. In fact, according to Jenel Virden, twenty-six percent of the American servicemen who married British women were born to immigrant parents, while only 15.3% of Americans in 1950 were second-generation immigrants.<sup>8</sup> Many of the war brides noted that their in-laws' inability to speak English made adjustment more difficult for them.<sup>9</sup>

More than any mid-twentieth century cultural force, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s brought long-standing racial and ethnic divisions to the fore. Scholars like Thomas Archdeacon have argued that "the implicit acceptance of the existence of permanent minorities in the United States popularized, in certain circles, the idea of accepting and

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Illinois Press, 1996). p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Warren F. Kimball and David Edwin Harrell, Jr. in Susan Estabrook Kennedy, *If All We Did Was to Weep at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America*, (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. x.

<sup>7</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 232.

<sup>8</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 116; Thomas Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1983). p. 203.

encouraging cultural divisions in the nation.”<sup>10</sup> While this “renaissance of ethnicity” occurred in the wake of white ethnics’ often hostile response to the expansion of civil rights activism to Northern cities in the 1960s, Archdeacon believed it also sprung from “an honest appreciation of roots and a protest against lingering discrimination.”<sup>11</sup> Michael Novak suggested that a resurgence of ethnic pride among Americans of European descent had the potential to help civil rights activists: “persons who are secure in their identity act with greater freedom, greater flexibility, greater openness to others. People who feel inferior or unacceptable lash out in anger.”<sup>12</sup> Growing interest in genealogy and ethnic foods indicated that even native-born Americans sought to develop a more complex ethnic identity.

Sociologist Richard Alba concurred with Archdeacon’s and Novak’s analysis of ethnic identification among the grandchildren of European immigrants. He argued that this third generation of ethnics lost feelings of self-consciousness surrounding their ethnicity. The theory of the melting pot fell out of fashion when these Americans enthusiastically embraced their various ethnic heritages and when civil rights activists demonstrated the important role ethnic difference played in securing equal rights. In the 1960s and 1970s, both scholars and the general public believed that “ethnic differences form[ed] a possibly permanent substructure, if not the ultimate bedrock, of American society.”<sup>13</sup> Others suggested that nearly all people in the United States considered “Americanism” to be a matter of loyalty and patriotism, rather than ethnicity. According to sociologist Mary Waters, “while people identify as American in a political sense, it

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<sup>9</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Archdeacon, *Becoming American*, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> Archdeacon, *Becoming American*, p. xviii.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Richard D. Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). p. 2.



has not been adopted as an ethnic identity.”<sup>14</sup> Waters found that ethnic identification affected patterns of housing and employment, voting habits, and religion, even among native-born Americans whose grandparents or great-grandparents were immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. By the 1970s, ethnic identification was not only a personal connection that individuals retained to long-deceased relatives from overseas; it had a concrete impact on the lives of millions of Americans.

Furthermore, recent scholarship has identified different patterns of assimilation and ethnic identity for immigrants to the rural West and Midwest. These areas of the country attracted millions of immigrants from Europe and Asia around the turn of the century, making them “a setting of great ethnic diversity.”<sup>15</sup> In 1900, approximately half of the population of Montana (50.6%) consisted of first and second generation immigrants, and several other states in the West and Midwest had even higher proportions of immigrants in their populations.<sup>16</sup> With the diversity of this region in mind, Jon Gjerde identified a type of “mutually supportive and self-reinforcing” complementary identity that was unique to immigrants to the Middle West.<sup>17</sup> He asserted that these immigrants considered freedom and liberty “malleable concepts” that guaranteed them the right to live differently from their neighbors.<sup>18</sup> European immigrant communities in the Middle West paired United States citizenship with a strong ethnic and religious identity. The emphasis on Americanization and “English-only” during World War I proved a significant challenge to this world view, but the ethnic communities created in the late nineteenth century, centered around church, extended family, and neighbors, did not disappear.

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<sup>14</sup> Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), p. ix-xi.

<sup>17</sup> Gjerde, *The Minds of the West*, p. 8.

Paul Kleppner, a political and social historian, analyzed late nineteenth century voting trends in three Midwestern states to argue that ethnic and religious identification, rather than economic class, dictated political affiliation and voting habits for voters across the economic spectrum.<sup>19</sup> Odd Lovoll, a historian who specialized in Norwegian immigration to the rural Midwest, identified similar patterns of ethnic identity, and also argued that “a shared identity based on landscape and place” united disparate ethnic groups who lived together in small rural settlements.<sup>20</sup> The present study, which sets itself apart from other scholarship on the war brides through its regional and rural focus, traces the development of ethnic identity among war brides who settled in cities and towns across Montana after World War II. The women’s description of their own ethnicity suggests that this pattern of complementary identity, as well as a strong identification with “place,” played a role in shaping the ethnic identity of post-World War II war brides in Montana as well.

Ultimately, the decreasing number and influence of immigrants in the mid-twentieth century may have provided the biggest boost to proponents of cultural diversity. As the number of first-generation immigrants dwindled, reformers largely stopped associating crime and poverty with immigration. In 1950, 6.6% of Americans were foreign-born, and 15.3% reported that they were the children of immigrants. By 1960, 5.3% of the population had immigrated to the United States, and their children comprised an additional 13.2% of Americans.<sup>21</sup> In the 1920s, restrictive immigration policies reduced the number of immigrants who arrived annually, but this study illustrates the continued influence of immigrants on the social and cultural life of

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<sup>18</sup> Gjerde. *The Minds of the West*, p. 60.

<sup>19</sup> Kleppner, Paul, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900*, (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Odd Lovoll, *Norwegians on the Prairie: Ethnicity and the Development of the Country Town*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2006), p. 124.

<sup>21</sup> Archdeacon, *Becoming American*, p. 203.

the United States in the mid-twentieth century and beyond.

The war brides, and the way in which their ethnic identity developed over the decades, were significant precisely because they were the first large group of immigrants to arrive in the United States after the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 established a quota system that privileged Northern Europeans, the British, and the Irish at the expense of other racial and ethnic groups. The debate surrounding the War Brides Act of 1945 that allowed European and Australian war brides to immigrate outside the quota system, paired with legislation granting legal status to Japanese and Korean war brides in 1948 anticipated some of the arguments of reformers in the 1960s who overturned the Johnson-Reed Act. The war brides, whose immigration would have been virtually impossible under the Johnson-Reed quotas, were among the first modern immigrants to the United States. The process through which they developed a hyphenated ethnic identification matched that of later immigrants and their descendants.

This study does not assume that a “hyphenated” ethnic identity means that an immigrant has not fully assimilated. The evidence indicates that ethnic identification and assimilation are complicated and sometimes painful issues for immigrants like the war brides, who arrived in the United States at a time when ideas about identity changed significantly. Virden’s finding that most British war brides identified both with the United States and Great Britain held true for the women from Britain, France, Germany, Poland, Korea, and Australia interviewed for the Montana Historical Society’s War Brides Oral History Project in 2001 and 2002. The women immigrants in this study participated fully in the social worlds of the ethnically diverse small towns in Montana in which they settled in the years following World War II. In their roles as wives and mothers, they took part in P.T.A. meetings, attended their children’s school activities, and joined neighborhood social clubs. All of the women worked at some point in their lives, and

their paid employment, along with involvement in church groups and local politics, brought them into contact with their communities in ways that homemaking could not. A long-standing, if sometimes limited, acceptance of ethnic difference among many residents of rural communities also aided the women's assimilation to life in small Montana towns. Interviews with Montana war brides suggest that the women developed a complex ethnic identity that involved a continued identification with their childhood homes in Europe, Asia, or Australia and a sense of loyalty to both the United States and the communities in Montana where they settled as adults. Although the women took pride in their heritage and in their families overseas, they were happy with their lives in Montana, and their successful assimilation shaped the stories they told in their interviews.

Already-existing scholarship on female immigrants can begin to shed some light on the process of assimilation for Montana war brides. According to Donna Gabaccia, a historian of immigration, “[a] woman’s starting place on ‘the other side’” - in other words, her education level, work experience, and economic situation in the country from which she immigrated - proved “most important” in determining her class status, her ability to assimilate, and the way she fulfilled her roles as a woman, and, in the case of the war brides, wife and mother in the United States.<sup>22</sup> Twentieth century immigrants also tended to have more contact with native-born Americans than earlier arrivals, which aided the migrants in the process of adjustment and assimilation. By definition, Montana war brides interacted almost exclusively with Americans immediately upon their arrival; husbands, in-laws, family friends, and neighbors comprised the majority of the women’s first contacts when they immigrated. Unlike many immigrants, these women did not settle in ethnic ghettos.

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<sup>22</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender and Immigrant Life in the United States, 1820-1990*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. xii.

Suzanne Sinke, an expert on Dutch immigration to the United States, argued that immigration “rearranges gender roles,” and that a woman’s age at immigration affected the range of options available to her as she determined whether to accept, reject, or accommodate the economic and social demands placed on women in American society.<sup>23</sup> These generalizations held true for the women in this study, though the unique circumstances under which they immigrated, along with the especially strong emphasis on women’s roles as wives and mothers in the post-war years, set these women apart from many other twentieth century female immigrants in important ways.

In his groundbreaking study of American immigration, Oscar Handlin defined immigration as “a history of alienation and its consequences.”<sup>24</sup> To Handlin, migration was a disruptive process that separated families and traumatized the immigrants, and it became “the central experience of a great many human beings.”<sup>25</sup> The women in this study complicated Handlin’s assertion. Immigration was, in fact, only one of the central experiences in the women’s lives. Their marriages to American soldiers, and, for many war brides, the birth of children overseas, were perhaps more important to the women. These marriages were the sole reason for their immigration to the United States, and the women anticipated reunions with husbands and the beginning of family life, not a better economic standing or relief from religious persecution, as they waited to immigrate in the post-war years.

Upon arrival, most of the war brides who immigrated to small Montana towns began their lives in the state as part of large extended families that were established and well-known in their communities. Residents of the towns where the women settled primarily defined them by their

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<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Sinke, *Dutch Immigrant Women in the United States, 1880-1920*, (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: the Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People*, (Boston: Little, Brown, & co., 1973), 2nd ed., p. 4.

status as wives, mothers, or daughters and sisters-in-law. Although the women's stories of their initial adjustment to life in Montana often emphasized difficulties such as the pain of separation from families overseas, difficulty becoming re-acquainted with husbands, or poor treatment from in-laws, the women quickly adapted to their families and communities in Montana. They resolved to make the best of their situations in the United States, and, in a process that began during World War II, learned to live with hardship. In fact, Seena B. Kohl, an anthropologist who completed interviews with twenty Montana war brides, argued that the women's wartime experiences made them uniquely well-suited to cope with the difficult situations they faced as immigrants.<sup>26</sup>

This study follows the lives of these twenty women chronologically. Chapter 1 explores the women's lives overseas, their initial encounters with Americans, and their marriages to American soldiers. These wartime experiences, and the ways in which the women related them to their lives in the United States, echoed the assertion by Gabaccia and Kohl that the women's circumstances in their countries of origin, including their class status, work history, childhood in urban or rural environments, and preparation for married life, shaped their expectations of their lives in Montana. More than anything, however, the shared experience of total war, including deprivation, rationing, and bombing, defined the women's experiences before they were married. Additionally, the evidence suggested that early contacts with Americans were the first steps in the process of assimilation for the war brides.

Chapter 2 addresses the war brides' immigration. This section emphasizes the unique nature of this virtually all-female migration to the United States. Not only did the women immigrate outside of the restrictive immigration policies of the time, but the United States

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<sup>25</sup> Handlin, *The Uprooted*, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Seena B. Kohl, "Love, Valor, and Endurance: World War II War Brides Making a Home in Montana,"

government also provided - and paid for - their transportation, from their front doors in Europe, Australia, and Asia to the doorstep of their new homes in Montana. “Bride ships” like the ones that transported the war brides to the United States were not necessarily unusual in American history. Men sought wives overseas even in colonial times, and male immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often returned home to find spouses. However, only in the post-war era did the federal government respond to pressure from returning American servicemen to provide transportation for their overseas wives and children. The women and their husbands lobbied Army officials, American consulates, and members of Congress for this transportation, and their arguments in favor of family reunification anticipated the immigration reform of the 1960s, which was based on the notion of reunification.

Furthermore, though many Americans initially viewed the large numbers of overseas marriages occurring during the war with suspicion, the war brides were celebrities as they arrived by the tens of thousands in 1946. Chapter 3 will integrate the women’s recollections of their initial reactions to Montana with the response of Montanans to the women, which can be gleaned from local newspapers of the era. Although the warm reception that many women experienced often aided their early adjustment to Montana, this was a very difficult time for all of the war brides. They struggled mightily to make marriages work and to reconcile their expectations with the reality of what many of the women considered to be very primitive conditions in the rural United States. Women who were accustomed to life in London, Birmingham, and Paris had to adjust to life on isolated ranches, company houses, or small apartments, many of which lacked running water and electricity. Virtually all of the women reached out to other war brides, and war bride clubs like Sheridan’s Transatlantic Brides and Parents Association sprung up across Montana in the late 1940s. The women used the clubs to

make friends, share frustrations, and exchange news from home. These clubs, or more informal friendships with individual war brides, were vitally important for the women in their first years in Montana.

Chapter 4 analyzes the continued process of adjustment and assimilation for the twenty Montana war brides. As the years went by, the women added church work, social clubs, school activities, and paid employment to their lives. Their friendships with other war brides took a back seat to these additional commitments. The women's community involvement indicated that they had assimilated, and also illustrated the women's connections to their Montana towns and cities. Each of the Montana war brides discussed ethnic identity with Kohl, and this chapter will analyze their responses in detail. In this instance, immigrants from the turn of the century Middle West, who developed a shared connection to the local landscape that enabled them to live in ethnically diverse settlements, pointed the way toward a process of adjustment and assimilation for modern immigrants like the war brides. Like immigrants from previous generations, many of the war brides developed an ethnic identity that involved a strong local, rural component. Some of the women identified more strongly with Montana than the United States, and they grew to love the barren landscape and widely-scattered population that intimidated them when they first arrived in the 1940s. Additionally, the mid-twentieth century development of hyphenated ethnic identities for European immigrants provided the women with an ability to combine assimilation with a connection to their homelands.

As indicated above, oral histories with Montana war brides provide the main primary sources consulted in the course of this study. The women told stories that were, in turn, romantic, funny, touching, and heartbreaking as they recalled the important events in their life. When Kohl considered their narratives as a whole, she called them "love stories, framed around



gender and a set of expectations of love and marriage.”<sup>27</sup> But historians should not dismiss these narratives as simple love stories. As Gabaccia argued, immigrant women “did not simply adjust to American life, they redefined the meaning of American womanhood.”<sup>28</sup> Because the women immigrated over the course of a decade, their effect on American life was “cumulative, rather than immediate,” and most historians have overlooked war brides in their studies of post-war American society.<sup>29</sup> However, historians like William Chafe pointed to World War II as the singular event that “disrupted traditional patterns of life and propelled men and women into new activities,” and war brides felt the social and cultural effects of the war more keenly than many other American women.<sup>30</sup>

As immigrants, wives, mothers, and workers, the war brides often found themselves, perhaps unknowingly, on the leading edge of trends that affected both American women and immigrants in the mid-twentieth century. Like many American women, they responded to the desire for stability during and after the war, and they left familiar homes and families overseas to dedicate themselves to their marriages and children in Montana. While only one of the women explicitly identified with twentieth-century American feminism, they all returned to the workforce, and, like their native-born peers, often came to enjoy the increased freedom that came from earning a paycheck. As immigrants, the war brides used their employment to expand their American contacts, solidify their commitment to their communities in Montana, and, at the same time, to retain a connection to families overseas. Many of them used their earnings to travel abroad.

The development of the women’s hyphenated ethnicity indicated that post-war American

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<sup>27</sup> Kohl, “Love, Valor, and Endurance,” p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, p. xiii.

<sup>29</sup> Elfrieda Shukert and Barbara Scibetta, *War Brides of World War II*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 1.

immigrants responded to a different set of expectations for newcomers. They were exposed to native-born Americans more frequently, but also had more opportunities to express ethnic difference and to remain in touch with overseas families and friends who reinforced their feelings of loyalty to their countries of origin. The war brides provide historians a more nuanced understanding of twentieth century immigration and ethnic identity.

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<sup>30</sup> William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 246.

