Florence the Farmerette: How America's Farmerettes Helped Women Win the Right to Vote

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In 1918, Chicago resident and University of Chicago freshman Florence Falkenau lied about her age to the recruiters for the Women's Land Army of America (WLA). She told them she was eighteen years old. She was only seventeen. She then convinced her reluctant parents to let her spend three months working on a farm through the WLA in West Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, 700 miles away. In doing so, Florence, my grandmother and the daughter of a prominent Chicago building contractor and a suffragist mother, joined 15,000 young WLA members to plow, sow, harvest, slop pigs, drive tractors, repair farm machinery, and milk cows. Once a week, they prepared supper for their fellow farmerettes. These young ladies, most of them with no agricultural experience, took the place of farmers and their sons who had dropped their hoes and milk pails and leaped from their tractors to march off to the battlefields in Europe.

Farmerettes like Florence joined girls and women across the country doing their part for the Great War. Those not tilling the soil worked in hospitals, battlefield medical camps, and factories; behind the wheel of ambulances; and in their kitchens sewing bandages and collecting clothes for wounded French soldiers. When these female war workers picked up their tools to fight for democracy, they had no idea they would shape the

A young Florence (center) alongside her older sisters Therese and Arline taken at their farm near Benton Harbor, Michigan.

These volunteers, identified as Mrs. Sidney Long, Mrs. Lester E. Frankenthal, Mrs. Joseph De Frees, and Mrs. Samuel Keiser, rolled bandages for the Red Cross in Chicago in April 1917.

outcome of the war and women's roles in the workplace, and spur their right to vote.

Nearly everyone Florence knew had an enlisted family member. She reminded her parents, Victor and Marie Falkenau, that there were no boys in their family. "Boys my age are being sent overseas to do far more perilous work," she told them.[1] All she needed to do was to pass a physical exam to prove she was fit.

Victor and Marie didn't see how Florence was going to make it. She knew nothing about farm work except for petting the horses, cows, and ponies and collecting eggs from the chickens at the family's Rest-a-Bit Farm in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Depending on a cook and housekeeper at home, Florence had no skills in these tasks either.

Florence, Victor and Marie's third and youngest daughter, vacationed at the shore in Florida during the winter holidays, along with her mother and sisters Therese and Arline. As girls, they had driven a pony cart from their three-story brick house at 5740 Woodlawn Avenue around their University of Chicago neighborhood in Hyde Park. White bows held back Florence's wavy blonde hair. Victor, who had constructed several of the city's iconic edifices, including the Stock Exchange Building, the Congress Plaza Hotel, and the Meyer Buildings, made sure his little trio lacked nothing. No one in the family had envisioned Florence chasing squealing pigs or hacking corn stalks with a scythe.

Without leaving home and subjecting herself to hard labor, Florence could have gotten involved in the war efforts her schoolmates undertook. At the end of 1917, coeds working at the university's surgical dressing station produced 18,500 bandages in a little over a month.[2] Students sewing for the American Fund for French Wounded met three days a week for five hours to make layettes and comforters for babies. The University Dames contributed six dozen pajamas. At the Red Cross Auxiliary on campus, 900 members produced 500 garments a month.

Others, like Florence, had trotted off to farms in increasing numbers since 1916, before the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917. Food production and prices had reached a crisis. The US government was sending grain and vegetables to its European allies because their war-torn agricultural systems could no longer produce sufficient food for their populations. On this side of the ocean, Americans dug deeper into their pockets and purses to scrounge for more change to buy flour, sugar, and beef, as prices across the country had quadrupled.

In New York City, mothers living in tenements took to the streets, crying out for potatoes, onions, and cabbage. More than 300 women living on the Lower East Side marched into City Hall crying, "We are starving! We want bread!"[3] In Chicago, on West Division Street, mothers carrying their babies barged into a meat shop to complain

Designed by Frederic G. Cooper and printed by the W. F. Powers Company, this 1917 poster for the US Food Administration encouraged limiting food waste and cutting back on wheat and meat.

Featuring the slogan "Food Will Win the War," this poster produced by the American Lithographic Company promoted food conservation rules from the US Food Administration.

about the cost.[4] The police arrested three of them. The mothers protested, "What would you have us do, steal the food we need to keep our children alive?"

Chicago's *Day Book*, a free daily newspaper for the working class, announced, "Cost of living is aeroplaning as never before."[5] Families spread less butter on their bread now that prices per pound had risen to 40 and 45 cents from 35.[6] They cut back on sweets with the cost of sugar going up to seven cents from five and a half. Working men's wives found that the cost of twenty-six of their staple items was higher in January 1916 than in any previous year.[7]

Florence's family, like millions of others across the country, felt the pinch of rising prices. They did their bit, as President Wilson encouraged all Americans to do, by growing fruits and vegetables in their war gardens to increase food production. Florence's father turned over more of the land on Rest-A-Bit Farm to cherries, melons, and tomatoes. At home, her mother instructed Anna, the cook, to cut down on sugar, flour, wheat, and meat in their daily meals. But that wasn't enough.

