

12-18-2014

# Wartime Love

Chelsey Hess  
*Ouachita Baptist University*

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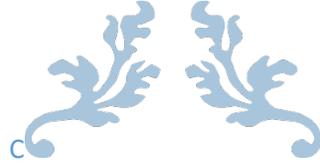
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## Recommended Citation

Hess, Chelsey, "Wartime Love" (2014). *History Class Publications*. 13.  
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# WARTIME LOVE

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Chelsey Hess



DECEMBER 18, 2014

TOPICAL SEMINAR

Dr. Hicks

Chelsey Hess

Topical Seminar

18 December 2014

### Wartime Love

“When the classic work on the history of women comes to be written, the biggest force for change in their lives will turn out to have been war. Curiously, war produces more dislocations in the lives of women who stay at home than of men who go off to fight”<sup>1</sup>. The Second World War was a total war. It had a total effect on manpower, industry, resources, and, even the lives of civilians. The United States did not fight on its own turf but the people, men and women alike, were affected by the wartime. Sixty percent of the men who went to war were drafted by the United States Armed Forces. This left 11,535,000 families without their husbands, sons, dads, or brothers.<sup>2</sup> Men either volunteered or were drafted into the United States Armed Forces, leaving their families behind to carry on their daily lives without their sole provider. The absence of men left the women to take up various aspects of life that they had never had to do before such as, providing for their family, getting the family car serviced, and many other activities that society deemed as masculine during this era. The presence of various propaganda art, like the iconic “Rosie the Riveter”, helped make the transition from masculine duties into feminine duties smooth. Pictures of women doing physically demanding jobs helped show other women that it was acceptable.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor et al, *Miss You: the World War II Letters of Barbara Woodall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor*, 137.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/ww2-by-the-numbers/us-military.html>

The women who put their husbands' lives on the line had to find a way to support their family. "As evocatively captured by the image of Rosie the Riveter, the war drew many women into the labor force as 16 million men mobilized to serve in the Armed Forces, with over 73 percent deploying overseas...only 28 percent of U.S. women over the age of 15 participated in the labor force in 1940. By 1945 this figure exceeded 34 percent"<sup>3</sup>. The mass entrance of women into the workforce was mainly a reason of supply and demand, with so many men gone to war there had to still be a workforce in order to get things made. Before the 1930s and the Great Depression, many businesses, schools, and other areas of occupations actually barred married women from holding jobs. The rules stated that a women must be released from her duty whenever she became married<sup>4</sup>. This type of workplace rule held women back from even entering the workplace for decades. The traditional gender roles told women that bringing home the bacon, so to speak, was a man's duty to his family, women were supposed to work within the home, to take care of the children and the house itself. During time of war though the traditional gender roles temporarily left; married women had to pay the bills since their source of income was overseas fighting against the evil Nazis. Women were generally excited and proud to be entering the workforce and taking care of things while their husbands were gone, it gave them a sense of pride and they wrote to their husbands explaining how happy they were to be taking care of the family. Polly Crow wrote to her husband that she, "Opened my little checking account too and it's a grand and a glorious feeling to write a check all your own and not have to ask for one"<sup>5</sup>. Women, before World War II, relied upon their husbands if they were married, or their family if they were single. Women, typically, did not open their own bank accounts because they usually did not have any money of their own, unless they were single women who worked

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<sup>3</sup> Acemoglu et al, "Women, War and Wages", 1.

<sup>4</sup> Goldin, "The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women's Employment", 3.

<sup>5</sup> Litoff et al, *Since You Went Away, World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, 147.

in a factory. The sense of freedom and independence that women got from something as small as opening a bank account is astounding. As the war dragged on more and more women entered the workforce and gained their own sense of independence. This new found freedom did not take away the way that they respected their husbands though. When the war was over and their husbands returned as the bread-winner, they knew that they were to return to their usual household responsibilities. After the war had ended many women voluntarily left their jobs, or were forced to leave their jobs, so that the returning males could have them. “American patriotism and inflated female wages during the war induced many women to enter the labor force, but according to this new literature, they did not become permanent participants”<sup>6</sup>. While many women were upset to lose their new found sense of independence, they were more gleeful that their loved ones were returning home to them.