## Chapter 1

Seena Kohl argued that “[m]ore than any other factor, World War II shaped the lives and outlooks of the war brides who came to Montana.”<sup>31</sup> The war expanded women’s sphere both in the United States and abroad, and the war brides worked in offices, factories, and in the military during and after the war. Many of the women lived away from their parents’ homes for the first time in their lives during World War II, and a majority of the war brides met their husbands through their war-related employment. These early work experiences proved important to all of the women, not only because wartime employment and military service brought many war brides into contact with their future husbands, but also because they re-entered the workforce in Montana in the years after their immigration. If, as Donna Gabaccia argued, a woman’s status in her country of origin largely dictated the options available to her after immigration, one must first explore the war brides’ wartime experiences in order to understand their eventual assimilation.<sup>32</sup> What were their initial reactions to the American GIs who overran their hometowns? Why did these women decide to date, and then to marry, American soldiers? How did their families and communities react to their marriage and immigration?

The evidence indicated no single response to the American GIs who flooded into England, Australia, and continental Europe during and after the war. Frenchwomen, for example, revered the GIs, seeing them as liberators. Englishwomen and Australians were grateful both for American involvement in the war, and for the large numbers of young single men with expendable income who flooded their cities and villages. Women from nations as diverse as Poland, Germany, and Korea saw American military installations and displaced persons camps as an opportunity to earn a decent living and gain necessary skills. Americans

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<sup>31</sup> Kohl, “Love, Valor, and Endurance,” p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, p. xii.

had odd, and occasionally annoying, customs and habits, which earned them the scorn of some Europeans. Many of the Montana war brides dated American soldiers over the objections of family and friends, but, as women in their teens and early twenties, their insistence upon recreating a “normal” social life in the face of war and occupation caused them to ignore the warnings of parents and other authority figures. In many instances, the only men who were single and of a similar age were foreigners. The women’s husbands generally found themselves able to win over their in-laws in the course of their courtship, and few of the women immigrated against the wishes of their families. GIs became known, particularly in England, for their generous, fun-loving nature, and they gained the trust and affection of their future in-laws.

The social upheaval that World War II brought to England was of particular interest to anthropologists like Margaret Mead during the war, and historians and sociologists in the 1960s wrote extensively about wartime Great Britain. In an address to British audiences in 1943, Mead discussed some important differences between Americans and the British that may have made American men attractive and interesting to young British women. According to Mead, American men enjoyed the company of women, and were therefore more likely to include women in informal social gatherings. She attributed this to the mixed-gender public schools that most American men attended as children.<sup>33</sup> British men, who as boys interacted with girls much less frequently, seemed to Mead to be ill at ease around women. In fact, she felt the need to explain American casual dating practices to English audiences who were apparently unaccustomed to mixed-gender socializing. American men were “free and easy,” more likely to ask personal questions, and more likely to initiate physical contact, such as a hand on the arm, all of which

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret Mead, *The American Troops and the British Community: An Examination of the Relationship Between the American Troops and the British*. (London: Hutchinson, 1944), p. 10.

would indicate to most British women that the men were interested in a serious relationship.<sup>34</sup> She urged her audiences to open up to Americans, to ask them about their families and learn about their nation, and to invite American servicemen into their homes. (GIs quickly learned that bringing meat, candy, fruit, or tea on a social call would make them welcome in virtually any British home.) Newspapers and pamphlets disseminated advice to British civilians on how to deal with the differences between the British and Americans. One Bristol newspaper advised its readers that “[l]ike all children [Americans] are very sensitive. They mistake our British reticence and reserve for...positive dislike. They come from a land where everybody knows everybody...[t]he contrast makes us seem unfriendly.”<sup>35</sup>

However, British society changed drastically in the months following Great Britain’s declaration of war. Almost one-third of the British population changed addresses in the month of September, 1939, a pattern that would continue to a lesser extent throughout the years of the war, and the German blitz of English cities in 1940 brought about the development of a type of communal life that had previously been unknown in cities like London.<sup>36</sup> Strangers banded together to seek shelter, fight fires in the neighborhood, cook meager rations together, or share their stories of survival during bombing raids. Large numbers of American servicemen entered Great Britain at precisely the point when British civilian populations became less insular and more open to strangers. Wartime changes had a significant effect on young women in Britain, virtually all of whom had been drafted by 1943 to perform some type of war work. As in the United States, marriage rates increased in England during World War II after falling during hard economic times in the 1930s, and Britons married younger. At the same time, more illegitimate children were being born, and Angus Calder described the rate of syphilis among British men

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<sup>34</sup> Mead, *The American Troops and the British Community*, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939-1945*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 310.

and women as “shocking.”<sup>37</sup> War work forced women to move away from their families’ homes during this era, and gave them their own income, which they were free to spend as they pleased. They also became more “worldly and emancipated” through their interactions with women from other parts of Great Britain and soldiers from throughout Europe and North America.<sup>38</sup> While the women who married American soldiers are the subjects of this study, troops from Canada, France, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland were also stationed in Great Britain during the war, and Polish soldiers in particular gained a reputation for being attractive to British women.<sup>39</sup>

Both the war brides themselves and the few scholars who have written about them agreed with Mead’s assessment of American GIs. Irene Hope Hedrick, a native of Lancashire, England who lived in Montana for most of her adult life, said she was attracted to the “unconventionality” of American servicemen, recalling how her husband stole turkey legs from his Army base and brought them to eat when they went to movies together.<sup>40</sup> Barbara Shukert and Elfreide Scibetta, the daughters of German war brides, analyzed the responses of more than two thousand war brides and suggested that English women also appreciated Americans’ obliviousness to accents and speech patterns that indicated a woman’s social class. In a pamphlet distributed to war brides on board bride ships, the Red Cross described the United States as a place where “[i]t is what you are that is important...if [Americans] like you, they like you, and if they don’t like you, a good address in London is no help.”<sup>41</sup> Working class British women who dated and married Americans undoubtedly welcomed the freedom they found in shedding Britain’s rigid class system.

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<sup>36</sup> Calder, *The People’s War*, p. 35, 178.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312-13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307-8

<sup>40</sup> Irene Hope Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, (Guilford, CT: Morris Publishing, 2006), p. 65.

<sup>41</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 112.

To women who lived in occupied Europe, Americans were liberators, or, in Seena Kohl's words, "symbols of hope."<sup>42</sup> Jenel Virden's English war brides considered American GIs "bold, exciting, cheeky, and gallant," though Virden cautioned her readers not to overstate the importance of money and material goods in the development of serious relationships between Americans and British women.<sup>43</sup> American soldiers earned five times more than their British and Australian counterparts, and, considering the severe rationing that civilian populations experienced, Americans' generosity undoubtedly proved appealing to many women. Marie Houtz, an immigrant from London to Havre, Montana, recalled how her husband Earl helped her family one Christmas:

We were sitting in the dark. We couldn't get any coal. It was cold and all of a sudden there was a knock on the door and it was Earl and he had all these brightly wrapped gifts. We didn't have a Christmas tree or a gift in the house because everything was rationed and my family just fell in love with him. My mother dearly loved Earl.<sup>44</sup>

For the reasons noted above, war brides, most of whom were teenagers during the war, found themselves drawn to the seemingly carefree American soldiers. Frenchwoman Elvia Stockton said that the GIs in France "were wild. Oh boy. Of course, it was fine, because after four years of occupation, to see a bunch of nuts like that was great."<sup>45</sup> Janet Mohn, a native of Rockhampton, Australia, also recalled some annoyance with the Americans in her community: "when our rations were low, we wanted to eat out but the Americans had eaten it all up. The same happened with the beer. They all got into the hotel bars and drank the beer before the men got off work...and [the local men] weren't happy about that."<sup>46</sup> Englishwoman Elsie Persieke

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<sup>42</sup> Kohl, "Love, Valor, and Endurance," p. 26.

<sup>43</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> Marie Houtz, interview with Seena Kohl, Great Falls, Montana, June 25, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2030.

<sup>45</sup> Elvia Stockton, interview with Seena Kohl, Grass Range, Montana, July 17, 2001, Montana Historical Society, OH 1941.

<sup>46</sup> Janet Mohn, interview with Seena Kohl, Kalispell, Montana, September, 11, 2002, Montana Historical

remembered that “most Englishmen didn’t appreciate the Americans being over there, because they took the women and then they had more money than our soldiers...[a]nd they always had candy and fruit, which we couldn’t get.”<sup>47</sup>

Early impressions such as these of American soldiers could be seen as the first step toward assimilation for the war brides. The soldiers defined the United States as a land of plenty for women who had no previous impression of the country and altered the image other women gleaned from Hollywood movies. When considering why Americans drew such interest from British women during World War II, a British Home Office surveyer noted:

...the sudden influx of Americans, speaking like the films, who actually lived in the magic country, and who had plenty of money, at once went to the girls’ heads. The American attitude to women, their proneness to spoil a girl, to build up, exaggerate, talk big, and to act with generosity and flamboyance, helped to make them the most attractive boy-friends.<sup>48</sup>

Many women who married servicemen became acquainted with Americans through working on military bases or in other jobs that brought them into contact with GIs. According to both Ji-Yeon Yuh and Seena Kohl, this caused the women to make comparisons between their home countries and the United States, and “American heroism and generosity joined with American material abundance into an image of utopia” for war brides.<sup>49</sup> Foreign civilians worked for the Americans to avoid poverty and take advantage of opportunities that came from employment with the military. Elizabeth Goff, a Polish displaced person who met her husband while working in a canteen in a displaced persons camp, initially decided to travel to Germany to enter a camp because she thought it would be the best way to “learn something or become

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Society, OH 2045.

<sup>47</sup> Elsie Persieke, interview with Seena Kohl, Whitefish, Montana, date unknown, Montana Historical Society, OH 2034.

<sup>48</sup> Calder, *The People’s War*, p. 311.

<sup>49</sup> Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America*, (New York & London: New York University Press, 2002), p. 35.



something.”<sup>50</sup> Angus Calder argued that this era’s “cultural traffic” was “one-way.”<sup>51</sup> American soldiers typically adopted few or no customs from the countries in which they were stationed, even if they eventually married foreign women. However, the American presence throughout Europe and Asia during and after World War II had a strong Americanizing effect on disparate countries all over the world.<sup>52</sup>

The war brides all shared memories of hardships experienced during the war, including bombings, rationing, and long periods of separation from family members. Evelyn Tuss recalled seeing *Gone with the Wind* on her fifth attempt, after having been evacuated from the theater on four previous occasions due to air raids.<sup>53</sup> Irene Hope Hedrick wrote that “[w]ar taught us about survival and about bearing the burden that was thrust upon us.”<sup>54</sup> Ruth Poore Batchen, who immigrated from Liverpool to Cut Bank, Montana, remembered rationing in wartime England “was difficult, but, you know, you think you can’t get by, but you can. You think you can’t do these things but you can.”<sup>55</sup> Doreen Richard, a native of Birmingham who settled on a ranch outside of Loma, Montana, recalled the air raids:

[They were] just unbelievable, if you think back, and think that you lived through that. More unbelievable to think that you could accept it and cope...there were some really sad times. You’d go to work one morning and you would see your friends’ houses down. You’d see them digging bodies out. It was just unreal. It was like it was a nightmare. But, I was a teenager and I got kind of brave. Well, most people did.<sup>56</sup>

Elfreide Johnsen, a German war bride, told Seena Kohl that her mother “apologized to me for the

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Goff, interview with Seena Kohl, Great Falls, MT, June 25, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2031.

<sup>51</sup> Calder, *The People’s War*, p. 311.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Evelyn Tuss, interview with Seena Kohl, Lewistown, MT, July 17, 2001, Montana Historical Society, OH 1940.

<sup>54</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 62.

<sup>55</sup> Ruth Poore Batchen, interview with Seena Kohl, Billings, Montana, July 10, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2039.

<sup>56</sup> Doreen Richard, interview with Seena Kohl, Great Falls, MT, June 26, 2002, Montana Historical

kind of a life I had because of the war.”<sup>57</sup> She missed the opportunity to socialize, attend school, and meet other young people during and after World War II. Many of the women also reported the deaths of childhood friends, brothers, boyfriends, and fiancés during the war, but they did not dwell on these difficulties in their interviews. After years of war and bombing raids, “people grew used to the sense of imminent peril,” and these memories were simply a part of growing up during wartime for the women.<sup>58</sup> In fact, Elsie Persiecke, a Montana war bride who lived through the London blitz, described her life in wartime England as her “golden years.”<sup>59</sup> Women like Persiecke emphasized the freedom they felt as young, single wage-earners, the charming and attractive Americans they dated, and fond memories of their families when they recounted their wartime experiences to Kohl. The disruption of the social order during the war opened avenues of social and sexual adventure for many young British women. Further, the sense of having taken part in the most significant event in their lives gave a romantic hue to many of their memories.

Americans at the time were aware of the hardships that civilians suffered during the war, and they believed that foreign women latched onto soldiers in order to take advantage of their relatively large salaries and their ability to acquire scarce items. Eleanor Roosevelt’s paternalistic comments on overseas marriages reflected the attitudes of most Americans: “I do not think soldiers should be allowed to marry abroad, when they are a prey to loneliness. I think that before marrying abroad a soldier should return home and then if he wants to marry he should bring the bride over.”<sup>60</sup> High-ranking military officials were concerned with the requests to marry that flooded their offices as early as 1942. They considered marriage, as well as the

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Society, OH 2033.

<sup>57</sup> Elfriede Johnsen, interview with Seena Kohl, Great Falls, MT, July 16, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2038.

<sup>58</sup> Calder, *The People’s War*, p. 112.

accompanying hassles with paperwork, spousal allotments, and leaves, a distraction from fighting the war. Like most Americans, they also believed that American GIs were the victims of foreign women who seduced them for their money.<sup>61</sup> As Jenel Virden noted, this was a stereotype of the war brides that has remained with them to the present. According to Virden, the women were “victims of the pervasive idea that somehow they were suspect...[a] reputation for being fast and loose followed many of these women from the time they were dating the GIs until after they landed in the United States.”<sup>62</sup>

Oral histories from Montana war brides indicated that relationships between soldiers and foreigners were not easy to sustain. The women’s families and communities often attempted to dissuade them from dating Americans. Norma Duff, another native of Rockhampton, encountered resistance from her father. He worked for the Americans, and overheard the way that GIs talked about the women they dated. He refused to allow his daughter to have anything to do with the soldiers. Duff had to meet Roy, her future husband, secretly: “when I’d come home at night, so my dad wouldn’t know who I was with, my mom would stand at the window and move the window up and down to tell me it was time to come inside.”<sup>63</sup> An English war bride, Joyce De Long, “almost gave my mother a heart attack” when she informed the family that she was seeing a GI; moreover, her husband’s chaplain and commanding officer expressed their disapproval.<sup>64</sup> Marie Houtz succinctly explained why many British parents disapproved: “Nice

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<sup>59</sup> Persieke, interview with Kohl.

<sup>60</sup> “Disapproves of G.I. Marriages Abroad,” *The Billings Gazette*, February 15, 1946.

<sup>61</sup> Barbara Friedman, *From the Battlefield to the Bridal Suite: Media Coverage of British War Brides 1942-1946*, (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 39.

<sup>63</sup> Norma Duff, interview with Seena Kohl, Whitefish, Montana, September 8, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2043.

<sup>64</sup> Joyce De Long, interview with Seena Kohl, Summers, Montana, September 10, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2046.

British girls didn't go with Americans.”<sup>65</sup> Americans were infamously known as “overpaid, oversexed, and over here,” perhaps for good reason - Jenel Virden found evidence indicating that the military turned a blind eye to the sexual activity of GIs, while actively dissuading men from marrying foreign women.<sup>66</sup> Korean war bride Jung Van Dam, who was seventeen years old when she was married, recalled the mayor of her town attempting to stop her from marrying her husband, and virtually all of the war brides discussed the arduous process of receiving approval to marry from the United States military (and additionally, in many cases, from the military in the nations where the women served in auxiliary roles).

Religious differences caused further complications for some of the young couples. The split between Protestants and Catholics came up most often in the women's recollections of their marriage and courtship. For example, only Joyce Vashro's parents attended her wedding, because the rest of her Quaker family disapproved of her marriage to a Catholic, while Evelyn Tuss's in-laws in Montana insisted that she convert to Catholicism after she immigrated to the United States. Ruth Poore Batchen, a Catholic, pointed to the fact that she and her soon-to-be husband shared a religion in her first contacts with her apprehensive in-laws, in an effort to assure them that their marriage would be a success. While the couples and their families were willing to overlook differences in ethnicity, all of the women agreed to adopt the religious denomination of their husbands after arrival in the United States.

Both Americans and foreigners debated the impact of relationships between Americans and foreigners during and after World War II. According to Barbara Friedman, Americans wondered how foreign men, particularly soldiers who had been away during the war, felt about relationships between American men and “their” women. Additionally, American women

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<sup>65</sup> Houtz, interview with Kohl.

