

“Doing Their Bit”: The USO in New Jersey During World War II**By Patricia Chappine****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i1.244>**

The participation of NJ women during World War II encompassed a wide array of new challenges and responsibilities. Not only were women moving into newly opened employment opportunities, but they also joined military branches, worked for the defense industry, and even played professional baseball. However, paid positions were only part of the story. Volunteerism was a significant, even integral part of the war effort, both on the home front and abroad. For women who volunteered as hostesses, the USO upheld feminine ideals of emotional labor and caregiving, emphasizing the activities that prepared young women to be wives and mothers. The ideological safety of USO work during WWII has served as a barrier to comprehensive academic consideration of their contributions on a national, regional, and local level. Demographic variations of USO clubs have yet to be analyzed comprehensively on a state-by-state basis. Research on NJ's USO groups forms a unique narrative of women's volunteerism and civic engagement, which upheld social constructs of femininity while impacting the war effort, especially the morale of the military, significantly.

“How well a man fights depends a little on how well you've done your part in the USO and how nearly ideal an American girl you are.”¹

The participation of NJ women during World War II encompassed a wide array of new challenges and responsibilities. Not only were women moving into newly opened employment opportunities, but they also joined military branches, worked for the defense industry, and even played professional baseball. However, paid positions were only part of the story. Volunteerism was a significant, even integral part of the war effort, both on the home front and abroad. Women dedicated their time to The United Service Organizations (USO), the American Red Cross, civilian

¹ Nell Giles, “If you are a Junior Hostess...” (Boston: Ralph T. Hale and Company Publishers, 1943), Illinois State Library, accessed December 1, 2020, <http://www.idaillinois.org/digital/collection/isl3/id/16785/rec/145>.

defense groups, the American Women's Voluntary Services (AWVS) and more. Unlike other areas newly opened to women during WWII, volunteerism was still viewed as "safe" and "normal." For women who volunteered as hostesses, the USO upheld feminine ideals of emotional labor and caregiving, emphasizing the activities that prepared young women to be wives and mothers. According to Meghan K. Winchell, "Senior hostesses reinforced their primary peacetime role as mothers and caregivers, and made their services as such available to the military, thereby performing a gendered form of citizenship"² The ideological safety of USO work during WWII has served as a barrier to comprehensive academic consideration of their contributions on a national, regional, and local level. Demographic variations of USO clubs have yet to be analyzed comprehensively on a state-by-state basis. Research on NJ's USO groups forms a unique narrative of women's volunteerism and civic engagement, which upheld social constructs of femininity while impacting the war effort, especially the morale of the military, significantly.

The USO formed as a nonprofit which brought together "The Young Men's Christian Association, the National Catholic Community Service, the Salvation Army, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Jewish Welfare Board, and the National Travelers Aide Association."³ The organization emphasized an ambitious mandate to "serve the religious, spiritual, welfare, educational and social needs in the armed forces and defense industries of the United States, and in general to contribute to the morale of our defense forces and the communities in which they are based."⁴ Stemming from a call by Franklin Delano Roosevelt to cater to the morale of the troops, the USO's efforts centered on creating "a second home."⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt also highlighted the

² Meghan K. Winchell, "'To Make the Boys Feel at Home:' USO Senior Hostesses and Gendered Citizenship" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 25, no. 1 (2004): 191.

³ The United Service Organizations, "What is the USO?" (circa 1943), Illinois State Library, accessed December 1, 2020, <http://www.idaillinois.org/digital/collection/isl3/id/14800/rec/442>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "USO Campaign for Funds gets under way here," *Red Bank Register*, June 18, 1942.