The *New York Times* claimed in March 1917 that the crops of that year would determine whether the world starved or was fed.[8] It warned that food reserves would run out by the end of the year. Increasing American foodstuffs was critical. The Department of Agriculture reiterated to farmers the importance of efficiency in food production and storage.[9] To address the problem, federal, state, and city governments came up with various schemes to form "agricultural armies." These consisted of schoolboys, men who had failed the army physical, prisoners of war, factory employees assigned to farm work, or immigrants from Manhattan's Lower East Side.[10]

President Woodrow Wilson reiterated the importance of agriculture in a speech in April 1917. He said, "By planting and increasing production in every possible way, every farmer will perform a labor of patriotism for which he will be recognized as a soldier of the commissary."[11] At the same time, he did not see a role for women in farming. He said, "The country's agriculture cannot be turned over to women, boys, and old men. It is too huge a job. The character of the work is not the same as that performed by women in the fields of Europe. . . . The gigantic crops of this nation must be handled by able-bodied men if the food supply is to be increased sufficiently to make adequate exports to the allied nations."[12] Little did he recognize that his country's young women would help keep food on Americans' tables and send wheat, meat, and grains to Europe's starving soldiers.

By fall 1917, newspapers reported that the head of the US Food Administration Herbert Hoover's motto "Food will win the war," had become the new "Battle Hymn of the Republic."[13] The war was being fought out of Americans' kitchens, he proclaimed.[14] With this charge, citizens across all forty-eight states organized into brigades and work groups to encourage every household to reduce food waste. In North Dakota, a woman rode on horseback across the plains to inform housewives what they could do to help the allied powers.[15] The press began to call Hoover "The Food Dictator," as he promoted "Meatless Mondays" and "Wheatless Wednesdays." "Eat more corn, oats, and rye products, fish and poultry, fruits, vegetables and potatoes, baked, boiled, and broiled foods" were splattered across propaganda posters.

Women didn't wait around until the government figured out how to resolve the food crisis. Even before the WLA's founding, young American women had already taken their hands to rakes, hoes, and plows to produce sustenance. Women's organizations and colleges had created training programs where young ladies learned farm chores and how to repair tractors and tools. During the summer of 1917, Vassar College sent twelve girls to work on its 740-acre farm to grow food for the students.[16] They worked 45 hours a week, pocketed 17.5 cents an hour, and did "every kind of work that the men tried, with the exception of cleaning the stables."[17] Four hundred Mount Holyoke College students tilled the land at their school's property. Students at Bryn Mawr, Goucher, Smith, and many others did as well.[18] At Barnard College's Women's Agricultural Camp in Bedford, New York, faculty learned how to structure a camp and how to organize large groups of women to work in the fields. Female students from colleges nationwide were spending their summers contributing to the war effort—by doing farm work.

The press was already calling these young ladies who worked on farms "farmerettes," a combination of "farmer" and "suffragette." The term came about in 1911 when Alva Vanderbilt Belmont, a multimillionaire socialite and an activist in the women's suffrage movement, established the Brookholt School of Agriculture for Women on 200 acres of her property on Long Island in New York. Belmont designed it as a vocational farm school for women. She aimed to give women economic independence so they wouldn't depend on factory work.[19] Instead, they could become superintendents of farms or work in agriculture and landscape gardening.[20] Her aspirations of turning women into farmers aligned with her convictions about women's suffrage. Within a month of the school's founding, the women earned the name, somewhat in jest, "farmerette."[21]

With several farms around the country putting women to work, a conference took place in December

Above: designed by Howard Chandler Christy, this 1918 poster depicts a woman cooking with cornmeal, oats, and barley instead of wheat. Below: the Women's Land Army of America had a training school at the University of Virigina.

1917 in New York City, where land and agricultural organizations convened to address food production problems in the United States. At the event, representatives from the Food Administration, the Women's Division of the State Defense Council, the Garden Club of America, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the State College of Agriculture, the Mayors' Committee of Women on National Defense, and other groups formed the WLA.[22] This took place only six months before Florence joined. Some of the inspiration for the WLA came from the Women's Land Army in Great Britain, which had come into being in the winter of 1917. It already had women plowing the fields and running tractors and other heavy machinery.

The new organization made its headquarters in New York City. The WLA worked with existing women's organizations, including garden clubs, suffrage societies, civic groups, the YWCA, and universities to recruit volunteers.[23] Just a few months later, in February 1918, as the food shortage heightened and the war dragged on, the WLA executive committee put out a statement to encourage more young ladies to join: "The world is facing famine and the world looks to America to save it."[24]

Left: this WLA poster was designed by Henry George Gawthorn in support of women doing farm work. Below: a woman driving a horse-drawn plow on a farm road in Libertyville, Illinois, in 1918.

Jane Addams on July 22, 1915, after returning to Chicago from the Netherlands for an international women's peace conference. During her time abroad, she also traveled throughout Europe to discuss peace issues with world leaders.

