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# War Gender and Dancing: Gettysburg College and the USO During World War II

## **Abstract**

Made up of women and the men who could not join the military, the home front was more than just victory gardens and factory jobs. Although factory work was seen as a way for women both to help the war effort and at the same time gain some independence outside the home, not every woman was ready to hang up her dress and start donning pants full time. There was a middle ground where women were able to break traditional feminine roles yet still keep their dresses and serve the servicemen fighting the war between victory gardens and factory jobs; a balance was found in volunteer organizations designed to serve the military. The largest and most well-known organization on the home front was the United Services Organization, more commonly referred to as the USO. After the outbreak of World War II, USO canteens start to appear everywhere across the United States in towns and cities alike. Gettysburg, Pennsylvania was one of many towns with their own USO branch. The Gettysburg branch was supported by the female students at Gettysburg College and the Army Air Corps detachment stationed on campus which provided an opportunity for local young women to explore new social roles while supporting the war effort. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

USO, Gettysburg College, Army Air Corps, homefront, Salvation Army, Young Man's Christian Association, Young Woman's Christian Association, National Catholic Community Services, National Jewish Welfare Board, National Travelers Aid Association, World War II, Rosie the Riveter

*“War Gender and Dancing:  
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Erin Richards

Made up of women and the men who could not join the military, the home front was more than just victory gardens and factory jobs. Although factory work was seen as a way for women both to help the war effort and at the same time gain some independence outside the home, not every woman was ready to hang up her dress and start donning pants full time. There was a middle ground where women were able to break traditional feminine roles yet still keep their dresses and serve the servicemen fighting the war between victory gardens and factory jobs; a balance was found in volunteer organizations designed to serve the military. The largest and most well-known organization on the home front was the United Services Organization, more commonly referred to as the USO. After the outbreak of World War II, USO canteens start to appear everywhere across the United States in towns and cities alike. Gettysburg, Pennsylvania was one of many towns with their own USO branch. The Gettysburg branch was supported by the female students at Gettysburg College and the Army Air Corps detachment stationed on campus which provided an opportunity for local young women to explore new social roles while supporting the war effort.

Posters of Rosie the Riveter hung all over the country encouraging women to step into the roles left by the men going off to war; it was often considered a woman’s patriotic duty to get a job outside of the house. Rosie the Riveter, a working woman who showed off her strength by tying her hair back and rolling up her sleeves as she shouted to the world, “We can do it!” encouraged many women to break free of pre-war restraints tying them to the household and get a job. There were challenges aplenty along the way as the women who followed Rosie the

Riveter's path found that safety required them to cut their hair, don pants and leave their children in the care of another while they worked long hours to bring in enough money to keep the family in food and clothing. These women faced harassment from the men at home who resented the influx of women into their sphere of influence.<sup>32</sup> While many women faced and overcame these challenges, others were not comfortable breaking so many social boundaries, but still wanted to do their part for the war effort. The USO was able to provide such an opportunity for these women.

The USO was founded in New York City in February 1941 when six different service organizations united to support America's troops. The six organizations were: the Salvation Army, the Young Man's Christian Association (YMCA), the Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA), the National Catholic Community Services, the National Jewish Welfare Board, and the National Travelers Aid Association.<sup>33</sup> Each USO operated a little differently, some in a permanent location, some in temporary spaces provided by private citizens until something more appropriate could be found or constructed. The USO fundraised for the war effort and held scrap drives, but is most well known for its canteens and entertainment. The goal of the canteens was to provide a "home away from home" for the soldiers; offering a place they could grab a bite to eat, write home or simply relax. Wherever there were soldiers away from home within the states, USO workers and volunteers gave out coffee, tea, hot cocoa, and often a baked good or two, always with a smile.<sup>34</sup> The canteens also provided a safe social atmosphere for the soldiers to dance and have fun; often local women and girls became volunteer hostesses,

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<sup>32</sup> Margaret Regis, *When Our Mothers Went to War: An Illustrated History of Women in World War II* (Seattle: Navpublishing, 2008), 62-63.