need for improved national morale, writing, “There are many things, of course, which can be done to raise Army morale. One is to make sure that the families at home are well cared for by the communities in which they live.”⁶ With shifting gender norms spurred by the emergency of war, nurturing USO hostesses represented a semblance of normalcy. Elizabeth Luce Moore, USO National Women’s Committee chair during the war, stressed, “Americans should not ignore the need for preservation of the national spirit. That is women’s biggest duty now, to prove in every way that we are united behind our fighting men.”⁷ The social correlation between women and ethics, essentially charging them with safeguarding American morality, found new significance during the turbulent war years. Senior hostesses were responsible for keeping young troops on a moral path by encouraging them to frequent USO clubs instead of taverns. According to a 1943 USO pamphlet, “It has been found that areas surrounding camps are inadequate in their resources for men who come to town by the thousands, find themselves without proper recreational facilities, without friends and with little to do but to stand on street corners.”⁸ With the Salvation Army, a well-known temperance group, as one of the member organizations, the USO stressed the dangers of drinking and offered alcohol-free entertainment.⁹

Wartime NJ stood as a unique blend of industry, activism, and military presence. With its vast shoreline, approximately 130 miles long, NJ’s geography was both a blessing and a curse in wartime. The threat of German U-boats in the Atlantic Ocean led to dim-out restrictions in shore communities up and down the NJ coast. Patricia “Pat” Vanaman Witt, a USO hostess from Millville, NJ, recalled, “It was very frightening here during World War II. People don’t realize it

⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt, “If you ask me” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, November 1941, George Washington University, accessed May 23, 2017, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/iyam/iyam_1941_11.cfm.

⁷ Meghan K. Winchell, ““To Make the Boys Feel at Home,”” 192.

⁸ “What is the USO?” The United Service Organizations, Pamphlet, circa 1943, page 2, Illinois Archives, <http://www.idaillinois.org/digital/collection/isl3/id/14800/rec/442>.

⁹ Winchell, “To Make the Boys Feel at Home,” 199.

because we're so near the coast. So, we were in black out time and all the headlights of the cars were painted black half-way down, streetlights were capped and low, very low. We had black out curtains up at the window."¹⁰ The state's location on the east coast and its proximity to both New York City and Philadelphia made NJ an essential staging area for troops. Fort Dix, Camp Kilmer, Fort Monmouth, Camp Shanks, Fort Hancock, and more served as critical staging and training points for soldiers being deployed to the European Theater. During WWII, the U.S. Army Air Forces trained pilots at airfields in Millville, Newark, Wildwood, Lakehurst and more, and approximately "560,500 men and women from NJ served in all branches of the armed forces and virtually every corner of the world."¹¹ Distinctively, "women served in the armed services in unprecedented numbers-more than 10,000 enlisted from NJ."¹² With a strong foundation in industry, NJ's factories converted to wartime production with ease. Among others, General Motors, Curtiss Wright, DuPont, Johnson and Johnson, and Singer Sewing Machines formed a big part of FDR's "Arsenal of Democracy" during WWII. NJ's shipyards in Camden and Kearny supplied essential battleships and escorts for the war effort. With this large-scale wartime activity, the volunteers of the Garden State answered the call to action, as well.

Far more than simple patriotic fervor, the women of NJ built on decades of activism to aid the war effort. During this time, the NJ League of Women Voters (NJLWV) pursued different campaigns and fought to ensure old protections were not lost during the emergency of war. Once the U.S. joined the Allied war effort, activism increased in certain areas. While some women simply added to their pre-war civic activism, others completely shifted their focus to efforts viewed as directly influential to winning the war. The NJLWV recognized the need to change some

¹⁰ Patricia Vanaman Witt, interview by author, Millville, New Jersey, September 28, 2014.

¹¹ Maxine N. Lurie and Richard F. Veit, eds. *New Jersey: A History of the Garden State* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 254.

¹² *Ibid.*, 255.

priorities during this time but were also reluctant to abandon their pre-war values and concerns. The NJLWV pushed for constitutional reform, foreign aid, the creation of the United Nations and child education while the Consumers' League of NJ (CLNJ) focused on occupational diseases, worker's compensation, child labor and the rights of migrant workers. Though the tactics employed by these groups did not change much during this period, the shift from peacetime to war represented new challenges in economic support, legislative action, and member participation. The WWII activism of both groups was a balancing act between keeping the momentum and influence they garnered after suffrage and rising to the new challenges faced by wartime society.