Women entering agriculture not only helped farm families put food on the nation's dinner tables, they also served the needs of the suffragists. Many of the largest and most important suffrage organizations supported America's entry into the war. They felt that farmerettes proving their mettle would earn them support and admiration from the public and policymakers to push for women's right to vote.[25] Florence's mother, Marie, was one of these suffragists. She had been active in their neighborhood Hyde Park chapter of the National American Woman Suffrage Association since 1912.

Chicago's Jane Addams, founder of Hull-House and a suffragist, who had previously opposed the country's interventions in the war, now promoted helping France and England. Food Administrator Herbert Hoover soon named her a government spokeswoman for America's war efforts. She traveled around the country encouraging women to be mindful of food consumption so that women in Europe would not want for it. She asserted that countries were uniting in the common interest of preventing starvation.[26]

When Florence was ready to head to a farm in the summer of 1918, the WLA had recruits working the fields and orchards in twenty-three states, including Illinois.[27] By October, these states had deployed 136 land army units.[28]

In Illinois, Margaret Day Blake, a prominent and socially active Chicago native, took on the state's leadership of the WLA. As part of her duties, she facilitated the development of a newly formed 240-acre Illinois Training Farm for Women near Libertyville, forty miles north of Chicago. She was the right person to take on this important state and national role. She had volunteered at Hull-House, helped start the Women's Trade League Union in Chicago, and fought to get Illinois women the right to vote in 1913 for presidential electors and local offices. She envisioned giving agricultural training to college-educated city women.[29] By May, one month after its inauguration, twenty-three girls were tilling, sowing, planting, and milking cows.[30]

Many Chicago elites and businesses wanted to get in on this novel venture. The International Harvester Corporation donated a Titan tractor along with someone

Above: counter to the Chicago Tribune *article that insisted women wouldn't do heavy farmwork, women operated tractors in Libertyville, Illinois. Below: women working in a field on a farm in Oak Forest, Illinois.*

to train the farmerettes to operate it. Other in-kind donations came from Chicago companies, including Armour & Company; Sears, Roebuck & Co.; Deere & Company (John Deere); Marshall Field & Co.; Carson Pirie Scott & Co.; and others.[31] Blake encouraged her acquaintances at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University to recruit female students. The camp would house forty to fifty girls at a time for each six-month course.[32] Over a fourth of the applicants to Libertyville ready to "don their overallettes," pick potato bugs off stems and leaves, and plow the fields came from the University of Chicago.[33, 34]

"Although the students will tend the chickens and milk the cows, they will not be asked to perform the more onerous farm work. For the heavy work, a man will be employed,"[35] the *Chicago Tribune* reassured its readers about Libertyville.

That is not what happened. Women who trained there later drove tractors, milked cows, shucked corn, laid barn floors, won scholarships in agricultural education at Midwestern universities, and became WLA unit directors.[36]

Blake aimed to develop a comprehensive farm training program for an entire season or year.[37] Florence did not have time for that; she wanted to ship out to a farm right away. She boarded a train in Chicago to Shenandoah Junction, West Virginia, to work on the 500-acre Media Farm. She traveled alone and arrived with no prior experience working on a farm. Gazing out the train window at the low-lying mountains and verdant acres of horse farms, territory she had never seen, was a "high adventure," she wrote to her parents.

Media Farm needed workers that summer. The owners, the McDonald family, had already sent two boys to the battlefields in France.[38] John McDonald, thirty years old and the youngest of six sons, managed the farm. He had just returned to the family home after graduating from Oregon Agricultural College to help his parents maintain the land that had been in the family since 1780.[39]

Even before the war began, the McDonald clan had already invited female college students to work at Media Farm. It was the first to host farmerettes in West Virginia.[40] The family had built an orchard cottage to house them over the summer. Eight girls at a time would work from June 1 to November 1, 1918.[41] They'd work for two or three months and cook their own meals from foods produced on-site.[42] The McDonalds believed their female crew would free up men to work on nearby farms.[43]

"Mr. John" picked up Florence in the runabout at the Shenandoah Junction train station. On the way to the farm, two-and-a-half miles outside of Charles Town, he halted the horse in front of the schoolhouse where a Red Cross meeting about the community's war efforts was taking place.[44] In Florence's first encounter with the South, she barely understood the locals' accents and sayings like "yase indeed" or "no indeed" or calling the afternoon "evening."

As Florence and Mr. John pulled up to the Gothic Revival farmhouse, one of the farmerettes, Carlotta Lowell Taber, came to greet Florence and settle her into the cottage, the home she would share with Carlotta and six other farmerettes for the next three months.[45] From the porch, Florence looked over the apple orchards and, gazing farther, at the Blue Ridge Mountains.

While some girls brought the standard WLA uniforms, the farmerettes could mix and match a khaki tunic with a belt, knickers, leggings, denim or cotton overalls, and a blouse.[46] They wore men's clothes, including pants, an unsightly shock to the mores of society ladies and gentlemen, or anyone else within sight. Men and women were just getting accustomed to the female sex wearing trousers designed by Amelia Bloomer and those suited for riding bicycles. Now, these college girls were fastening clasps to hold up their pants. Florence had packed overalls, long-sleeved shirts, heavy work shoes, and a straw hat, an essential piece of the wardrobe. She had also nestled into her trunk a few cotton dresses for supper time and visits to town.

