

## A FINE PROPOGANDA: THE FAIR FARMETTE AND HER PUBLICITY MACHINE

**F**or a newspaper or magazine editor the Woman's Land Army had it all: war duty, novelty, controversy, pretty girls in exotic costume, crusty old farmers, and picturesque poses. It was something new—wholesome but also outlandish, bucolic but patriotic. It made for great copy and terrific photos.

It even provided fodder for biting satire. The WLA was barely a month old when it was first lampooned in the political cartoon magazine *Puck* with illustrations by the up-and-coming artist Rockwell Kent, using a pseudonym, no less. With a wide wink Kent took the nom de plume "William Hogarth, Jr.," when penning illustrations for magazines ranging from the socialist standard *The Masses* to the cocktail set's *Vanity Fair*. Since its founding in 1877 *Puck* had delighted in skewering the politicians and social movements of the Gilded Age and often put suffragists within its bull's-eye. Now *Puck* paired Kent's illustrations with the humorist George S. Chappell's sly verses to create "The Fair Farmerettes and Their Shameless Chauffeurs" in its January 20, 1918, issue.

*When lovely ladies cease to loaf  
Their chauffeurs do not have to chauf*

Accompanying Kent's stunning modernistic drawings of lithesome young ladies in frilly-bottomed overalls and pointy shoes tending the soil and handsome drivers sleeping or snacking by their idle limousines were Chappell's cutting couplets.

*Dora, for her country's sake  
Labors till her muscles ache.  
Joseph, always wide-awake  
Wishes he might be a rake.  
Rhoda, loyal to the nation,  
Does her bit for conservation.*

*Adolph, though of lowly station,  
Quite approves her cultivation.<sup>1</sup>*

And so on.

While the WLA Advisory Council may not have appreciated seeing their young movement parodied in verse, they could take some pleasure in knowing they'd arrived on the national scene in sophisticated style. And as many were veterans of the long and often-spoofed suffrage campaign, they'd been the target of *Puck's* slings before and knew how to take them.

Further, the Woman's Land Army was also able to present its own calling card to the press, one of more agreeable design. Announcing that its members were eager to talk, the WLA made them available for interviews and offered the press story ideas. Just as George Creel was selling the government's war aims to the public by feeding the press a tasty diet of stories, the WLA would sell its whole-grain farmerette story to the nation.

The press ate it up. "Call for Women for a 'Land Army'" was the headline in the *New York Herald* in January, "Fifty Thousand Farmerettes to Be Recruited for Farm Work as a Patriotic War Service." The long article continued on a second page—"Fair Farmers Working to Win War; Sex Makes Good at This Hard Labor"—and featured pictures of women in overalls harrowing and hoeing and Professor Ida Ogilvie in a cameo portrait. "Women farm hands have proved a success wherever they have been tried out," Dr. Ogilvie assured the *Herald's* readers.

"We shall probably meet a great deal of opposition from the farmers and have a difficult time persuading them to give the girls a chance," she cautioned, with the air of a general assessing battlefield dangers. "We did last year up at our Mount Kisco centre, but after the farmers once tried the farmerettes their objections were promptly overcome.

"The success of our plan depends upon the women of America, who can save the world in this food crisis," said Ogilvie.<sup>2</sup>

From the outset the WLA did its utmost to dispel the impression—so hilariously conveyed in the *Puck* parody—of farmerettes as frivolous dilettantes who joined the movement as a lark and treated it as a costume party. Over and over the leaders spoke of the diversity and the mixed-class (though never mixed-race) nature of the ideal WLA camp. The WLA welcomed to its ranks young women office workers, teachers, and factory workers, along with those of the leisured class. "The army is a body of women who have enlisted to serve in the fields just as their brothers are serving in the trenches," emphasized Mrs. A. Gordon Norrie, a WLA Executive Committee member, in a newspaper interview. Trying to distance the new movement from the earlier female Preparedness Movement "show camps," she continued, "They are to work for the farmers and under their direction as regular paid farm hands. They are not to be tea party gardeners nor vacant lot experimenters. They will not have fancy camps to show off

their uniforms. These women farmers will go out into regular barracks, like soldiers. . . ."