As with the NJLWV, the CLNJ played an active, yet often overlooked part in the war effort. Their concern for working families and industrial standards, particularly evident in factory inspections and investigations into industrial homework, positioned the CLNJ to address the new issues arising from American involvement in WWII. Although CLNJ investigations and public information campaigns before WWII made some progress towards improving working conditions for NJ families, the enforcement of labor legislation still left much to be desired. Since the CLNJ was created from the tumult wrought on society during the Second Industrial Revolution, it was no small step for the organization to address the growing issues of war on the home front. In a telling address to members of the CLNJ on December 29, 1941, Susanna Zwemer wrote, "Faced with continued threats to hard-won labor standards, we in the Consumers' League have stressed the need for careful planning to secure the greatest efficiency of production. We have reiterated our belief that a tired worker is like a broken-down machine- neither produces enough."¹³ The problems of a war economy presented disastrous possibilities for the workers of NJ. At the dawn of American military involvement in WWII, the impending crisis for the CLNJ was the possible

¹³ Susanna P. Zwemer, December 29, 1941, MC 1090, box 7, folder 1, Consumers League of NJ Records, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Zwemer was president of the CLNJ from 1940-1947 and then again from 1963-1971.

suspension of several hard-won legislative victories. On July 1, 1941, Mary L. Dyckman, who served on the Executive Board of the CLNJ in 1938 and as president from 1944-1956, wrote, “Efforts to ‘suspend’ the laws regulating child labor, night work for women and similar measures, for which the League has worked for many years, continue to be made, only the excuse now is ‘defense emergency.’”¹⁴ Throughout WWII, a common concern shared by both the NJLWV and the CLNJ was child labor regulation. Mere months after the Pearl Harbor attack, Dyckman insisted, “Again this is our part of the defense program, just as vitally important in summer as at any other time. We hope our contributors will help save the women and children of NJ from the aftermath of bad industrial practices which resulted from the last war.”¹⁵ Before the U.S. entered WWII, the child labor laws in NJ were amended to protect against certain labor deemed dangerous and include criteria for educational opportunities. The revisions also include “all children who work here, migrants as well as residents, and covers farm labor (away from home).”¹⁶

With NJ’s rich history of women’s civic engagement, the participation of women in the war effort seemed a natural outlet. According to the American Psychological Association, “civic engagement” is defined as:

individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.¹⁷

¹⁴ Mary L. Dyckman to members and friends, letter, July 1, 1941, Consumers League of New Jersey Records, MC 1090, box 7, folder 1, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mary L. Dyckman to members and friends of the CL, letter, July 17, 1940, Consumers League of New Jersey Records, MC 1090, box 7, folder 1, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.

¹⁷ “Civic Engagement,” American Psychological Association, accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.apa.org/education/undergrad/civic-engagement.aspx>.

Martyn Barrett and Bruna Zani insist “civic engagement is used to denote the engagement of an individual with the interests, goals, concerns and common good of a community.”¹⁸ By this definition, any war work, despite economic motivations, was civic engagement. In looking at the WWII participation of NJ women, an expanded view of civic participation as including “work which is undertaken either alone (e.g., helping an elderly neighbor, boycotting a product on environmental grounds) or in cooperation with others (e.g., attending a community meeting about an issue of concern, helping to construct a children’s playground)” is necessary.¹⁹ The USO formed a crucial outlet for civic engagement in NJ, while catering to the new challenges of wartime society.

