

On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II. *By Stephanie A. Carpenter.* DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003. viii + 214 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$40.00. ISBN 0-875-80314-8.

Reviewed by Anna R. Igra

Rosie the Riveter gains a sister icon in the uniformed agricultural worker of the Women's Land Army (WLA), thanks to Stephanie Carpenter's study of the largely forgotten wartime labor program. The WLA, part of the Emergency Farm Labor Program, operated under the auspices of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) from 1943 to 1945. It recruited three million women to work on the farms, replacing the men who had gone into military service, the Japanese Americans who had been sent to internment camps, and the migrants who were flooding the cities to pursue opportunities in defense industries. Urban working women seeking a "victory vacation," college students on summer break, and homemakers enlisted in the WLA, joining farm women to help meet wartime agricultural production quotas.

Historians have long debated the significance of women's wartime employment. No one disputes the statistics showing that women, particularly those who were older and married, participated more fully in the labor-force, both during and after the war. However, some interpret this growth as merely a continuation of prewar trends (for example, Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work* [1982]), while others (for example, William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change* [1991]) view the war as a major turning point. Stephanie Carpenter argues that her study of the Land Army bolsters Chafe's characterization of World War II as a "watershed" event in U.S. women's history.

Whether historians view World War II as a turning point for American women depends on how they interpret prewar and postwar trends. As in other areas of the economy, the numbers of women relative to men doing farm work during the war increased. However, with the exception of the Midwest, Carpenter's examples suggest a great deal of continuity with prewar patterns, weakening her claim for the war as a critical moment in women's agricultural labor history. In the East and Far West, where women had harvested crops before the war, farmers were most receptive to the WLA.

They were willing to employ even the white, middle-class urban women that farmers in the Midwest, eastern Rocky Mountains, and the South resisted hiring. In the Rocky Mountains, farmers suffered financial losses rather than expand their conception of appropriate agricultural labor to include WLA workers. In the Midwest, the mechanization of agriculture in the decades before the war had been accompanied by an increasingly domestic definition of farm women. In her primary example of war-related change, Carpenter argues that farm women reentered the fields during the war and stayed there in the period that followed. Nevertheless, midwestern farm families resisted hiring nonfarm women, whom they characterized as immoral, vain, and incompetent.

Carpenter's investigation of southern practices demonstrates the persistence of racial segregation among women workers, reflecting the biases of both employers and WLA recruits. Both before and during the war, southern African-American and poor white women worked in the fields. Southern white farmers viewed field work as inappropriate for middle-class white women and therefore were reluctant to employ many of the WLA recruits. The WLA excluded African-American women in some southern states, since white women often refused to work with them. In other regions, farmers often preferred male and female Mexican, Japanese, and Chinese laborers, as well as prisoners of war, over white, nonfarm female labor. Unfortunately, Carpenter does not subject other regions' ethnic practices to the kind of analysis that she reserves for the South.

At the end of the war, the WLA disbanded. In the immediate postwar period women's field labor declined, and the domestic ideal reemerged. Over the long term, however, farm wives and machinery increasingly replaced hired help in the fields. Like former Rosie the Riveters, farm wives could look forward to a "double day" of work in and out of the home. Carpenter's tendency to tell, rather than show, gives the reader little access to her sources and makes it difficult to evaluate her argument that the war was the catalyst for these later developments.

It is to be hoped that *On the Home Front* will not be the last word on the WLA and women's agricultural labor during World War II. Stephanie Carpenter has opened the door for future scholars, who will be indebted to her for putting the Women's Land Army on the historical map.

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