Women not only faced work outside of the home and the life of being a single parent but they also were often forced to move from their homes. Women were encouraged to work during the wartime yet factories were in urban cities and many women lived in rural areas, so not only did women go to work but many were forced to move from their home in order to do so. “Many women were recruited to migrate from rural areas to take on the dangerous but necessary work. They often faced shortages of housing and food service establishments, and rationing of gasoline and tires made travel difficult”<sup>7</sup>. Many married women moved in either with their in-laws or their own parents, in an effort to take care of their children, be closer to job opportunities, or to save money. The occupations that women were allowed to go into during the wartime were very difficult and strenuous jobs such as working in munitions factories, shipyards, clothing factories, railroads, farm work, taxi drivers, and even delivering mail. Every single one of these jobs were

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<sup>6</sup> Goldin, “The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women’s Employment”, 3.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/partners/exhibitentrance.html>

typically held by men but the country could not go on without them. Women were put into these occupations and did a highly effective job. There was no time to doubt a woman's ability because supplies, resources, and artillery had to be in the Pacific and European theatres as quickly as possible in order to help protect the men that they loved.

Married women, who had typically only worked inside their homes and were the primary caretakers of their children, now had to find a way to balance a job and also their home life. Men, as primary money earners, were able to go to work and come home to a home cooked meal and clean children, all because their wives were at home all day to take care of those things. The pantry was always stocked and a clean home was expected, but with the husband gone to war and the wife entering the workforce, who would take care of the things at home? The wives and mothers were still held to the standard, at home, that they had always been. Women now had to find time to get the car serviced, fix broken things around the house, and pay the bills. Polly Crow was one of these wartime brides that had to find a way to manage a job and the caretaking of her and her husband's son, Bill. Polly describes in a letter to her husband, William, about all of the things she has to have done on their car and how much it will cost her, "have used all my gas coupons now up to Dec.21<sup>st</sup> and cain't figure how I did it as I've never run short before. I guess the leak must have lost a lot before I discovered it..."<sup>8</sup>. Things that women had not typically had to worry about until World War II were coming into light. While women were gaining their independence from solving all that life threw their way, they were also gracious to their husbands who had always taken care of these things for them. In many of the letters found from wartime brides, they usually seem to follow up how much they have had to tackle in the previous days by sayings such as, "I love you terribly, Darlin' and can hardly wait to see you

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<sup>8</sup> Litoff et al, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, 148.

again”<sup>9</sup>. While they enjoyed being responsible, it is still evident that they missed their husbands and could not wait for them to return home so that the women did not have so much on their plate to handle. Not only were women focused on things that their husbands typically took care of but they also had to still handle the caring of their children. These working wartime brides were completely exhausted at the end of their day. Mrs. Crow, in one of her letters, described how her son had had a bad dream and did not want to let her leave the house for work. She eventually had to convince him that she would only work a portion of the day and that she would be back soon. This incident caused stress in her life because if it had not been a wartime than she would have been able to stay with her son all day to calm him down. After she returned from home she wrote, “Got home at 6:00 this afternoon as I had to stop and get the groceries for tomorrow. By the time we ate, did the dishes, I washed out a few things, mended the fur coat again and bathed us both, it was time to go to bed”<sup>10</sup>. Women were absolutely worn out during this stressful time in their lives and in the life of the nation. It is a miracle that they were able to function fully and give it everything that they had. Perhaps the most amazing part about how busy and preoccupied these wives were, was that they were still able to make time to write to their beloved soldiers almost daily. They took precious time out of their busy days in order to let their husbands know what their child had recently learned, how much money they had been saving, or the small, miniscule things that they were having to deal with. Taking time out of their busy lives in order to inform and delight their distant husbands’ shows just how much they cared about the mental and emotional wellbeing of their soldiers.

