

The Women's Land Army of World War II Conversation Kit



Cover, *Life* magazine, September 27, 1943. National Museum of American History.

BECAUSE OF
HER STORY

 Smithsonian

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Women's Land Army of World War II



Cover, *Life* magazine, September 27, 1943. National Museum of American History.

“We're working for
Victory, too; growing
food for ourselves
and our
countrymen.”

– Toni Taylor (“Women on the
Home Front,” *McCall's*, May
1942)

While most people recognize World War II's iconic Rosie the Riveter, her lesser-known compatriots in the Woman's Land Army of America (WLAA) provided just as critical a service during the two world wars. Women and schoolgirls like seventeen-year-old Shirley Armstrong (featured on this cover of *Life*) worked on farms and in canneries to feed the nation and ensure that crops did not spoil while millions of farm laborers served in other wartime capacities.

The WLAA was initially established during World War I by an array of civic clubs and organizations, with women banding together to do the work of farmhands called to military service or factory jobs. Called “farmerettes,” the women were trained to cultivate, and harvest crops used to feed those on the home front and abroad. This invaluable civil organization was resurrected during World War II, this time under the US Department of Agriculture's United States Crop Corps, a federal agency tasked with overseeing civilian agricultural efforts. With an estimated 1.5 million at work between 1943 and 1945 performing duties as varied as driving tractors, picking fruit, milking cows,

and trucking produce, the WLAA helped fuel the massive war effort. The organization also opened opportunities for many women to work outside the home for the first time and earn a wage.

Just like the millions of Americans who grew their own victory gardens, enlistees in the WLAA came from every walk of life, from wives and sisters of servicemen to rural schoolteachers and urban office workers. Some toiled full-time, while others lent support after work, on weekends, or during summer vacations. Bolstered by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and besting skeptics ranging from farmers to Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard, the WLAA played an essential role in sustaining America during World War II. Little wonder, then, that *Life* chose to honor their contributions with this victorious cover.

Driving Questions

How can communities shape the direction of history?

What made the Women's Land Army of America (WLAA) a powerful movement during World War II?

Supporting Questions

- What is a community? What communities do you belong to?
- What was the purpose of the Women's Land Army of America (WLAA)? Why did it form? What did its members do?
- What reasons might women have had for joining or not joining the WLAA?
- What role did magazines and posters play in the building the Women's Land Army?
- What impact did WLAA have during World War II? What is the legacy of this labor organization?
- What lessons can communities today learn from the actions and impacts of the WLAA?
- How might your communities shape history now and in the future?

Civic Learning Themes

- **Community Participation:** Meaningful engagement in community life, including volunteering with local organizations, attending neighborhood meetings, joining community groups, and so on. This is differentiated from civic action in that it is not necessarily tied to governing or political initiatives.

- Rights and Responsibilities: The freedoms, duties and responsibilities that all Americans should exercise and respect as participants in our shared democracy.

Learning Objectives & Aligned Standards

This conversation kit follows the learning arc outlined in the [National Council for the Social Studies College, Career and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework](#).

D2.Civ.2.6-8. Explain specific roles played by citizens (such as voters, jurors, taxpayers, members of the armed forces, petitioners, protesters, and officeholders).

D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2.Civ.14.6-8. Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies and promoting the common good.

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

D2.His.1.6-8. Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

Primary & Secondary Sources

All conversation kit resources can be found in this [Learning Lab collection](#).

Individual links to resources are also included below for your convenience.

