



Student "farmerettes"—dressed in khaki uniforms and straw hats—grew vegetables on a farm leased by the State Normal and Industrial School (now UNC–Greensboro) to support the war effort, 1918. Images courtesy of University Archives Photograph Collection, University Archives and Manuscripts, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, NC, USA.

# The Women's Land Army of America

by Gary Moore\*

When America entered World War I (WWI), about 80 percent of the people in North Carolina lived in rural areas. Across America, 30 percent of the population lived on farms. Agriculture was very important for the economy.

When thousands of young men marched off to the war, who was left to do the farming? Who plowed the fields and harvested the crops? Who picked the apples and cotton? Who milked the cows and took care of the livestock?

The Women's Land Army of America!

## The Idea Begins in Britain

World War I began in Europe in 1914. At the time, women in Great

Britain were protesting the fact that they could not vote and had fewer rights than men. The outbreak of WWI interrupted their marches and demonstrations for *suffrage*—the right to vote in an election. But women wanted to help with the war effort. So the war also opened a new window of opportunity for women to prove that they were equal to men.

By 1917 Great Britain had a serious food shortage. The Germans had a war tactic called a naval blockade—to stop food and other supplies from entering or leaving Great Britain. The British also suffered a major harvest failure. It left the British with only three weeks of food in reserve.

To address this food shortage, British women and the British

Board of Agriculture formed the Women's Land Army (WLA). So, instead of marching for the right to vote, 250,000 British women marched to the fields to grow and harvest food. These women were known as Land Lassies or Land Girls. The idea of the Women's Land Army soon spread to Australia and America.

## The WLA of America

Even before entering the war, the United States government encouraged Americans to plant what became known as Victory Gardens to help their Allies in Europe. In April 1917 the United States entered World War I. Now it became even more important to feed the armies. By the winter of 1917, there were food shortages, and prices had skyrocketed. There

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were food riots in a number of large American cities. It was obvious that America needed an organization like the Women's Land Army of Great Britain.

On December 1917 several women's groups met in New York and formed the Women's Land Army of America. By the summer of 1918, 33 states had formed WLA units. Between 1917 and 1919, nearly 20,000 American women joined the effort and became known as farmerettes.

Most farmerettes were young white women of college age. They wore uniforms and practiced military drills such as marching. They lived in canvas sleeping tents with wood floors. In some places they lived in college dormitories. They even had officers selected from among their ranks.

Many WLA members worked in California, where they picked vegetables and fruit. Others volunteered in northeastern states like New York and Vermont, where they picked grapes and apples or worked on dairy farms.

The WLA was not as popular in the southern states. Some farmers doubted that women had the strength to do farmwork. Many believed that women belonged in the house, not in the fields. Of course, African American women had long been doing back-breaking work in the fields, first during slavery and then in the early years of freedom. Poor white women had often toiled in the fields alongside their menfolk as well. But these deeply held beliefs about the role of women in southern society were hard to change. And the question of race entered the picture. There was concern about white women picking cotton in the fields alongside African-American workers.



Young farmerettes cheer for the camera—happy to do their part for the war effort, ca. 1918. Image courtesy of the US National Archives and Records Administration.

But in spite of these beliefs, some young women did go to work for the WLA in North Carolina. During the summer of 1918, 10 students from the State Normal and Industrial School (now UNC–G) worked on a 300-acre farm near Greensboro. These farmerettes produced 1,100 bushels of wheat, 3,000 bushels of corn, 2,500 gallons of tomatoes, and 2,000 gallons of beans.

Farm work was hard. It took strength to plow with horses and carry bushel baskets filled with produce. And it took knowledge. Since society believed woman's place was in the home, few women had a knowledge of agriculture. However, after they were taught what to do, the women became very good workers. And they were dedicated to doing their part to win the war. The Women's Land Armies of America, Britain, and Australia played a major role in helping the Allies win World War I.

## After World War I

World War I ended on November 11, 1918. The Women's Land Army disbanded, and the women returned to their previous lives. However, life was not the same. Women were no longer willing to meekly accept their previous role in society.

Women had proved they could do equal work in the Women's Land Army. How could governments still argue that women were not equal to men? In Great Britain the Representation of People Act of 1918 gave women the right to vote. In 1919 the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act removed gender restrictions on employment. In the United States the 19th Amendment, which was ratified in 1920, gave women the right to vote.

"There was little point in pretending anymore," wrote Dr. Gerry Oram, a WWI historian at Swansea University. "Women had proved they could take on any role a man had done, and they'd played an enormous part in winning the war." 🌸

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Women's Land Army of America poster, ca. 1918. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, WWI Posters [LC-DIG ppsca-13492].