Carlotta, "the boss," was twenty-eight, older than most of the farmerettes, and had worked on another farm before this one. She had been helping the McDonalds for several months. Carlotta, according to Florence, was tall, thin, and athletic. She had studied at Bryn Mawr. After that, she spent two years at the Cornell School of Agriculture.[47] Esther Forbes, who had come from the University of Wisconsin, had worked on Media Farm the year before.[48] This summer, she had organized the farmerettes and was helping Mrs. McDonald manage them.[49] Forbes had told the *Worcester Evening Gazette*, "When suddenly the idea presented itself, the idea of working on a 500-acre farm near Harpers Ferry seemed to hold great fascination. The labour situation was desperate, and anything was worth a gamble."[50]

The WLA's standard rules applied to Florence and the others at Media Farm. They put in an eight-hour day with a break for a midday meal, a rest that was unheard of before this time, especially for agricultural laborers.[51] Florence and the other farmerettes received twenty cents an hour on Media Farm, though farmers elsewhere could pay by the hour, day, or the equivalent of piece work.[52]

Every day, Florence hauled herself out of bed at 6:40 to pull on overalls and a cotton blouse to take her place at the breakfast table by 7:00. Mrs. McDonald would pile the table with cereal, fruit, boiled eggs, cold ham, hash, and hot rolls and biscuits.[53] Florence and the farmerettes washed down their vittles with coffee, tea, milk, and water.

After breakfast, the gals assigned to apple picking followed the horse-drawn wagon through the furrows of the apple orchards. By 8:00 A.M., they had already hoisted themselves into the branches of the trees and were twisting the stems to pluck the ripest fruits. They picked

Florence (second from left) with three fellow famerettes working on Media Farm near Shenandoah Junction, West Virginia.

Baldwins, a hard apple for making cider and apple pie; Golden Delicious, which grew abundantly and had a sweet, crisp flavor; Ben Davis, often referred to as a "mortgage lifter" because farmers could count on a lot of fruit that did not drop from the trees until late September; and King David, which resisted disease. After picking, Florence climbed down the branches, pulled back her thick hair, and often ran around the orchard, free like a boy.

In the first few days, Florence not only climbed the trees to harvest apples, she also buried herself in the boughs to cry from homesickness. "No familiar sight or voice!" she lamented to her family. She had never been away from home, except for visiting friends on their farms in Michigan during the summer.

At noon, the siren sounded, calling the girls to dinner. They scrambled down the branches, ambled back to the farmhouse, and washed the grit and sweat from their hands, necks, and faces.

They enjoyed an hour's rest from one o'clock to two o'clock.

Early on, Florence and another farmerette had earned the unfortunate reputation of being "city girls." The first night that Florence had the housekeeper job of making supper for the farmerettes, she found pounds of string beans piled in front of her on the kitchen table. She carefully split open each thin bean to pluck out the tiny pods inside. Only when she set the meager panful of peas in front of the famished farmerettes did she learn the difference between peas and string beans.

Florence and her companions planted and harvested corn. One day after tying stalks together, Florence saw the prettiest sight of her life—the girls coming down the rows, their arms full of ears of corn, their slender bodies visible when the breeze swayed the stalks back. After heaving the cobs into piles before pouring them into the silo, Florence and the others rested, climbed around the silo on the ladders, and, often, once firmly on the ground, turned somersaults.

Florence got so filthy working in the cornfields that even scrubbing with the rose-scented soap her parents had sent did not remove the dirt from her skin, hair, and fingernails. One evening, in a flurry to get to supper on time, she put on slightly soiled overalls and a work shirt instead of a dress. Mr. John told her she was the dirtiest girl he'd ever seen. "I am soaked with perspiration all the time," she wrote to her parents. "The temperature can be 110 in the shade (and there is no shade) or 120 degrees in the sun. It's ridiculous to be neat and dainty here and I'm glad we didn't spend all that money and time on uniforms."

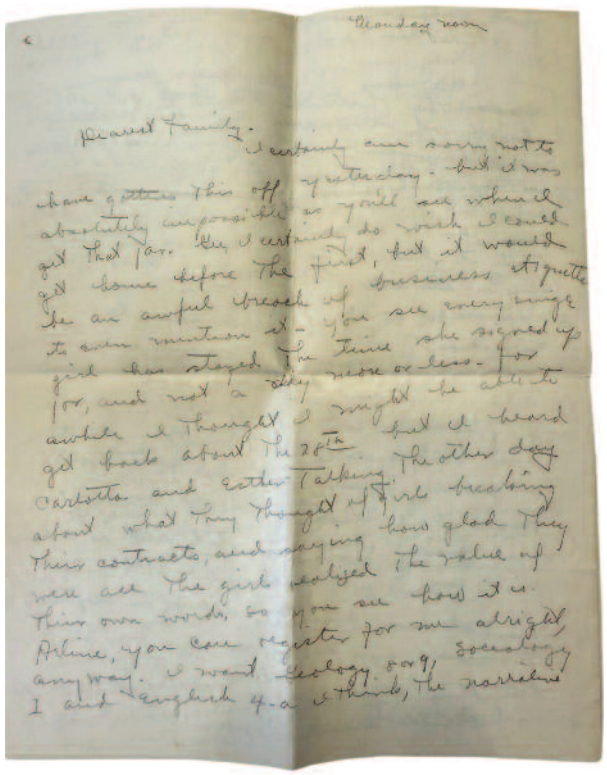
After stitching sack cloth linings for the apple baskets to prevent them from bruising, she told her parents what they already knew. "I found I wasn't much better at the womanual labors than the manual."