- Primary Resources:
 - Artifacts:
 - [Life magazine cover, September 27, 1943](#)

- [Women's Land Army Posters Collection from the USDA, National Agricultural Library](#)
 - ["Mrs. Sam Crawford helps with tobacco harvesting on her husband's farm in Maryland" from the Agricultural Administration of the Farm Service Agency from the National Archives](#)
 - Article
 - ["Orders to Defer Farm Workers Issued by WMC." Evening Star newspaper, March 7, 1943, Image 1, from Library of Congress](#)
 - ["Women from All Walks Eagerly Respond to AWVS Call for Greater Food Supply." Evening Star newspaper, March 7, 1943, Image 42, from Library of Congress](#)
 - ["Women Respond to AWVS Call to Farm Work." Evening Star newspaper, March 7, 1943, Image 52, from Library of Congress](#)
 - Secondary Resources:
 - Articles:
 - ["'To the Rescue of the Crops:' The Women's Land Army During World War II" from the National Archives](#)
 - [The Oregon Encyclopedia "Women's Land Army" from the Oregon Historical Society](#)
 - ["Food Rationing and Canning in World War II" from The National Women's History Museum](#)
 - ["American Food Posters From World War I and II" from the Smithsonian Magazine](#)
 - Online Exhibitions
 - [Powers of Persuasion online exhibit by the National Archives](#)
-

- [Homefront Contributions: Women's Land Army by the Library of Congress](#)
- [The Price of Freedom: Americans at War "World War II" online exhibit by the Smithsonian National Museum of American History](#)

Facilitation Strategies & Discussion Formats

Warm Up & Context Setting

Define the term community as a group of people coming together with a shared attribute, interest and/or purpose. Ask students to reflect on this definition for a moment and then share out examples of communities to which they belong.

Review the first essential question with the class: How can communities shape the direction of history? Explain that this question presumes that communities can shape events and outcomes in history. Ask students if they agree with this assumption. Have students share whether they agree and to explain their reasoning.

Explain that in this learning activity, students will examine and question this statement by looking at the example of the Women's Land Army of America.

The Women's Land Army of America (WLAA)

Display or distribute copies of the [Life magazine cover from September 27, 1943](#), featuring Shirley Armstrong ([image included at the end of this conversation kit](#)). Using the guided looking and analysis questions below, have students work in pairs to carefully analyze the object and begin to develop an understanding of the Women's Land Army of America (WLAA).

- What are your first impressions?
- Take a closer look; make sure to examine the whole photograph. What details do you see?

- What is happening in the photograph? List any activities you see.
- What kind of clothing is being worn?
- What is the mood of the person featured in the picture?
- Are there any captions? A date? Location? Names of people?

Have each student pair find another to form groups of four. In this group, have students share their observations and think critically about the object using the structure below.

- **One minute each:** Have each student in the group describes one observation they found most interesting and one question they have about the image.
- **Three minutes:** Direct students to the date in the bottom right corner of the magazine cover. Have students list what events they can think of that were occurring at that time.
- **Three minutes:** Challenging students to discuss what they think this is a picture of, why it might have been taken, and why they think it was chosen for the cover of *Life* magazine in 1943.

Have each group share their ideas with the full class, noting each on the board.

Provide historical context about the object using an [excerpt from the Smithsonian's American Women book about the WLAA \(included at the end of this conversation kit\)](#). Have students read the information independently, as a class, or in whatever format best meets the students' needs.

Compare the description of the WLAA with the *Life* magazine cover. Have students identify areas where their ideas were similar or different from the historical information.

Forming and Joining the WLAA

Explain that the WLAA was officially organized under the umbrella of the US Crop Corps in 1942, and in 1943 a massive recruitment campaign was launched to encourage women living in urban areas to join the movement. The 1943 *Life* magazine cover was one of several print media pieces created to help promote the WLAA and encourage

women on the home front to leave their homes to take farm labor jobs in support of the war effort.

Distribute [three recruitment posters from the US Crop Corps and quotes from WLAA members \(included at the end of this conversation kit as “Supplemental Resources: Forming and Joining the WLAA, Resources A-D”\)](#) to students, one to each group. Have each group examine the poster using the [object analysis questions they used with the Life magazine question](#). Provide each group with 5-10 minutes to observe the poster. Then have groups pass their poster to another group so that they can observe another one. Do this two more times so that each group has the opportunity to review all three posters and the quotes.

