The Women’s Land Army During World War II

by Caron Smith

World War II called thousands of farmers and their workers away from food production to military service. Even before America entered the war, statistics published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on October 1, 1941, showed that there were two hundred thousand fewer agricultural workers than the year before.1 After America went to war and as the war continued, gasoline and tire shortages combined to complicate the farmers’ labor problems by reducing the flow of migratory workers along the entire Atlantic Seaboard. While on the West Coast, the supply of Japanese workers was stopped completely when they were placed in relocation camps.

One non-depleted labor supply was women. Though a great deal has been written about the part women played in war industries during World War II, people tend to forget the vital part they played in agriculture. This lack of interest is surprising since large numbers participated. For example, more than three hundred thousand non-farm women worked on farms in 1943 alone.2

At times of shortages of manpower or at harvesting times, farm women had always helped out. During World War II, farm women increased their roles in food production, but eventually city women had to be mobilized to maintain output levels. Many organizations were formed to match city women to farmers needing workers. The most important of these organizations was probably the Women’s Land Army of America (WLA), which became a national organization on April 29, 1943, when Congress appropriated funds and named the Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture as the agency to mobilize and allocate farm labor.

The term “Women’s Land Army” usually conjures up pictures of urban women spending their vacations on farms, helping farmers in times of need. This was indeed the case on the eastern and western seabords where women could easily pick fruit and vegetables and sort and pack produce. A case study of Kansas, however, shows that the Women’s Land Army in the midwestern states had significant differences. In Kansas the main crop was wheat. It was not a labor intensive crop and at harvest time the need was for skilled machine-handlers, not unskilled pickers. For this reason, farmers were loath to hire raw recruits with non-farm backgrounds to handle their expensive machinery. The burden of work therefore fell upon the farmer’s own family, who had some understanding of harvesting and of the machinery used. Thus, the Women’s Land Army in Kansas directed most of its attention towards farm women. Its primary function was to teach women to handle machinery safely, proper clothing, work-simplification methods in the home, and nutrition. It was not assumed that simply because a woman lived on a farm, she knew all that was necessary to its operation.

The Women’s Land Army dated from World War I, the idea of mobilizing women as agricultural workers originating in Great Britain. In 1918, forty thousand women served in the British Women’s Land Army, which was a government directed scheme. Similar wartime programs operated in countries such as France, Italy, and Canada. In America the labor scarcity in rural areas led some people to try to adapt the European solution to American circumstances. During World War I, however, the WLA was organized by private women’s organizations and it was not until peacetime that the government accepted direction of the project.3

During World War II, it was not until mid-1942 that the farm labor problem became acute and progressive farmers and women’s leaders began organiz-

2. Ibid., September 30, 1943.
WE'RE IN THE FIGHT, TOO!

WOMEN'S LAND ARMY
Food comes first

ing agencies to recruit farm workers. On February 3, 1943, the secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Claude R. Wickard, requested that the Cooperative Extension Service of the Department of Agriculture and the State Extension Service take responsibility for the development and supervision of programs to recruit non-farm women for appropriate tasks. The Women's Land Army was set up under the U.S. Extension Service, and in April 1943, Congress appropriated funds. The WLA became a national service and Land Army leaders were appointed by the Extension Service in each state, working directly under the state farm labor supervisor, who was an employee of the Extension Service.

The WLA of America was a decentralized organization with county agents of the State Extension Services working with the U.S. Employment Service, state colleges, civic groups, clubs, and local farmers in recruiting and placing women. By the end of the war the Extension Service and the U.S. Employment Service were the major recruitment agencies. They printed circulars and posters and advertised extensively in newspapers and on the radio. A uniform and insignia were designed and adopted and certificates of service were printed.