<sup>66</sup> Calder, *The People's War*, p. 310; Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 30.

questioned what attracted American men to foreigners - many assumed that foreign women were less intelligent, more submissive, and easier to control, which caused heated debates among both military and civilian audiences. Finally, advice columnists and magazine editors advised women to excuse the extramarital relationships that their husbands may have had while overseas.<sup>67</sup> The war brides married and began the process of immigration before most of these questions were settled, and many Americans remained suspicious of the women as they landed in the United States after the war.

Despite disapproval from family, friends, and bureaucrats, the couples continued their relationships. As Seena Kohl observed, “[t]he desire to date - to have some semblance of a normal life - trumped any familial or community objection” for the war brides.<sup>68</sup> More than 100,000 couples worked through the institutional roadblocks, including invasive personal interviews, warnings from superior officers, and the ubiquitous paperwork requirements and subsequent waiting periods, to get married while the men were overseas.

The war brides’ husbands were surprisingly homogenous, and some of their similarities may explain why they married during their military service. Although Jenel Virden was the only researcher to survey the husbands of war brides, anecdotal evidence in other scholarship and the Oral History Project interviews supported her findings. Ninety-two percent of Virden’s respondents served in the U.S. Army; an additional seventeen percent served in the Army Air Corps. Only three percent of the men were officers, and five percent were career military men. Their average age was twenty-three upon arrival in Great Britain, and virtually all of the men came from working or middle class homes.<sup>69</sup> When the men petitioned their superior officers for permission to marry, many of them noted the fact that they were draftees, which they felt gave

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<sup>67</sup> Friedman, *From the Battle Front to the Bridal Suite*, p. 2-3.

<sup>68</sup> Kohl, “Love, Valor, and Endurance,” p. 27.

them a particular right to pursue relationships and marry while overseas. The couples forced commanding officers and chaplains to weigh the right to marry against the needs of the military during a war, and the dogged determination of many couples to marry in spite of the odds caused the United States military to ease some of its official restrictions on overseas marriage. Seena Kohl's description of the war brides as "young, in love, and...not assured of a future" also aptly described the men they married.<sup>70</sup>

Most of the women told Kohl that they never considered the possibility of having to leave friends and family to join their husbands in the United States, even as they prepared to marry American citizens. The nature of World War II caused the women and their husbands to downplay the possibility of a long-term life together. Civilians became involved in the war in a way that had never been seen previously. Much of Europe was in a state of total war, and both Axis and Allied forces targeted civilian populations as well as military outposts. The uncertainty of life during wartime caused couples to live for the day, because many of them questioned whether they would survive to see the end of the war. Joyce Vashro, a native of London who immigrated to Butte, Montana, explained why she began dating her future husband after her English boyfriend was killed in battle: "I think part of it was, to me personally, time began to mean nothing and also you kind of didn't think about the future. I didn't think about the future at all. I didn't even think about what I was getting into."<sup>71</sup> Marie Houtz, who was sixteen years old when she met her future husband, concurred:

We didn't think we would live very long because, when we were married, there were still the V-2 rockets coming over and we just didn't think we'd survive. So we didn't think of the future. Neither one of us thought there would be a future...we just thought we were lucky to be alive that day and

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<sup>69</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 23.

<sup>70</sup> Kohl, "Love, Valor, and Endurance," p. 28.

<sup>71</sup> Joyce Vashro, interview with Seena Kohl, Helena, Montana, June 24, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2029.

maybe by the end of the day we wouldn't be...It never entered my mind that I would have to leave my mother and my family behind.<sup>72</sup>

Because of wartime rationing and the spontaneous nature of many of the women's weddings (the men often returned to be married on very short notice), the war brides had little to say about their actual wedding ceremonies. However, the couples often had more time to prepare for marriage than many American couples who married quickly before men went off to war. Bureaucratic delays meant that the courtship period of the war brides' relationships could be as long as two years.<sup>73</sup> Even after marriage, the women did not assume that they would live long, happy lives with new husbands. Joyce Vashro "didn't think about America" after marrying her husband:

He was very, very homesick, as many of them were, and I hadn't experienced homesickness...I really felt bad for him...[t]hey were so homesick for their families and the American way of life, you know. Everything was so different, and you felt good about helping people. That's a strange thing to say, but I did feel good about making him feel better, and I gave no thought to the future...I just thought one day at a time.<sup>74</sup>

Doreen Richard, who immigrated as the fiancée of a serviceman, echoed Vashro: "[W]e never thought that there would be anything serious, because I hadn't ever considered that I would leave my country and my family."<sup>75</sup> Richard was the only immigrant fiancée among Kohl's interviewees, as most couples decided to marry at the earliest opportunity rather than risk the possibility of dying before the marriage could occur. Janet Mohn, who married her husband in November, 1943, vowed to marry if her then-fiancé returned from New Guinea. They reasoned that "if he went out again he might not get back to Australia."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Houtz, interview with Kohl.

<sup>73</sup> Shukert and Scibetta, *War Brides of World War II*, p. 19.

<sup>74</sup> Vashro, interview with Kohl.

<sup>75</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>76</sup> Mohn, interview with Kohl.

The women's stories indicated that suspicion of relationships between Americans and foreign women existed on both sides of the Atlantic, with family members, co-workers, the military, and other agencies investigating the backgrounds of many potential spouses. Elvia Stockton, a Frenchwoman who worked for the Americans, said that her American co-workers wrote to her husband's family and former employers to verify that he had told her the truth about his background. Ruth Poore Batchen's future sister-in-law cautioned Ruth's future husband, Wendell to "watch out for these girls. They're after your money and they're after everything else." Wendell showed me the letter. I thought it was rather nice of him to let me see both sides of the coin."<sup>77</sup> Joyce De Long and her English family received a visit from her husband's chaplain before they got married, and the chaplain reported his observations of the family to higher-ranking officials. In 1944, Australian Red Cross officials refused a request by the American Red Cross request to investigate the backgrounds and families of Australian women who applied to marry American GIs: "The Australian society pointed out that there was no means of reciprocation, as it was impossible to ascertain the conditions of the family life of the American soldiers wishing to marry the Australian girls."<sup>78</sup> During their engagements and after their marriages, many of the war brides and their families corresponded with their American in-laws, and the women learned about their future homes through letters and photographs. Although GIs were well-known for bragging about their nation and their hometowns, the women interviewed for the Oral History Project overwhelmingly agreed that their husbands had been truthful in their descriptions of such things prior to their marriages.

The uncertainties of life during wartime were not the only issues that concerned the couples. With the economic uncertainty of the pre-war years in mind, some husbands worried

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<sup>77</sup> Batchen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>78</sup> "Red Cross of Australia to Keep Out of Marriages," *The New York Times*, January, 26, 1944, p. 5.



about their ability to support a family upon returning to the United States. According to Ruth Poore Batchen, Wendell Poore “got cold feet a little bit toward the end, before we got married, he was wondering about my coming here to America and, you know, whether he would be able to...take care of me.”<sup>79</sup> Peggy Floerchinger recalled the apprehension that her parents expressed before her marriage, as her father had previously immigrated to the United States and returned to England after only a few years.<sup>80</sup> Most of the women, however, were unconcerned with the economic issues that faced young couples in post-war Montana. French war bride Elvia Stockton said, “we never talked about money or anything...I guess I was awfully naïve. I just didn’t expect anything.”<sup>81</sup> Youth, war, and lovesickness colored the women’s expectations. As Irene Owen explained, “I knew that I loved him and he loved me and he wanted to make it fine...[t]hat was all.”<sup>82</sup>

Lillian Breslow Rubin, who studied working-class white women in the mid-twentieth century, argued that her subjects’ formative experiences “not only reflect[ed] the past, but dominate[d] the present,” affecting the choices they made, and how they ordered their lives as mothers in working class homes.<sup>83</sup> As Elaine Tyler May noted, observers in the United States were concerned with the morals of women, even “good girls” who took advantage of expanded roles and new opportunities during World War II, and the present study indicates that these concerns extended to the war brides who waited to immigrate at the end of the war.<sup>84</sup> The nature of total war caused the women to take risks and explore options that may not have otherwise

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<sup>79</sup> Batchen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>80</sup> Peggy Floerchinger, interview with Seena Kohl, Conrad, MT, July 29, 2001, Montana Historical Society, OH 1942.

<sup>81</sup> Stockton, interview with Kohl.

<sup>82</sup> Irene Owen, interview with Seena Kohl, Geraldine, MT, July 9, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2041.

<sup>83</sup> Lillian Breslow Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family*, (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 48.

<sup>84</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic

been open to them, although they ultimately hoped for traditional lives as wives and mothers. The women lived, worked, and socialized in ways that had been unthinkable to their parents. As young, single women, they asserted the right to date and marry men of different nationalities, religions, and races than were deemed acceptable before the war. Immigrating meant “a greater variation in roles” for the war brides, and they, like women immigrants of a generation earlier, also challenged notions of proper behavior for young women through their decision to immigrate, and this made observers on both sides of the Atlantic suspicious of their intentions.<sup>85</sup> Many of the war brides married without fully considering the consequences of their actions, at least partly because they were not convinced that they or their husbands would survive the war. The war brides would draw on their experiences as young women during war and occupation to guide them through their lives as wives and mothers in Montana.

After the war, they immigrated with confidence in the strength of their marriages but with the knowledge that their lives would change forever. They believed they would never see their families again, and they knew very little about what their lives would be like in the United States. Their willingness to immigrate suggested both that the women were sincerely in love with their husbands and that their lives during the war had prepared them both to take advantage of unexpected opportunities, as well as to survive great hardships. Their immigration was unprecedented in American history, and the next chapter will explore the women’s experiences as they prepared to travel, boarded ships, and landed in the United States.

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Books, 1988), p. 69.

<sup>85</sup> Sinke, *Dutch Immigrant Women in the United States*, p. 2-3.

## Chapter 2

Scholars who studied the war brides had differing perspectives on the importance of the process by which war brides arrived in the United States. Seena Kohl devoted no space to the “bride ships” and “bride trains” that transported war brides from their doorsteps in Europe and Australia to their new homes in Montana. Conversely, Jenel Virden wrote extensively about the debates among Army bureaucrats, government officials, and even the American public as the military devised a transportation plan for the war brides at the end of the war. The present study argues that the physical process of the women’s immigration is significant simply because it was unprecedented in American history. Never before or since has the United States government enabled the immigration of such a large group of people.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the process of assimilation began in earnest for many of the women as they prepared to immigrate, and as they traveled on the specially-outfitted “bride ships” and “bride trains” that transported them first to the United States, then to Montana. As the prospect of immigration became real for the war brides, they asked other Americans about Montana, and Red Cross representatives on bride ships presented classes on American government and culture to the women while their ships were at sea. War brides marveled at the food available to them in American transit camps, ships, and trains; and ship commissaries sold cosmetics, sanitary napkins, nylons, and other items that had been unavailable in Great Britain and continental Europe for years.

When World War II ended in 1945, the war brides and their husbands considered themselves lucky to have survived. Hundreds of thousands of demobilized military personnel

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<sup>86</sup> Shukert and Scibetta estimated that 1,000,000 military spouses immigrated to the United States, the vast majority of them with government assistance. Although other scholars, including Jenel Virden, also cited this figure, they admitted that it is probably fairly high. Some solid figures included the 115,000 women and children from Great Britain who immigrated under the auspices of the War Brides Act in early 1946. Smaller groups from Australia (25,000), New Zealand, France (10,000), Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands were transported at the same time. These numbers would exclude fiancées who arrived before June, 1946 with visitor’s visas, and any war bride who arrived prior to January, 1946. Ji-Yeon Yuh estimated that 100,000 Korean military brides immigrated

returned to the United States in 1945 and 1946, and tens of thousands of the men, along with a few women, had married while overseas. They and their spouses were unsure when or how they would be reunited, since a cumbersome quota system severely restricted the number of newcomers that the United States would accept each year. Men who married women from Japan and Korea faced additional hurdles, as their spouses were considered ineligible for immigration because of their race.<sup>87</sup> Former servicemen lobbied their members of Congress for assistance, and their wives picketed United States consulates overseas for the ability to travel as non-quota immigrants. While the Johnson-Reed Act gave consideration to family reunification, the number of spouses and children of servicemen waiting to immigrate overwhelmed the immigration quota system established in the 1920s. In response, Congress passed Public Law 271, commonly known as the War Brides Act, on December 28, 1945. It defined the spouses of service men and women as non-immigrants, which removed the possibility that they could be denied entrance to the United States if they failed a physical or mental examination, and provided for their transportation to the United States.<sup>88</sup> Legislation in 1948 and 1952 enabled Asian spouses of servicemen to legally immigrate to the United States.

Newspapers and radio heavily covered the war brides' arrival, and public opinion about the women shifted as Americans read stories about the emotional reunions between war brides and their husbands. People sympathized with the sacrifices the women made as immigrants to the United States, and, as with all immigrants to the United States, war brides seemed to confirm the notion of American exceptionalism. As Ji-Yeon Yuh argued, “[a]t the dawning of the so-called American Century, these women...were seen by the American public as proof positive of

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between 1950-1989.

<sup>87</sup> For further information on the ways in which mid-twentieth century United States immigration policy excluding Asians both re-defined race and ethnicity and created the status of ‘illegal immigrant,’ see Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

American superiority...[they] validated America's confidence in itself as the greatest country on Earth."<sup>89</sup>

War brides also reinforced the importance of traditional gender roles to a public that was unsure about the nation's economic and social future. With the assistance of the American media, the women became not gold-diggers who wanted to sink their claws into wealthy Americans, but wives and mothers who were willing to sacrifice everything they knew to join their husbands in a foreign land. Their stories transformed into fairy tales, reassuring narratives on the strength of the postwar family. The war brides' initial impression of the United States as a warm and welcoming land of plenty was almost certainly shaped on board the bride ships and during their first few days in the United States.

As indicated above, however, the war brides and their husbands were not assured a quick reunion at the end of World War II. Before Congress drafted the War Brides Act, which developed the government-sponsored bride ships, a few war brides arrived in the United States by other means. Newspaper articles indicated that the first bride ship arrived in September, 1944, carrying 295 Australian war brides and their children, with sixty wives and a few dozen children from Northern Ireland arriving a week later.<sup>90</sup> This news angered both the American public, who felt that returning soldiers should receive priority, as well as the war brides remaining in Australia and Europe, who continued to search for a way to travel to the United States. An unknown number of British war brides, including Irene Hedrick, were secretly transported during the war when space became available on troop transport vessels.<sup>91</sup> Others, like Doreen Richard, avoided the hassle of government transportation by purchasing private

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<sup>88</sup> Shukert and Scibetta, *War Brides of World War II*, p. 46.

<sup>89</sup> Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 55.

<sup>91</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 90.

passage on commercial ships or airplanes. The vast majority of the war brides, however, traveled with the assistance of the United States Army and the American Red Cross, either on specially-designed bride ships in 1946, or with their husbands, when the latter received discharges in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Couples who married during the war became increasingly impatient while waiting for the United States government to decide how to handle the thousands of visa applications that flooded consulates in 1945. The end of the men's military service and their return to the United States meant the end of allotments for their spouses, which placed some of the women in desperate financial circumstances. Couples separated, simply not knowing when they would see one another again. A letter written in December, 1945 from an anonymous resident of Grantham, Lincolnshire, England to a newspaper in Fallon County, Montana pleaded the case of war brides who were separated from their husbands:

...what will Christmas mean to the woman I know, who, still loving her American and being loved in return, is facing misery and loneliness because she hasn't the means to get to him? Because she cannot find enough money, she is unable to take their baby to the man who is as eager to share her life as she is to spend it with him.<sup>92</sup>

The anonymous writer suggested that American and English government agencies and charitable institutions work together to reunite families. The writer was also concerned with locating the American fathers of the illegitimate children in her community, which hosted both an Army Air Corps base and a large munitions plant during the war. By the time the writer's letter reached Montana in January, 1946, the United States Army had formed a partnership with the American Red Cross to assist war brides in reuniting with their husbands in the United States.

