Katherine Jellison, President of the Agricultural History Society, 2016–2017. Photo courtesy of Katherine Jellison.
Get Your Farm in the Fight: Farm Masculinity in World War II

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During World War II, the United States needed to raise a sufficient military force while at the same time maintaining a sizeable farm labor force to meet increased wartime production goals. At a time when the word farmer was emphatically gendered male, and many farming communities resisted employing inexperienced outside labor, the nation's agricultural sector focused on keeping as many young men as possible on the farm. The strategies the nation employed to secure both military personnel and agricultural producers played on a set of common themes regarding American masculinity. Visual images designed to persuade young men to stay on the farm echoed the iconography intended to recruit men into the military. Wartime propaganda portrayed both the ideal serviceman and the ideal farmer as white, muscular, and ready to use his powerful body to fight the war on the battlefield as well as on the farm field.

In January 1941, anticipating the war that would soon come to American shores, President Franklin Roosevelt told Congress that the nation must protect and extend around the globe four fundamental freedoms: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear. Four months earlier, Roosevelt had signed into law the nation’s first peacetime military draft in order to ensure the services of the young men who would defend these Four Freedoms. While raising a sufficient military force, however, the Roosevelt administration also needed to maintain a sizeable civilian labor force to achieve both Freedom from Fear, through arms manufacturing, and Freedom from Want, through increased agricultural production. To meet its

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war industry needs, the administration turned largely to the nation’s so-called “hidden army”—those civilian adults, particularly women, who were under-employed or not yet participating in the paid labor force. In contrast, at a time when the word farmer was emphatically gendered male, and many farming communities resisted employing inexperienced outside labor, the nation’s agricultural sector focused on keeping as many young men as possible on the farm. In other words, at a time when the country needed soldiers, sailors, and marines, all presumably male, it also needed farmers, also presumably male, and the strategies the nation employed to secure both military personnel and agricultural producers played on a set of common themes regarding American masculinity.\(^1\)

In his 1943 book *The Farmer Citizen at War*, Howard R. Tolley, head of the US Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), set forth the farmer’s daunting tasks for achieving Freedom from Want: feed the nation’s civilian population at home and its military personnel at home and abroad; feed America’s British, Soviet, and other lend-lease partners; provide the fibers that would go into millions of military uniforms and the leather used in millions of boots; and raise the corn, sugar, soybeans, and peanuts that would be processed as alcohol and oils for use in the munitions industry. As Tolley acknowledged, their country was asking American farmers to achieve these ambitious production goals at the very time they were “facing their greatest difficulties in meeting these responsibilities.” After all, he noted, labor was scarce because “boys have been rolling off the farms to fight all over the world.” Suggesting that perhaps more farm boys should remain on the farm, Tolley cited the head of the War Manpower Commission as stating that military personnel, war plant workers, and agriculturalists were all equally “essential” to an American victory. The key to coordinating the efforts of these three pools of labor, Tolley argued, was simply “putting the right man in the right spot to lend his full power to the winning of the war.” The clear implication was that more men needed to recognize that their “right spot” was the American farm.\(^2\)

Anticipating the important role farmers would play in achieving Freedom from Want, the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 had already provided exemptions from military service for young farmers and farm workers who were “necessary to and regularly engaged in an agricultural occupation.” Rather than being classified as 1-A (fit for military service) or IV-F (unacceptable for military service), these men were classified as II-C, “men necessary to farm labor.” Responding to the efforts of farm organization lobbyists and heeding Secretary of Agriculture Claude Wickard’s assertion that food
would “win the war and write the peace,” framers of this legislation believed they had forestalled possible wartime agricultural labor shortages. Following the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, with the nation now waging a real war rather than a theoretical one, keeping young workers on the farm proved more difficult than anticipated. In the initial flush of patriotism and outrage that followed the Japanese attack, thousands of young farm men preempted the draft’s deferment system by volunteering for military service. Later, when the armed services stopped accepting unclassified volunteers and all eligible personnel had to submit to the selective service system, many young farm men still felt duty bound to pursue military service rather than a deferment. After all, at a time when singer Betty Bonney had a hit record entitled “He’s 1-A in the Army and He’s A-1 in My Heart”—the musical saga of a manly pacifist who abandoned his beliefs to answer Uncle Sam’s call—military service remained the preeminent masculine activity. In addition, local draft boards differed significantly in their willingness to grant agricultural deferments. For example, the draft board in one eastern Nebraska community quickly acceded to farmers’ demands that young male labor would do “more good” on the farm than in the service, while another draft board in the area summarily sent all its young farmers to the military, leaving farm wives and daughters to pick up the slack. Under circumstances such as these, the government soon launched an extensive propaganda campaign to convince draft-age men and their communities that they could just as honorably fulfill their obligations of male citizenship by driving a tractor as by driving a tank.