Despite the shifting gender norms represented by new opportunities, the ideology of women as caretakers and guardians of morality influenced WWII volunteerism. Although the introduction of women into occupations traditionally considered off limits to them caused friction, most volunteer activities fell firmly within the caretaker category. Thomas Rotolo and John Wilson explain further, “Women’s family roles are linked to volunteer work in a number of ways. Much of the time they devote to volunteer work can be seen as an extension of those roles, or as being limited by those roles.”²⁰ The Progressive Era saw an increased influence of women’s groups as the socially accepted role of women as caretaker was extended beyond the family and into the public realm. The assumed role of women as the guardians of family morality extended to the community. Alan Dawley insists, “The most enduring contribution of the progressive generation

¹⁸ Martyn Barrett and Bruna Zani, “Political and Civic Engagement: Theoretical Understandings, Evidence and Policies” in *Political and Civic Engagement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Martyn Barrett and Bruna Zani (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ Thomas Rotolo and John Wilson, “What Happened to the ‘Long Civic Generation’? Explaining Cohort Differences in Volunteerism,” *Social Forces* 82, no. 3 (March 2004): 1097.

to American reform was the invention of a social conscience.”²¹ Importantly, the idea of sacrifice, in the form of actual battlefield loss and along a wide spectrum of many other wartime activities, like rationing and volunteering, has held wide renown as a lens with which to look at this time. However, Mark H. Lee argues, “The mystique of unconditional sacrifice, forged in the war itself and celebrated in collective memory, has not fared well as an interpretive guide to wartime politics and mobilization.”²² While the outpouring of civic participation in many areas during WWII was certainly impressive, Lee warns against using this trope as the singular way to interpret this time. Since “It is nostalgically recalled as our ‘finest hour,’ when Americans freely sacrificed selfish desires, did without, went all out, and ‘pulled together’ in common purpose and spirit,” the tendency to dramatize the events surrounding WWII is strong.²³ In the tumultuous era of WWII, the social concern of NJ women did not wane, but shifted with the changes of society and found new outlets.

Women who volunteered for the USO represented a continuance of activities long viewed as normal for women. If perceived gender norms were adhered to, women engaging in wartime activities faced little social resistance. Other areas of activism, notably war industry work and entry into women’s military branches, required a break from accepted gender roles and were thus viewed with more skepticism and greeted with both covert and open hostility. Winchell notes, “At the same time that opportunities were growing for women in industry and in the armed services, many middle-class women continued to find their niche in volunteerism.”²⁴ In subtle ways, USO volunteers changed the public perception of women’s work during wartime. Winchell observes:

²¹ Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 43.

²² Mark H. Lee, “The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (March 1991): 1297.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1296.

²⁴ Meghan K. Winchell, “‘To Make the Boys Feel at Home,’” 192.

Although mending shirts, baking cookies, and ‘listening’ were hardly revolutionary undertakings for middle-class women in the early 1940s in the same way that working in factories or joining the Women’s Army Corps were, USO senior hostesses transformed these activities ordinarily performed daily at home into public fulfillment of their obligations to the wartime state.²⁵

Despite upholding gendered ideals of society, USO work still formed a major source of activism during WWII.

While many USO activities were common from state-to-state, the organization encouraged creativity in club offerings. In a USO pamphlet titled “Hail Hostess,” volunteers were advised, “If you see your club getting into a program rut, and you have a few ideas about other things to do—say so. Serve on committees, help plan new and interesting things to do.”²⁶ Hostesses were moral support; a taste of normalcy in a world turned upside down. The junior and senior hostesses of the USO provided services which might seem mundane to the average onlooker. They brought homemade treats to soldiers, served coffee, and provided a friendly ear. These women, who donated countless hours of their personal time, helped soldiers to find a sense of home in an otherwise violent and uncertain time. They took nurturing out of their own homes and away from their families and brought it to the men and women of the armed forces. As was common in the home, a division of responsibility based on age and experience also existed in the USO. Usually, senior hostesses were married women in their mid-thirties and older. They often took on the added responsibility of counseling soldiers who were homesick. The younger members, or junior hostesses, engaged in activities that involved socializing with the soldiers. Providing a sense of home life for the troops was an essential part of USO work. In NJ, USO clubs sprang up to meet the needs of both the military and civilians. According to the National USO, NJ contributed funds

²⁵ Ibid., 190.