<sup>33</sup> Metropolitan New York USO, "History of the USO," <http://www.usonyc.org/AboutUs/OurHistory/tabid/70/Default.aspx> [accessed September 29, 2011].

<sup>34</sup> Gary L. Bloomfield and Stacie L. Shain, with Arlen C. Davidson, *Duty, Honor, Applause: America's Entertainers in World War II* (Guilford, Connecticut: The Lyons Press, 2004), p 185.

providing dance partners for the soldiers or just a listening ear those missing families and sweethearts.<sup>35</sup> Almost every town with military stationed nearby had a USO canteen and Gettysburg was no different; serving the Army Air Corps cadets training at Gettysburg College, and local military home on leave, the Gettysburg USO worked closely with the college. Although the main facility was in town, there was a small office on campus to help plan and organize any interaction between the college and the USO.<sup>36</sup> The USO dances were often held in the campus gymnasium, Plank Gym, with female students as hostesses.<sup>37</sup>

Gettysburg College's role in the local USO was small, but significant to keeping the USO open. Although the USO occasionally brought in visitors from other local bases, the primary focus of the USO's attention was on the Army Air Corps, who happened to be stationed on campus. This was not the college's only contribution. Like other colleges at the time, Gettysburg College became practically an all-girls school due to the war. For those female students who enrolled after the male students left to fight, a majority female college was all they ever knew. Students who had been on campus before the start of the war experienced a significant change. Perhaps the most significant event for these young ladies was the morning the ROTC contingent left campus in April of 1943. Although most male students who were fit to serve in the military had already left, there remained behind a fairly large contingent of between 200-300 ROTC students. Since they had to catch the train in Baltimore to travel to Harrisburg, the boys got an early start, and left campus around 6AM. Elly Horn a Gettysburg College class of 1944, and what she remembers as most of the college, all turned out early to see the ROTC boys off,

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<sup>35</sup> Frank Coffey, *Always Home: 50 Years of the USO, the Official Photographic History* (Washington: Brassey's Inc., 1991), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Beverly Littlauer, telephone interview by author, November 15 2011. Angeline Haines, telephone interview by author, November 11, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> "Group Lists USO Dance," *Gettysburgian*, April 15, 1943, Gettysburg College Archives.

wishing them well as they left to join the war.<sup>38</sup> This caused considerable changes for the college and the young ladies left behind. The lack of students on campus made certain classes unavailable because there were not enough students enrolled to warrant teaching the classes. Mildred Barrick, Gettysburg College class of 1945, was on track to graduate with a degree that would enable her to become a physician after graduation. However, in her senior year there were not enough students on campus to teach Bacteriology, a necessary course for her major, and she was forced to graduate with a Chemistry degree instead. Mrs. Barrick insisted that she had received a “good education” despite the necessary change in curriculum.<sup>39</sup>

Another significant change after the ROTC left campus was the Army Air Corps College Training Detachment arriving on campus. The College Training Detachment program was a federal program in which colleges could volunteer campus space for the Army Air Corps to train. Gettysburg College was one of many colleges across the nation which had the honor of hosting the Army Air Corps while they trained. One problem with their presence on campus was housing. The college at that time had very few male dormitories, so the Army Air Corps was forced to take over some of the girls’ dormitories, thus restricting the number of dorms available for female students. In response the sororities were moved into the recently emptied fraternity houses, providing everyone with a room to live in. The girls also gave up their cafeteria to the Army Air Corps, because it was in the same building as the dormitories. As a result, the girls in sororities were assigned a time and a fraternity to go to for meals.<sup>40</sup>

Though the Army Air Corps was on campus and had taken over the dorms, they had their own classes and were not actually enrolled at the college. There was a possibility that other than

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<sup>38</sup> Elly Horn, telephone interview by author, November 9, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Mildred Barrick, telephone interview by author, November 15, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Joanne Miller, telephone interview by author, November 15, 2011. Jane Orlando, telephone interview by author, November 15, 2011.