Employing the slogan “Food for Freedom,” the nation’s propaganda machine, centered in the Office of War Information (OWI), used a variety of strategies to convince farmers that they were now soldiers of the soil. Government-produced films made the connection between agricultural production and the war effort explicit in movies with such titles as Food for Freedom (1941), Farm Battle Lines (1942), and Food for Fighters (1943). Partnering with the US Department of Agriculture, Disney Studios explicitly referenced Agriculture Secretary Wickard’s famous pronouncement with a five-minute animated short entitled Food Will Win the War (1942).

Even films not explicitly focused on agriculture touted the importance of maintaining a robust farm labor force. Shortly before he left his wife, children, and lucrative Hollywood career behind to join the US Navy, movie star Henry Fonda narrated a 1942 public service film whose title said it all: It’s Everybody’s War. A coproduction of Twentieth Century Fox and the OWI, Fonda’s film depicted men in uniform but also portrayed civilian Americans engaged in a
Figure 1. “Want Action?” Source: National Archives, Records of the Office of Government Reports, Record Group 44, photo no. 513532.
variety of activities that furthered the war effort. Best known for his 1940 role as downtrodden farm laborer Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Nebraska-born Fonda now told the story of an unnamed Midwestern town where local youth cheerfully “went out to the farms to help harvest the crops.” Unlike the exploited young farmworker he had portrayed two years earlier, the youngsters Fonda described in *It’s Everybody’s War* thrived in the fields as their labor yielded “food to sustain” their friends, neighbors, and brothers fighting overseas. In other words, the American farm worker was as vital to the war effort as the naval officer Fonda was about to become.

To persuade young men to serve in the war effort—whether in or out of uniform—government propaganda represented war service not only as an obligation of male citizenship, but also as the ultimate expression of masculinity itself. As two-thirds of the male population between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four were headed for military service—and the requisite physical exam—the male body was literally scrutinized as never before. The secondary sexual characteristics that supposedly defined the healthy adult male body—a V-shaped torso and significant upper-body musculature—now dominated portraits of the wartime male. In contrast to the disheveled “forgotten man” portrayed in Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographs in the 1930s, the wartime man was at the height of his physical powers—whether as a soldier or as a farmer. At a time when the government and popular culture portrayed the national crisis as “everybody’s war,” and even Hollywood’s masculine ideal—box office king Clark Gable—was volunteering for military duty, the dominant visual representation of the American-male-at-war resembled the typical Gable character on screen: handsome, sturdy, self-confident, and ready for a fight.

Wartime poster art encouraging young men to serve in the military, war plant, or farm field presented hyper-masculinized images of the male body that were meant to represent not only the strength, power, and resolve of American men but of the American nation itself. The idealized men portrayed in this artwork shared some dominant characteristics: They were white, broad-shouldered, and their bared, well-muscled forearms were ready for action. Sometimes their forearms were visible because they were either shirtless or their sleeves were in tatters due to their arduous work. More frequently, however, their forearms were bared because they had rolled up their sleeves in anticipation of strenuous labor. Figures in military recruitment posters frequently struck this pose, perhaps most famously in illustrator James Montgomery Flagg’s artwork for the World War II-era Marine Corps (Figure 1). Poster
artists also bared male forearms to promote increased agricultural production and the important work of the wartime farmer. A poster calling on farmers to raise more sugar beets, for instance, emphasized the muscular physique of a fighting man whose heroic leadership of a bayonet charge was fueled by American sugar (Figure 2).