²⁶ Barbara Abel, “Hail Hostess,” New York: The United Service Organizations Inc., circa 1941-1945), Illinois State Library, 12.

totaling \$7,203,822 during WWII.²⁷ Estimates on USO club activity in NJ put the total operations at about 106 in roughly 51 communities during WWII.²⁸ Major USO operations often found homes in areas surrounding military bases.



Playing Ping Pong at the USO in Fort Dix. Courtesy of James Marker.

Affectionately nicknamed the “Kilmer Sweethearts,” USO hostesses, many from nearby Douglass College in New Brunswick, NJ, formed the backbone of emotional support for troops at Camp Kilmer. Located between Piscataway and Edison, construction on Kilmer began in January of 1942. With “over 1,500 acres and 1,120 buildings...barracks, seven chapels, five theatres, nine post exchanges, a gym, three libraries, four telephone centers, a post office, a 1,000 bed hospital, 28 miles of roadway and about 11 railheads.”²⁹ The camp served as an essential staging area and transportation hub during WWII. 1,320, 481 servicemen were processed through Kilmer during WWII. At war’s end, the camp aided in processing more than 300,000 troops returning from

²⁷ “Operation USO: Report of the President, February 4th, 1941-January 9th, 1948,” 2.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁹ “A Historical Sketch of Camp Kilmer,” The National Archives and Records Administration Northeast Region-New York, accessed December 24, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/nyc/exhibit/camp-kilmer>.

overseas deployment.³⁰ With such a massive movement of troops through the camp, there was also a large USO presence necessary to create a “home away from home.” Aside from the usual club operations, the USO affiliate Camp Shows also found their way to Kilmer. The Camp Shows were domestic at first but then soon added an overseas Foxhole Circuit of entertainers.³¹ Celebrities including Benny Goodman, Betty Grable, Red Skelton, and famous Yankee Joe DiMaggio made appearances at Kilmer during the war.³²

With Douglass College, the women’s college of Rutgers University, so close, many students traveled to Kilmer as hostesses. Alice Jennings Archibald recalled, “Well, Camp Kilmer really had a great impact on the area because...I belonged to church groups that used to go to USO weekly and entertain the fellows.”³³ Catherine Ballentine remembered, “Well, they had USO dances here on Albany Street. We would come down to dance or just talk to the soldiers and of course when we went to Dix, or Kilmer, this is what it was primarily.”³⁴ As Adaline Bloom discussed, the area surrounding Kilmer was very active and, “it wasn’t only USO centers, but there were churches and synagogues and other organizations that provided, you know, activities for these soldiers.”³⁵ Jean Comeforo recalled the USO fulfilling a social deficit for both the men and the women, stating, “I remember there were so few men left, and I remember that being a big problem, but then along came the USO, so that kind of filled in-the USO and dances at Camp

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 88.

³² National Archives, “A Historical Sketch of Camp Kilmer.”

³³ Alice Jennings Archibald, Oral History Interview, March 14, 1997, by G. Kurt Piehler and Eve Snyder, page 21, Rutgers Oral History Archives. <https://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/interviewees/750-archibald-alice-jennings>. (accessed December 23, 2020).

³⁴ Catherine Ballantine, Oral History Interview, March 2, 1999, by Tara Kraenzlin and Michael Bino, page 13, Rutgers Oral History Archives. <https://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/interviewees/30-interview-html-text/736-ballantine-catherine>. (accessed December 1, 2020).

³⁵ Adaline Glasser Bloom, Oral History Interview, November 18, 1996, by G. Kurt Piehler and Lara Fletcher and Barbara Tomblin, page 32, Rutgers Oral History Archives. <https://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/interviewees/809-bloom-adaline> (accessed December 23, 2020).

Kilmer, and the girls all got dressed up, and had their social life anyway.”³⁶ The emotional toll on the hostesses is often ignored in academic consideration. According to Marie Griffin, “It was a little sad, because you knew you’d never see those people again, and you sort of hoped there would be somebody to talk with your husband or father in the same way. Sometimes there was somebody who loved to dance and that was fun.”³⁷ Although dancing is probably the most popular and well-known activity of USO hostesses, the actual contributions to the emotional well-being of soldiers, war workers, and their families was ever-present in NJ clubs.