Whether, or how, to transport immigrant spouses became a topic of public discussion after World War II, and Americans closely followed the process through which war brides

received transportation to the United States. Barbara Friedman's analysis of media coverage of British war brides indicated that Americans discussed what impact, if any, the loss of tens of thousands of young women would have on Great Britain as the nation began to rebuild itself. Many Americans remained unconvinced that the military should be responsible for transporting the women to the United States, and still others wondered if the families and communities of the husbands would welcome the new immigrants.<sup>93</sup>

Although these issues were never fully settled in the minds of many Americans (one Montana war bride recalled picket lines protesting her ship's arrival in New York), the federal government developed a process through which spouses of former military personnel could immigrate to the United States. The war brides simply overwhelmed the existing system, and it would have taken decades for immigration authorities to process all of the women who waited to be reunited with their husbands. According to Barbara Friedman, military officials reasoned that the Army, which had permitted the marriages, should handle the responsibility of reuniting the war brides and their husbands.<sup>94</sup> After Congress passed the War Brides Act, enabling war brides to travel as non-quota immigrants, the women and their husbands began the arduous process of securing transportation.<sup>95</sup> After filing the necessary paperwork and receiving approval to sail, the women and their children traveled to processing camps in Southampton and Bournemouth, England, Sydney, Australia, and Le Havre, France.

The Montana war brides shared only a few recollections of the weeks they spent in transit camps. Most of their comments regarded their outrage at the United States Army's physical exam. As Evelyn Tuss recalled, "we had to go there and get de-toxed, or something, and it was

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<sup>92</sup> "War Is Hell and Leads to Many Things," *The Fallon County Times*, January 17, 1946, p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> Friedman, *From the Battlefield to the Bridal Suite*, p. 2-3.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28-29.

so embarrassing because they would make us go, strip off, put a blanket on, and look for lice with a flashlight...it was the most degrading thing...and then they'd offer you whiskey if you'd sleep with them.”<sup>96</sup> In many instances, the women only began to contemplate the impact of their decision to marry and immigrate at this point in the process, in the first few days after being separated from their family of origin overseas. The prospect of immigrating saddened the women and their families, but the war brides and their husbands were also very much in love. The women expressed hope for the future, and confidence that their married lives would be happy. Tuss shared the sentiments of many war brides when she said, “I just thought it would be all right no matter where we were.”<sup>97</sup>

Intense sorrow was often paired with the war brides' hope and confidence. Mirra Komarovsky, a sociologist who studied working-class men and women who were very similar to the war brides and their husbands, noted the “strong emotional attachment” that her subjects had to their mothers, and the women's stories confirm the close relationships they had with their parents and siblings.<sup>98</sup> Virtually all of the war brides recalled the difficulty of leaving their parents at home, in train stations, or immediately before entering the transit camps. Joyce Vashro's parents traveled to Southampton to see her before she boarded the *Queen Mary*: “My father was crying, and my mother was pretty upset...and of course, I was crying too...[i]t was a very sad parting.”<sup>99</sup> Irene Hedrick, who immigrated in January, 1945, recalled questioning her decision to immigrate during her first night on board the ship that brought her to the United States. Hedrick wondered if she had “made a choice without considering the consequences.”<sup>100</sup> She questioned the injured American troops who comprised the majority of her fellow

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<sup>96</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Mirra Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 246.

<sup>99</sup> Vashro, interview with Kohl.



passengers about Montana, and learned from them that her new home “would be sheep and snow and cowboys chasing Indians.”<sup>101</sup> Newspaper reports and anecdotal evidence from some of Seena Kohl’s interviewees indicated that a small handful of war brides made it into the transit camps before refusing to proceed further in the immigration process, but the vast majority of the women went forward with their decision to immigrate. In turn, newspaper articles reported that about a hundred men advised the Red Cross not to send their wives and began divorce proceedings, and, in March, 1946, the Red Cross reported that no war bride who sailed to the United States had been refused by her husband.<sup>102</sup> Doreen Richard, who had not seen her husband for almost two years when she immigrated in 1946, reminded Seena Kohl that “in those days, your word was very important. And when you make a promise, you do not back down” when explaining why she traveled to Montana.<sup>103</sup>

The process of adjustment began on the bride ships that transported women from their homes in Europe to their new residences in the United States. While on board, the women took classes in American government, learned about American cooking styles, and expressed their desire not to be seen as “different” when they arrived in their new hometowns. News reports from the *SS Argentina*, the first bride ship to depart from Great Britain after the War Brides Act took effect, informed Montana readers that the war brides learned the national anthem in orientation sessions on board.<sup>104</sup> Joyce De Long, a passenger on the *Argentina*, received a pamphlet that described some of the important differences between American and British

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<sup>100</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 91.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>102</sup> Vashro, interview with Kohl; “British Bride Changes Mind,” *The Billings Gazette*, May 5, 1946, p. 7; “100 G.I.s Cancel Brides’ Trips,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 1946, p. 5; “No GI Wives Unclaimed,” *The Daily Missoulian*, March 3, 1946;

<sup>103</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>104</sup> “War Bride Ship Arrives in U.S.,” *The Billings Gazette*, February 5, 1946, p. 1-2.

English, while others remembered taking knitting lessons.<sup>105</sup> Although the women's first contact with large groups of other war brides often occurred while on bride ships, very few of the women made lasting friendships while being transported. While women like Janet Mohn and Norma Duff, Australian war brides who settled in Kalispell and Whitefish, became lifelong friends after meeting on a train to Montana, some of the women, like Marie Houtz, did not recall speaking to any of the other war brides while en route to Montana.<sup>106</sup>

Nearly all of the women recalled their shock when they discovered the types of food available to them on military transportation. Ship attendants served meat, eggs, candy, rolls, and fruit that had been unavailable to Europeans and Australians throughout the years of the war, and many of the women initially became seasick after overeating.<sup>107</sup> When the *Miles City Daily Star* interviewed Mrs. Robert Fairbanks, a native of London, about her trip on the *Bridgeport* in March, 1946, she told a reporter that "everything was arranged for our comfort and the food was excellent."<sup>108</sup> Joyce Vashro, who avoided seasickness while at sea, recalled a meal she ate on the train from Chicago to Minneapolis:

The first meal we got I ordered lamb, and I'd been used to the English rations and they brought this humongous plate of lamb...I passed it around the table thinking it was for all of us. ...There were several GIs and another lady, and they said "No, ma'am, that's all yours." I said, "I can't eat it," and I couldn't either. It was just too much. [I] was not used to that much food.<sup>109</sup>

The women's families overseas, and the strict rationing that was still in effect, were not far from their minds as they ate large meals and shopped during their journey to Montana. Irene Owen recalled her first visit to an American department store in Chicago: "[w]e got there and the first

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<sup>105</sup> De Long, interview with Kohl.

<sup>106</sup> Houtz, interview with Kohl.

<sup>107</sup> "Queen Mary Arrives in New York with 1,666 War Brides," *The Daily Missoulian*, February 11, 1946, p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> "G.I. Bride Marvels at Food Supply in the West." *Miles City Daily Star*, March 24, 1946, p. 8.

<sup>109</sup> Vashro, interview with Kohl.

thing that I did was go to the shoe department to buy my two sisters a pair of shoes...[t]hey were rationed in England...I was determined to get those shoes.”<sup>110</sup> Muriel Morse, a Welsh war bride, was among the many women who sent packages of food and other hard-to-find items to family almost immediately upon arrival in the United States.<sup>111</sup>

Although most of the Montana war brides had generally positive experiences while traveling to the state, some of the passengers on the earlier-arriving ships experienced both minor annoyances and delays and serious shortages and outbreaks of disease. In January, 1946, war brides from New Zealand publicly complained about the conditions on board the *SS Permanente* during their forty-five day voyage. They criticized shortages of food, milk, and burners to heat water, and accused the military of leaving them unaware of the length of the trip and unprepared for conditions on board.<sup>112</sup> Twenty children contracted measles on the *Permanente*, and sixteen children died during outbreaks of disease on the *SS Holbrook* and *SS Zebulon Vance*, which transported war brides from England and France.<sup>113</sup> Women without children often complained about the babies of other war brides, and some women bound for Montana, like Elsie Persiecke, who shared a cabin with eighteen women and their children, recalled being “stacked like cord wood” with other war brides in crowded ships.<sup>114</sup>

Upon arrival in the United States - the Europeans docked in New York Harbor, while Australians and New Zealanders sailed to San Francisco - the Red Cross either placed the women destined for Montana on trains that took them across the country, or reunited war brides with husbands who had traveled to New York or San Francisco to meet the ships. The Associated Press filed dozens of stories as the women arrived in the United States, and the

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<sup>110</sup> Owen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>111</sup> Muriel Morse, interview with Seena Kohl, Kalispell, MT, September 9, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2047.

<sup>112</sup> “Young Humanity Close-Packed on 45-Day Trip.” *The Daily Missoulian*. January 15, 1946, p. 2.

arrival of the *SS Argentina* and the *Queen Mary* in February, 1946 received several pages of coverage in major Montana newspapers.<sup>115</sup> Reporters described women cheering and crowding the railings of the *Queen Mary* as it passed the Statue of Liberty, and an Army band played “Here Comes the Bride” for the women as the ship docked in New York Harbor.<sup>116</sup> War widows, women who married American servicemen who subsequently died during the war, received particular interest from reporters. One such widow, Mrs. Curtis Johnson, was among the women on the *SS Argentina*. She told reporters that she promised her late husband, a native of Texas, that their child would be raised in the United States: “[h]e was always talking about how he could live in Texas...I don’t think it will be strange at all. This is what he wanted. He wanted it more than anything.”<sup>117</sup>

Perhaps more than anyone, newspaper editors and reporters changed Americans’ attitudes toward the war brides. Editorial pages and news coverage openly sympathized with the war brides, emphasizing their desire to Americanize, their suitability as wives and mothers, and the sacrifices they made to immigrate to the United States. In a February 5, 1946 editorial, the *New York Times* noted that the war brides on the *SS Argentina* “sang ‘There’ll Always Be an England’” as they left Southampton, but “dressed in their best and lined up at the rail in New York Harbor yesterday, they sang ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’”<sup>118</sup> On the same day, the *Times* also reported that the crew of the *SS Argentina* vouched for the British war brides. John M. Eggen, the ship’s chaplain, told a reporter that he “was most highly impressed by the type of women that comprise the load. They seem to be the solid homebuilding type...I have never seen

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<sup>113</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 74.

<sup>114</sup> Persieke, interview with Kohl.

<sup>115</sup> *The Daily Missoulian*, *The Great Falls Tribune*, *The Billings Gazette*, and the *Butte Daily Post* ran Associated Press articles about the arrival of the *SS Argentina* and the *Queen Mary* in early February, 1946.

<sup>116</sup> “Queen Mary Arrives in New York with 1,666 War Brides,” *The Daily Missoulian*.

<sup>117</sup> “War Bride Ship Arrives in U.S.,” *The Billings Gazette*.

<sup>118</sup> “The War Brides,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 1945, p. 22.

a finer aggregation of young women, and America is to be congratulated for getting this type of wives and mothers for their homes.”<sup>119</sup> According to Elaine Tyler May, Americans “were poised to embrace domesticity” in the months and years following the war, and comments like these from the first Americans after the war to have direct contact with the war brides must have proved reassuring to American newspaper readers.<sup>120</sup>

Montana newspapers also took an interest in the war brides. As they arrived in the state, the newspapers in Billings, Great Falls, and Missoula published Red Cross lists of war brides whose final destination was Montana, and editors commented on the women who were about to make Montana their home. These articles and editorials indicated little apprehension about the women’s arrival among average Montanans in 1946. In fact, the editor of the *Sanders County Independent-Ledger* told his readers that “America is the winner” in the immigration of war brides:

The girls all look intelligent and attractive. This is selective immigration. In the years to come, the children of such marriages may be worth more than any form of reverse lend-lease we may ever hope to get from England in material goods. It takes high grade people to create a high grade nation. If all immigration from Europe was on the same selective basis, it would pay the nation to open the gates a lot more than we do, but since the reverse prevails we don’t dare allow much immigration or the country would be gutted with the undesirable and unabsorbable.<sup>121</sup>

This editor not only commented on the women’s ability to fulfill traditional roles in the home, but he also shed light on the debate surrounding immigration in the mid-twentieth century. He seemed to support mid-twentieth century immigration restrictions, but saw the war brides as exceptions to the “undesirable and unabsorbable” waves of immigrants from earlier in the century. Most press coverage focused on women from England, Ireland, and France, countries

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<sup>119</sup> “468 British Brides Here on Argentina,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 1946, p. 25.

<sup>120</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 23.

<sup>121</sup> “Hit or Miss,” *Sanders County Independent-Ledger*, February 20, 1946, p. 1.

that had been favored in the mid-twentieth century quota system. The potentially “undesirable” Southern European, Eastern European, and Asian military wives arrived later. In his view, England “gave” the United States thousands of its young women, who would populate the nation with good citizens, as partial repayment for American assistance during the war. Immigration from areas of the world other than Europe appeared not to be a consideration for the editor. This proved significant when Americans began marrying Japanese and Korean women in the years following World War II.

While romantic reunions and stories of sacrifice dominated news coverage, other articles indicated that the process did not always run smoothly for every couple. A resident of Missoula, Thomas Adams, who married his wife Lillian in Northampton, England, in 1943, found that his wife and daughter had been omitted from a list of passengers sailing on the *Queen Mary* in February, 1946. Two *Daily Missoulian* articles detailed his inquiry about the whereabouts of his family, the local Red Cross chapter’s response, and, finally, the couple’s reunion in Missoula.<sup>122</sup> Some of the war brides were unable to conceive of the distance between New York City and Montana. Patricia Smith, whose husband awaited her in Baker, Montana, assumed that he lived within driving distance of New York, and cancelled her train accommodations while she visited friends and waited for her husband to arrive. Roland Smith had to wire money through the Red Cross so that she could book a train ticket to Baker.<sup>123</sup>

Most of the couples had been separated for months or even years during the process of applying for transportation, and some of the women were apprehensive as they traveled to Montana. Norma Duff recalled her response when another war bride asked her what her husband

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<sup>122</sup> “Red Cross to Help Welcome English Bride of Local Man,” *The Daily Missoulian*, February 14, 1946, p. 3; “Adams Family Reunited in Missoula,” *The Daily Missoulian*, February 16, 1946, p. 8.

<sup>123</sup> “First English Bride in Baker,” *Fallon County Times*, April 11, 1946.

looked like: “I said, ‘How do I know what he looks like? I haven’t seen him in two years.’”<sup>124</sup>

As Irene Hedrick traveled from Chicago to Missoula, she “didn’t know and didn’t want to know the names of...the towns through which we rode, but I did want to know where the houses were hidden, the schools, the parks, the fields...I wanted to know that my expectations were more than those castles in the air Mother had warned me about.”<sup>125</sup> Many of the women simply had no idea what was in store for them in their new lives.

The women’s initial reactions to Montana will be covered in Chapter 3, but their first experiences as immigrants, including their encounters with representatives of the federal government in transit camps, their accommodations on American ships and airplanes, and their arrival and warm welcome in the United States, proved to be important when considering the women’s assimilation and the development of their ethnic identity. War brides continued to observe the differences between their home countries and the United States on ships and trains that carried them across the ocean, and across the United States, and their belief that the United States was a land of abundance had been solidified in their minds before they arrived in Montana. Their experiences on ships, in trains, and at shops in New York City and Chicago awed them. October 1946 marked the end of the bride ships, and the Red Cross ended their involvement in the immigration of war brides the following month, but the stories of women who immigrated in the later 1940s and 1950s were similar to those of the earlier arrivals whose stories were the focus of this chapter.

Linda Kerber argued that the War Brides Act “aided the divided family and especially heterosexual spouses by offering preferences to aliens with family relationships in the United

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<sup>124</sup> Duff, interview with Kohl.

<sup>125</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 112-113.

States.”<sup>126</sup> Kerber further pointed to the importance of the war brides and their migration in understanding mid-twentieth century immigration and ethnicity patterns more generally. The laws that governed the women’s arrival in the United States served as a model for later immigration legislation. The next two chapters will explain how their adjustment, and the development of their ethnic identity were also indicative of larger trends in mid-twentieth century American society.

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<sup>126</sup> Linda K. Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998), p. 45.



### Chapter 3

From the moment that the war brides stepped off trains in towns and cities across Montana, they struggled to adjust to conditions that natives took for granted. The women had never seen cattle ranches, most had never lived in small farming communities, and none had experienced the state's hot summers and cold winters. They learned to live with in-laws and neighbors who often held onto deep suspicion about war brides and their intentions and who had no sense of what the women had experienced during the war. Many of the women found the manners and customs of Montanans abhorrent, and they were shocked by what they perceived to be the backwardness of the state. The women who lived in company towns, on farms and ranches, or in rural communities had a particularly difficult time living in homes that, even into the 1950s, frequently lacked electricity and running water. Even the women who lived in Montana's bigger cities found them lacking when compared to London, Birmingham, or Paris. Jenel Virden succinctly summarized the issues that faced war brides, and particularly those in Montana, as they adjusted to lives that were in many cases almost entirely foreign to them. Their main problem in adjustment, according to Virden, laid in confronting the differences between their expectations of the United States and the reality of the situations that faced them.<sup>127</sup> Although virtually all of the women grew to love life in Montana, it was not the America that Hollywood movies and bragging GIs presented to them. Letters from in-laws and husbands' descriptions of cold Montana winters could not prepare the war brides for drawing water from a well for washing and cooking - or for their first blizzard.

