



**WOMEN'S LAND ARMY
OF AMERICA**



Washington, D.C.

REPORT OF DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DIVISION

WOMANS LAND ARMY OF AMERICA

1918-1919

Dear all,

The District of Columbia has completed its first year of activity; a year successful beyond all expectations in a diversity of enterprises, chiefly in Montgomery and Prince George Counties, Maryland, and in unlooked for fields of social adjustment between county and city. As a result of the connection of our activities with the Maryland Council of Defense and the District of Columbia War Garden Committee, appointed by the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, As a sequel to this work a detailed report was requested by the Office of Markets of the Rural Organization Services of the United States Department of Agriculture.

A close co-operation has been kept up with the Office of Farm Management, through Dr. E. V. Wilcox and with the States Relations through Mr. E. Merritt, both of the United States Department of Agriculture. At the beginning of the work both signed themselves as organizers of the District of Columbia Womans Land Army and have given freely of their time as advisers to our Committee.

More recently our progress has been stimulated by the co-operation of Mr. T. J. Newbill of the States Relations Service, and M. O. Evans, Supervisor of Farm Help Specialists, and by Mr. John Poole, President of the National Rotary Club.

The Maryland Council of Defense, through its Montgomery County Chairman, Mrs. Frank Wilson, has requested our report for filing with the Maryland State record. The Prince George County Council of Defense has also received our report and is co-operating with us.

In all, our three units at Broad Creek, Rockville and Ednor, and detachments at Chillum and Idylwood, registering over a hundred workers, served twenty-eight employers, with earnings of about three thousand dollars. Of the money earned there has been a surplus of several hundred dollars available at the close of the season and this sum is being applied for administration and publicity expenses and return of funds, in part, to subscribers.

Since October the special nutting unit already described in the October report, continued expeditions for collecting nuts for gas mask making, ending the season with a reunion attended by four hundred people. One of our Executive Committee used a detachment of unit workers to harvest cowpeas on her farm in Idylwood, Va. Mrs. Patterson, State Chairman of Virginia, has been invited to take part in our counsels to make suitable adjustment of the many calls that come to us for help from Virginia, especially on the border of the District of Columbia.

Our actual farm service continued up to December 1st at the Rockville camp, where there was the greatest variety of occupations imaginable, from garden work and actual farm labor, including corn shucking and silo making, to mending of the State road and assisting at the County Fair. Our work might have been twice as great if we could have had more girls. At Ednor apples from five thousand trees were saved. *

On January 3rd a most successful reunion of farmerettes, farmers and friends was held at the College Womans Club, at which Mrs. Dorothy Hubert, Federal Director, gave an informal address on the Womans Land Army of America throughout the country. Mrs. Hubert also addressed the recent Reconstruction Conference in Washington, held in the Auditorium of the Interior Department, on the occasion of an exhibit of Womans Land Army film, arranged by Mrs. Bertha Taylor Voorhorst, Secretary of the D. C. Division.

Many other opportunities have been used by the Executive Committee to speak for the Womans Land Army of America. A special program was arranged for Miss Sophie Carey at the Washington Club, the subject being "Why The Womans Land Army of America Should Continue After the War." One of the guest expressing great interest was Mrs. William Howard Taft.

We have not let the year pass without a glimpse into the future. Our Executive Committee believe that the District of Columbia Commissioners in the Department of Labor will find the suitable field of work in the District of Columbia itself and that through the Clearance Department of the U. S. Employment Service all work in Maryland to which we were called may be cared for by the Maryland authorities and that work may be largely in recruiting for and placing units within the District of Columbia.

Respectfully submitted,

A. C. Ransome

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* At Broad Creek several acres of wheat, oats and rye were shocked and a variety of small fruits to the value of over one thousand dollars were saved.

At Chillum the crops of carrots and beets were gathered and bunched for market which, but for the timely service of the farmerettes would have been plowed under.

Postscript: When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the newly established United States Food Administration publicized a campaign that "Food Will Win The War." In Europe, tens of thousands of civilians died each day of starvation and malnutrition. The United States was spared the domestic

destruction of their European counterparts, but still faced severe labor and resource constraints as millions were drafted or enlisted into the armed forces and German submarine attacks brought maritime trade to a standstill.

Family farms were particularly hard-hit by the war. The fathers and sons that traditionally tended and harvested crops were shipped overseas. To save American agriculture, these farms needed a new labor source. That's where the "Farmerettes" of the Women's Land Army of America (WLA/WLAA) came in. The concept of the WLA originated in Great Britain and was borrowed by a collection of Suffragettes. They came to the conclusion that the best way to make the case for their participation in American democracy was to do their part to protect it.

Formed in 1917, the WLA recruited, vetted, and trained tens of thousands of American women, and deployed them to farms throughout the United States. The Farmerettes lived in communal camps for weeks or months at a time, working long hours in the fields, tending to livestock, and delivering produce to market. Recruitment was easy. Convincing obstinate farmers that Farmerettes would be an asset to their farm, rather than a burden, was more difficult.

This report written by Amy Ransome, Chair of the D.C. Division, describes the work of her Farmerettes, and her vision for the organization's future. Ransome describes her division's successful efforts saving various fields from ruin, and one somewhat unusual assignment: gathering nuts. These nuts were not food, but fuel burned to produce a form of "activated charcoal" used in battlefield gas masks to filter poison from the air. Other materials used for the task included peach pits and coconut shells. The work of Farmerettes during the 1918 harvest won the organization respect from many a skeptical farmer, and by 1919, the organization was planning for a major expansion.

Ransome's prediction of an enduring peacetime role for the WLA was not to be. At the end of 1918, the national WLA organization was converted from a private entity into a division of the Department of Labor. In a deal negotiated between the Secretary of Labor and Juliet Morgan Hamilton, a WLA leader and daughter of banker JP Morgan, the Labor Department agreed to fund the WLA for the foreseeable future, and to let women continue to lead it. Suffragette Dorothy N. Hubert was hired to administer the organization.

Despite his acquiescence to the deal, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson took a condescending attitude toward the WLA's work, and when Congress moved to slash the organization's budget when the war was one, he refused to intervene. Without help from the federal government, the WLA and its state and local entities scrambled for private funding, but there was none to be found. Many of the organization's WLA's top benefactors, Suffragettes and Temperance advocates, turned their attention and resources to passing the 18th and 19th Amendments, and the return of millions of young men, veterans looking for work, renewed the stigma against women performing farm work, or manual labor in general. By the end of 1919, the WLA was formally dissolved.

When the United States entered World War II, the WLA returned in full force. A long, multi-front war, World War II severely stressed American food and labor supplies, and the reinvigorated WLA scaled up accordingly. Backed by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and led by Department of Agriculture economist Florence Hall, the WLA deployed millions of women to work on farms in dozens of states between 1943 and 1945. Their work paid off. Food production spiked, despite a decline in total agricultural employment. The WLA continued its work until 1947.