

WWI changed Solano's landscape

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The spring of 1918 saw California farmers, including local orchard growers, worried. Many young men had been called to training camps or had left for the battlefields of Europe, and more were being drafted on a daily basis.

With the previous season's record harvest numbers still fresh in mind, farmers were concerned that there would not be enough hands available during the peak harvest months.

The idea of the "Land Army" was born. Women from the larger metropolitan areas would come out to the farms to assist with the harvest. The Vacaville Reporter explained on June 28, 1918:

"The Woman's Land Army is an organization patriotically conceived to aid America in winning the war by increasing and husbanding the nation's food supply, and the Vacaville contingent is the first unit to actually engage in horticultural or agricultural pursuits.

"The experiment is being watched with the greatest interest, and the success or failure of the entire plan undoubtedly depends in a large degree on the young women composing the pioneer unit now in Vacaville."

Twenty-five young women from San Francisco, Berkeley and Oakland had arrived in Vacaville on June 20. Most were recruited from high schools and colleges, or were teachers and businesswomen. They were accompanied by Miss Phillips and Miss Newhouse, who were in full charge of the camp that housed the Land Army women.

"The camp was erected under the auspices of the state housing commission and has been referred to as a model," wrote the Vacaville Reporter on June 21.

"A screened-in kitchen and mess house will do away some of the greatest nuisances of camp life, while shower baths will add greatly to the comfort of the girls after a day of hard work. Each tent contains two single cots, and the 50 tents which have been erected will accommodate 100 workers."

Their life was strictly regulated, explained the Vacaville Reporter on June 28.

"Reveille sounds at 5:15 each morning. An hour and 45 minutes is given over to setting-up exercises, tidying the camp and breakfasting. The day's labor begins at 7 o'clock. At noon an hour is given for luncheon. At the present time they are working until 6 o'clock, although eight hours is supposed to constitute a day. The extra labor is required because the fruit is ripening rapidly and must be cared for immediately. Camp must be quiet by 9:30 and all lights out.

"The women wear during working hours the official Land Army uniform, a one-piece garment comprising waist [blouse] and trousers."

"A few of the girls are packing but the majority are picking and their work has proved very satisfactory."

They were paid 25 cents for each hour and "No woman sent out by the Land Army shall be required to lift repeatedly more than 25 pounds in a single load, or to handle other than the regulation 8-foot picking ladder, nor be subject to any undue muscular strain."

While the Vacaville Reporter reported the success of the Land Army program, not everybody was enamored of it. Helen Harbison Power, then 24, managed her father's ranch at the time. In an interview in 1973, she remembered hiring Land Army women to work on the Harbison ranch.

"They called them Farmerettes and they had a Farmerette camp in Vacaville. I used to go there to hire women. Those were the women I couldn't stand. I'm sure they were patriotic. I'm sure they were great. But some way or other - I don't know why - they didn't appeal to me."

She also remembered an amusing incident. "The one thing I never could do was to stoop. We always knocked prunes on the ground with a pole and then picked them up, and these Land Army women were so slow at picking up. I always tried to work with the pickers to get them to produce and that was one thing I couldn't do, so I never picked up more than 15 minutes. For the length of that time, I'd pick up furiously, and then I'd be completely done up and have to depart."

While farm girls and city girls had to learn to accept each other's differences, the young soldiers then stationed in France experienced a whole different culture. Les Blackwell of Suisun described some of it in a letter to the Solano Republican, published on Sept. 20, 1918:

"There is a village every three or four miles over here. Very rare sight to see many farm houses, they are bunched up together and make a village. See them going to the field

in the morning with their oxen teams, they work them over here ... They sure can haul a big load. There is lots of hay over here - they cut it with a cycle - never use a pitch fork ...

"Had great sport trying to understand them [the French] and making them understand us. They treat us royal everywhere we go. All seem glad to see us.

"Been having great time and seeing lots of sights, wouldn't take anything for experience I have had," Les Blackwell concluded.

But for some, the war brought darker memories. A new kind of warfare also introduced new words to families back home - mustard gas, chlorine gas. On May 17, 1918, the Vacaville Reporter let readers know that Louis Damiano and Edgar Scharder had been wounded on the French front.

The Solano Republican announced on Oct. 4, that Fred Anderson of Cement had been gassed with mustard gas and was now on the way to recovery.

A few months earlier, on Aug. 4, the Solano Republican wrote: "The first hero to give his life for the 'great cause' from Rio Vista was Frank Kroutch, ... According to a letter received by his mother from an American hospital in Paris, Frank was a victim of the deadly chlorine gas.

"After being gassed, he was removed to the Val-de-Grace hospital for treatment. Here he was nursed for a week, when it was deemed necessary to operate on his throat to remove the burned tissues. He died as he was being placed on the operating table."

Sixty names from throughout Solano County are commemorated on the World War I plaque in front of the Solano County Courthouse. More were wounded or gassed, marking them for life.

When the German Army finally surrendered, ending this first World War, people celebrated throughout the nation. "Did Suisun people celebrate the German surrender Thursday?" asked the Solano Republican on November 1918. " Suisun people did.

"They were there with whistles, bells, tin cans etc., in all shapes, sizes and degrees of loudness, with a few large caliber guns to accentuate the whistles. ...

"About eleven o'clock private telephone messages announced that the bay cities were wild with rejoicing at the surrender ...

"The news soon spread and soon a factory whistle-string was tied down and then

another, and to them was added bells and shouts and gun shots and after dinner the fun really commenced.

"The band came out in force, and many decorated automobiles joined together and paraded the streets of Suisun and Fairfield. Flags broke out everywhere and one great glad day of rejoicing took place, as it did in all towns across the United States."

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