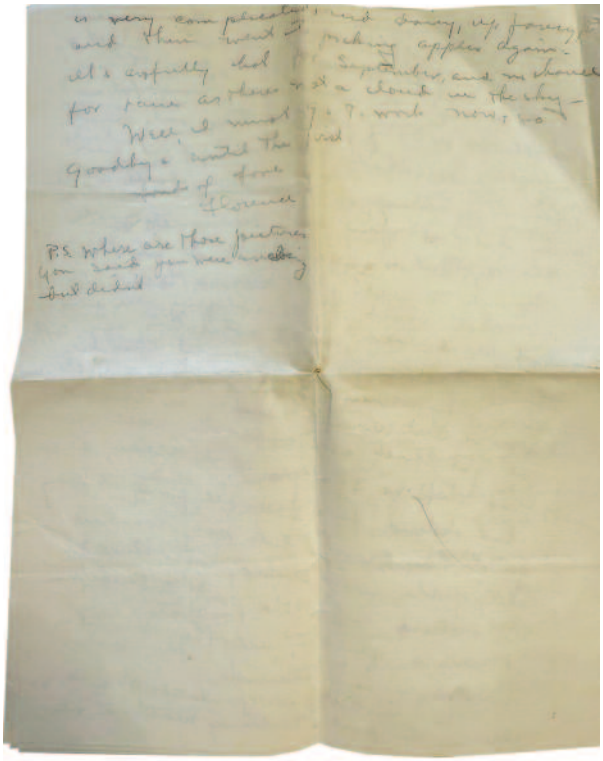
Every morning and night for a week Florence walked across the field to the milk house to take her turn doing "the fool pails": washing them, the mechanical pulsator that created a smooth flow from the cows' teats, and the cloths for cleaning the buckets. "The nice thing about doing pails," she told her parents, "is that you don't have time to get dressed for dinner. I am still in my pants."

Occasionally on weekend nights after supper, Florence and her friends, wearing their floor-length cotton dresses and low heeled, lace-up shoes, piled into the horse-drawn wagon and jostled to Charles Town, Shenandoah Junction, and Harpers Ferry. Residents could pick out the farmerettes a mile away. They wore different clothes and shoes and talked with an accent. The local folks told them they had always wanted to see a real, live farmerette, one of these "home girls." Florence and the others laughed. "It simply kills us, this 'brave' stuff for not one of us has had a better time in our lives." It has been "a circus climbing those strong old trees and looking out over the country for miles around."

Though most farmers initially scorned the idea of deploying city girls to farms, many came around to value and use their labor. Some farmers said that their "quickness and conscientiousness" compensated for men being physically stronger.[54] The secretary of the Illinois State Farmers' Institute said that given the food shortage, "The young women of the land army will be a real and a great help."[55]

On the day Florence turned eighteen, September 1, finally of legal age to be a farmerette, she and the other





Florence wrote this letter to her parents in September 1918, three months into her time working on Media Farm.

gals took off on bicycles to Harpers Ferry, nine miles away, to taste town life and spend their hard-earned wages. Upon returning to the farm, Florence had just enough time before supper to open the birthday package her parents had sent. She welcomed this one even more than the weekly boxes that Victor and Marie filled with the *Chicago Tribune*, cookies, and soap. This time, they sent her a new dress. She unwrapped a big box of chocolates, which, shared among the girls, did not last six hours. Victor included a white lace handkerchief and a check. Most surprising was the vanilla cake that Anna had made. It arrived intact except where the frosting had touched the sides of the box.

She wrote to her family that night. "You cannot imagine how wonderful those luxuries seem to we working women." She also reported, "I'm developing the most intense passion for girly clothes and pretty underwear."

Victor, Florence's father, also contributed to the war effort. Having long given up his bricklayer's trowel and level from the earliest days of his career, he was too old to run off and enlist. Instead, he volunteered as a dollar-a-year man alongside a thousand other successful business executives, merchants, and manufacturers who lent their expertise to the allied cause.[56] Working with the Production Department of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, he oversaw manufacturing of steel at a plant in St. Louis. He also took charge of expediting millions of dollars of the alloy down the Mississippi River and onto trains that would carry it to munitions factories around the country.