In their quest to promote increased agricultural production, poster artists often characterized the farmer himself as a fighting man. One widely circulated poster pictured the American farmer with the stereotypical broad shoulders and muscular forearms as he displayed baskets filled with tomatoes, potatoes, and corn that would feed the nation’s servicemen and allies abroad. As the young farmer stood against a backdrop of warplanes, a battleship, a smoke-belching munitions plant, and his own farm fields, the poster exhorted other farmers to “Get Your Farm in the Fight!” (Figure 3) In an environment where male brawn was associated with successful agricultural production, even Uncle Sam was no longer the stern, wizened old man who had pointed out of James Montgomery Flagg’s recruitment posters during the previous world war. While still sporting a gray beard, he also now had matinee idol looks, a farmer’s sun-drenched, chiseled face, and the ubiquitous rolled-up sleeves and muscular forearms in a poster alerting farmers to the agricultural census in early 1945 that would gauge, in part, how efficiently farmers had used available resources to expand crop production. The single-file lines of tractors, cattle, and shocks of grain in the poster’s background resembled battle tanks coming off the factory production line—another reminder that farm production was war production and that the farmer was as vital to the war effort as any man (Figure 4).

Predictably, the creators of this type of publicity made their way to America’s idealized garden spot—Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. For generations, observers had touted the county’s fertile soil and its inhabitants’ efficient farming methods. Only five months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, in a heavily illustrated July 1941 National Geographic article, writer Elmer C. Stauffer had paid tribute to Lancaster County as the nation’s premier agricultural district. Numerous color photos of expansive farm fields and bushels of fresh produce had provided readers with ample evidence of the county’s agricultural bounty, but it was Stauffer’s sensuous description of items for sale at a local farmers’ market that drove the point home: “Look at those apples shining as though individually and painstakingly polished; crisp, cool lettuce having a handled-with-white gloves freshness about it; big tomatoes, red and firm, glistening like clever wax copies; gourds and pumpkins, fresh and full,
Figure 2. “Plant More Sugar Beets.” Source: National Archives, Records of the Office of Government Reports, Record Group 44, photo no. 515180.
Figure 3. “Get Your Farm in the Fight!” Source: National Archives, Records of the Office of Government Reports, Record Group 44, photo no. 514376.
Farm Masculinity in World War II

Lancaster County's fertile landscape and agricultural bounty may have provided a perfect backdrop for images of Freedom from Want, but many of its most successful agriculturalists were not men prone to conceive of themselves—even metaphorically—as farmer-warriors. The county's most celebrated farmers were in fact religious pacifists—members of its sizeable Mennonite and Amish communities—whose young men were allowed access to conscientious objector status or non-combatant military service under the 1940 draft law and its 1941 follow-up legislation. That reality, however, did not deter the OWI from focusing on these farmers. In fact, these descendants of Swiss and German religious protesters fit an ideal profile. Their European ancestry and their unique religion, which taught that farming was a divinely ordained way of life to be passed on from father to son, made Lancaster County largely a region of white male farm operators—the population targeted in most wartime publicity.

Filmmakers from the OWI and Columbia Pictures in fact used Lancaster County as the setting for a propaganda film cheering on the farmer's heroic effort to feed the war effort. Filmed in November 1942 and released in March 1943, Farmer at War spent most of its nine minutes showing local farmer Moses Zimmerman at his daily chores as the narrator shared some staggering national statistics. Farmers had produced a record quantity of milk in 1942 and were planning to produce two billion more pounds in 1943 because the United States had “to send so much powdered milk overseas.” The Department of Agriculture had set goals for 28 percent more chickens, 9 percent more eggs “and still not enough,” and 10 percent more meat in “100 million hogs with 10 pounds more on every one of them.” The narrator, however, carefully avoided identifying Zimmerman as a Mennonite, even as the film clearly showed his wife Amanda wearing a Mennonite head covering. And while the narrator discussed the issue of farm labor shortages, he never bothered to explain whether a farm deferment or his conscientious objector status allowed twenty-two-year-old Vernon Zimmerman to remain out of uniform and to farm alongside his father Moses. As Vernon's sister Ruth later noted, her Mennonite father and brother did not view their participation in a war propaganda film as ironic but as consistent with their religious beliefs. In their minds, Farmer at War simply highlighted the Zimmermans’ life-affirming act of growing more and different crops to feed hungry people whether those in need were “soldiers or not.”