the mandatory 'Gettysburg Hello' a Gettysburg student would not have to interact with the soldiers, although many of the girls on campus did.<sup>41</sup> Since there was no rule against dating the soldiers, many did date the Army Air Corps men. However, the girls did have a curfew, of 10PM on weeknights and a little later of the weekends. According to Joanne Miller, "there was a lot of kissing down in the bushes by the entrance to the fraternity houses just before 10pm on weeknights."<sup>42</sup>

The presence of the Air Corps men allowed the USO in Gettysburg to remain open. Without troops to serve on a regular basis, the USO would shut down. The USO, though federally recognized, was completely funded by donation. No one would donate to an organization that was not serving a purpose. The Gettysburg USO had run into this problem previously . The town had a USO branch in the Hotel Eberhart at the outbreak of the war which had to close when there were no soldiers to visit the USO.<sup>43</sup> In 1943, when the Army Air Corps came to the college campus, there was once again a need and the USO re-opened in the building which had formally been Hill's Coffee Shop on Chambersburg Street.<sup>44</sup> It is uncertain when exactly the new canteen opened, but sometime between August and October of 1943 the new facility was available for use. The first USO in town had no connection with the college, it was after the second USO opened that the college started to support the USO.

On campus, the USO was affiliated with the Student Christian Association, or SCA. During World War II what is now Weidensall Hall was the SCA building where the USO

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<sup>41</sup> It was a freshman tradition in the 1940's of greeting everyone on campus with a 'hello' followed by their name. This tradition was a way for the students to show each other, and their professors, respect. 1941. G-book, Mussleman Library, Gettysburg College Special Collections, Gettysburg, PA.; "Why Not Say Hello," *Gettysburgian*, October 5, 1944, Gettysburg College Archives.

<sup>42</sup> Joanne Miller, telephone interview by author, November 15, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> "USO Drive, Adams County Quota=\$5,000," *Star & Sentinel*, June 6, 1942, Adams County Historical Society.

<sup>44</sup> "USO Opens New Room for Services," *Gettysburgian*, October 1, 1943, Gettysburg College Archives.

campus office was located. According to *The Gettysburgian*, “the SCA building [was] open to the aircrew during [the lunch period] for playing ping-pong, checkers, listening to the radio and playing records.”<sup>45</sup> From that office, the girls who volunteered with the USO found out what they could do to help that day. One of the most common tasks that the young ladies were asked to perform was mailing letters or picking up stamps and cards. Writing material was provided at almost every USO branch for the soldiers, and the Gettysburg branch was no different. When the USO ran low on writing supplies, the ladies volunteering were sent into town to stop by one of the stores and purchase cards and stamps.<sup>46</sup>

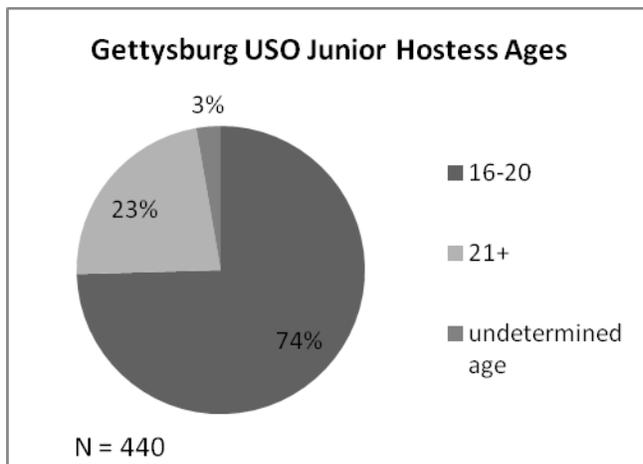
Every USO across the country was run by volunteers, but not everyone qualified to volunteer. The USO had an image that they wanted to project, and that image was one of a comfortable home setting. They felt that the perfect junior hostess was a white, middle-class woman in her early twenties. Although the experience was different in every town, most USO branches required some sort of recommendation in order to volunteer to be a junior hostess. The recommendations let the organizers of the USO branch know what character of each young woman, and allowed them to determine if she would be a good fit for their establishment. Anyone of questionable morals and values was not allowed to become a junior hostess; the ideal presented by the USO of a ‘home away from home’ was an image of comfort and leisure, not one of fast romance. In order to maintain this feeling, organizers had to ensure that the girls who would be interacting with the soldiers were “chaste and respectable.”<sup>47</sup> USO organizers were looking for traits of sexual responsibility and femininity when they chose junior hostesses. This gave respectable girls who were not ready to give up their dresses in exchange for pants an

