

MISS DIEHL AND THE WELLESLEY EXPERIMENT STATION

The great outdoor laboratory of the Woman's Land Army of America sprung up on the Wellesley College campus. Transformed into a quasi-military base, it had straight rows of white tent triangles flanked by square wooden structures, all set on a precise grid on the manicured college lawns. Trenches and water pipes zigzagged through the compound, tractors and tools ringed the perimeter, and the mess tent's cooking smoke wafted over the college buildings' Gothic Revival spires. A pig named Zelda waited patiently outside the kitchen for his garbage breakfast while women in green khaki uniforms practiced marching steps on the college playing fields, turning smartly to a U.S. Marine Corps drill sergeant's commands.

These tender ladies, who were learning both how to salute and how to plow, were the future officers of the Woman's Land Army of America, and this camp was their West Point. Chosen for their leadership potential, they'd signed up for this most innovative and audacious undertaking of the Land Army yet, the Wellesley College Training Camp and Experiment Station.

Before reporting for instruction in the ergonomically correct posture for hoeing, the cadets heard the bugle call summoning them to the raising of the colors. At the flagpole a petite woman in a pressed uniform stood at rigid attention, her hair pinned up under her hat and pince-nez glasses on her nose. Her eyes darted from one Land Army soldier to the next as they assembled around the pole and took mental note of their movements—how fast, how fluid, how deliberate they were. Those women who had the nerve to meet her gaze slightly bowed their heads in greeting; those who straggled in last, bumping shoulders to join the circle, avoided glancing her way. It was not wise to be tardy when Miss Edith Diehl, the director of the Wellesley Training and Experiment Camp, was watching. And she was always watching, taking notes in her red leather notebook.

The Wellesley Camp was set up to train a new cadre of unit leaders, the commis-

sioned officers of the Land Army who would organize and run units of their own the next season. The movement had a scarcity of qualified unit leaders—it was the common complaint of all state and county organizers—and this shortage threatened the ambitious plans to expand the Land Army and perhaps keep it going in peacetime. While thousands of women nationwide were working under the banner of the Woman's Land Army, another of this training camp's functions was to work out kinks in the unit management system—for example, housing, rations, and governance questions—that would be “both uneconomical and inefficient” for each Land Army unit to work out for itself. This grassroots movement needed to be cultivated, pruned, and standardized.

These goals were certainly reasonable and laudable, for the Land Army prided itself on its brains as well as on its newly developed brawn. But WLA executives at the highest levels, women who were established in their own professions in academe, the sciences, philanthropy, and the arts and who took a distinctly cerebral approach to the cabbage patch, harbored loftier ambitions for the Wellesley Camp. They felt this camp could be a place where the newest ideas in science, technology, psychology, nutrition, and industrial management could be synthesized and applied. They wanted to see the theories of the women's land service movement grafted to the practical lessons already learned in the field and to put new concepts to the test.

In Diehl's mind, the camp would be a great outdoor laboratory for testing, probing, and measuring the capacity of women to undertake strenuous labor, quickly master new skills, and assume leadership roles. Women would need these aptitudes to lead the Land Army and, as Diehl believed, to dispatch their duties in the greater war effort and ultimately to assume their proper place in the unfolding twentieth century.