The lives of married women during World War II were very different than the lives that their mothers and grandmothers had had as married women. While these women were providing

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<sup>9</sup> Litoff et al, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, 146.

<sup>10</sup> Litoff et al, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, 150.

for their families, emotionally and financially, they also thought about things bigger than themselves. Just because they were busy with their everyday lives does not mean that they forgot to have normal worries. During World War II there was outrageous racism towards Japanese Americans because of Pearl Harbor. Edith Speert worked at a daycare while her husband was overseas fighting in the war. In one of the letters that she wrote to him she says, “What we “hold against” the Japanese shouldn’t at all be held against these American children of Japanese descent. Both these kids play well with the others and are very well liked by the other children”<sup>11</sup>. Mrs. Speert saw the impact that Pearl Harbor had on Americans’ views of Japanese-Americans and she wanted to insure that these children of Japanese origin were treated fairly since they had no say in the incident. Even though her husband was in the Pacific theatre fighting against the Japanese, Mrs. Speert kept her caring heart open to see that it was not these Japanese-American children’s fault that many Americans were killed. In the midst of warfare and terror, she was able to keep her innocent and pure outlook on people. These war brides were also able to keep their minds about them and think for themselves on what they believed should happen during war on the home front. Mrs. Speert also wrote to her husband about what the city of Cleveland was planning on doing with money in an effort to memorialize soldiers. She described how they were planning on building a fountain, this was foolish to her and she said, “Wouldn’t it be a really swell thing if they donated this money to housing for veterans or for day care centers for servicemen’s children- but no- why bother- everyone will go look at a fountain- ha! Ha”<sup>12</sup>. Women were taking on a far more heavy load than they had ever carried before and most had to do it alone, but they still took the time to read the newspaper and keep themselves involved in the day to day activity of the places in which they lived. These women took the world upon their

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<sup>11</sup> Litoff et al, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, 153.

<sup>12</sup> Litoff et al, *“Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, 156.

shoulders and were still able to come across as carefree and happy in the letters that they wrote to their soldiers.

These women were not able to undergo such a dramatic change in their lives without themselves changing. When the war was over finally in 1945, they and their husbands had to be prepared for what the war had done to both of them, at the home front and on the battle front. Perhaps Mrs. Speert said in best in a letter to her husband, “More and more I’ve been living exactly as I want to and I don’t see people I don’t care about- I do as I damn please. As a whole, I don’t think my changes will affect our relationship, but I do think you’ll have to remember that there are some slight altercations in me”<sup>13</sup>. Women had learned how to manage a job and home without help from their husband for quite some time and they knew that readjusting once their men came back home was going to be difficult. They had had so much freedom and independence during those six years that it was going to be hard to just give it all up once the men returned from the battle lines. “The rhetoric of wartime mobilization led many to believe that there would be real change, when in actuality, according to this new interpretation, none materialized”<sup>14</sup>. This meant that women who were working saw that change was on the way but once their husbands returned from their service in the Armed Forces, this change came to a halt. “Although, as documented by Goldin , more than half of the women drawn into the labor force by the war left again by the end of the decade, a substantial number also remained. In fact, the decade of the 1940s saw the largest proportional rise in female labor force participation during the twentieth century”<sup>15</sup>. There have been debates between historians on if the mass entrance of women into the workforce during World War II really did help spur women into careers, from

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<sup>13</sup> Litoff et al, “Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front, 157.

<sup>14</sup> Goldin, “The Role of World War II in the Rise of Women’s Employment”, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Acemoglu et al, “Women, War, and Wages”, 1.

reviewing census information it is clear to see that the amount of women who remained in the workforce had increased to an amount which it had never been before. Even though all of the women who entered the workforce did not stay after the war, it is still remarkable that so many of them did.

