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Zoe

The Women's Land Army's Beginnings and Importance

Most people have heard of Rosie the Riveter or have at least seen the iconic poster of the woman with the red bandana saying "We Can Do It". However, the majority of people have never heard of the "Land Girls" or the women that fed the world when it was most starving. During both World Wars, the young women of America and Britain signed up for back breaking work and a new purpose. These women led the force of women volunteers of the era, aiding in the war effort.

What Was the WLA?

Sadly our world has seen many wars. During those times of need, rationing and other ways to preserve enough food were essential. But that in itself was not always enough to feed soldiers at war as well as the country. This was true especially during World War I and World War II, many of the farmers were drafted causing farms to be short handed and desperately in need of help. During the first world war, the Board of Agriculture in Britain recruited 23,000 women to work in the brand new Women's Land Army. These women replaced the men that were sent off to fight, their main objective being to increase the amount of food production to keep the country from starvation. These women were dubbed "Land Girls". By January of 1915 over 100,000 farmers and men that worked on land had been shipped off for war. This left farms in desperate need of hands.

Land Girl, April 1943

As women stepped into the roles left empty by the men on active duty, they were met with shock and disgust. Numerous people resisted their help, even started to call them "farmettes", a word meant to be an insult derived from suffragette. While they eventually became symbols of patriotism and resilience, the hard working women of the WLA were never seen in the same light as

nurses or other women's volunteers. Nonetheless these young women were a large part of the fabric of volunteers that helped carry their countries to victory.

Formation and the Beginning of the WLA

The program was founded by Dame Meriel Talbot in January of 1917. This was a response to the growing intensity of the war and common food shortages. March 1917 (three months after the WLA was formed), recruitment and training centers started to pop up all over Britain and America. The U.S. had just joined the fight and they had established their own WLA, called the Women's Land Army of America (WLAA), which was modeled after the original in Britain. Volunteers were flooding in looking to help the war effort. These women were eager to sign up for many reasons. One of the main motivations to join was to find purpose among a time where women weren't allowed to serve their country on the front line. Another common reason to become a Land Girl was the independence it brought to the women, the volunteers were sent to farms miles away from home. Here they weren't treated like children and got to experience the world. There were of course seemingly random reasons to sign up, for instance the uniform attracted a surprising amount of girls. Wearing pants wasn't completely unusual at the time but many of the young women had never been allowed to indulge in wearing them. Thousands upon thousands of young women answered the call to help their country and were proud of their newfound duty as a Land Girl.

Women's Land Army Campaign Poster, Circa 1943

Once signed up, they had to undergo an interview and leveling degrees of training. But first, the women had to be reviewed by a board of and participate in a medical examination. The WLA was looking for women that were physically fit but also were willing to be sent anywhere in the country for long stretches of time. This didn't discourage a lot of the women, many were looking for a change of pace and welcomed the idea of going to new, exciting places. Next, the recruits were trained to work in one of the three branches available. The sections of work within the WLA were, the agriculture branch (which was the majority of the WLA), the Timber Corps (responsible for increasing timber production), and the Forage Corps (they mainly dealt with

making hay for animal food and foraging). Some women went through short 4-5 week courses and some learned on the job, it varied depending on their experience. Eventually, they had an estimated 17,000-20,000 women trained and placed on farms across the country. These women lived in wildey different conditions and worked insane schedules, very opposite from their normal lives away from war. They were squished into hostels set up in old, rat infested houses or for the unlucky few who got stuck in farmers houses alone, they were treated like the dirt on their boots. Even though it was a female-led and female-staff, the women remained underpaid and underappreciated. Be that as it may, these women worked till their hands were numb and knees were sore. They worked so that families didn't have to go to bed hungry and so soldiers could trudge on with bread to fill their stomachs.

Telling Their Stories

Their contribution to the war effort saved the lives of many. But for decades after the war, they never got the museums or a page in our history books that they very much deserve. This was due to a multitude of things, but one of the most obvious, is the writers of said history books. Not saying that all writers are men, but historically the writing done by men has been pushed into the public eye and limelight easier. Women's achievements have historically been erased and gone unacknowledged, luckily these past years many more women from the past have been recognized as true heroes in our history. Of course, it is too little too late in many ways for groups of women especially the ones in the Women's Land Army. A recent reunion brought together former Land Girls from across the country, sparking a conversation about the importance of these brave women. Many are continuing that very conversation about other unsung heroines of those times.

Land girl, Ivy Hilda Jarrett, and other land girls sitting on the back of a parade float. (date unknown)