Like senior hostesses, junior hostesses also performed gendered tasks, as their work trained them for their adult roles as wives and caregivers. Janice L. Karesh, who grew up in Newark, NJ, served as a hostess during WWII.³⁸ While at Douglass College, Karesh volunteered with the New Brunswick USO and went to events at least once every week. She recalled, “we saw a lot of really young men who probably had never been away from home before and who that cup of coffee and the cookie and a little conversation with someone female seemed to help.”³⁹ Again, until recently, historians bypassed a thorough analysis of the contributions of USO hostesses during WWII. According to Winchell, “Senior hostesses completed work for servicemen and women in the USO clubs that women had always done, and this helped to erase its historical significance.”⁴⁰

Though the women were volunteers, not everyone was welcome. The USO did not accept every volunteer. To recruit senior hostesses, “They wanted middle class, mostly white women who

³⁶ Jean C. Comeforo, Oral History Interview, April 10, 1996, by G. Kurt Piehler, Maria Mazzone and Melanie Cooper, page 19, Rutgers Oral History Archives. <https://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/interviewees/868-comeforo-jean-c> (accessed December 23, 2020).

³⁷ Marie Picker Griffin, Oral History Interview, March 16, 1996, by Kathleen Plunkett, page 36, Rutgers Oral History Archives. <https://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/interviewees/959-griffin-marie> (accessed December 1, 2020).

³⁸ Janice Karesh, Oral History Interview, June 2, 2000, by Sean Harvey and Sandra Stewart Holyoak, page 3-4, Rutgers Oral History Archives. Online: <http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/interviewees/1019-karesh-janice> (accessed May 23, 2017).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ Winchell, “To Make the Boys Feel at Home,” 191.

were considered sexually respectable. The USO knew women mattered to morale—the men needed the company of women. [But] they didn't want them having sex.”⁴¹ The USO, when possible, preferred hostesses with previous activism, notably participation in women's clubs, perhaps deeming them more truly interested in service than just in men.⁴²

The USO rules outlining the dress and conduct of hostesses upheld gendered ideals. Regulations forbade tight-fitting clothes or short dresses and dating the men was prohibited. Aside from policies governing their appearance, hostesses were under scrutiny for their moods and behaviors, as well. A USO handbook advised, “*Be cheerful*. If you have indigo moods or private pessimisms, check them in the coatroom. The boys have a few troubles of their own and one reason they come to the USO is to forget them.”⁴³ Another publication suggested, “And even tough men, such as Marines and Bombardiers, soften up with girls who are completely feminine.”⁴⁴ Advice on dancing with the soldiers offered another glimpse into social norms, admonishing, “Never volunteer to teach a man anything. Let him ask for it.”⁴⁵ Some guidelines combined ideals about the proper dress and mood: “A girl who is carelessly dressed, obviously bored, and ungracious, gives a man nothing nice to remember.”⁴⁶

Despite the many regulations, the women of NJ volunteered all over the state and USO chapters became a vital part of the war effort on both the home front and abroad. Organized in an American Legion building on Main Street, the Millville USO hosted men bused in from the Millville Army Air Field.⁴⁷ Besides dancing and music, the local club included card tables and a

⁴¹ Winchell quoted in Terese Schlachter “In the USO's Early Years, Hostesses Provided a Wholesome Morale Boost” Thursday, February 4, 2016 <https://www.uso.org/stories/149-in-the-uso-s-early-years-hostesses-provided-a-wholesome-morale-boost> (accessed June 8, 2017).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Barbara Abel, “Hail Hostess,” 11.