Lancaster County was also one of the locations where Roy Stryker sent
members of his famous FSA photography unit, now working under OWI auspices, to create pictures that explicitly “emphasize[d] the idea of abundance” and celebrated Freedom from Want. In November 1942, as filmmakers were shooting Farmer at War, Stryker employee Marjory Collins traveled through Lancaster County taking pictures of a hybrid corn test field, local marketplaces filled with fresh fruit and vegetables, and a heavily laden Thanksgiving dinner table. She also illustrated Freedom from Want by focusing on the well-nourished bodies of Lancaster County residents. Although Collins primarily photographed women, children, and older men, she occasionally trained her lens on the healthy young adult male body. A few of these images were of men in uniform home on leave, but others were of men who—at least temporarily—were doing their part for the war effort as civilians. Most frequently, these were men involved in some aspect of food production.

The captions that Collins created for her pictures of young men out of uniform typically noted that these Lancaster County residents were performing vital home front service. In the captions for a series of photos Collins took of thirty-year-old Henry G. Lutz butchering a steer, she explained that while two of his brothers were in the army, Lutz had “been deferred so that he [could] continue to help in his father’s butcher business and slaughterhouse.” Her pictures showed Lutz with his sleeves rolled up, using his muscle power to ensure Freedom from Want. His weapon may have been a meat cleaver rather than a bayonet, but Lutz was fulfilling his wartime mission with the same resolve as those who directly engaged the enemy in battle (Figure 5).

A photo that Collins took at a local war plant further established the premise that a draft-age man could remain on the Lancaster County home front and still serve the war effort. While visiting a converted animal-trap factory that now produced “armor-piercing bullet cores and other war essentials,” Collins dutifully photographed the women and elderly and disabled men who labored there. She also photographed an able-bodied lathe operator and peace church member named Raymond Newswanger, whose race, clean-cut looks, and well-muscled forearms resembled those of the all-American boys featured on the era’s military recruitment posters (Figure 6). Collins’s caption for the photo identified Newswanger as a thirty-year-old Mennonite who until recently had, like “[m]ost Mennonites,” been a farmer but now served the war effort in a new capacity. Only two months before Collins snapped Newswanger’s picture, Secretary of Agriculture Wickard had told Congress, “Food is just as much a weapon in this war as guns.” As Collins’s caption for the Newswanger photo indicated, however, the Mennonite church disagreed with
Figure 4. “Farmers, Uncle Sam Asks You...” Source: National Archives, Records of the Office of Government Reports, Record Group 44, photo no. 514239.
the secretary’s assessment. While Newswanger’s earlier service as a farmer was life-affirming, his transition to munitions maker—probably for the high wages to be earned in arms factory employment—would not sit so well with his co-religionists, and he hoped “his church [wouldn’t] find out” about his war plant employment.15

In the end, even with agricultural draft deferments in place, the need for men in the military and the lure of high-wage, off-farm war industry jobs siphoned off young farm men at such a rapid rate that agricultural employment dropped by one million people during the war years. Stopgap measures, employed most frequently in busy harvest seasons, included the use of Jamaican

Figure 5. Henry G. Lutz butchering a steer. Photograph by Marjory Collins. Source: Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, photo no. LC-USW3-011746-E.
and Mexican migrant laborers, Italian and German prisoners of war, interned Japanese Americans, and urban women and teenagers. Longer-term solutions included the exchange of male labor between neighboring farms and the expansion of work duties for farm wives, daughters, and minor sons.¹⁶