In April 1943, it was envisaged that the women's division of the U.S. Crop Corps would number 360,000. Of these, 60,000 would compose the Women's Land Army, of whom 10,000 would be permanent year-round workers living where they worked. An additional 50,000 were expected to enroll for a period of one month or more to harvest perishable crops that required quick handling. The other 300,000 female farm workers were to wear armbands which designated them as members of the U.S. Crop Corps; their service would be given during weekends or for a week or so at a time.¹

On the eastern and western seaboard, the farmers' early skepticism as to the worth of city women depleted as the labor shortage became more critical. Most farmers were astonished by the quantity and quality of the women's work. According to Florence Hall, head of the WLA, prejudice against employing women broke down first in the Northwestern states because the women had pitched in so effectively in 1942 when the Japanese workers were placed in relocation camps. By August 1943, there were approximately seventeen thousand women field hands in Oregon and ten thousand in California.5

The women of the Atlantic and Pacific areas usually worked in units, traveling from one farm to another. These women came from a variety of backgrounds and included students and teachers from colleges and high schools, business and professional women, housewives, and industrial women workers.6 In the midwestern states the situation was quite different. The WLA in Kansas, while still attempting to recruit and place town women on farms, spent the majority of its time organizing training for farmers' wives on machine handling, safety, proper clothing, time-saving methods, and nutrition. The main aim was improving the efficiency of farm women as these women were taking on much more outside work than they had previously. If the farmer had to entrust his machinery to anyone, his best option seemed to be his immediate family who were at least familiar with farm life. Therefore, farm women were spending more time doing outside work but were still responsible for domestic chores. The WLA realized that these women needed training to develop skills in time management and heavy machinery operation.

The need for women farm laborers became more pronounced as the war wore on. The armed services and war industry made deep inroads into farm labor in the Midwest. Draft regulations changed in 1943, resulting in the deferment of many farmers and workers. Yet in Kansas many farmers' sons and workers were enlisting believing it was their patriotic duty to do so. At the same time, workers discovered they could earn larger wages by working at war plants or factories such as the aircraft plants in Wichita. Gas shortages too effectively cut off the supply of transient labor which some had relied upon.

Despite labor shortages, Kansas farmers succeeded in planting and harvesting record crops and rearing record numbers of livestock. Much of the praise for this must go to the farmers' wives, daughters, and relatives, both male and female, who helped out. The Kansas Farm Labor Report for 1942 and 1943 notes that despite female workers providing a small part of the farm labor in 1942 and 1943, "the proportion of the farm workers who were females increased two-thirds from 1942 to 1943." Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of farm workers (excluding operators) in Kansas in 1942 and 1943. About two-fifths of all farm workers were related to the operator and the percentage was larger in 1943 than 1942. This reflects the greater dependence on labor within the family and among relatives. Because of military exemptions for farmers, most of the immediate family labor was supplied by operators' sons, but this number fell between 1942 and 1943 as many entered the armed services. The compilers of the Kansas Farm Labor Report sampled 1,902 farms and found 183 female workers in 1942 and 283 in 1943, representing 3.6 percent of farm workers in 1942 and 6 percent in 1943. Of the female workers, only 12 percent were not

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related to the farm operator. In 1942, 95 percent of female farm workers were farm reared, while in 1943, 90 percent were farm reared.8

Table 1

Percentage distribution of farm workers (excluding operators) according to their relation to the operator in 1942 and 1943 in Kansas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relation to Operator</th>
<th>1942 %Total Employed</th>
<th>1943 %Total Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Relation</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1942 and 1943, the majority of female farm workers were performing tasks such as driving tractors, running combines, hauling grain, and operating other machinery. Hauling grain was by far the most frequent job performed by female workers; 30.5 percent in 1942 and 28.25 percent in 1943.9 By the very nature of these tasks one can see why the farmer preferred to employ farm-related rather than non-farm women. Farm machinery could be dangerous for those unfamiliar with its use, and parts were difficult to obtain if broken by mismanagement. Many Kansas farm women were passingly familiar with the operation of farm equipment, although their usual tasks before the war had consisted of chores such as feeding chickens or milking cows.