⁴⁴ Nell Giles, “If you are a Junior Hostess,” 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁷ The Millville Army Airfield was dedicated as “America's First Defense Airport” on August 2, 1941.

phonograph. By virtue of its proximity to the shore, USO volunteers frequently organized day trips to the beaches of Ocean City, NJ. Pat Witt, a high school student who lived in Millville, NJ during WWII, joined the organization as a junior hostess.⁴⁸ For Witt, hostesses did much more than dance with the troops. She recalled, “Our job was to keep up their morale. Sometimes they wanted to talk about their families.”⁴⁹ Organized at a local church, formal dances were a common occurrence. Witt reminisced, “There was always food, good food for the soldiers. It was a mystery who provided all this food.”⁵⁰ With rationing placing limits on items like sugar, cooking oil, and coffee, organizing food for these social events was another responsibility that fell on the hostesses. Some women used their own ration cards to purchase ingredients. While food shortages made providing meals difficult, gas rationing made traveling a chore, as well. Witt remembered the difficulties in figuring out the logistics for the recreation of men in the area on leave. Since her family owned a farm, they always had extra gas rations for their tractors. Knowing this, her friends inevitably called her up on their weekend pass and asked if she would like to go to Ocean City. When she said yes, the next question was whether she had any gasoline to spare. She joked, “I always had dates because I had gas.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Junior hostesses were single women between 17 and 25 years of age (Lessa Scherrer, “There’s no Place Like Home: An Overview of the USO in World War II” *Homefront Digest* 1, no. 6 (November 2001) <http://www.ww2homefront.com/junkie6.html> accessed July 12, 2017.

⁴⁹ ⁴⁹ Patricia Vanaman Witt, interview by author, Millville, New Jersey, September 28, 2014.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*



**Dancing at the Millville USO Club.
Courtesy of the Millville Airfield Museum.**

Monmouth County was another area with a large-scale USO presence. Mrs. Adeline Moffat, director of publicity for the USO, described the county activities after a personal visit as follows, “It was different from other USO clubs I had been in. There was a thrill and excitement about the tea party that made one feel that these were not

just men looking for something to do on a Sunday afternoon, but tired soldiers who had flocked to the one place within their reach where a good time could be had.”⁵² Among the many USO clubs in the county, Long Branch, Asbury Park, and Perth Amboy boasted some of the most prominent. As the largest chapter in Monmouth County, the Red Bank USO was a hub of activity to nearby camps. Soldiers enjoyed dancing, a library, game rooms, and Spanish lessons. According to the *Red Bank Register*, a local newspaper, “Club records show that more than 425,000 servicemen have used the local club, and that more than 1,000 volunteers give service regularly each week.”⁵³ The activities of the club ensured no soldier or war worker suffered from boredom. According to another article published in the *Register*, “Informal dancing, Sunday afternoon coffee hour and community singing, programs of games and other activities are featured. The club is in constant use, and the library, lounge, workshop, dark rooms, bowling alleys, game rooms and canteen snack

⁵²“Director describes USO work in County: Many Activities Provided at Clubhouse for Servicemen,” *Red Bank Register*, June 18, 1942.

⁵³ “Local USO to have Open House Program: Residents of Vicinity Urged to Visit Clubhouse,” *Red Bank Register*, February 3, 1944.

bar do double duty every day.”⁵⁴ Other services offered at the Red Bank USO included a Camera Club to provide photos for servicemen, a headquarters for women working for the Army Signal Corps, and a beach club for servicemen and their families.⁵⁵ The Traveler’s Aid Service found housing for both military members and civilians and put soldiers in touch with families willing to open their homes to them.⁵⁶

As with other aspects of American society in the 1940s, volunteerism was also divided along racial lines. With segregation still legal in the US, women’s military branches, workplaces, and volunteer groups like the USO kept separate, yet unequal facilities for African Americans during WWII. Despite organizational directives emphasizing the importance of equality in service, USO ideals did not always translate into reality. The treatment of African American soldiers differed according to location, club leadership, and other factors. The USO also developed a “circuit of black performers who would entertain the black troops.”⁵⁷ Winchell notes, “Lack of government funding for African American servicemen’s recreation, in particular, hindered the development of positive morale among black troops.”⁵⁸ She goes on to explain, “The USO’s policy was to offer assistance and include black servicemen in all programs but not to break the barriers of racial segregation and limit discrimination.”⁵⁹

USO publications pushed an inclusive environment, advising hostesses, “You may meet here people who differ from you and from each other in nationality, religion, race, education, and social background. They differ, yes, but in a USO club they stand on common ground. You can

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “National USO Work Outlined by Club Director,” *Red Bank Register*, June 8, 1943.