After students have observed all three posters and read quotes from women who joined the WLAA, ask them: *Imagine you are on the home front during World War II. Would you join the WLAA?*

Students can share their answers and rationales using a spectrum of responses activity. Share the four numbered statements below and have students select the one that best reflects their response.

1. Yes, absolutely.
2. No way.
3. Probably no, but I'm not sure.
4. Probably yes, but I'm not sure.

Ask students in each group to explain why they have chosen their responses. For students in the Yes and No groups, they should describe what in the primary resources they reviewed resonated the most for them. For students in the Probably Yes or Probably No groups, they should describe what additional information they still want to know. Remind students that they may change their response at any time if they change their opinion based on what their peers say.

Share additional information with students about why women may have been reluctant to join the WLAA, using an excerpt from the National Archives' *Prologue* magazine article ["To the Rescue of the Crops"](#), summarized below. As each information bullet is read, ask students if they would like to change their position.

- “[L]ow farm wages and the competition for relatively high-paying jobs in urban areas often made recruitment difficult.”
- “[A] shortage of day-care facilities presented significant problems for many WLAA mothers.”
- “[The] complex nature of southern race relations sometimes hampered recruitment campaigns. [WLAA] Supervisors noted that because field labor in the South was often associated with the work of black women and men, many white southerners objected to the use of white women in the fields.”

Debrief this activity with students by explaining that choosing to join the WLAA was not an easy choice for many Americans. Ask students to share reasons why they might or might not join a national effort like this today.

“If the US [is] to feed the world, it must have a Land Army” (*Time* magazine, April 27, 1942)

Provide students with an excerpted copy of the [March 7, 1943 Evening Star newspaper \(included at the end of this conversation kit\)](#). Have students read the article describing the work of the WLAA. Encourage students to annotate the text as they read.

Add to this the information below, which was excerpted from [the Prologue magazine article, “To the Rescue of the Crops: The Women’s Land Army During World War II,”](#) from the National Archives and Records Administration mentioned in the [Forming and Joining the WLAA](#) section:

“The *Labor Information Bulletin* estimated that three million women, or 27 percent of the entire agricultural labor force, worked on farms in June 1943. The US Women’s Bureau reported that the percentage of women employed in agriculture rose from 8 percent in 1940 to 22.4 percent in 1945. The Extension Service of the USDA estimated that it had placed approximately 1.5 million *nonfarm* women in farm jobs between 1943 and 1945...”

Returning to their small groups, have students engage in a discussion centered on the following prompts:

- What impact did the WLAA have on the war effort through their work on the home front?
- How did the WLAA during World War II shape the direction of American History?
- What might have happened if the WLAA was not part of the war effort?

Students should prepare for this discussion by first thinking individually about the prompt, forming a short opinion and argument in support of that conclusion.

Then, encourage students to go around the group, with each person talking for one minute about their conclusions and rationales. During this time, no other students in the group may talk. After each person has spoken, have the groups talk about where they had similar and different ideas and where they agree or disagree with each other's arguments. Have groups report out findings to the class.

Connections to Today

Using a think-pair-share structure, have students reflect on the communities that they are part of today, what those communities could learn from the legacy of the WLAA, and how their communities could shape history now and in the future.

Extension Ideas

[Smithsonian Gardens \(SG\) Green Ambassador Challenge](#) – Locate and learn about a greenspace being created or preserved in your community and submit a story to the Community of Gardens digital archive or learn about modern-day community or victory gardens.

[Cultivating America's Gardens Online Exhibit](#) – Learn about the motivations of garden-making in America.

This conversation kit was authored by Kelly Crawford at Smithsonian Gardens and Abby Pfisterer at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Learn more at womenshistory.si.edu, gardens.si.edu and americanhistory.si.edu.