While Florence scurried up boughs of trees to pick Golden Delicious apples and ran after muddy pigs squeezing under fences, the second wave of the influenza epidemic broke out in the United States. In August 1918, it struck the Boston Navy Yard, Camp Devens, thirty miles west of Boston, and other military sites. Soldiers carried the disease as they traveled from one base or camp to another. Residents of the Boston, New York, and Philadelphia areas were succumbing to sore throats, fever, chills, and, finally, respiratory failure. It quickly spread around the country. Florence was safe on the farm, but her parents decided not to send her to Smith College in Massachusetts for her sophomore year, where she had planned to transfer. There she would run a greater risk of infection even farther from home than the Shenandoah Valley. Toward the end of September, Florence, disappointed by the lack of another big adventure, returned home.

Shortly after her arrival, on October 1, 1918, the *Chicago Tribune* covered President Wilson's plea to the Senate to pass the amendment for women's suffrage. Wilson insisted to his colleagues in the Senate that allowing women to vote was a "war measure." The president, who

Following the influenza outbreak that arose in the United States in August 1918, women who volunteered for the Red Cross began making influenza masks.

had long opposed women going to the polls, had finally been convinced. "The war would not have been fought . . . without the services of the women—services rendered in every sphere—not merely in the fields of efforts in which we have been accustomed to see them work, but wherever men have worked and upon the very skirts and edges of the battle itself."[57] Though the amendment passed in the House, it fell short by two votes in the Senate. Wilson did not continue the charge.

After the war ended, the WLA experienced controversy over whether it should be managed on a national or state level.[58] By 1919, the organization had lost its strength and its immediate cause. The suffragists who had delighted in the WLA's support for their movement were now focusing on getting Congress to pass the Susan B. Anthony Amendment, not on aiding one of the organizations that got them there.

As a result of the disputes over national versus state control, the Illinois chapter of the WLA decided to secede from the organization, as did those from New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.[59] As the head of WLA in Illinois, Margaret Day Blake informed the president of the WLA that her state, one of the strongest delegations, was withdrawing. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, "The Illinois women have seceded from the national organization saying that the agricultural problems of the west are not understood by the eastern women who drew up the constitution of the national body."[60] The Illinois branch also expressed a philosophical difference with the national unit over the purpose of the Illinois Training Farm for Women. While some saw it as a means to win the war, Blake claimed the farm was more than just an "economic or industrial enterprise"; it gave women long-term opportunities in country life.[61]

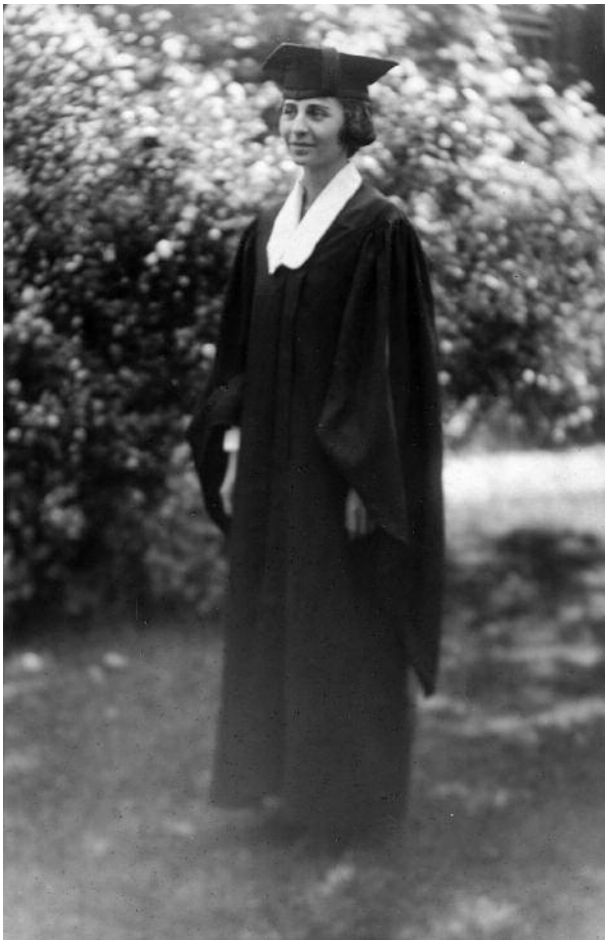
Other state delegations carried on after Illinois and a handful of others dropped out. However, by the summer of 1919, the WLA, despite many state chapters forging on, suffered political and financial problems and began to collapse. Though the national government and the press made little of the organization's demise, the director general of the Department of Labor's Employment Service, John Densmore, wrote a letter to the WLA president. He said, "The work done by the Women's Land Army has not only been valuable in increasing the food supply . . . but it has also demonstrated that women are able to do almost any kind of agricultural work . . . your work . . . has opened up a new means of livelihood for women."[62]

During wartime, women across America, in addition to working on farms, signed up to drive trucks, operate heavy machinery, and assemble airplane motors. One hundred thousand women kept the trains running on time, sold tickets, repaired tracks, and cleaned cars. Twenty thousand nurses trained by the Red Cross

