

## Postcards from the Farmerettes

### Letter from a farmerette in a Staten Island, N.Y Land Army unit, 1918:

This isn't like any other camp for man, woman, or child. It is at times the jolliest, but always the most strenuous, ever. Rise 5:30; tumble downstairs in the dark for a hose pipe shower; overalls on. breakfast with a cafeteria rush; bed-making; grab a lunch; jump into the Ford with ten to twenty others whom a natty little chaufferette delivers at several farms within a radius of six miles by 7:30; hoe, weed, plant or gather and carry bushels of luscious tomatoes, until the noon whistle blows; lunch under the trees with perhaps a few minutes nap in the long grass; then farm work with the farmer till the long Ford comes with our driver in Fifth Avenue togs to take us home again. Can you beat it, the Woman's Land Army Plattsburg Camp?

At home there is a rush for the porcelain tubs and hot baths, a rush for the laundry tubs to put underclothes and overalls to soak. Dinner at 6, dishes washed, lunches for the next day packed, and assignments made of next day's work. A spin down to the beach for a salt-water swim, a coolish ride home with the girls hanging on anywhere the Ford offers a foothold and singing lustily.

### From a Bedford Camp farmerette, summer 1917:

(Battling boredom while working) Discussing this matter with my fellow workers at lunch one day I found that they were troubled in the same way. I found relief in an unwonted occupation---learning poetry. I copied a poem and carried it in my overalls pocket and while working said a line over and over until it was fixed in my mind, and then I began on another line and eventually on another poem. In this way I learned Shelley's 'Ode to Night,' Kipling's "If," two of Browning's one of Alfred Noyes and others. Even now when I say:

“Wrap they form in a mantle gray  
Star in wrought”

I see before me a bed of onions and my hoe hacked at them with energetic strokes! I loaned out my copy of poems to my fellow workers. It became a favorite sport. Singing, also, we found a great boon, and as long as we had the energy to sing our work went with more swing and the time more quickly. “Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag” always brings before me a vision of a potato field or the Ford delivery car, filled with girls, rattling homeward.

But I have realized since that my mind was not in a state of coma all those weeks, but was really taking in many new things, digesting old ones and changing its viewpoint. Nor was I always oblivious to the beauties of nature; far from it. I found now that as I worked it was usually with a pleasant consciousness of sunlight and good, free air, and there were moments when I paused in my work to take a deep breath and look around the orchard or the field with a sense of wonder.

It was rare that we reached home long enough before dinner to do more than wash and occasionally change from overalls to skirts. There were days, once in a while, blessed

days when one or two of us managed to squeeze in between work and dinner a swim in the swimming hole.

In the evening there were always groups around the lamp in the sitting room reading, and writing letters. Frequently a few energetic ones danced to the music of the Victoria, and on the veranda and about the tents were little groups of congenial souls loafing and talking.

### **Memoir of Margurite Wilkinson: My Experience as a Farmerette**

Chop,chop,chop went our hoes. Down the long field in the hot sun we trudged slowly, hilling up those sprawling plants. Sally could very nearly do two rows while I was doing one, but she cheered me along kindly and tactfully, telling me that I was doing very well indeed for a new girl and that it would be a lot easier when I had grown accustomed to it. Bertha did not work much faster than I, but she was steadier and did not have to stop for breath so often.

Chop,chop,chop. Birds were singing in the trees that bordered the field, Bumble bees buzzed along on their way to neighboring patches of wild flowers. But after a while I was only conscious of the fact that my back, my right wrist, and my left elbow ached like mad.

We went to the house for a pail of water. We took long draughts of it, left the pail under a big tree to keep cool and went back to work. We were painfully conscious of profuse perspiration. They have another word for perspiration on the farms which is more vulgar, vigorous and appropriate. Big drops of moisture were running down our foreheads into our eyes, down our necks into our clothing, down our legs into our mule, protective boots. But for the rest of the morning we kept an honest pace, stopping occasionally for a drink when our progress down the rows took us near the big tree and the tin pail. And at last came noon and the chance to rest.”

In those hours of the afternoon the heat was at its worst. The air seemed to be vivid with it and quivered about our faces. We felt it rising from the soil against the stiff, leather soles of our boots. We were aching, and dripping wet. Little shivers ran up and down our spines occasionally. But we did not stop. We just thought of the boys in the trenches who have much more to bear. Sometimes we spoke of them.

“You see, it is a course in many things besides agriculture, and the camp is a democracy, and cosmopolitan at that. Across the furrows at her weeding, a little Russian tells of her recent voyage to America. Further in among the celery beds a French girl and an Irish girl exchange consolation for the lover and the husband who recently started ‘over there’. College girls, important in their senior years, and women weary of degrees and world travel, wisdom or teaching, come here and take the kink out of tired nerves by straining their flabby muscles a bit. There are violinists in the camp, and singers, too, that the world will yet hear from. ..The war is not talked about thought it lies deep in the hearts of the sweethearts and sisters who are trying to do their bit to increase the country’s food supply.”

Eileen Foster, New York Tribune, September 15, 1918