In addition, it would be impossible to overstate the trauma that the war brides felt upon separation from their families overseas. War brides traveled to the United States believing that they would never see their families again. Scholars who studied mid-twentieth century working

class families emphasized the continued importance of kinship ties as young couples established themselves in American cities and suburbs. Mirra Komarovsky argued that “[e]very aspect of life, from the most fundamental to the most frivolous would be drastically altered” if parents and siblings were removed from the lives of her subjects.<sup>128</sup> Michael Novak concurred, stating that relatives were the best friends of most working class white ethnics in the United States, and that most of their social activities centered on family celebrations.<sup>129</sup> The war brides’ families of origin played a crucial role in the development of the women’s ethnic identities, so this chapter will explore how the women maintained ties with parents, siblings, and close friends overseas.

War brides who immigrated to Montana had a different experience from the urban women whom most scholars of the war brides have studied. Virden briefly suggested some of the differences between urban and rural life in her study: “[s]mall-town life...meant that the war brides would need to learn the act of ‘neighborliness.’ This included talking to neighbors, arranging an evening’s entertaining at one’s home, and participating in informal drop-in visiting.”<sup>130</sup> The subjects Virden interviewed, however, were residents of Seattle, so she was unable to explore how the women may have adjusted to life in small towns.

The war brides were most likely among the only newcomers, and almost certainly were the only immigrants, to arrive in Montana towns in decades. In their history of Montana, Michael Malone and Richard Roeder asserted that immigration to Montana had “largely ceased” in the 1920s.<sup>131</sup> Women who settled in Montana were by no means anonymous. Many of the war brides married into prominent local families, and networks of friends and in-laws often helped them to adjust to life in the state. At the same time, however, most of the women

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<sup>127</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 107.

<sup>128</sup> Komarovsky, *Blue Collar Marriage*, p. 236.

<sup>129</sup> Novak, *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, p. 23.

<sup>130</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 111.

struggled to fit in with the new extended families of which they were a part. Friendships with other war brides, which were forged outside of their husbands' family and social networks, were critically important for the war brides in their first years in Montana. The women were able to share experiences as wives, mothers, immigrants, and participants in World War II, and they supported one another through the process of adjustment to life in Montana.

Montanans were incredibly interested in the women, as indicated by the almost endless stories that ran about arriving war brides in Montana newspapers in 1946. Newspaper interviews with the war brides, most often conducted within days after their arrival, focused on the women's wartime experiences, and their happiness to be reunited with their husbands. Some of the women almost certainly put on a brave face for newspaper reporters. Mrs. Jack Gnelting, the first English war bride in Butte, told a reporter for the *Daily Post* that "I haven't had time to get homesick - because Butte people are so friendly that it's almost like being at home."<sup>132</sup> A reporter for the *Bozeman Courier* told readers that Ernestine Payne, a war bride from Luxembourg, was successfully adjusting to life in Manhattan, Montana: "She gets along well in a strange land with a new language, and has expressed pleasure with the country and the people she has met."<sup>133</sup> The *Daily Missoulian* reported that Mrs. James Masterson "has expressed herself as delighted with the United States, but finds herself wishing that its plenty could be enjoyed by her people and friends in England."<sup>134</sup> Other women, particularly British war brides who continued to hear from relatives at home about rationing that continued long after the war ended, expressed their surprise at the availability of food and clothing in Montana. Mrs. Robert Fairbanks, one of almost a dozen war brides in Miles City, said, "I feel guilty when I eat the

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<sup>131</sup> Malone & Roeder, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, p. 268.

<sup>132</sup> "War Bride Finds Butte Friendly," *Butte Daily Post*, March 18, 1946, p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> "Luxembourg Bride Now with Husband in Manhattan," *Bozeman Courier*, April 12, 1946.

<sup>134</sup> "English Bride Arrives to Make Home Here," *The Daily Missoulian*, April 14, 1946, p. 10.

delicious meat you have here when I think of my people in England....I love America. It seems wonderful to have enough to eat.”<sup>135</sup>

Many communities in Montana met war brides at the train station with flowers and an official welcome, and towns threw wedding showers for the war brides as they settled into life in the state. Some of Seena Kohl’s interviewees have fond memories of these gatherings, which were not a part of wedding traditions in Europe or Australia. Representatives of the towns of Corvallis and Thompson Falls joined two husbands at the train station in Missoula to welcome their wives, who had traveled from London.<sup>136</sup> Seventy people attended a wedding shower for Harold and Jeanne Roby in Bozeman. A reporter noted that, “[m]ounted on the groom’s cake was an American flag, and on the bride’s cake a British flag.”<sup>137</sup>

At least one couple, however, experienced a real crisis during their first days together in Montana. The *Roundup Record-Tribune* reported that Eloise Joanne Larson, the infant daughter of an English war bride and local resident Adrian Larson, died of pneumonia contracted on a bride ship only three days after the mother and daughter arrived in Roundup.<sup>138</sup> Instead of scheduling a wedding shower, residents of the town assisted the couple in planning a funeral for their daughter.

These articles not only gave Montanans first-hand accounts of life in wartime Europe, but they also reminded readers of the relative ease of the wartime experience for most American civilians. Further, at the beginning of an era of unprecedented consumerism, the stories reassured Montanans that they had more and better-quality products to choose from than the rest of the world. As indicated in chapter two, war brides have virtually always stood as a symbol of

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<sup>135</sup> “GI Bride Marvels at Food Supply in the West,” *Miles City Daily Star*, March 24, 1946, p. 8.

<sup>136</sup> “Bride from England Arrives to Live in Bitter Root,” *The Daily Missoulian*, May 8, 1946, p. 2; “Adams Family immigration.

<sup>137</sup> “Reception Honors English Bride,” *Bozeman Courier*, February 22, 1946.

something greater than themselves. In this case, war brides served as living evidence of both American exceptionalism and European and Asian dependence in the years following the war.<sup>139</sup>

After the newspapers published their stories and the women packed away gifts received at wedding showers, the war brides began the process of settling into their lives in Montana. Although virtually all of the women felt their husbands had given them some sense of what to expect after arriving, their descriptions of small towns, wide-open spaces, cold winters, and hot summers did not prepare the women for their initial experiences in the state. Evelyn Tuss's reaction when she got off the train in Harlowton, Montana was fairly common: "I said 'Oh, my Lord!' ...all I saw was nothing! I mean, land, land, land...it was a shock. It was really a shock."<sup>140</sup> Marie Houtz recalled seeing teepees along the railroad tracks outside of Havre: "I thought 'My Lord, what have I gotten myself into?' I didn't know whether to stay on the train or get off or what to do...It was a terrible, rude awakening...there was nothing really in Havre."<sup>141</sup> Elsie Persieke said that Whitefish "reminded me of a Western movie," and Mrs. Luke Dagnall, who settled in Miles City, shared Persieke's reaction: "I just didn't think America could be like the movies we have seen of it, but it is...the men really do wear plaid jackets and big rimmed hats like in the movies, don't they?"<sup>142</sup> Peggy Floerchinger, who traveled with her husband by bus from New York to Montana, described herself as "overpowered" by the state as she watched it through the window.<sup>143</sup>

For some war brides, weather conditions proved a challenge. Bernice "Pete" Berringer,

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<sup>138</sup> "Baby Dies Three Days after Arrival Here from England," *Roundup Record-Tribune*, March 7, 1946, p. 1.

<sup>139</sup> See Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) for analysis of the relationship between American exceptionalism and mid-twentieth century immigration.

<sup>140</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

<sup>141</sup> Houtz, interview with Kohl.

<sup>142</sup> Persieke, interview with Kohl; "Mrs. Luke Dagnall Reaches Miles City," *Miles City Daily Star*, March 17, 1946, p. 8.

<sup>143</sup> Floerchinger, interview with Kohl.

who said that her childhood in the Australian Outback prepared her for Montana's open spaces, recalled that she "almost died" during her first winter in the state: "I'd never seen snow or ice...not like that, [c]oming out of the sky."<sup>144</sup> Doreen Richard described a car ride in the snow during her first December in Montana:

[W]e went to the farm and I thought it all looked alike. We'd go in the car and it was barren. Snow. And we'd go along and turn the corner and it was the same...that was the way it seemed to me. It went on and on for such a long time. I said to my husband, "Don't we ever come to a town?" [He replied], "Oh, yes. We will be coming into Loma very soon." So I waited and I said to him, "When will we be coming into Loma?" Oh, we did. That was it. I hadn't even noticed it.<sup>145</sup>

Rural women and farm wives like Richard, whose families' livelihoods depended on good weather and productive land, tended to have the most to say about their reaction to the land when they recalled their initial impressions of Montana.

Some of the war brides did not expect the warm welcome they received, while long-awaited reunions with husbands initially mitigated the culture shock that war brides experienced. Elfriede Johnsen was pleasantly surprised at her reception in the town of Broadus, Montana. Johnsen assumed that Montanans would react negatively to her because she was from Germany, but she described them as "very nice...very interested."<sup>146</sup> Ruth Poore Batchen recalled that Great Falls in 1946 was a "very nice city," but noted that "I guess I was kind of lovesick or something. I was glad to be there."<sup>147</sup> While Joyce Barry thought Montana was "the end of the world," she added that "...at that time you were in love, so you didn't mind."<sup>148</sup>

Some of the war brides were worried about their reunions with their husbands and their welcome in local communities. Norma Duff, who had not seen her husband for almost two

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<sup>144</sup> Berringer, interview with Kohl.

<sup>145</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>146</sup> Johnsen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>147</sup> Batchen, interview with Kohl.

years, recalled not speaking to him because of her nervousness as they drove from the train station to their new home in Whitefish. Although they quickly rekindled their relationship, both of the Duffs recalled feeling very anxious about their reunion.<sup>149</sup> Irene Hedrick described Montana as “no place for the faint of heart,” and wondered why her husband had not been more forthright about the state. She wondered, “Did my husband expect me to like it here?”<sup>150</sup> Elvia Stockton, a native of Paris who immigrated to Grass Range, Montana, ignored her husband’s family when they made “a few stupid remarks...[s]exist remarks... You know how they talk about the ‘mademoiselles de Paris.’ Jokes about French women...[b]ut it was real easy because I could pretend I didn’t understand.”<sup>151</sup>

Women from Japan and Korea had perhaps the most difficult time being accepted in Montana. Jung Van Dam, a Korean war bride, hoped for a warm welcome in Conrad, Montana, but did not receive it: “Just [her husband’s] sister and his mom and dad was nice to me, you know...[m]ost other families treat[ed] you different. Because you [were] not one of them.”<sup>152</sup> War brides were sometimes surprised to discover the racial assumptions that Montanans had about their home countries. Janet Mohn and Bernice “Pete” Berringer recalled that their mothers-in-law were pleased to discover that their new daughters-in-law, both natives of Australia, were white.<sup>153</sup>

Due to the postwar housing shortage, many of the couples started their married lives in the homes of the women’s in-laws. This was not unusual, both among returning servicemen and among rural, working class whites generally. Mirra Komarovsky reported that forty percent of her subjects lived with in-laws upon their marriages in the 1960s, and Shukert and Scibetta

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<sup>148</sup> Barry, interview with Kohl.

<sup>149</sup> Duff, interview with Kohl.

<sup>150</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 119; 130.

<sup>151</sup> Stockton, interview with Kohl.

reported that sixty percent of married veterans of World War II who were discharged in December, 1945 had no home by the summer of 1946. The women and their in-laws both struggled to adjust. An English war bride, Evelyn Tuss, described sharing a home with eleven members of her husband's ethnic Slavic family in Lewistown as "just such a shock...after being an only child and spoiled rotten...I couldn't cook...and I used to iron all my sheets and they'd laugh at me because I was fussy."<sup>154</sup> Tuss had a warm relationship with her in-laws, but she insisted upon finding an apartment after six months with the family.

While Evelyn Tuss was only one of many war brides who reported a friendly relationship with in-laws, other women initially felt uncomfortable or unwelcome among Americans. Some women, like Joyce Vashro and Elsie Persieke, encountered open hostility from their husbands' families. Persieke wanted her husband to buy a home with federal government assistance, and her sister-in-law, with whom she and her husband lived, "said, well, I expected everything the same as what it was at home. I suppose she thought I was a little high and mighty, but I wasn't."<sup>155</sup> Joyce Vashro's sister-in-law informed her that her mother-in-law "thought I was an alien and was disappointed that Dick [Vashro's husband] married me"<sup>156</sup> Others, including Doreen Richard, recalled having distant relationships with their in-laws: "I don't think I ever felt part of the family. I couldn't say they treated me badly by any means...I don't think they really came to accept me."<sup>157</sup> Marie Houtz recalled hostility from her husband's sister and stepmother, and said that people in Havre were "[v]ery unfriendly, very suspicious of me."<sup>158</sup> When Irene Hedrick announced her pregnancy to her husband's aunt, the woman replied: "I don't know why

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<sup>152</sup> Van Dam, interview with Kohl.

<sup>153</sup> Mohn, Berringer, interviews with Kohl.

<sup>154</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

<sup>155</sup> Persieke, interview with Kohl.

<sup>156</sup> Vashro, interview with Kohl.

<sup>157</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>158</sup> Houtz, interview with Kohl.



that husband of yours married a foreigner anyway when he could have married a nice little girl from around here...God knows, the kid might not even be his!”<sup>159</sup> Elizabeth Goff, a Polish displaced person who met her husband in Germany, recalled her mother-in-law’s initial reaction to her son’s relationship: “Her come back was: ‘Of all the beautiful American girls, why in God’s name would you want to bring a foreigner home.’...I never forgot that. When I reminded her of that she said, ‘Oh my, honey, why do you have such a good memory?’”<sup>160</sup> Ironically, Goff’s mother-in-law was married to an Italian immigrant. Jung Van Dam, the only Asian war bride interviewed for the Oral History Project, remembered her early experiences as the only Korean in Conrad, Montana:

...[T]his is a small community here, so when you go to church, they all look at you, you know, like head to toe. Examine you, you know, to see if she’s fit enough to belong in our church...I thought everybody going to accept me and give me a nice wedding shower and gifts and all that. Nothing like that!...I took a lot of criticism and I got called...people would call me, you know, nigger, Jap, Chinaman. And squaw.<sup>161</sup>

Van Dam recalled learning how to cook and perform other household tasks from watching television, because she felt the locals were unwilling to help her. When Seena Kohl asked Van Dam about the most difficult part of adjusting to Montana, she replied, “Buying groceries and clothes and washing. You left all your friends there. You didn’t have nobody. No one...I had to learn everything myself.”<sup>162</sup> While the lack of interviews with Japanese and Korean war brides in Montana make it difficult to assume much about their experiences, it seemed likely that Asian women encountered more resistance from in-laws and had a more difficult time adjusting than many European and Australian women. The only Asian war bride in the sample of women used in this study had a singularly difficult time adjusting, and recalled the

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<sup>159</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 140.

<sup>160</sup> Goff, interview with Kohl.

<sup>161</sup> Van Dam, interview with Kohl.

most outright hostility from residents of her new home in Montana.

Food and clothing surprised the women, both while they traveled to Montana and after they arrived in the state. They were still unaccustomed to large portions and the absence of rationing. Ernie Barry, the husband of English war bride Joyce Barry, recalled a shopping trip with his wife: “There were oranges and she asked how many she could have. You can have all of them if you pay for them.”<sup>163</sup> Doreen Richard told Kohl about her reaction to her first meal in Montana:

I thought that the Americans were the greediest people I had ever seen...[t]hey'd have half a pie, and sometimes even ice cream on it. I was thinking, I can't even believe it...And then the stores...It took me a long time before I could remember that I didn't have to ask, May I have two? Two loaves of bread, because I was so used to only being able to have one for so many years, you know.<sup>164</sup>

Food preparation was a problem for many of the war brides as well; they found it difficult to learn how to cook American food. Not only were they expected to prepare unfamiliar foods, often without the benefit of running water, but wartime rationing meant that European mothers were unwilling to experiment by allowing their teenaged daughters to cook what little food was available. Many of the war brides reported having had no experience preparing meals prior to their immigration. Richard, who cooked at spring planting and fall harvest for crews of hired men, recalled the challenges of making American meals:

We'd never had pancakes for breakfast...I'd never heard of French toast...the way they would do it is fruit or juice. Cereal, plus the main course, plus coffee. That was a lot of breakfast. I didn't have hot water or anything. Every bit...had to be heated. So I would gather up the dishes...[t]hen I would have to start getting lunch...I would have to make maybe two pies.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Van Dam, interview with Kohl.