⁵⁶ “USO Traveler’s Aid Service Helps Many,” *Red Bank Register*, August 12, 1943.

⁵⁷ Yellin, *Our Mothers’ War*, 218.

⁵⁸ Meghan Winchell, *Good Food, Good Fun, and Good Girls: USO Hostesses and World War Two*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Arizona, 3107052, 2003, 30.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9.

help make the common ground uncommonly pleasant.”⁶⁰ In the Asbury Park USO, a separate Servicemen’s club for black soldiers was created on Cookman Avenue. In May of 1945, Paul Robeson, a popular African American singer and actor, dedicated the club.⁶¹ Other places, like Camp Kilmer, also had separate USO facilities. However, in some areas, locals rallied against the segregation of USO clubs. For instance, “In Newark, plans to build a segregated USO drew crowds of picketers, and the group reportedly won a number of concessions from the military, including the promise that the next facility would employ an integrated staff.”⁶²

Some areas of NJ were fairly integrated before the war. For Marjorie Suggs Edwards, a WAC from Passaic, NJ, “It never hit me because I always went to mixed schools. Everything I went to was always mixed.”⁶³ It was not until she joined the women’s branch of the Army that she saw the segregation first-hand, “See, two service clubs, two theaters, two of everything. Then I realized why they had two. Then I began to look around and realize there’s only certain people of a certain color here.”⁶⁴ She recalled the segregated USO clubs, “We had our own service club, as some people will tell you...Ours was just a little hole in the wall...Okay. Ours was just nothing. It was just like a barn. There was nothing to it at all, just folding chairs and things like that. We had the juke boxes that they could dance to and things of that sort, and that’s about all there was.”⁶⁵ The Double V campaign, representing the pursuit of both victory over fascism in Europe and

⁶⁰ Barbara Abel, “Hail Hostess,” 11.

⁶¹ Gary D. Saretzky, ed. *World War II: The Home Front in Monmouth County 1941-1945*, Monmouth County Archives, 2017.

⁶² Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 38-39.

⁶³ Marjorie Randolph Suggs Edwards, Oral History Interview, Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project, Martha Hodges Special Collections and University Archives, University of North Carolina, 5-6, <http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/ref/collection/WVHP/id/4423> (accessed December 1, 2020).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

victory over racism at home, found a hold in NJ but it would not be until 1964 that segregation ended on a federal level.

On December 31, 1947, USO clubs throughout the nation were closed and given an “honorable discharge” by President Harry S. Truman, who said the organization had “fulfilled its commitment and discharged its wartime responsibility completely and with signal distinction.”⁶⁶ Recognizing the significance of their contributions to the war effort, Truman reserved the right to call on the USO in subsequent wars. The wartime record of NJ’s USO volunteers stands as a testament to women’s emotional labor and its benefit to the community. While hostesses did not break gender barriers like women in the workforce and the military, their contributions to the war effort were still essential. The perceived normalcy of their roles as they mirrored already acceptable forms of women’s work contributed to a lack of analysis of their wartime responsibilities. While work has been done on a national level, research on the narratives of local USO groups during WWII has been neglected. In NJ in particular, a unique geography, economics, industrial makeup, demographics, and social climate all contributed to a distinctive war effort of which USO hostesses contributed in tangible ways.

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⁶⁶ Eric Brander, “A Different way of Serving,” The USO, <https://www.uso.org/stories/34-a-different-way-of-serving>, accessed December 27, 2020.