

AWFULLY BUSY THESE DAYS

RED CROSS WOMEN + IN FRANCE + DURING WORLD WAR I

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IN EARLY NOVEMBER 1918, MARION BACKUS was stationed as a nurse in Villers-Daucourt, France, near the front lines. To celebrate the rumors of an armistice, the French and American soldiers “got drunk and . . . wild,” she wrote. Marion chose instead to take a long walk with a friend, and as she returned, just before midnight, she was struck by the sight of her hospital and the nearby cemetery nestled in the valley. “As we stood there on this night, looking down on the hospital lighted for the first time in four years and knew that now we were sometime going home . . . the thought of the other boys and from them, to their folks and what they would have to suffer, made a mixture of feelings that I will not forget for some time. And any celebration afterward never did mean what those fifteen minutes out there in the quiet that night, did to me.”¹

For Marion and dozens of other Minnesotan women, the experience of working with the Red Cross in France during World War I was a significant personal milestone. From the front desk to the front line, these volunteers offered an invaluable service to their country that history has often overlooked. Warriors on the front lines of France, they were also pioneers on gender frontiers, and many returned to be leaders in their home state.

In Minnesota, as across the nation, the American Red Cross quickly emerged as the largest social-welfare agency supporting the war. Chapters in both St. Paul and Minneapolis had formed by April 1917, when the U.S. entered the war, and the Red Cross began to focus its efforts both in Minnesota and abroad. By the fall of 1918, the Twin Cities’ Red Cross chapters had enrolled more than 150,000 members and raised nearly two million dollars for foreign and local war relief. By the end of the war, 20 percent of all Minnesotans had joined the organization. Locally, these volunteers operated canteens at railroad depots to assist soldiers in transit, offered monetary and transportation support to soldiers’ families, and organized recreation for the men at Fort Snelling. They raised money by running a salvage shop in Minneapolis and offered classes in first aid, elementary hygiene, and

home dietetics. Overseas, the Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Rochester members and medical leaders sponsored Base Hospital #26 in Allerey, France, raising nearly \$50,000 to supply it with equipment and bandages. Members donated and then paid to ship new and used trucks, ambulances, and cars to Europe. In addition, Minnesotans produced 5,842,078 surgical dressings, knitted 94,439 sweaters and other items, produced 14,522 garments for refugees, and packed 38,551 comfort kits with shaving supplies, cigarettes, chewing gum, and other essentials.²

The most compelling act of voluntary generosity, however, was undoubtedly signing up to serve in Europe. Though the work of Red Cross nurses has been studied, the efforts of other women have received less scholarly attention. More than 120 Minnesota women enrolled to be clerks, searchers, canteeners, social workers, supply-truck drivers, nurses’ aides, recreational volunteers, stenographers, secretaries, and chemists.³

The work of these volunteers was staggering. In France alone, from July 1, 1917 to February 28, 1919, the American Red Cross established 551 stations from which it offered service. Twenty-four of these were hospitals run jointly with the U.S. Army. These hospitals had 14,890 beds, served 91,356 patients, and saw just 1,457 deaths. The Red Cross also ran 12 convalescent homes for soldiers and organized reconstruction and re-education efforts for crippled and disabled men. It maintained emergency depots of medical supplies for the American army and medical-supply depots for French hospitals and produced all splints, nitrous-oxide anesthetic, and oxygen for the army.⁴

The Red Cross also operated 130 canteens—serving more than 6 million meals and 12 million drinks—on the front lines, along lines of communication, at aviation camps, evacuation hospitals, and metropolitan centers. Beyond that, it provided recreation and welfare service; hospital farms and gardens; moving pictures for hospitals; grave photography; relief for civilians, French soldiers’ families, and children (including hospitals, clinics, canteens, expositions, and adoption assistance); and anti-tuberculosis efforts.

FACING: St. Paulites who served in France: (front, from left) sisters Lucile Davis and Marguerite Davis, Alice O'Brien, Mary Morrissey; (back) Anna Corcoran, Jessie Moberg, Anne Williams.

Nancy O'Brien Wagner is a local historian and proud St. Paulite.