<sup>163</sup> Ernie Barry, interview with Seena Kohl, Kalispell, MT, September 2, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2042.

<sup>164</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

Odette Saylor, a French war bride, had a difficult time adjusting to American food, and introduced French cooking styles to her husband's family:

I didn't like corn. I didn't like peanut butter. I didn't like potato salad...[t]he first time I had potato salad, I could have thrown up. Sweet potato salad. Sweet tomato sauce...too much sugar...They wanted me to cook when I got here, but I said "Well, I'll cook my way!"...and they loved it.<sup>166</sup>

The women adjusted to new styles of dress in much the same way as they approached American food. As with food, a much wider variety of clothing was available to the women, even in isolated areas of rural Montana. The war brides became accustomed to more casual styles of dress in the United States, though some of them initially resisted wearing jeans to events that would have required more formal clothing in Europe or Australia. Irene Owen bought her first pair of pants after she arrived in Geraldine, Montana:

[We were] all invited to [a] picnic in the mountains...Dick [Owen's husband] said, "So, do you have something to wear?"...I thought I would wear my skirt and my lovely twin set. He said, "You can't wear that, you have to wear jeans." I didn't know jeans. I didn't have any pants...I said, "We don't wear pants in England."<sup>167</sup>

Janet Mohn found her first trip to the movie theater in Kalispell surprising: "I was so appalled to see these girls in their jeans and dirty saddle shoes and sweaters. I'd say, are they going to the show like that?"<sup>168</sup> Casual socializing also took some of the war brides by surprise. Peggy Floerchinger did not understand the invitation to "come for coffee sometime" offered by one of her neighbors: "Well, I waited for the invitation. You see, that's the difference, in a lot of respects. I waited for the invitation and it never came, because they were expecting me to just

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<sup>166</sup> Odette Saylor, interview with Seena Kohl, Billings, MT, July 27, 2001, Montana Historical Society, OH 1943.

<sup>167</sup> Owen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>168</sup> Mohn, interview with Kohl.

come. In England, you didn't do that."<sup>169</sup>

As the women discussed the accommodations they had to make to life in Montana, they told Seena Kohl that their wartime experiences gave them the ability to adjust to new situations and to deal with hardship. Elvia Stockton, who settled on a ranch near Grass Range, Montana, said living on the ranch was "not a pretty life. I want you to remember that, and then the four-year occupation, so I was not a spoiled brat. I was very strong. The world had landed on my shoulders."<sup>170</sup> In a very different context, Irene Hedrick compared the relationships between the other wives of students at Montana State College to the English response to World War II. The women pulled together to support each other and, in this case, get their husbands through college.<sup>171</sup>

The women's husbands were often not directly helpful in the process of adjustment for the war brides. While the women spoke fondly of their spouses, and undoubtedly were happy to be reunited after months or years apart, most of them said that their husbands failed fully to understand the difficulty of adjusting, and the pain of permanent separation from their families. Evelyn Tuss said her husband, while loving and supportive, "didn't have a clue" about the vast differences between life in Montana and England.<sup>172</sup> Doreen Richard said that neither her husband nor her in-laws understood how difficult it was to adjust: "I don't think anyone realized what a change it was. He was a very kind man, my husband. Very kind and compassionate, but you know Montana men?" Richard concurred when Seena Kohl answered her question: "Take a lot for granted."<sup>173</sup> Some of the men took American celebrations for granted, and failed to inform their wives of holidays like Halloween. Bernice Berringer's husband was out of town for

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<sup>169</sup> Floerchinger, interview with Kohl.

<sup>170</sup> Stockton, interview with Kohl.

<sup>171</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 214.

<sup>172</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

her first Halloween in Miles City: “there was a knock on the door and here are all these kids. They said, trick-or-treat...I had no candy. I said, I don’t know what I am supposed to do...[t]hey went away and pretty soon there is a knock on the door with a little sack of candy and a note that said, ‘for the lady who has no candy.’”<sup>174</sup>

Perhaps partially because husbands and in-laws were unhelpful, friendships with other war brides, many of which occurred through the formation of war bride clubs, played a vital role in the women’s early adjustment to life in Montana. These clubs matched broader postwar social patterns, which emphasized both “joining” and almost exclusive same-sex socializing. Scholars like Elaine Tyler May did not have the war brides in mind when they discussed the “rootlessness” experienced by white, middle-class transplants to American suburbs in the 1950s, but the Montana war brides exhibited some of the same forms of behavior as May’s suburban dwellers when they formed war bride clubs and joined churches.<sup>175</sup> In the post-war years, both war brides and many native-born women in American suburbs had been removed and isolated from kin networks that provided them with both a social life and a sense of identity. Suburban women, the wives of William H. Whyte’s “organization men,” “left home spiritually as well as physically,” migrating to other areas of the country when husbands received promotions or took new jobs, while war brides immigrated with children to form nuclear families in the United States.<sup>176</sup> These women attempted to recreate traditional patterns of socializing, share advice and information about family life, and feel like part of a larger community through clubs and religious organizations.

Mirra Komarovsky’s working class female subjects primarily confided in their mothers

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<sup>173</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>174</sup> Berringer, interview with Kohl.

<sup>175</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 24.

<sup>176</sup> William H. Whyte. *The Organization Man*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956), p. 3

and sisters, but the women who formed intimate friendships outside of their families of origin almost exclusively depended on other women.<sup>177</sup> War brides, whose marriages removed them from regular contact with parents and siblings, instead sought close friendships with other women who shared their experiences of wartime and immigration. The contacts they formed with other war brides in their communities became an incredibly important tool for the women as they began the process of assimilation.

The English war brides in Sheridan, Wyoming who were discussed in the introduction affiliated their club with the Transatlantic Brides and Parents Association, a group that had chapters for brides throughout the United States and their parents in England. Oral histories suggested that war brides in Montana joined less formal social organizations and preferred not to limit their clubs to women of specific ethnicities. This also set the women apart from Jenel Virden's sample of British war brides, who, she argued, used war bride clubs as an expression of their identity as Englishwomen.<sup>178</sup> Many of the interviewees for the Montana War Brides' Oral History Project were members of the Overseas Wives' Club of Kalispell and Whitefish, which welcomed women from Great Britain, France, Denmark, Japan, Belgium, Germany, and Australia. Both "Pete" Berringer and Ruth Poore Batchen recalled a war bride club in Billings that attracted about ten women from Europe and Australia.<sup>179</sup> Sheila Buck, a war bride from Scotland whom the other women considered the founder of the Overseas Wives' Club, said that county extension agents started it as a response to public interest in hearing the women's stories. Club meetings were informal, "a night out" for the women.

We just took turns entertaining. We went from one house to the other. We met once a month and we would exchange magazines, letters, and information. People were hearing from home. And then when we had

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<sup>177</sup> Komarovsky, *Blue Collar Marriage*, p. 208, 213.

<sup>178</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 127.

<sup>179</sup> Berringer, Batchen, interviews with Kohl.

visitors from overseas we would have an extra special party because somebody had a mother come, or some other family member. We had a nice social evening...[w]e left the kids at home and went out.<sup>180</sup>

Janet Mohn, another member of the Overseas Wives' Club, recalled that the club was a way to let off steam and share frustrations without offending Americans: "[W]e just shared some things and there was nobody else to hear it but us...we could have our discussions and not hurt anybody...[w]e really looked forward to that night out."<sup>181</sup> Joyce Barry, who was also a member of the club, said the women's shared experiences as wives and mothers gave them plenty to talk about: "It was lots of fun because we were all raising children. We had little children to raise and things in common."<sup>182</sup>

In communities that had no war bride club, the women found other ways to forge friendships with local women. Joyce Vashro, whose husband traveled six days a week for his job with the railroad, read accounts of English war brides arriving in Butte and phoned them: "When I'd see in the paper that so-and-so arrived from England, I'd call them up and say 'I'm English too,' and we'd get together for tea...I got to meet an awful lot of nice people. They saved my sanity - they really did."<sup>183</sup> Though Vashro recalled the intense loneliness she felt while her husband was away, she created her own community through her informal friendships with other English war brides. Irene Hedrick's sister Eva also married an American, and the women stayed in touch after Eva moved to Oklahoma.<sup>184</sup> Women who did not recall friendships with war brides connected with native-born women. Evelyn Tuss, who lived in Lewistown, Montana, recalled her friendship with an older American neighbor who taught her to cook and

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<sup>180</sup> Sheila Buck, interview with Seena Kohl, Kalispell, Montana, September 10, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH 2044.

<sup>181</sup> Mohn, interview with Kohl.

<sup>182</sup> Barry, interview with Kohl.

<sup>183</sup> Vashro, interview with Kohl.

<sup>184</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 193.

sew: “She taught me responsibility, you know, because I was so dumb.”<sup>185</sup>

Many of the war brides made return trips home relatively soon after their immigration, or brought relatives to Montana to visit. Immigrants have, of course, always made return trips, often to display their success and happiness in the United States. To some extent, the war brides visited and hosted visitors for similar reasons. They wanted to introduce grandparents and grandchildren who had never seen one another, relieve the homesickness they felt during their first years in Montana, and receive support and encouragement from parents and siblings. For Doreen Richard, who first returned to England in 1949, returning to Montana a second time “was worse than when I had left home, because I knew what it would be like” on the ranch.<sup>186</sup> Many couples made great sacrifices so that their families could visit Europe or Australia. Elvia Stockton recalled, “[m]y husband had to sell everything he owned to send us back the first time.”<sup>187</sup> Joyce Vashro’s mother lived with her in Butte for about a year upon the birth of her second child: “I wrote to England and I said please, please send me the money to come home. I can’t do this. I just can’t stay here. And they sent my mother over instead...of sending me the money.”<sup>188</sup> Vashro’s mother helped her with the children, and also made her feel less lonely in Butte.

As indicated above, war brides adjusted to the reality of separation from family in various ways. In the years immediately after their immigration, all of the women corresponded with family and friends, and relatives overseas sent packages, magazines, photos, and letters from home. Some of the women sponsored relatives as immigrants in later years, and all of them hosted family in Montana or returned home to visit. Many women returned frequently, and

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<sup>185</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

<sup>186</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>187</sup> Stockton, interview with Kohl.

<sup>188</sup> Vashro, interview with Kohl.



others, like Joyce Vashro, had relatives from overseas living with them for as long as a year at a time. Evelyn Tuss recalled that her father was very fond of Montana: “[He] said, every time he came, ‘It puts five more years on my life.’ ...He said every part of Montana has its beauty - even Ekalaka.”<sup>189</sup> Jung Van Dam sponsored the immigration of siblings whom she visited in Seattle, and one of Ruth Poore Batchen’s sisters retired in Red Lodge, Montana.<sup>190</sup> The women’s lasting connection to family overseas, along with their friendships with other war brides, reinforced the importance of their identities as immigrants and natives of Europe, Australia, and Korea.

While nearly all of the interviewees recalled the importance of return trips and friendships with war brides, and the women remain in touch with other war brides to the present, all of the war bride clubs in Montana stopped holding regular meetings in the 1960s and 1970s. Sheila Buck recalled that the Kalispell/Whitefish group “just sort of died a natural death...so many of us eventually went to work and did other things. Our children were all into basketball, football, and all that kind of stuff. It just got so we didn’t have time for it.”<sup>191</sup> The war brides also had less need for the support and encouragement that they offered each other in their first years in Montana. Paid employment, civic involvement, children’s activities, and other friendships took precedence in the women’s lives.

According to Jenel Virden, churches played only a minor role in the process of adjustment for her British war brides, but the stories of women in Montana seemed to contradict her findings.<sup>192</sup> A number of women remembered how their social circle expanded upon joining a church. Evelyn Tuss became a member of the Catholic church in Lewistown, and women from the church taught her to play bridge. She then joined a bridge club, where she made a number of

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<sup>189</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

<sup>190</sup> Van Dam, Batchen, interviews with Kohl.

<sup>191</sup> Buck, interview with Kohl.

<sup>192</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 119.

friends. Irene Hedrick, who found a circle of friends in the Methodist church in Glendive, first joined a local chapter of the Toastmasters' Club, and then became a lay minister in her church. She served as a member of the school board after her family moved to Lewistown, and ran unsuccessfully for state legislature on the Republican ticket. Marie Houtz said that "[l]ife was entirely different" after she joined a church in Havre and made friends with the women there: "I had...other young women I could associate with and it was much more pleasant."<sup>193</sup> Churches often served as a springboard for the war brides. The friends they made in church introduced them to other activities, which made them more deeply involved in their Montana communities.

Husbands and in-laws often introduced the war brides to other women, as well.

Particularly in situations where the couples settled in the communities where the husbands had been raised, former high school classmates, extended family, and other lifelong friends stepped in to help war brides adjust. Ruth Poore Batchen had fond memories of a group of women, former classmates of her husband's, who befriended her in Cut Bank, Montana: "When I came to Cut Bank, for two days I never saw my house from morning to evening. These ladies came and they took me and showed me things and did things with me."<sup>194</sup> Irene Owen and her husband remembered their friendships with other married couples in Geraldine, while Evelyn Tuss also made friends by agreeing to speak to women's clubs about life in England during the war. Janet Mohn and Peggy Floerchinger recalled that their in-laws introduced them to other young women. While war brides in the Denver, Colorado area recalled women from the Veterans of Foreign Wars auxiliary assisting them with shopping and other tasks, Montana women did not seem to have direct help from veteran's clubs or women's organizations as they settled into their new

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<sup>193</sup> Houtz, interview with Kohl.

<sup>194</sup> Batchen, interview with Kohl.

lives.<sup>195</sup> The intense interest in war brides upon their arrival helped the women to make a few initial contacts, though real friendships did not develop until later.

Elfriede Shukert and Barbara Scibetta, who analyzed surveys from about 2,000 war brides, reported that their respondents had a difficult time making friends with American women.<sup>196</sup> While the findings from Montana war brides again seemed to contradict some of the broad claims made by scholars who have studied the women, a few of the Oral History Project interviews suggested that some women resisted becoming too close to native Montanans.

Doreen Richard joined a women's club in Loma, and said she "didn't have much in common" with the other members: "I can remember going to those meetings and all they would talk about is diapers and the soap box on the radio. Ma Perkins. Actually, it did me good...I made up my mind that I wasn't going to be that way."<sup>197</sup> Richard's association with American women made her more determined to hold onto things that, in her perception, made her different.<sup>198</sup>

All of the women juggled their new friendships with the responsibilities of a wife and mother. Additionally, all of the war brides eventually took paid work, often over their husbands' objections. Millions of American women, the vast majority of whom were not first-generation immigrants, made a similar transition during the mid-twentieth century. While, as Rosalind Rosenberg argued, legislation like the GI Bill established men as the breadwinners and rightful heads of American households, William Chafe added that World War II itself had made women's work more acceptable, even in middle class households.<sup>199</sup> Additionally, many families could purchase new household items only if they had a second paycheck adding to the

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<sup>195</sup> Elizabeth Hawthorne, *War Brides and Memories of World War II*, (Denver: Empire Publishing, 1998), p. 6.

<sup>196</sup> Shukert and Scibetta, *War Brides of World War II*, p. 91.

<sup>197</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), p. 143; Chafe, *The American Woman*, p. 183.

family income. Women's wartime work experience exposed them to the independence that came with earning a separate paycheck, and, especially after children entered school and the full-time duties of a housewife and mother came to an end, women wanted to re-enter the workforce. Mirra Komarovsky found that working and earning money provided sources of "self-esteem and power" for her female subjects.<sup>200</sup> On-the-job socializing was also important for the women, and they felt that the benefits of working overruled their husbands' concerns. Historians like Suzanne Estabrook Kennedy also noted a more general shift among working class white women toward a greater interest in their personal lives. Women sought to expand their social circle through employment and involvement in community organizations.<sup>201</sup>

The stories of Montana war brides illustrated these transformations. Only one of the women, Irene Hedrick, expressed any explicit displeasure with her time as a housewife. She was one of the few war brides in the sample of women utilized for this study whose husband was college educated, and she recalled, with some disdain, receiving a "PhT" (Putting Hubby Through) certificate from Montana State College when he received a bachelor's degree in 1952. Although she was unhappy with many aspects of her life, she "did the best to act the role of happy housewife, an act that took far more courage than any role I'd played on the stage in my younger years...I could not have stood to have them pity me."<sup>202</sup> She noted her work and community involvement with pride in her memoirs.<sup>203</sup> Two more women, Sheila Buck and Peggy Floerchinger, who worked as a teacher and a librarian respectively, were the only war brides who held jobs that required a college education. Both of the women received their degrees at the University of Montana as non-traditional students.