Colloquially known as "Hello Girls," these women were members of the Signal Corps Female Telephone Operators Unit, shown here working in Chaumont, France, on November 5, 1918.

worked across the country's armed forces. They changed the bandages of the sick and wounded, meted out anesthesia in the operating theater, triaged bloody soldiers in the trenches, and worked on shock teams to care for soldiers who had their faces and limbs blown apart. Eight million female Red Cross volunteers dished out food on mess trays in canteens and provided recreational services and physical therapy. They made surgical dressings, masks, and gowns. They volunteered as nurses' aides in veterans' hospitals. Women made up most of the 12,000 drivers for the Red Cross's Motor Service, providing transportation to canteens, hospitals, and camps. Over 1,000 library workers at home and in Europe directed the construction of thirty-six camp libraries and distributed ten million books and magazines to service men. Seven thousand women became "Hello Girls," switchboard operators working for the US Army Signal Corps. Over 200 near the front lines fielded calls and relayed urgent messages. The Salvation Army sent 250 young women to travel with the American Expeditionary Forces to Europe. They wrote letters and mended clothes for the soldiers and served them coffee and donuts.

This poster was published by the American Lithograph Company in 1918 and encouraged women to join the land army to support the war effort.



This photograph of Florence was taken when she graduated from the University of Chicago.

Florence, along with women across the country, finally gained the right to vote on August 18, 1920, when Congress ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. Thousands of women had left sweat in fields and factories and blood on the battlefields to help the United States and its allies defend their country and the world for democracy.

Though the WLA disbanded, the farmerettes of the Great War paved the way for their sisters of World War II. Eleanor Roosevelt, as the assistant director of the volunteer service for the Office of Civilian Defense, as early as 1941, called for a Women's Land Army. She was already writing about it in her syndicated "My Day" column, planning recruitment centers, and developing a conditioning program to help girls get in shape for the labor.[63] The following year, she plunked herself down on a bale of straw on a tractor seat in the rain to tour a training farm in England to see how the British managed their women's land army.[64]

During World War II, the Women's Land Army formed in 1943 as part of the US Crops Corps, and the program operated for five years, employing nearly 3.5 million workers during that time.

This poster from 1917, designed by Charles Edward Chambers, specifically encourages immigrants who came through New York Harbor to support the food conservation efforts during WWI.

By 1943, the War Food Administration of the Department of Agriculture began a new WLA as part of the US Crop Corps. The Agricultural Extension Service held in its ranks 10,000 full-time and 50,000 seasonal farmerettes.[65] It expected another 300,000 to work a few days a week for specialty crops. Without those pioneer Great War farmerettes, Mrs. Roosevelt may never have been able to gin up interest and overcome skepticism around a "city girl" farmer.

Florence put into practice her independence, initiative, and hard work after graduation from college. During the Depression when her geologist husband couldn't find employment, Florence became a social worker to support the family. She and her husband hosted European exchange students through the American Field Service to promote international friendships after World War II. Her husband had been an ambulance driver in France in 1916 with the American Ambulance Field Service.

The contributions of Florence the farmerette, along with thousands of others who drove tractors and harvested crops plus millions of women who sewed bandages, washed down trains, made airplane wings, and nursed wounded soldiers, followed the seventy-year fight of their suffragist sisters' protesting, lecturing, and lobbying. Women who sacrificed their money, energy, and family life and risked their lives to save democracy changed the government's and society's ideas about women's ability to support their country. It still took Congress two years after the end of the war to pass the Nineteenth Amendment, but women's wartime work on the back of the suffragists finally convinced Congress to give many, but not all, women more equality in society.

Neither Florence's nor any other woman's place was just in the home any longer.

Andrea Eschen's essays have appeared in Months to Years, All Your Stories, *and* Spillwords. *Her Substack, "Building Modern Chicago," shares her discoveries while writing a nonfiction book about her great-grandfather, Victor Falkenau, a renowned—and controversial—contractor who built the Stock Exchange, the Congress Hotel, and other iconic buildings in Chicago.*

ILLUSTRATIONS | Illustrations are from the collection of the Chicago History Museum unless otherwise noted. 38, courtesy of Andrea Eschen. 39, top: DN-0067784, Chicago Daily News collection; bottom: Library of Congress, LCCN: 2002708936. 40, Library of Congress, LCCN: 2002722585. 41, top: Library of Congress, LCCN: 2003652812; bottom: Library of Congress, LCCN: 97520484. 42, top: Library of Congress, LCCN: 2003675370; bottom: DN-0070250, Chicago Daily News collection. 43, DN-0064813, Chicago Daily News collection. 44, top: DN-0070249, Chicago Daily News collection; bottom: DN-0070612, Chicago Daily News collection. 46, courtesy of Andrea Eschen. 47, courtesy of Andresa Eschen. 48, DN-0070540, Chicago Daily News collection. 49, Army Signal Corps Photo #: SC-33446. 50, top: courtesy of Andrea Eschen; bottom: Library of Congress, LCCN: 00652171. 51, Special Collections, USDA National Agricultural Library. 52, Library of Congress, LCCN: 2002720171.