Supplementary Materials: Object Analysis



Cover, *Life* magazine, September 27, 1943. National Museum of American History.

- What are your first impressions?
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Supplementary Materials: Excerpt from *Smithsonian American Women*

'Farmerettes' Feed a Nation

Serving the home front in the Women's Land Army

By Joyce Connolly, Smithsonian Gardens

While most people recognize World War II's iconic Rosie the Riveter, her lesser-known compatriots in the Woman's Land Army of America (WLAA) provided just as critical a service during the two world wars. Women and schoolgirls like seventeen-year-old Shirley Armstrong (shown here on the cover of *Life*) worked on farms and in canneries to feed the nation and ensure that crops did not spoil while millions of farm laborers served in other wartime capacities.

The WLAA was initially established during World War I by an array of civic clubs and organizations, with women banding together to do the work of farmhands called to military service or factory jobs. Called "farmerettes," the women were trained to cultivate and harvest crops used to feed those on the home front and abroad.

This invaluable civil organization was resurrected during World War II, this time under the US Department of Agriculture's United States Crop Corps, a federal agency tasked with overseeing civilian agricultural efforts. With an estimated 1.5 million at work between 1943 and 1945 performing duties as varied as driving tractors, picking fruit, milking cows, and trucking produce, the WLAA helped fuel the massive war effort. The organization also opened opportunities for many women to work outside the home for the first time and earn a wage.

Just like the millions of Americans who grew their own victory gardens, WLAA enlistees came from every walk of life, from wives and sisters of servicemen to rural schoolteachers and urban office workers. Some toiled full-time, while others lent support after work, on weekends, or during summer vacations. Bolstered by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and besting skeptics ranging from farmers to Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard, the WLAA played an essential role in sustaining America during World War II. Little wonder, then, that *Life* chose to honor their contributions with this victorious cover.

Supplementary Materials: Forming and Joining the WLAA, Resource A



"Pitch in and Help!" Women's Land Army Poster, 1944. USDA National Agricultural Library, Special Collections.

Supplementary Materials: Forming and Joining the WLAA, Resource B



"Harvest War Crops" Women's Land Army Poster, 1945. USDA National Agricultural Library, Special Collections.

Supplementary Materials: Forming and Joining the WLAA, Resource C



"Join the Women's Land Army of the U.S. Crop Corps" Women's Land Army Poster, 1943. USDA National Agricultural Library, Special Collections.

Supplementary Materials: Forming and Joining the WLAA, Resource D

“We're working for Victory, too; growing food for ourselves and our countrymen. While other women work at machines and in factories—we're soldiers in overalls. . . . We're running the place while Dad's away.”

—Toni Taylor, "Women on the Home Front,"
McCall's, May 1942.

“I noticed on the farms, mostly the little ones with just a shack for a house, there seems to be no one but the women left to do the work. You see them taking care of cattle, etc. It makes me proud to see how the women have picked up where the men left off and are keeping the home fires burning.”

—Mabel Opal Miller to Pvt. Ivan Johnson
Letter of September 6, 1944.

Complete Article: [“To the Rescue of the Crops”](#)

Source: Litoff, Judy Barrett and David C. Smith, *To the Rescue of the Crops*, Prologue Magazine, National Archives and Records Administration, Winter 1993, Vol. 25, no. 4.

Supplementary Materials: Compiled Article from The Evening Star newspaper, March 7, 1943

Transcript follows. Complete digital files for this article can be found [at the links provided in Primary Sources at the beginning of this conversation kit.](#)



Evening Star newspaper, March 7, 1943. Library of Congress: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.*

Article Transcription, "Formidable Land Army Mobilizes to Defend Home Front: Women From All Walks Eagerly Respond to AWVS Call for Greater Food Supply," *The Evening Star*, 1943

It's the Land Army now!

In world War No. 1 women were farmerettes; but whatever their name today, they are an effective and well-trained corps of workers taking over the men's jobs on the farms—freeing the manpower for war work.

