War, Gender and Dancing: Gettysburg College and the USO during World War II

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.
During World War II America’s home front effort was very strong. 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 dresses and start donning pants full time. There was a happy medium between victory gardens and factory jobs where women were able to break traditional feminine roles yet still keep their dresses and still directly serve the servicemen fighting the war; this medium 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, or USO. After the outbreak of World War II, USO canteens started appearing everywhere across the United States, in towns and cities alike. Gettysburg, Pennsylvania was one of many towns with their own USO branch, supported by the female students at Gettysburg College and the Army Air Corps detachment stationed on the campus, providing the opportunity for local young women to experience new social roles which supported the war effort and yet were less radical than finding a factory job.

With 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 women’s patriotic duty to get a job outside of the house. Rosie the Riveter, a working woman showing off her strength, hair tied back and sleeves rolled up, shouting to the world “We can do it!” encouraged many women to break free of the pre-war restraints tying them to the household and get a job. There were challenges aplenty along the way as the women who followed the Rosie the Riveter path found that safety required them to cut their hair and don pants, as well as 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 also faced harassment from the men still at home
who resented the influx of women into their sphere of influence. While many women dealt
with these challenges and overcame them, many others understandably 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 just 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. The goal of the organization was to support the troops.
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; a place where 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
were there with coffee or cocoa, with cookies and donuts, with a friendly smile and best wishes

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from home.”

The canteens also provided a safe social atmosphere for the soldiers to dance and have fun; often local women and girls became volunteer hostesses, providing dance partners for the soldiers or just a listening ear those missing families and sweethearts. Almost every town with military stationed nearby had a USO canteen and Gettysburg was no different; serving mostly the Army Air Corps cadets training at Gettysburg College, but also local military home on leave, the Gettysburg USO worked closely with Gettysburg College. Although the main facility was in town, the college had a small office on campus to help plan and organize any interaction between the college and the USO. Also, the USO dances were often held in the campus’s gymnasium, Plank Gym, with the female students acting as hostesses.

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 either. Like other colleges at the time, Gettysburg College found itself almost an all-girls school due to the war. For those female students enrolling after the male students had all left to fight, a majority male college was all they had ever known, but for those who had been on campus before the start of the war, significant changes occurred after the young men left. Perhaps the most significant event for these young ladies was the morning the ROTC contingent left campus. By this point most other male students who were fit to serve in the military had already left, leaving behind the fairly


5 Beverly Littlauer, interview by author via telephone, November 15 2011 and Angeline Haines, interview by author via telephone, November 11, 2011.

6 “Group Lists USO Dance,” Gettysburgian, April 15, 1943.
large contingent of between 200-300 ROTC students. Elly Horn, a Gettysburg College graduate of 1944, remembers the entire campus knowing when the ROTC boys had to leave shortly after the start of her junior year. Having to catch the train in Baltimore to travel to Harrisburg, the boys had to get an early start, leaving campus at 6am. Elly Horn, and what she remembers as almost all the rest of the college, all turned out at 6am to see the ROTC boys off, wishing them well as they left to join the war.\(^7\) This caused considerable changes for the college and the young ladies left behind. For one thing, the lack of students on campus made certain specific classes unavailable because there were not enough students enrolled in the class to warrant teaching the class. Mildred Barrick, Gettysburg College graduate of 1945, had been on track to graduate with a degree that would enable her to become a physician after graduation, but 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 because those courses still had enough enrolled students to warrant teaching them. Even still, Mrs. Barrick insisted that she had received a “good education” despite the necessary change in curriculum.\(^8\)

The next significant change after the ROTC leaving campus was the Army Air Corps College Training Detachment arriving on campus. The College Training Detachment program was a Federal program where colleges could volunteer campus space for the Army Air Corps to train. Gettysburg College was one of quite a few colleges across the nation who had the honor of hosting the Army Air Corps while they trained. One problem their presence on campus caused was in relation to housing. The college at that time had very few male on-campus

\(^7\) Elly Horn, interview by author via telephone, November 9, 2011.
\(^8\) Mildred Barrick, interview by author via telephone, November 15, 2011.
housing 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 to live in. The
response to this was to move the sororities into the now empty fraternity houses, providing
everyone with a room to live in. When they moved into the fraternities, the girls also gave up
their cafeteria to the Army Air Corps, with it being in the same building as the dormitories, so
the girls in the sororities were assigned a time and a fraternity to go eat in for meals.9