Love and war are not two words that are often used together, but through the letters of World War II brides, it is evident to see that their love sure did survive the distance and hard times that stood in each couple's way. "During the entire period of American involvement in World War II, the number of pieces of mail handled by the Post Office increased from approximately 28 billion in 1940 to almost 38 billion in 1945"<sup>16</sup>. There were no computers in the 1940s to facetime or skype loved ones who were far away at war, there were only letters. Perhaps letters are the most genuine pieces of history that people leave behind because through letters and words of everyday people, one can really get the essence of emotions that people felt about one another. During World War II these war brides spilt their hearts out to their soldiers because they were the closest, perhaps not in distance but in feelings. These brides wanted their husbands to know of each small thing that their newborn child did, they wanted them to be proud of how they were handling the family affairs, or they even may have just written to lift their husband's spirits and tell him of the merry things going on back at home. The day to day situations that these women write about may seem mundane to some people but to a soldier who hears firing, day in and day out, it is a relief to hear of normalcy and home. The government and corporations encouraged women to write to the men overseas, for they knew just how important morale could be to a depressed soldier. "It is almost impossible to overemphasize the role of mail both at home and away. The arrival of the mailman, the bugle call to mail distribution, or the

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor et al, *Miss You: The World War II Letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor*, 139.

opening of the mail deposit box in the local post office were precious times in everyone's life"<sup>17</sup>. Women waited and longed for mail from their husbands, just to ensure that they were alive and well, while men waited upon letters from home to boost their morale and rally them to keep up the good fight.

No matter the distance or length of time, these women were regular about writing. They would carve time out of their day no matter how tired or busy they were, they almost always made time to talk, through letters, to their husband. There are all sorts of sappy messages and brilliantly written love letters to husbands who had been shipped off to war such as, "I love you so- oh honey, what would my life have been like had there never been a Charles E. Taylor to sweep me off of my feet and carry me away up into the clouds. Ever since the first night we met...I've been walking on air"<sup>18</sup> or perhaps, "Dearest one, I love you so much. You know, honey, I thought I loved you after our honeymoon; I knew I loved you about the time we were in Chanute Field; and since then, each day I'm sure I love you, and as the days go and come, I love you more and more"<sup>19</sup>. In each and every letter there are mixtures of everyday life and love, the war brides made sure to let their loved one know just how much they meant to them for they never knew if it would be their last correspondence. These couples were able to keep their love alive by writing to each other almost daily. Although the men could not give much detail about where they were located or what they were doing, they were able to send their affection, via mail and their wives cherished every second of it.

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor et al, *Miss You: The World War II Letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor*, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor et al, *Miss You: The World War II Letters of Barbara Wooddall Taylor and Charles E. Taylor*, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Litoff et al, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*, 153.

“Here we all are together, glad to be in America, as compared to any other place on earth, and hoping to make America more nearly the kind of place we want it to be”<sup>20</sup>. This was the type of messages that women were receiving daily from ads in the newspaper and propaganda books, what would they do to ensure that America was protected? These women, war brides, sacrificed their comfortable and familiar life of taking care of domestic activities to go to work and provide for their family while their husbands were away protecting the United States of America. These women took on traditionally male dominated jobs and fulfilled them because there was a need, the men overseas needed ammunition, clothing, and many other things that women were able to provide for them through labor. The most amazing part of it all was that they still managed to make time for their husbands through their letters. These women kept their love alive through the thick and the thin of wartime. They did not let their troublesome jobs, newborn children, or rationing get in the way of the way that they felt about their husband. War brides respected their husbands and the sacrifices that they were making for the country and reciprocated those with sacrifices of their own. In today’s world people use advanced forms of communication that do not come close to the intimacy that can be felt when reading World War II letters. These women gave everything that they had in order to protect their home; they took on the role of sole provider when they had no former experience. These women are to be respected for all that they gave and their love is to be remembered, for it will last far beyond their lifetime through the beautiful art of letters.

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<sup>20</sup> Coyle, David Cushman. America. Washington, D.C.: National Home Library Foundation, 1941. Print. 85.

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