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<sup>45</sup> “USO Details Still Doubtful, Keith Reveals Cadets Will Use SCA for Entertainment during Stay,” *Gettysburgian*, February 25, 1943, Gettysburg College Archives.

<sup>46</sup> Angeline Haines, telephone interview by author, November 11, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Meghan K. Winchell, *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun: The Story of USO Hostesses during World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 51.



opportunity to serve their country. This was especially important for the young women at Gettysburg College who wanted to support the war effort and continue their education at the same time.

The Gettysburg USO had all junior

hostess applicants fill out an index size card, providing their name, age, address, telephone number and church affiliation. These cards also required a sponsor signature and a parental consent signature.<sup>48</sup> By providing all this information, the organizers of the USO were able to determine those best suited to volunteer at the Gettysburg USO. Even the girls from the college needed a sponsor to vouch for their values and behaviors. College students often made up a large percentage of junior hostesses. In her book on USO hostesses, Meghan Winchell makes the point that “female college students...were the appropriate age for USO hostesses and usually had free time to volunteer.”<sup>49</sup> Even in Gettysburg it held true, that the majority of junior hostess applicants were between the ages of 16 and 20 years old, as is seen in the graph to the left.<sup>50</sup> Gettysburg College provided 109 out of 440 junior hostess applications.

Many of these hostesses from the college volunteered their time of their own decision, and a few were told to volunteer their time as part of freshman activities. Beverly Littlauer, class of 1947, reminisced about her involvement in the USO saying, “we were told where to go and we did what we were told.”<sup>51</sup> Mrs. Littlauer explained that her first experience with the USO was when an upper-class girl brought her a college beanie to wear and told her to go over the SCA

<sup>48</sup> USO ID Cards, 190E Adams County in WWII: General, Adams County Historical Society, Gettysburg, PA.

<sup>49</sup> Winchell, *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> The pie chart is compiled using the ages off the USO ID Cards found at the Adams County Historical Society. A total of 440 Gettysburg USO ID cards were sampled.

<sup>51</sup> Beverly Littlauer, telephone interview by author, November 15, 2011.

building to dance with the military trainees for a short time. She did what she was told and went to dance with the Army Air Corps boys for two hours and continued to do so once a week throughout the year.<sup>52</sup>

Holding USO dances on campus was a big part of Gettysburg College's contribution to the organization. The college hosted the dances in Plank Gymnasium, where there was plenty of room for all those invited. Sometimes the dances were for local military units, and sometimes for visiting military units, but they were all welcomed to Gettysburg College for the dances and ensured a dancing partner. Dances were a characteristic trait in USO entertainment throughout the entire country. Many of the organizers felt that if the soldiers were provided with good, "wholesome" entertainment, then they would be less likely to engage in socially unacceptable behavior with women of looser morals and values.<sup>53</sup> By handpicking the junior hostesses, the organizers were able to keep the USO dances innocent. It was a time for the military to think a little less about the war and how much they missed home and family and enjoy talking with other people their age. As Mrs. Littlauer phrased it in her interview, "there was nothing sexual about [the dances]."<sup>54</sup> Everyone was just there to have a little fun.

The dances at Gettysburg were typical of USO dances. Invitations would be sent out ahead of time to a group of soldiers in order to ensure that there would be enough hostesses to dance with all the soldiers. Because there were not always the same numbers of soldiers attending, not every junior hostess would be invited to every dance. The organizers rotated through the list of hostesses, inviting only the number they would need to have a dance partner

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Winchell, *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun*, 51.