To this end the agricultural section of the American Women's Voluntary Services, under the able chairmanship of Mrs. Dean Acheson, is working through the numerous classes, many of them well underway, which are sponsored through this organization.

Mrs. Acheson, who takes her work so seriously that she is at her office early and is still working through the late afternoon and many an evening, has had some practical experience in the workings of a farm. She and her husband, who is Assistant Secretary of State and formerly held a similar post in the Treasury Department, have a charming old place in nearby Maryland, which is a successful farm on a small scale. However, she always finds something constructive and of much interest to her when she takes time out to inspect the various classes which have been organized at the University of Maryland for the AWVS.

Started over a year ago, the "army" keeps marching on. Classes at the University of Maryland in 1942 were so successful that Dr. Thomas B. Symons, dean of the agriculture department, again is co-operating with AWVS leaders in training women in various phases of farm activities.

At present there is a class held twice a week in AWVS headquarters at 2170 Florida avenue, where University of Maryland specialists in their particular fields lecture to earnest workers who plan to go out on farms this spring and summer to help the farmers. The class was so crowded, so many were turned away, that another night class for day time workers was organized. The United States Chamber of Commerce loaned its small auditorium, and there the classes are held.

In addition, for those who can go out to the university there are daytime classes. And, still another group will start training March 22 when 20 women are to be given an intensive three weeks' course at the university, promising, in return, to work three months on a farm when they have completed the course. And the work is of the most practical kind, not only in the actual raising of food stuffs, but in caring for poultry and fruit trees.

Prof. Wade Rice of the university is conducting the class in poultry raising, which includes the marketing of the poultry products. This was so practical that one of the students in last year's classes now operates her own chicken farm and has more work than she can manage. Small fruit tree culture and care is another subject which enrollees are studying and methods of picking apples proved very successful, for Mrs. Mieczyslaw Nowinski, who is chairman of the Land Army troops, has had more demands for pickers than she has workers.

Farmers at first were reluctant to employ women in their orchards, but after the first crew went out they became eager for women workers. The same was true of the corn huskers, many of the women doing a better job than the men in the fields. Over in the dairy building farm management—and this includes the feeding and handling of dairy herds—is being taught.

This year the shortage of farm labor and the rather stringent rationing of food has given an impetus to the work of the Land Army, in which women from various walks of life are serving under the direction of Mrs. Nowinski. Demands from county agents and the United States Employment Service are pouring in to the AWVS, which is co-operating with them as far as the supply allows.

In blue jeans and warm plaid jackets the women do their practical work in classes supervised by Dean Symons. They are women who are eager to learn farming from a practical standpoint, women who plan to put this knowledge to work when the demand for labor comes this spring and summer. Some of the women are housewives, eager to do their part in the war effort. Others have small plots of land

(Continued on Page D-II, Column 3)

Please note: *This newspaper article has been re-typeset to improve readability. No wording or punctuation has been altered in the process. The original article appeared on page 42 of the Evening Star. It was located on the bottom left of the page.*

Article Transcription, “Women Respond to AWVS Call To Farm Work: Many Enrolling In Classes to Aid Food Production,” *The Evening Star*, 1943

(Continued From Page D-I.)

which they want to put on the “production line,” while still others, like Mrs. Jouett Shouse, operate farms but are eager to learn new and approved methods of running those farms.

It's a great work and one in which women can give a helping hand, one in which they substitute for the men on the front lines. Theirs is the home front and, according to Mrs. Acheson, every group studying the various phases of farm management is made up of a cross section of workers.

Not only mink-coated women are learning to run tractors, to work in dairy barns and poultry sheds, but other fine, earnest women who want to work where the work is most needed—on American farms.

Please note: *This newspaper article has been re-typeset to improve readability. No wording or punctuation has been altered in the process. The original article appeared on page 52 of the Evening Star. It was located on the top of the page in the center.*