In an interview in 1985, Mrs. Ray Sayler from Topeka, Kansas, related some of her wartime experiences. These probably were mirrored by many hundreds of other farm women across the state at this time. During the war, the Saylers owned a two hundred-acre farm near Manhattan where the family raised hogs, a few cattle, some chickens, corn and alfalfa. Help on the farm was usually provided by the Saylers’ eldest son, but in March 1943 he enlisted, leaving a serious shortage of manpower. As well as her usual chores of gathering eggs and feeding and milking the cows, Mrs. Sayler’s services were enlisted in driving a tractor and a horse-pulled mowing machine. Her day began at 4:30 a.m. and ended at 5:00 p.m. or later. Besides those tasks, she had meals to prepare and a small child to care for. It was to ease these burdens and to ensure safety that the WLA generally concentrated upon in Kansas.

By 1943, the Extension Service described farm labor as one of the nation’s most serious problems. The farm labor supply was “seriously depleted” because of the induction of men of military age into the armed services, the employment of skilled farm workers in war plants, the introduction of farm women into auxiliary branches of the armed services, and the employment of farm women in war plants and allied industries.10

It was decided that all 105 Kansas counties should have a WLA. Recruitment was to be made by visiting schools, women’s groups, and by house-to-house visits to attract enlistees. Training of recruits was to be provided by short courses held at Kansas State Agricultural College (now Kansas State University) and other colleges throughout the state. The training would be in gardening, poultry work, dairying and housework, which were all farm homemaker tasks. The aim of the training was to teach non-farm women how to help in and around the farm home, freeing farmers’ wives to operate heavy farm equipment and to aid in the fields.

8. Ibid., 42.
9. Ibid., 47.
By the end of 1943, the Extension Service realized that farmers were not responding to the call to hire non-farm women, even for housework. It was discovered that most farm women solved their home labor problems by exchanging help with neighbors during harvesting and by only doing tasks of major importance, neglecting many regular duties. In response, the WLA became even more strongly directed toward recruiting farm women. The 1943 Farm Labor Report of the Extension Service described enrollment progress as follows:

In general, farm women assisting their husbands did not respond until the end of the year to the idea of enrolling with the Women's Land Army. Their husbands resisted the plan also. The uppermost thought in their minds was that they did not want to have their womenfolk working in the fields if any other source of labor could be located. This resistance was softening, however. A general change in attitude was being felt and the outlook for progress in 1944 was much better, especially in the western half of the state. 11

Home economics agents began to play a large part in the Farm Labor Program. They helped teach local leaders the skills that the farmers' wives needed to know. Extension specialists traveled extensively around the state holding training sessions for local leaders in county seats. Many of the changes introduced by the agents were simple to apply, but very effective in saving women time and labor. They cut chairs to correct heights or put them on casters, adapted milking stools as garden stools, and invented a service cart that made it unnecessary to walk continually between the kitchen and dining area. All of these small changes were intended to conserve time and energy. Agents also taught fire drills, kitchen organization, and meal management. Efficiency in shopping was emphasized because of the gasoline and rubber shortages that limited travel to market.

Vera Ellithorpe, former extension specialist in the Family Housing and Safety Unit, described some of her wartime experiences.

The Extension Foods and Nutrition Specialist who worked in the western half of the state, and I, taught "Meal Management in Wartime" in those counties. She taught leaders how to prepare a quick, attractive and nutritious dinner for harvesters and family. I taught methods of organizing for meal service, improved methods of dishwashing, and the "new" way of washing the cream separator. They did have fun making a silvertone drainer, modeled after the tin juice can which I carried to meetings. I used an ice pick to punch holes in the bottom of the can. Silver could be "fed" into it from the sudsy water, the can could be lowered into scalding water and later removed to the drain board. This saved laundering of tea towels. 12

Home health experts helped women plan their work to allow time for rest periods, avoiding fatigue. These experts demonstrated how to maintain one's posture and to lift properly and how to care for one's feet by choosing the correct type of shoes for outdoor work. Local leaders would pass on to farm wives the skills taught by the extension specialists, as well as other skills they already possessed. For example, Mrs. Sayler became a local leader and often held demonstrations for groups of ten to fifteen ladies in a church kitchen.