The young farmer as soldier of the soil campaign produced limited results. Aimed at convincing young farm men and their families, communities, and draft boards that they could uphold their obligations of male citizenship just as honorably in the farm field as on the battlefield, the campaign did not sufficiently staunch the flow of young men off the farm. Even if the posters, films, and photo displays convinced more young men to accept agricultural

Figure 6. Raymond Newswanger. Photograph by Marjory Collins. Source: Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, photo no. LC-USW3-011777-D.
deferments, young male labor remained inadequate for the increased production goals of wartime agriculture, necessitating the use of alternative sources of farm labor. And at a time when popular culture and the government’s own propaganda glorified the serviceman as the epitome of young American masculinity, the young farmer inevitably lacked the prestige of the soldier. The point of reference in publicity encouraging young men to stay on the farm was always the serviceman. The man in uniform was the gold standard against which the food producer was measured. More than a half century after the war ended, for instance, Iowan Richard Young still regretted that because his father had believed him to be a better farmer than his twin brother, Young had remained at home with an agricultural deferment while his brother donned a uniform and left the farm behind. The propaganda photographs, posters, and films that Richard Young and other Americans viewed might indeed have convinced them that farmers performed a vital service to the country in her hour of need, but farmers would never topple the serviceman from his wartime pedestal.  

Nevertheless, the campaign did provide an alternative way to perform wartime masculinity. According to most wartime propaganda, the American farmer was a real man—broad shouldered, well-muscled, and ready for action. While those who took farm deferments might not enjoy the level of prestige and praise accorded the serviceman, they did receive recognition for making a necessary, masculine contribution to the war effort. In wartime America, the correct answer to the question “Who is a farmer?” was obvious: He was a soldier of the soil.

NOTES

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5. Draft policies in place once the United States actively entered the war made men eighteen to forty-five subject to possible military service. In reality, however, the military drew the majority of its personnel from the male population aged eighteen to thirty-four. The average age of a US serviceman in World War II was twenty-six. Information on Nebraska draft boards is from “Farming in the 1940s,” *Wessels Living History Farm*, http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe40s/crops_01.html (Accessed Sept. 6, 2016); Rita Oberholzer, conversation with Katherine Jellison, *The Plains*, Ohio, Sept. 22, 2016.


7. Although contemporary viewers would undoubtedly categorize it as a propaganda film, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences classified *It’s Everybody’s War* as a documentary and granted it an Oscar nomination for the best documentary of 1942. For discussion of Henry Fonda’s portrayal of Tom Joad and of his wartime naval career, see Devin McKinney, *The Man Who Saw a Ghost: The Life and Work of Henry Fonda* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012), 86–92, 108–120.


10. *Get Your Farm in the Fight!* and *Farmers! Uncle Sam Asks You*, World War II Posters, RG 44, Records of the Office of Government Reports, National Archives, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/513498 (Accessed Nov. 17, 2017). Although male figures were the ones that appeared most often in such publicity, female bodies also sometimes appeared in wartime images with their sleeves rolled up and muscles exposed, ready to defeat the Axis. Several visual representations of the fictional war plant worker Rosie the Riveter, including Norman Rockwell’s iconic 1943 *Saturday Evening Post* cover, portrayed her with biceps exposed. Rockwell, however, based his Rosie’s body on a male model—the burly figure of the Prophet Isaiah on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. See Karal Ann Marling, *Norman Rockwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 101.

11. Elmer C. Stauffer, “In the Pennsylvania Dutch Country,” *National Geographic Magazine*, July 1941, 73–74. In the wake of Stauffer’s praise of Lancaster County’s agricultural bounty, local clergyman Calvin G. Bachman and cultural geographer Walter M. Kollmorgen both published widely read studies in 1942 specifically touting the success of Lancaster County’s Amish farmers. In his study, published under the auspices of the US Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), Kollmorgen even pronounced the county’s Amish enclave to be the most stable and successful rural community in the nation. See Calvin G. Bachman, *The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County* (Norristown, PA: Pennsylvania German Society, 1942); Walter M. Kollmorgen, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: The Old Order Amish of Lancaster
For a thoughtful analysis of these and other works that have portrayed Lancaster County as America’s ideal agrarian location, see David Walbert, Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).