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. Without having classes with the
soldiers, there was the possibility that other than the mandatory ‘Gettysburg Hello’ that all
students on campus were required to say when passing someone on campus, a student did not
have to interact with the soldiers, although many of the girls on campus did. There was no rule
against dating the soldiers, so many did date the Army Air Corps men who were on campus. The
girls did have a curfew though, 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.”10

It was these same soldiers that the campus girls liked getting to know so well who
allowed the USO to run. Without troops to serve on a regular basis, the USO would shut down.
The USO, though federally recognized, was completely funded by donation, and who was going
to fund an organization when there was no one for the organization to serve? The Gettysburg
USO had run into this problem previously as the town had a USO branch in the Hotel Eberhart

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9 Joanne Miller, interview by author via telephone, November 15, 2011 and Jane Orlando, interview by author via
telephone, November 15, 2011.
10 Joanne Miller, interview by author via telephone, November 15, 2011.
at the outbreak of the war which had to close when there were no soldiers to visit the USO.\textsuperscript{11} In 1943, when the Army Air Corps came to stay on the college campus, there was again a need and the USO was re-opened in the building which had just formally been Hill’s Coffee Shop on Chambersburg Street.\textsuperscript{12} It is uncertain when exactly the new canteen opened, but sometime between August and October 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 a part of the Student Christian Association, or SCA. During World War II what is now Weidensall Hall was the SCA building and that is where the USO on campus was conducted from. According to \textit{The Gettysburgian}, “the SCA building will be open to the aircrew during [the lunch period] for playing ping-pong, checkers, listening to the radio and playing records.”\textsuperscript{13} From that office also, 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 complete was mailing letters or picking up stamps and cards. Providing writing material is an activity that almost every USO branch had 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.\textsuperscript{14}

Every USO across the country was run by volunteers, although not just anyone could volunteer at a USO. The USO had an image that they wanted to represent, and that image was one of a comfortable home setting, “the USO set up canteens in towns for troops to have a

\textsuperscript{11} “USO Drive, Adams County Quota=$5,000,” \textit{Star & Sentinel}, June 6, 1942.
\textsuperscript{12} “USO Opens New Room for Services,” \textit{Gettysburgian}, October 1, 1943.
\textsuperscript{13} “USO Details Still Doubtful, Keith Reveals Cadets Will Use SCA for Entertainment during Stay,” \textit{Gettysburgian}, February 25, 1943.
\textsuperscript{14} Angeline Haines, interview by author via telephone, November 11, 2011.
place to congregate [and] dance with carefully screened young ladies."¹⁵ For that reason, the USO felt that the perfect junior hostess was a white, middle-class young 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 kind of character each young woman had, allowing the organizers 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.”¹⁶ USO organizers were looking for two main traits when they choose junior hostesses, sexual responsibility and femininity. This gave respectable girls who weren’t ready to give up their dresses in exchange for pants an opportunity to serve their country as much as their more adventurous sisters who joined the workforce. This was especially important for the young women at Gettysburg College who wanted to support the war effort, but could not join the work force 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 parent consent signature. By providing all this information, the organizers of the USO were able to determine who would be best suited to volunteer at the Gettysburg USO. Even the girls from the college needed to have a sponsor to vouch for their values and behavior. In point of fact though, 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.” As seen in the graph to the left, even in Gettysburg this held true, with the majority of junior hostess applicants being between the ages of 16 and 20 years old. Gettysburg College provided many of these young ladies, with 109 out of 440 junior hostess applications coming from the college.

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, Gettysburg College graduate of 1947, reminisces in an interview about her involvement in the USO saying, “we were told where to go and we did what we were told.” In an interview, Mrs. Littlauer explained that her first experience with the USO was when an upper-class girl brought

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17 USO ID Cards, 190E Adams County in WWII: General, Adams County Historical Society, Gettysburg, PA.
18 Winchell, Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun. Pg 47.
19 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.
20 Beverly Littlauer, interview with author via telephone, November 15, 2011.
her a college beanie to wear and told her to go over the SCA building to dance with the military boys for a short time. She did what she was told and went to dance with the Army Air Corps boys for two hours. She then repeated this throughout the year, going to the office in the SCA building one day a week to dance and entertain the Army Air Corps.  

