

## IN BIFURCATED GARB OF TOIL: CALIFORNIA

A brass band welcomed the first unit of the California Woman's Land Army when it arrived in the town of Elsinore on the first of May. The whole community turned out to greet the fifteen women dressed in their stiff new uniforms. The Chamber of Commerce big shots gave speeches of welcome, the Farm Bureau president thanked the farmerettes for coming, and the mayor gave them the keys to the city.<sup>1</sup>

California did not fear the farmerette. Then as now, California prided itself on the imaginative impulse and progressive nature of its citizens—women won the vote there seven years before—so a platoon of patriotic girls in “bifurcated” work costumes did not rattle or provoke as it might have in the East. Tradition did not weigh so heavily on the far coast of the continent, and the Wild West's spicy spirit was still nurtured. The *Los Angeles Times* even poked fun at the difference in attitude between the coasts:

With even the conservative New England country-sides admitting as much [that the farmer needs the farmerettes] with very good grace, considering the utter lack of correct precedent in their traditions bearing on the subject, it is not surprising that California communities fairly march to meet the fair invaders with a “Welcome to Our City” banner and a band.<sup>2</sup>

The Golden State also suffered from an insatiable hunger for farm laborers and had long displayed a willingness to import workers from afar and exploit them if possible. For the California growers, ranchers, and packers, blessed with a long growing season for a great variety of crops, employing squads of women was simply a logical, practical business decision. Although the Food Administration had urged the Californians to “produce and then produce more,” Washington had quashed the farmers' petitions to import “coolie labor” from China, the war had shut off the flow of European immigrant laborers, and while Mexican workers were available, they were scorned as

unreliable. California could not be so foolish as to turn its back on any farm help available now, especially respectable, American, white women.



The leaders of the Woman's Land Army in California were politically powerful women of the progressive wing who recognized the strength of their bargaining position and the complexity of their task. They divided the state into northern and southern WLA divisions; established dual headquarters, in San Francisco and Los Angeles; and put in the key regional positions experienced women who knew how to talk to the growers, to finesse arguments, and to negotiate deals. Because California women already had the vote and some real political clout, these WLA leaders knew how to handle the knobs of the state bureaucratic machinery and which levers to pull and valves to turn to get things moving.

Katherine Philips Edson certainly did. She had championed the drive for the California suffrage referendum in 1911, pushed through landmark pure milk laws in the legislature, and spearheaded eight-hour-day and minimum-wage statutes for women. Edson was not only a trusted adviser to reformist Hiram Johnson—the former California governor, now U.S. senator, and Theodore Roosevelt's vice president on the Progressive ticket of 1912—she was also an expert on labor conditions and chairwoman of the state's Industrial Welfare Commission.

In these war years Edson wore two other hats, which made her a powerful friend of the Land Army movement: she was state chairwoman of the National League for Women's Service and served as the head of the Women in Industry Committee of the California Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense. After a careful survey of agricultural labor needs, conducted in the winter of 1918 and with the advice of the dean of the state's College of Agriculture, Edson and her Women in Industry colleagues decided to throw their energies and devote their considerable organizational resources toward a California Woman's Land Army. "We believed the recruiting attraction of the WLA was great," Edson recalled, "so all work of the Women's Committee in the farm labor needs was transferred to it."<sup>3</sup> Edson added to her hat collection by joining the Advisory Board of the California WLA.

Because the state's growers held lucrative government contracts to supply the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy with dried and canned fruits, they experienced high anxiety about their ability to plant and harvest enough to meet these commitments. Edson and her WLA comrades were able to demand extraordinary cooperation and protections for their Land Army workers. The state's Employment Bureau and agricultural agencies were put at their disposal. The WLA was able to get written labor contracts and enforce wage, hour, and working condition requirements for the farmerettes that were far ahead of the time; in fact, agricultural laborers in California would rarely enjoy these benefits again. The grateful citizens of Elsinore gave the farmerettes three loud cheers as they

welcomed them that May Day morning. The women, whom the *Los Angeles Times* labeled the “Intrepid First Fifteen,” drove the fifty miles from the WLA headquarters in downtown Los Angeles to Elsinore in style: the mayor had dispatched a truck to chauffeur them. At the gala welcoming ceremonies, Mayor Burnham apologized for the lack of an official municipal key ring and offered instead a rake, hoe, and shovel to the farmerettes, “emblematic of their toil for patriotic defense.” It was the thought that counted.<sup>4</sup>