I taught the young farm wives to make cheese, homemade soup, food from corn yeast for bread making and how to dry fruits for winter use. Towards the end of the war, cotton was a surplus crop so I taught how to make mattresses for beds. 13

11. Ibid., 61.
The major proportion of training for outdoor work was given by farmers to farm and non-farm women. In some cases this was adequate since the women already were experienced. In other cases it caused a safety hazard as those unused to helping outside did not have proper instruction or work clothing. The Extension Service responded by setting up seven training schools to teach women to safely operate and care for heavy farm machinery. To safeguard women against accidents caused by inappropriate clothing, many Home Demonstration agents ordered the Women’s Land Army work outfit. This was modelled at Home Demonstration meetings with the hope that women would adopt the uniform. Many women ordered the outfit, while others made similar outfits for themselves.

By 1944, up to 80 percent of the farm women in some counties were helping out because of farm labor shortages. A Geary County agent reported:

The farm wife and younger children are doing most of the chores so that the men can work from daylight to sundown in the fields. They are helping with fieldwork after the chores are done on two-thirds of our farms. Thus 900 grown men on our farms with help from farm women and children are doing what 1,500 did before the war and our production has increased 40 percent. 14

The 1944 Farm Labor Report of Kansas describes the type of women working in agriculture as first, the farmer’s wife; second, the farmer’s daughter; third, the daughter who is in business but who can get two weeks off to help her dad with the job she is somewhat familiar with; fourth, the relative who “likes to spend a short vacation on the farm;” fifth, friends of the family eager to help; and finally, those urban women who “desire to help if they are accepted into the farm family.” 15

In most cases family members were not paid for their help at harvest time. It was customary for harvest to be a family project, and patriotism and the war effort fueled this trend. Before and during World War II, it was customary for the farm homemaker to prepare and serve at least one meal a day for all those working on the farm. This was usually served at noon. The farm homemaker would usually provide midmorning and mid-afternoon refreshments, which she would take to the fields. Board was normally provided for all workers, whether they were relatives or not. Non-family workers were either provided bedrooms or haymows if they were unable to return to their own homes at night. 16

In 1945, the term “Women’s Land Army” was changed to “Women’s Division of Farm Labor Program” since Land Army was not a popular title. It was anticipated that enough farm boys and workers would return in 1946 to ease the situation, and the 1945 Kansas Labor Report noted:

That part of the Labor Program where women were urged to work in the fields was sound during the war but our farm economy after the war should be on a plane which would not necessitate women working in the fields. 17

Women’s roles as operators of farm machinery and field hands decreased in importance after 1945 with the veterans’ return. The women of Kansas, however, had played a vital part in alleviating the labor shortage and in increasing agricultural production during the war years. At least 215,000 men, between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, had joined the armed forces; an estimated sixty percent were from farms. The loss of crops, which would have occurred without the women’s help, would have had serious consequences at a time when the maximum amount of food was needed for American and Allied armed forces.

The Women’s Land Army in the eastern and western states and in Kansas showed striking differences. Along the seaboard mainly urban women enrolled, whereas in Kansas the emphasis was upon farm women. Kansas farmers were not as used to hiring migrant workers as were farmers in the truck garden/orchard states, having relied mostly on sons and trusted year-round workers. In the wartime emergency farmers turned to those they trusted—their immediate family and friends. The WLA in Kansas focused upon the needs of the farm women who attempted to meet the wartime crisis by continuing to maintain their homes while carrying on the jobs of the absent male farm laborers. 18

15. Ibid., 32.
16. Ellishorpe to author.

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