FOR FURTHER READING | For more on the Women's Land Army of America, see Elaine F. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory: The Woman's Land Army of America in the Great War* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008). For more on women during World War I, see Lettie Gavin, *American Women in World War I: They Also Served* (University Press of Colorado, 2006); Lynn Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Elizabeth Cobbs, *The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers* (Harvard University Press, 2019).

ENDNOTES

1. This quotation and all other references and descriptions of Florence's adventures as a farmerette come from the letters she wrote to her family during the summer of 1918.
2. All figures in this paragraph come from Leona Bachrach '20, "Women's War Work at the University," *The Chicagoan* 1, No. 4 (March 1918): 6.
3. *New York Herald*, February 21, 1917, 1.
4. *The Day Book*, Chicago, IL, March 28, 1917, 25.
5. *The Day Book*, Chicago, IL, April 10, 1916, 28.
6. Ibid.
7. *The Day Book*, Chicago, IL, April 10, 1916, 28.
8. *The New York Times*, March 30, 1917, 10.
9. Ibid.
10. Elaine F. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory: The Woman's Land Army of America in the Great War* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 28–30.
11. *The Washington Post*, April 13, 1917, 6.
12. Ibid.
13. *Greenfield Republican* (Greenfield, IN), October 11, 1917, 8.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 45.
17. Peter Bronski, "The Farmerettes: Working the Farm, Filling a Gap," *Vassar/The Alumnae Quarterly*, Fall 2011.
18. *The Anaconda Standard* (Anaconda, MT), May 12, 1918, 37.
19. *New York Tribune*, February 26, 1911, 56.
20. *Daily Sentinel*, May 31, 1911, 8.
21. *Brooklyn Eagle*, March 4, 1911, 2.
22. *The Anaconda Standard* (Anaconda, MT), May 12, 1918, 37.
23. "Formation of the Woman's Land Army of America," Digital History 511: Theory & Practice, Central Connecticut State University, Fall 2016, accessed November 5, 2024, https://library.ccsu.edu/dighistFall16/exhibits/show/the-woman-s-land-army-of-ameri/formation-of-the-woman-s-land-.
24. *The Anaconda Standard* (Anaconda, MT), May 12, 1918, 37.
25. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 34.
26. *Kansas City Times*, May 17, 1918, 2.
27. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 107.
28. *Hartford Current*, October 20, 1918, 18.
29. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 155.
30. *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1918, 12.
31. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 156.
32. *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1918, 11.
33. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 156.
34. *University of Chicago Magazine* 10, no. 8 (June 1918): 295.
35. *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1918, 11.
36. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 161.
37. Ibid., 153.
38. Patricia H. Wilkins, "Farmerettes in the Field: The Women's Land Army at Media Farm," *Goldenseal* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 35.
39. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, "Media Farm, Jefferson County," June 7, 1993, 6.
40. *The Pittsburgh Press*, June 3, 1918, 23.
41. *The Shepherdstown Register*, May 30, 1918, 3.
42. *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 8, 1918, 4.
43. *The Shepherdstown Register*, May 30, 1918, 3.
44. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, "Media Farm, Jefferson County," June 7, 1993, 14.
45. Ibid., 5.
46. "State Committees: Structure of the WLAA," Digital History 511: Theory & Practice, Central Connecticut State University, Fall 2016, accessed December 5, 2024, https://library.ccsu.edu/dighistFall16/exhibits/show/the-woman-s-land-army-of-ameri/state-committees--the-connecti.
47. Wilkins, "Farmerettes in the Field," 36.
48. Esther Forbes was an American novelist, historian, and children's writer. In 1943, she received the Pulitzer Prize for History for *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* and the Newberry Medal in 1944 for *Johny Tremain*.
49. *The Pittsburgh Press*, June 3, 1918, 23.
50. Wilkins, "Farmerettes in the Field," 36.
51. "State Committees: Structure of the WLAA," Digital History 511.
52. Wilkins, "Farmerettes in the Field," 37.
53. Julia Davis Adams from her Preface to *Harvest: Collected Works of Julia Davis*, ed. William Theriault (Charles Town, WV: Arts &. Humanities Alliance of Jefferson County, 1992). It describes the summers young Julia spent at Media Farm with the McDonald branch of her family. Julia Davis was the daughter of famed lawyer and 1920 and 1924 Democratic candidate for President, John W. Davis. Her mother, Julia Leavell McDonald, from Media Farm, Jefferson County, died three weeks after giving birth to her. Davis wrote about her summers at Media Farm.
54. *The Anaconda Standard* (Anaconda, MT), May 12, 1918, 37.
55. *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1918, 3.
56. Robert Cuff, "The Dollar-A-Year Men of the Great War," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 1968): 10–24.
57. *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1918, 7.
58. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 240.
59. Ibid., 241.
60. *Chicago Tribune*, January 10, 1919, 14.
61. Ibid.
62. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory*, 267.
63. *Tulsa World*, November 25, 1941, 5.
64. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 7, 1942, 6.
65. *Des Moines Register*, July 19, 1943, 8.