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<sup>200</sup> Komarovsky, *Blue Collar Marriage*, p. 68.

<sup>201</sup> Kennedy, *If All We Did Was to Weep at Home*, p. 226.

<sup>202</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 217.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

A few of the war brides entered the workforce after life-altering events, and they displayed further ability to adjust to difficult circumstances through their paid work. Elfriede Johnsen recalled a series of jobs she took in Miles City after she and her husband divorced: “I worked in a grocery store as a meat wrapper for several years. I worked as a waitress. I worked in a diner as a cook, dishwasher, waitress. And I had actually never worked in Germany before.”<sup>204</sup> Elizabeth Goff stated that many of her neighbors looked down on her and her husband, because she worked from the time she arrived in Montana in the early 1950s. However, her husband remarked that her salary as a hospital switchboard operator made it possible for the couple to purchase a house in Great Falls shortly after they moved to the city.

Rural women wore many hats, stringing together a number of different jobs through the course of a year. For example, Janet Mohn did seasonal work as a pharmacy assistant, bookkeeper, and manager of a fireworks stand. Joyce Vashro became the postmaster in the small town of Austin, Montana, which she enjoyed because it helped her make friends. As postmaster, she quickly befriended all of the forty-eight people who received their mail at her post office. Jung Van Dam, whose adjustment to small-town Montana was arguably the most difficult of all the interviewees, also made friends after she got a job at the local nursing home. The war brides worked in stereotypically working class female professions. A number of them were sales clerks, while others worked as telephone operators, factory workers, and hairdressers.

War brides who lived and worked as “farm wives” in rural Montana had varying reactions to farm and ranch life. Irene Owen spoke warmly about her life in the farming community of Geraldine: “I always enjoyed it...[w]e always made fun....It was a very nice family type feeling. If you were sick or needed help it would just be automatic, they’d come.

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<sup>204</sup> Johnsen, interview with Kohl.

Geraldine is not a very big town...but a very caring town.”<sup>205</sup> Englishwoman Doreen Richard had a more difficult time making the adjustment from the large industrial city of Birmingham to a farm outside of Loma, Montana:

I couldn't believe people worked that hard. I had never seen people do it because they wanted to, let me put it that way...They absolutely loved that land...Do you know what came to mind...? I remember one day, it was so hot and the men were out there working. I thought to myself that part in the Bible, “A land that devours the people”...It is a very hard life.<sup>206</sup>

Richard felt alone on the farm, and she despised many of the chores that became her responsibility. She depended on relatives in England who sent letters, magazines, books, and newspapers that connected her to the outside world. Later, the library in Fort Benton, Montana, provided her with resources that helped her to feel less isolated. A fellow Englishwoman, Peggy Floerchinger, remembered talking to her mother after spending the day in the field: “I heard the phone ringing and it was my mother and she said ‘Where have you been?’ ...And I said, ‘well, I was out on the tractor.’ Well she literally came unglued...and she said ‘I didn’t raise you to be a tractor driver.’”<sup>207</sup> Floerchinger got a job at the local library “to do something to make me feel that I wasn’t something to be used out in the field,” and then took classes to become a librarian.<sup>208</sup>

War brides like Richard and Floerchinger were undoubtedly not the only Montanans searching for opportunities outside of farm life in the mid-twentieth century. According to Michael Malone and Richard Roeder, 1960 marked the first census in which records indicated that more Montanans lived in cities than in rural areas.<sup>209</sup> Only a few of the interviewees lived on Montana farms, while a few others lived in communities of under a thousand people. By the

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<sup>205</sup> Owen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>206</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>207</sup> Floerchinger, interview with Kohl.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

time Seena Kohl conducted her interviews, nearly all of the women had relocated to larger population centers in Montana.

Whether the war brides settled in larger towns like Billings and Great Falls, or found themselves on barren ranches in the eastern part of the state, they looked for chances to cultivate their own interests or earn their own money. Involvement in the “public sphere,” through work, community organizations, and even political parties, provided the women a larger circle of friends and acquaintances. As the roles they played in their communities and families changed, their ethnic identification changed. They began to identify with the United States generally, and with the communities in which they worked, worshipped, and socialized, while maintaining important connections with family overseas.

When the war brides arrived in communities throughout Montana in the 1940s and 1950s, magazines like *Good Housekeeping* assured them a “fresh start” in the United States, “with no questions asked.” According to Jenel Virden, the magazine told war brides that they “would find that Americans were willing to accept most anyone who would work hard and who were courageous enough to immigrate.”<sup>210</sup> European women, in particular, came from nations that shared many of the same 1950s social norms as Americans, and the war brides expected to live as wives and mothers in Montana. As Elaine Tyler May asserted, the war brides, like most young Americans in the postwar years, hoped that family life would be better, and, most importantly, more stable than the constant upheaval of life during World War II.<sup>211</sup> They learned, through an often painful and difficult process, how to live without familiar family members and close friends, and how to adjust their expectations to the day-to-day reality of life in a largely rural, isolated area of the nation. All immigrants to the United States have

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<sup>209</sup> Malone and Roeder, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, p. 266.

<sup>210</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 112.

determined how to adjust, or, in Suzanne Sinke's words, how to accommodate life in the United States when they cannot replicate familiar patterns from overseas.<sup>212</sup> Much of the work of immigration historians has been to outline how this occurs.

A number of factors set the war brides apart from the waves of immigration that bookend their arrival in the years following World War II. Among the most important, the women received an unprecedented warm welcome in the United States, which undoubtedly aided them in their adjustment. Only a minority of Americans reacted negatively to the arriving war brides, and, in fact, most Montanans were actively interested in the women and their lives. Additionally, because they immigrated as the wives of American citizens, they avoided the ethnic ghettos in which most immigrants initially settled. The women adopted American cooking and homemaking techniques, at least in part because of the fact that their youth and the circumstances of war disrupted the normal process by which young women learned from their mothers. If, as Donna Gabbacia argued, immigrant women who work as domestics in American homes came to understand American ways most completely, the war brides received a great deal of assistance in the process of adjustment from mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, and other Americans who taught them to cook and keep house when they first arrived.<sup>213</sup>

Soon after arrival, the war brides primarily depended on American relatives and a few other war brides for support and encouragement in almost every aspect of their lives. Although the first couple of years in the United States were difficult for the women, they eventually adjusted. Their recollections of the process of adjustment, as told to Seena Kohl, were punctuated with laughter and jokes that the women made at their own expense. Like Elfriede Johnsen, most of the Montana war brides "took it all in stride." "I guess," she reflected, "maybe I

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<sup>211</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, p. 12.

<sup>212</sup> Sinke, *Dutch Immigrant Women in the United States*, p. 222.



thought at first, in the United States, the sun always shines, which isn't so, but...I was never disappointed.”<sup>214</sup> After their initial adjustment, they began to assimilate, a longer and more complicated process through which the women began to take on an American identity.

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<sup>213</sup> Gabbacia, *From the Other Side*, p. 114.

<sup>214</sup> Johnsen, interview with Kohl.

## Chapter 4

For decades, historians of immigration have debated the process through which immigrants assimilate to life in the United States, or whether immigrants assimilate at all. Oscar Handlin saw immigration as an alienating process, through which an immigrant leaves her familiar home and becomes a foreigner. The immigrants could not retain their old ways in the United States, and, as individuals, could not avoid “choices that involved, day after day, an evaluation of his goals, the meaning of his existence, and...the purpose of the social forms and institutions that surrounded him.”<sup>215</sup> The children and grandchildren of immigrants felt the trauma of their forbearers’ immigration, and, in Handlin’s analysis, assimilation to life in the United States was nearly impossible for the first generation of immigrants. There was no settled definition of what an American was, much less how one “became” American. Others, like John Bodnar, saw nineteenth century immigration in economic terms. The immigrants were pushed out of their homes and pulled to the United States due to economic conditions, and, after arrival in the United States, both ethnic leaders and Americans competed for the loyalty of individual immigrants and their families.<sup>216</sup> Work drew the immigrants into American life, and away from the control of immigrant churches and ethnic clubs.

Some of the scholars who have studied war brides have attempted to address the issue of assimilation of these twentieth century immigrants. Jenel Virden, who studied British war brides, established conceptual assimilation, which was outlined in the introduction of this study, as the benchmark that defined true assimilation for her subjects. Only a small minority of the women she surveyed met her standard of assimilation, while the vast majority developed a hyphenated ethnic identity that included both their heritage as Englishwomen and their

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<sup>215</sup> Handlin, *The Uprooted*, p. 6.

<sup>216</sup> John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, (Bloomington &

experiences as Americans. Ji-Yeon Yuh, who studied Korean military wives, found that her subjects articulated a Korean identity, perhaps in part because many Koreans who married Americans were ostracized both from families in Korea and Korean-American communities in the United States.<sup>217</sup> However, Yuh's subjects also discussed the benefits of life in America, including increased opportunities for women, and more freedom in family life. This study argues that hyphenated ethnic identities, like those articulated by the English and Korean war brides that Virden and Yuh studied, had become American identities by the last half of the twentieth century.

Women immigrants, particularly military wives who lived in "American" homes with American husbands and children, were often able to express their perceived difference from Americans in domestic tasks over which they held primary control. Many of the war brides from Montana believed that they raised their children very differently from most of their native-born peers, and that they tried to give the children a sense of their ethnic heritage. This chapter will analyze the women's responses to questions about their assimilation, and the ways in which they passed their ethnic heritage on to their children. It will argue that the vast majority of the women considered themselves fully American, even as they unapologetically retained aspects of their ethnic heritage and pride in their homes and families of origin.

The war brides told Seena Kohl that they raised their children with manners and customs that reflected the women's ethnic background. This, according to Donna Gabaccia, an immigration historian, is common among women immigrants throughout American history. For these women, the maintenance of family life and kinship ties was one of the most important ways to express "differences" from the larger American society, and they considered American

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Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. xvii, 1.

<sup>217</sup> Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, p. 155.

women “less involved with and committed to” family life than the immigrants.<sup>218</sup> The war brides’ critiques of American child-raising placed them solidly within a long history of female immigrants’ adjustment to life in the United States. When considering how they raised their children differently from most Montanans, the women primarily cited different forms of discipline and a greater expectation of respect and deference from children. Joyce Barry thought that her peers were too lenient. She emphasized “[r]aising your kids with manners. And toilet training, I thought they let go too long.”<sup>219</sup> Elsie Persieke agreed: “I think children are more disciplined...in England. My mother noticed it when she was here.”<sup>220</sup> Odette Saylor also noted some differences between raising children in France and in Montana:

...one day, I went...to town and I kind of hit my little girl. By that time she was three years old and she had got lost in the store. I popped her one on the butt and my sister [in-law] said “Oh, you can’t do that in public. You know, you could be arrested.” I said, “What, to give a tap to my child?” And she said, “Yeah, you can’t do that here.”<sup>221</sup>

Peggy Floerchinger reported that she raised her children more strictly than other Montanans, and she also tried to give them a “strong affinity” for England. “[M]anners,” she said, “were extremely important to me. That was something I had a hard time with.” She found that children in Montana “were more free to be able to express themselves.”<sup>222</sup> Marilyn Wade, the daughter of Bernice Berringer, an Australian war bride, considered her mother “kind of a novelty. She talked different and the kids would like to come over and listen to her talk...they liked her accent. She did our Girl Scouts and we frequently did Australia Day for her...I was never embarrassed by her or ashamed of her.”<sup>223</sup> The war brides made significant efforts to

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<sup>218</sup> Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, p. 61; 74-75.

<sup>219</sup> Barry, interview with Kohl.

<sup>220</sup> Persieke, interview with Kohl.

<sup>221</sup> Saylor, interview with Kohl.

<sup>222</sup> Floerchinger, interview with Kohl.

<sup>223</sup> Marilyn Wade, interview with Seena Kohl, Billings, MT, July 9, 2002, Montana Historical Society, OH

acquaint their children with their relatives overseas, often making multiple trips home so that parents and siblings could meet and spend time with each of the women's children. Although the Oral History Project provided only scant evidence of the experiences of the war brides' children, the information that existed indicated that the children grew up with pride in their mothers' differences, and with interest in their backgrounds overseas. As the women aged and became unable to travel, many of their children continued to go abroad to maintain connections with their mothers' relatives.

When the Montana war brides looked back on their lives, Kohl asked nearly all of them if they would "do it again." In other words, if the women had known about the hardships they would face when they married, would they have made the same decision to marry an American and immigrate? Scholars who studied the war brides frequently posed this question to their subjects, but the weight given to the women's answers varied in their analysis of the women's lives. Eighty-seven percent of Virden's English war brides stated they would make the same decision, and she considered the question vital to "evaluat[ing] assimilation from the immigrant's perspective."<sup>224</sup> The question allowed both Virden's subjects and the participants in the Oral History Project the opportunity to discuss their ethnic identification, and the ways in which it has evolved during the decades that the women have lived in the United States. War brides immigrated because they married American servicemen, so Virden also attempted to gauge the success of the women's marriages through their answers to this question. However, Ji-Yeon Yuh, who studied Korean military brides in Philadelphia and New York City, argued that the women's affirmative responses to a similar question "may be better interpreted as self-validation of the lives they have lived...if they believe their lives would have been better in

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<sup>224</sup> Virden, *Good-Bye Piccadilly*, p. 138.

Korea, that is tantamount to saying that their lives in America have been failures.”<sup>225</sup>

The responses of Montana war brides complicated both Virden and Yuh’s arguments. A number of the women stated unequivocally that they would make the same decision. They cited their husbands, children, and the friends they have made over the years in explaining why they would make the same decision to marry and immigrate. For example, Elizabeth Goff said the “best thing God could have done” was to bring her into contact with her husband, and therefore the United States.<sup>226</sup> Sheila Buck concurred, saying “I am happy that I came. I made a lot of good friends here, and had a good marriage and family.”<sup>227</sup>

Other women expressed their affinity for the United States, and for Montana specifically, when posed the same question. Norma Duff simply said “[t]his is my country” when Kohl asked her if she would make the same choice to marry and immigrate again.<sup>228</sup> Elfriede Johnsen cited her German heritage in explaining why she loved Eastern Montana and felt no desire to leave: “[M]y mother used to say, ‘You shouldn’t move an old tree’...a lot of German people like to stay put...I’m rooted in Montana. I have no desire, never had a desire to move back to Germany. I’m very happy here.”<sup>229</sup> Ruth Poore Batchen said, “I love Montana. I wouldn’t go back to England for a million dollars...I love the people...I love everything about it.”<sup>230</sup> Elvia Stockton illustrated how many of the women’s ethnic identity involved identification with both the nation and their small Montana communities when she told Kohl, “I would say if somebody asked me if I feel very much like an American, well, I feel like a Montanan.”<sup>231</sup> As some of the responses above indicated, many of the women thought less about the United States as a nation, and more

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<sup>225</sup> Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, p. 122.

<sup>226</sup> Goff, interview with Kohl.

<sup>227</sup> Buck, interview with Kohl.

<sup>228</sup> Duff, interview with Kohl.

<sup>229</sup> Johnsen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>230</sup> Batchen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>231</sup> Stockton, interview with Kohl.

about their communities in Montana when they expressed their identification with the United States, and their certainty that they would make the same decision again.

For many of the women, their trips back to Europe in later years illustrated their differences from their families and friends overseas. Although some of the war brides had a difficult time adjusting to rural Montana, they came to appreciate small town life. Elvia Stockton, who lived her life in Montana on a ranch, said, “I like the simple things in life. Paris is too crowded for me now. I appreciate when I go there [but]...I can do very well without it.”<sup>232</sup> Joyce De Long remembered her mixed emotions during her first years in Montana, but said that return trips to England reminded her that Montana was home: “When I first came over, I cried myself to sleep every night...[n]ow I think I didn’t make a mistake. I think the United States is the best country in the world. I go back to England and I wouldn’t want to live there anymore.”<sup>233</sup> Elsie Persieke, who told Seena Kohl that her siblings still questioned her about why she decided to immigrate, asserted that she felt like a “foreigner” when she returned to England to visit.<sup>234</sup>

While almost all of the women reported feeling at home in Montana and among Americans, about half of the interviewees offered complex and sometimes contradictory answers when asked if they would make the same decision. Janet Mohn first emphatically answered “yes, yes, yes,” but then said “I love Australia, and...what it stands for...if you asked me would it tear my heart apart to choose one over the other. It would be awfully difficult.”<sup>235</sup> Mohn expressed a deep loyalty and sense of commitment to both the United States and her country of origin which was common among immigrants and their descendants in the years since the

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<sup>232</sup> Stockton, interview with Kohl.