<sup>54</sup> Beverly Littlauer, telephone interview by author, November 15, 2011.

for each soldier. The dances for the Army Air Corps in particular were done in a series, so there were plenty of opportunities for the young ladies to attend.<sup>55</sup>

When 100 soldiers from Indiantown Gap were invited to Gettysburg for a dance, Gettysburg College and the USO put together a whole weekend of activities for the soldiers. There was a dance held in Plank Gymnasium, socials held in the SCA building and the Women's Division building, a pot-luck lunch held in town, and a battlefield tour.<sup>56</sup> On another occasion, twenty-five young men from the naval reserve unit at Mount Saint Mary's were invited to be guests of the college for an evening of, "dancing, ping-pong, checkers, card playing and other diversions."<sup>57</sup>

Gettysburg College was also involved in the USO activities that did not relate directly with the college. For example, the college donated to various USO fundraisers and helped with the book drive as well. The Victory Book Campaign was a USO drive to provide libraries to their canteens and other places where military personnel spent a large amount of time. It was a particularly important cause for many schools and colleges, to provide the opportunity for further education to those who were unable to be in school due to current circumstances. Colleges and universities also collected books to show their opposition to the Nazis who burned books and harassed academics.<sup>58</sup> Because the USO did not receive federal money and relied on donations, it held fundraisers to remain in operation. Each county or section of the state would have a set monetary goal, so that funds were proportionally divided throughout the state based on how

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<sup>55</sup> "140 Hostesses for USO Dance," *Gettysburg Times*, April 28, 1943, Adams County Historical Society.

<sup>56</sup> "100 Indiantown Gap Soldiers Being Sponsored by Gettysburg USO Up-coming Weekend," *Gettysburg Times*, April 23, 1942, Adams County Historical Society.

<sup>57</sup> "Women Plan Open House," *Gettysburgian*, February 4, 1943, Gettysburg College Archives.

<sup>58</sup> Mary Weaks-Baxter, Christine Bruun and Catherine Forslund, *We are a College at War: Women Working for Victory in World War II*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 106-107.

many soldiers they typically served.<sup>59</sup> Gettysburg College supported the War Fund throughout the war, donating \$712 to support the USO in 1944 in particular.<sup>60</sup>

As the war drew to a close and soldiers returned, changes that had gradually occurred over the duration of the war suddenly became noticeable, making it clear that not everything would be the same. As the young men who had been off fighting in the war came back to Gettysburg College to complete their education, changes were abundant. Many of the soldiers had gotten married, and it became common to see baby carriages on campus. Classes were suddenly much larger than during the war. Class sizes were even up from pre-war sizes because the GI Bill allowed many soldiers who were not previously enrolled in college to get a higher education. Although with the presence of the Army Air Corps there had always been a male presence on campus, this presence had been limited, allowing the female students to step into roles they had previously been excluded from, such as editor of *The Gettysburgian*. The young ladies who had held these positions did not want to lose them once the soldiers came back. Those who had been USO hostesses on campus suddenly lost any position they held when the USO in town closed. The USO in Gettysburg closed at the end of 1944 for lack of need, but the organization stayed active until President Truman gave it an honorable discharge in January 1948.<sup>61</sup> The USO and Gettysburg College had an important relationship during World War II. The USO provided opportunities for female college students to support the war effort while still continuing their education, yet unintentionally giving them opportunities they would use after the war to gain more independence outside of the home.

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<sup>59</sup> "Name Leaders for USO Drive," *Star & Sentinel*, June 17, 1944, Adams County Historical Society.

<sup>60</sup> Adams County War Fund 1944 collection totals, World War II Files, Adams County Historical Society, Gettysburg, PA.; Arthur E. Braun to Henry W.A. Hanson, February 4, 1943, Box 29, Office of the President of Gettysburg College; Henry W.A. Hanson 1923-1952, Mussleman Library Special Collections, Gettysburg, PA.

<sup>61</sup> USO Center Register Gettysburg, PA, Adams County Historical Society, Gettysburg, PA.; "USO is Awarded Honorable Discharge," *Gettysburg Times*, January 9, 1948 Adams County Historical Society.