Holding USO dances on campus was a big part of Gettysburg College’s contribution to the USO. The college would host the dances in Plank Gymnasium, where there was plenty of room for all those invited to dance. Sometimes the dances were for local military units, and sometimes for visiting military units, but they were all welcomed onto Gettysburg College for the dances and ensured a dancing partner. USO dances were a large feature in most USO entertainment throughout the entire country. Many of the USO organizers felt that if the soldiers were provided with good, “wholesome” entertainment in the form of dancing, then the soldiers would be less likely to engage in less socially acceptable entertainments with women with fewer morals and values than those young ladies who became junior hostesses. By handpicking the junior hostesses, the organizers were able to keep the USO dances innocent. It was just a time for the military to have a little fun; enabling them to think a little less about the war and how much they miss home and family and just enjoy talking with other young people their age. As Mrs. Littlauer phrased it in her interview, “there was nothing sexual about [the dances].” Everyone was just there to have a little fun.

The dances at Gettysburg were typical of other USO dances. Invitations would be sent out ahead of time to a group of soldiers in order to ensure that there were enough hostesses to

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21 Ibid.
22 Winchell, *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun.* Pg 51.
23 Beverly Littlauer, interview with author via telephone, November 15, 2011.
dance with all the soldiers so that no one would be left out. Because there were not always the
same numbers of soldiers attending, not every junior hostess would be invited to every dance.
The organizers would rotate through the list of hostesses, inviting only the number of junior
hostesses they would need to have a dance partner for each soldier attending the dance. The
dances for the Army Air Corps in particular were done in a series, so there were plenty of
opportunities for those young ladies who were not invited to one dance to be invited to a
future dance.24

When one hundred soldiers from Indiantown Gap were invited to Gettysburg for a USO
dance, Gettysburg College and the USO worked together to put together a whole weekend of
activities for the soldiers to participate in. There was a dance held in Plank Gymnasium, but
there were also socials held in the SCA building and the Women’s Division building on campus,
a pot-luck lunch held in town and a battlefield tour scheduled. The weekend was sponsored by
the Gettysburg USO and the soldiers were guests of Gettysburg College for the weekend.25
Another time, twenty-five young men from the naval reserve unit at Mount Saint Mary’s were
invited to be guests of the college for the evening; “dancing, ping-pong, checkers, card playing
and other diversions will provide the entertainment.”26

Gettysburg College was also involved in the USO activities that did not relate directly
with the college. For example, the college donated to a few different USO fundraisers and
helped in the USO book drive as well. The Victory Book Campaign was a USO drive to provide
libraries to USO canteens and other places that the military hangs out. This was a particularly

24 “140 Hostesses for USO Dance,” Gettysburg Times, April 28, 1943.
25 “100 Indiantown Gap Soldiers Being Sponsored by Gettysburg USO Up-coming Weekend,” Gettysburg Times,
April 23, 1942.
important cause for many schools and colleges, to provide the opportunity for further education to others who due to current circumstances were unable to be in school. Also the knowledge that the Nazis were often burning books and targeting academics often caused colleges and universities to take a stand and collect books to show a strong opposition to what the Nazis represented.\textsuperscript{27} The fund raisers that the USO held were to keep the organization running since the USO received no federal monetary compensation. Often the way the fund raisers would be set up is that each county or section of the state would have a set goal, so that once everything was added together and divided out within the state, every canteen received the money that needed based on how many soldiers they typically served.\textsuperscript{28} Gettysburg College donated to the War Fund throughout the war, donating $712 to the War Fund to support the USO in 1944 in particular.\textsuperscript{29,30}

As the war drew to a close and soldiers started returning from war, changes that had gradually occurred over the duration of the war suddenly became noticeable and made it clear that everything was not going to be the same as before the war. 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, so it soon became very common to see baby carriages all over campus. Classes were suddenly much larger than during the war, now that the young men were in the classes once again. Class sizes were even up from pre-war sizes because the GI Bill allowed many soldiers who were not previously enrolled in

\textsuperscript{28} “Name Leaders for USO Drive,” \textit{Star & Sentinel}, June 17, 1944.
\textsuperscript{29} Adams County War Fund 1944 collection totals, World War II Files, Adams County Historical Society, Gettysburg, PA.
\textsuperscript{30} 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.
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 during the war did not want to just hand over the positions once the soldiers came back. Those young ladies 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, although the organization would stay active until President Truman gives the USO an honorable discharge in January 1948.31,32 The USO and Gettysburg College had an important relationship during World War II, with the USO providing opportunities for the female college students to support the war effort while still continuing their education, yet unknowingly giving those same young ladies the opportunity they would use after the war to gain more independence outside of the home.

31 USO Center Register Gettysburg, PA, Adams County Historical Society, Gettysburg, PA.
32 “USO is Awarded Honorable Discharge,” Gettysburg Times, January 9, 1948.
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