<sup>233</sup> De Long, interview with Kohl.

<sup>234</sup> Persieke, interview with Kohl.

<sup>235</sup> Mohn, interview with Kohl.

“renaissance of ethnicity.” Furthermore, her answer indicated that she had never been asked to “choose one over the other” in her life in Montana. Evelyn Tuss, whose initial homesickness caused her to return to England with her husband and children for two years in the 1950s, also initially said yes: “I feel blessed I came here, and I’m glad I came to Montana.” Then, she discussed her ethnic identity: “deep down, I’m still British. I’m just so proud of being British for some reason. I don’t know why but it’s still home...I don’t push it because I don’t want them to think I’m being disrespectful.”<sup>236</sup> Tuss felt torn between the United States and Great Britain, and also discussed a special connection to Montana that many of the war brides shared. Irene Hedrick wrote that she was drawn to the work of local poet Millicent Ward Whitt when considering her ethnic identity. In Whitt’s words, she considered Montana “home, yours, you,” but viewed her life in Montana through the lens of her childhood and young adulthood in England.<sup>237</sup>

A few of the interviewees, including Jung Van Dam, offered a complex “no” to Kohl’s question: “I don’t want to hurt my husband’s feelings, but no, I would not...” However, she also stated that she loved her husband, and that she felt free and safe as an American: “I like America...America is a beautiful country...I am glad I’m living here now...and I appreciate this country.”<sup>238</sup> Doreen Richard concurred, saying, “I love America and I think this is a wonderful country,” but also agreed that she would not make the same decision to marry an American:

When I think of some of the things that happened, it is absolutely horrible. I don’t have happy memories of the farm at all...[w]e had to haul every drop of water...[t]here was no garden, no trees, and in the summertime everywhere you would look it really wasn’t beautiful, because it was just dry, barren land...I planted flowers and tried to have a garden. I think that I had it for three days and we got one of those hot winds and it just went over my flowers and I actually just saw them shrivel. It is things like that

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<sup>236</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

<sup>237</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 274.

<sup>238</sup> Van Dam, interview with Kohl.



you don't expect.<sup>239</sup>

Joyce Vashro answered, "I don't know if I would," and struggled to explain her conflicting feelings about her life in Montana:

Yes, that's one of the more difficult questions, because the times were different. I was different. My husband was different...and we've been through a lot together. But, if I'd known what it was going to be like, I don't think I'd have had the strength. The living was very hard...we did everything the hard way...the electricity was off most of the time. We didn't have telephones. I was washing on a board...I really was very close to my mother, and I was so proud of my father and my brothers and I missed them so dreadfully, and I still do.<sup>240</sup>

Like Vashro, many war brides felt a sense of loss when they discussed their immigration. Peggy Floerchinger reflected that "losing one's country is like losing a child" after returning home from a trip to England.<sup>241</sup> Virtually all of the women were in their late teens or early twenties when they immigrated, and at the time of their departure, they never considered how they would react when parents, aunts and uncles, or siblings aged and passed away. When deaths occurred, the women not only grieved the loss of a family member, but they also felt guilty for their inability to be with family and assist with funeral preparations. Irene Hedrick recalled her guilt when her sister Joyce had to care for their mother as she suffered from cancer: "I had sailed away from home with never a thought that Mother might need help herself one day."<sup>242</sup> Irene Owen was pregnant with triplets when she learned that her father was terminally ill, and her "only regret" about immigrating involved the medical restrictions that prevented her from traveling to England to see him before his death.<sup>243</sup> Evelyn Tuss, one of the few women who had no siblings, felt a responsibility to be with her parents as they aged: "[O]h, I had such

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<sup>239</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

<sup>240</sup> Vashro, interview with Kohl.

<sup>241</sup> Floerchinger, interview with Kohl.

<sup>242</sup> Hedrick, *Memories of a Big Sky British War Bride*, p. 4.

<sup>243</sup> Owen, interview with Kohl.

guilt...when [her mother] died, I wasn't there."<sup>244</sup> Elfriede Johnsen expressed a common sentiment among the interviewees when she said, "I don't know why I ever did this to my folks."<sup>245</sup> Only after becoming mothers themselves did some of the women understand how their parents felt when they immigrated to the United States.

Life became easier for some of the women as television and other consumer items connected rural Montanans to the outside world. For many years, Jung Van Dam felt that her cooking style, among other things, helped to set her apart from her neighbors in Conrad, Montana, but they eventually developed a taste for Asian cuisine. To Van Dam, this shift illustrated the difference between the way she was treated when she immigrated and the acceptance she feels now:

People come to my house and...we'd be eating...[h]aving supper and they go around the table to see what kind of food you are serving. Well, you know, oh, yeah, she put a lot of fruit, vegetable...and rice and things like that, and fish...everybody used to like potato and gravy and all that, but now everybody likes Oriental food. And people like to come to my house and eat my Oriental dishes now, and I have a good many friends now. It took many, many years for people to accept me. I used to cry a lot. A lot. The first five years is horrible.<sup>246</sup>

Peggy Floerchinger said she "leans toward anything English," but felt very self-conscious about her differences: "I was very conscious of the way I spoke. I was very conscious of the way I, for instance, laid the table. There were so many little different things."<sup>247</sup>

For many of the women, friendships with other war brides, often women they originally met in 1946, remained very important. Several of the interviewees, many of whom were widows, discussed how they reconnected with women from their war bride clubs decades after they stopped meeting regularly. Muriel Morse, a Welsh war bride who lived in Kalispell,

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<sup>244</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

<sup>245</sup> Johnsen, interview with Kohl.

<sup>246</sup> Van Dam, interview with Kohl.

Montana, told Seena Kohl that she wanted the local Overseas Wives' Club to begin meeting again: "I was talking to them the other day that we should once more get together, the all of us...[w]e have one lady here that is in the restaurant, that is from England. We should go down and patronize her."<sup>248</sup> Morse felt a connection both to her fellow war brides, and to other recent immigrants to Montana, like the English woman who owned a restaurant in Kalispell.

The question "Would you do it again?" proved to be more complex for the twenty Montana war brides than the simple yes or no options that Virden gave her survey respondents. Furthermore, many of the women asserted both their profound love for their husbands and children and their lack of confidence that they would make the same decisions again. The war brides sacrificed a great deal to make their lives and marriages in Montana successful, and it should be no surprise that some of the women would question whether the painful and difficult process of adjustment and assimilation was worth it in the end. As Evelyn Tuss's mother reminded her, "You could have had three daughters in England."<sup>249</sup> Even after considering the consequences of their decision to immigrate, which included loneliness, isolation, long periods of separation from family, and a difficult time adjusting, the war brides are content with their lives in Montana, proud of their accomplishments, and proud of decades of involvement in family life and community activities. Their feelings of doubt and regret should not be interpreted as an admission of failure.

When the women considered whether or not they would make the decision to marry and immigrate again, many of them, either explicitly or implicitly, began to discuss their ethnic identity. For many of the war brides, particularly those who found a welcoming environment among in-laws and women friends in their Montana communities, the answer was simple, and

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<sup>247</sup> Floerchinger, interview with Kohl.

<sup>248</sup> Morse, interview with Kohl.

their ethnic identification was uncomplicated. They identified themselves primarily as Americans, and aligned themselves with their husbands, children, in-laws, and friends in Montana. Many of the women who expressed conflicted emotions when considering Kohl's questions had significant difficulties after immigrating to Montana. Some of the women, like Joyce Vashro, had unfriendly in-laws, and others, like Jung Van Dam, felt unwelcome in Montana because of racial differences that set them apart from their peers.

Farm women and other residents of rural communities, in particular, had a difficult process of adjustment, and tended to consider both positive and negative aspects of life in Montana when they discussed their ethnic identity. Of the six women who lived on farms for significant periods during their lives in Montana, only two of them failed to hesitate before saying they would make the same decision again. The remaining four cited early mornings, long days of hard work, and the isolation they felt in rural areas when considering whether they would make the same decision to immigrate. Doreen Richard recalled that her husband "did tell me how different [farm life] was, but you can't comprehend...the farms in England are much different."<sup>250</sup>

Virtually all of the war brides, however, retained a deep pride in their ethnic background, and in their countries of origin. They passed this pride on to their children, who seemed to also identify with their mothers' ethnic heritage, even when their fathers' family were also recent immigrants with distinctive religious practices and customs of their own. Previous scholarship on ethnic identification suggested that this set the families of war brides apart from most white Americans, who tended to identify with their fathers' ethnicity.<sup>251</sup> While the women adjusted to American life, they still retained some freedom to hold onto their old ways of life when they

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<sup>249</sup> Tuss, interview with Kohl.

<sup>250</sup> Richard, interview with Kohl.

found American practices unacceptable. While immigrants have always chosen whether to accept or reject certain aspects of American life as they adjust, the war brides made these choices while living in American homes, among native-born American husbands, children, and in-laws. The women who reported raising their children differently from their peers, or the women who introduced their American families and friends to French, English, or Asian cooking, illustrated the possibilities open to women who felt their pre-immigration practices were preferable to the American alternative. The war brides and their children exemplified the new attitude toward ethnicity in the United States through their embrace of, and, in many cases, insistence upon, ethnic difference.

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<sup>251</sup> Waters, *Ethnic Options*, p. 20.

## Conclusion

In May, 2008, the *Lewistown Morning Tribune* of Lewistown, Idaho, reported on the last meeting of the English Club of Aberdeen, Washington, a group of British war brides from communities in western Washington that began meeting in 1946. Over the last several years, their membership of around ten began to die, or move away to be closer to children and medical facilities. When reporter Callie White attended the club's final meeting, the women discussed their marriages to American soldiers, their immigration to the United States, and, finally, the development of their ethnic identity after decades living in Washington. According to White, "[i]n every respect, the women are proud to be Americans. But they can't let go of the Union Jack, tea time, or their marvelous accents."<sup>252</sup> One of the war brides, Joyce Haner, explained her affinity for both the United States and Great Britain in terms of retaining a connection to the past while embracing the realities of the present and future: "I think you're proud of your citizenship and proud of your heritage."<sup>253</sup> For all the women, membership in the English Club was an important aspect of their identity, and the women considered themselves, in the words of a club member, Margaret Lundgren, "like sisters."<sup>254</sup>

A few scattered collections of reminiscences from war brides, including the Montana Historical Society's Oral History Project, told stories that matched the experiences of the members of the English Club of Aberdeen. Many of the early collections were gathered by the war brides themselves, while the daughters and granddaughters of war brides have written most of the academic work that exists on the women. Scholars and others interested in the war brides often focus on the romantic nature of their encounters with American GIs, their whirlwind courtships, and the endless sacrifices that the women made to make lives and marriages work in

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<sup>252</sup> Callie White, "English Club Holds Its Final Meeting," *Lewistown Morning Tribune*, May 12, 2008.

<sup>253</sup> White, "English Club Holds Its Final Meeting."

the United States. Undoubtedly, an analysis of the women's lives would be incomplete without recognizing the significant hurdles the women faced as they made a new life in the United States. To Pierre Berton, who wrote the forward to a collection of stories from war brides who settled in Canada, "the remarkable postscript to the story of the war brides is the indisputable evidence of marriages that worked."<sup>255</sup> Joyce Hibbert, a British war bride in Canada, who published the first collection of war bride stories in 1978, asserted that "most of the women...are now ordinary Canadian citizens, but their romantic journey - both physical and emotional - to their new land and the courage, humor, and determination that marked their adventures sets them apart."<sup>256</sup> When Ji-Yeon Yuh sought to explain why, often over the objections of husbands and other family members, her subjects agreed to take part in her research, she said the women "want the world to know that they were people trying to live decent lives just like everybody else."<sup>257</sup>

While it remained important to recognize those aspects of the women's stories, an exclusive focus on these narratives as love stories negated the impact that World War II and the upheaval it caused around the world had on women generally and the war brides in particular. While a wide body of literature explained the impact of war on women, only a few scholars have given the war brides the attention they deserve as participants in the war. As the stories from Montana war brides suggested, the women were a critical part of waging war, both as workers and as members of auxiliary branches of the military, and they were as likely to be targets of bombings and attacks as were the soldiers they would eventually marry. The war brides should not be written off in half a sentence in American history textbooks, and their stories should not be viewed as a mostly irrelevant postscript to the impact of World War II on the United States,

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<sup>254</sup> White, "English Club Holds Its Final Meeting," p. 1

<sup>255</sup> Pierre Burton, in Ben Wicks, *Promise You'll Take Care of my Daughter: The Remarkable War Brides of World War II*, (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1993), p. ix.

<sup>256</sup> Joyce Hibbert, *The War Brides*, (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1978), p. xi.

Europe, Australia, and Asia, more appropriate for romance novels or sentimental movies and television shows.

Studies of war brides could not only enhance historians' understanding of the impact of World War II on women, but also help historians to make sense of the development of cultural pluralism in the United States in the twentieth century. The soldiers and their war brides were very much products of their era. The men's marriages to women of diverse ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds illustrated the "broad social integration" among Americans, particularly those who shared a European ethnic heritage, which developed in the twentieth century.<sup>258</sup>

While Richard Alba, who wrote a sociological study of European ethnicity in the United States, saw inter-ethnic marriage as the "most impressive evidence of the diminishing power of ethnicity," the stories of Montana war brides indicated that ethnic identity still played a vital role in the lives of these first-generation immigrants and their families.<sup>259</sup> As with the Cold War era suburban families that shaped Elaine Tyler May's analysis of the 1950s, the couples placed a high premium on family, community, social clubs, and other institutions that would stabilize their lives in an era marked by great uncertainty. Furthermore, the women's expression of ethnic identity, and the great deal of thought that they had put into questions of ethnicity and the immigrant experience, marked them as members of a generation in which, in Gail Sheehy's words, the "democratization of education" through initiatives like the GI Bill led to a "democratization of personhood," which allowed "the opportunity for large numbers of ordinary people to take themselves seriously...to make a sustained project of the ordinary self."<sup>260</sup> Arlene Skolnick, a historian of the American family, termed this "psychological gentrification," and the

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<sup>257</sup> Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, p. 6.

<sup>258</sup> Alba, *Ethnic Identity*, p. 10.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>260</sup> Arlene Skolnick, quoting Gail Sheehy, *Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of*



assertion of a clearly-defined, distinct, hyphenated ethnic identity among most of the war brides can also be seen as the product of this phenomenon.<sup>261</sup>

Previous scholarship on immigrants tended to focus on the experiences of the people who migrated during the great waves of immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The findings of historians like Donna Gabaccia and John Bodnar, who focused on early twentieth century immigration, suggested that the war brides, and the immigrants who followed them, approached ethnicity and ethnic identity much differently from previous waves of immigrants. In Gabaccia's analysis, the second generation, or, the children of the original immigrants, "walk[ed] on the edge," or lived "between worlds" as both Americans and members of an ethnic community, which seemed, in the case of the war brides, to more accurately describe the experiences of the immigrants themselves.<sup>262</sup> The way that the children of the war brides express ethnicity, and whether they follow the typical voting, residential, and employment patterns of second-generation immigrants, remains unstudied as of yet and would also tell historians and sociologists a great deal about the immigrant experience of the war brides.

As Seena Kohl asserted, the women's decision to marry and immigrate "defined their lives."<sup>263</sup> The interviews indicated that the women considered the pros and cons of their decisions for decades after their arrival. Major life events, including having children, starting new jobs, moving, and retiring caused the women to compare their lives in the United States to what life could have been like in Europe, Australia, or Asia. War brides came to Montana in the months and years following World War II knowing only their husbands. They met, and frequently lived with, their husband's relatives; they also reached out to other war brides to make

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*Uncertainty*, (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>261</sup> Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, p. 16.

<sup>262</sup> Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, p. 114.

<sup>263</sup> Kohl, "Love, Valor, and Endurance", p. 26.

connections and share common experiences as immigrants and as young wives and mothers. Eventually, the women joined churches as well as community groups and added paid work to their other commitments. The women maintained connections with loved ones overseas while becoming more involved and more invested in the Montana communities where they lived, worked, and raised their children. In an era that encouraged “hyphenated ethnicity,” and in rural communities where people of various European ethnicities had learned to live with one another’s differences decades earlier, the women developed a complex ethnic identity. It was neither exclusively American nor only a reflection of the women’s home countries. In the twentieth century, these forms of ethnic identification became the norm. World War II-era war brides exemplified this transformation of attitudes toward ethnic identity in their adjustment and assimilation to life in the United States.

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