Recruitment posters encouraged women to volunteer locally and overseas.

This work was all completed by 5,860 male and female volunteers and paid staff. Practically speaking, commanding generals of various army areas approved or controlled the efforts of Red Cross field directors.⁵ Red Cross workers were as subject to military orders as any soldier.

Unlike the soldiers, however, Red Cross volunteers were not always paid, and many of those who were paid received only living expenses. In recruiting female volunteers, the Red Cross looked for a “certain type of girl.” While the State Department decreed that women volunteers could not have a father, son, husband, or brother in the armed services, Red Cross headquarters clarified that good temper, discretion, and self-reliance were essential, and that women had to be willing to work for a “nominal salary.” Office workers had to be 28 through 35 years old, and similar age rules applied to other positions. Preferably, volunteers should also have some knowledge of French or Italian.⁶

These restrictions largely limited the volunteer pool to unmarried, educated, upper-class women—those without spousal obligations or significant financial needs. While their wealth might suggest that these women came with romanticized assumptions, their education, age, and single status suggested independent minds. Indeed, the records show that each woman held her own—sometimes unconventional—attitudes and beliefs, though certain common characteristics appear. These women were tough, creative, patriotic, and determined.

THE WOMEN WHO VOLUNTEERED FOR FRANCE

consciously set aside traditional class and gender roles to claim new ones. St. Paulite Margaret MacLaren was studying organ in New York when the war began to go badly for the United States. In the spring of 1918, she decided, “I don’t want to be an organist, I want to go to the

WHAT? ARE YOU GOING TO DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY?



war and FIGHT for the United States. I’m coming home, I’m coming right home and apply to the Red Cross . . . to go overseas.”⁷ Margaret dropped her studies and began the cumbersome application process, coordinating her application with that of a friend from Chicago. Applying in groups of two or even four was common, and the letters the women exchanged tell us much about their friendships.

For some, such as vocational-guidance assistant Helen Scriver of Minneapolis, the first task was to convince their brothers to delay enlisting. After securing her position and arriving in Paris, Helen wrote to her brother Eugene, by then at machine gun officers training camp in Georgia: “I can not tell you how much I appreciate your waiting for me to get off and what a good sport you are. I send you heaps of love and wish you the best of success in getting your commission.”⁸

The larger family had to be considered, too. Each of these women was well aware of the attitudes of family

“I want to go to the war and **FIGHT** for the United States.”

members—whether supportive or skeptical. Dee Smith, previously a clerk at the Minneapolis Board of Education, wrote home: “Had a very nice long letter from Aunt Lou—she said she was very proud that a ‘female’ of the family had had the great opportunity.” Though Alice M. O’Brien left St. Paul for Paris despite her father’s disapproval, she still hoped to convince him of the value of her efforts: “Max wrote that he called and found you all at home and that Dad was still saying that I had no business in France. I wish he could see me for about twelve hours out of the twenty-four and he might change his mind.”⁹

Approval from the Red Cross and the War Department could be equally difficult to get. The application requirements were demanding: recommendations, four “loyalty letters” from prominent people who would vouch for the volunteer, interviews, vaccinations, inoculations, proof of birth in the United States (no German or Austrian ancestry allowed), then passports. Once the approval and a preliminary job assignment came, the final task was to get a uniform. “Nobody likes our uniforms—they are not becoming to any one and the hats are most unbecoming,” Dee Smith complained. Others enjoyed the formality; “Our uniforms came last night and we feel like three stiff soldiers but it is very nice to have them because everyone in Paris is in uniform,” Alice O’Brien wrote. Her friend, New Yorker Doris Kellogg, described the first day in uniform and her experience being saluted: “I could hardly believe my eyes, and really didn’t. Then today . . . a YMCA man presented me with the noblest salute in the world. I was panic-stricken and just feebly smiled. . . . When a few minutes later another salute came along I was weak as a rag—really still am.”¹⁰

IN PARIS, THE PROCESS OF ACCLIMATIZATION TRULY began. Some of the volunteers had traveled to Paris before, but for others, being in a foreign land was an entirely new experience. While waiting—sometimes weeks—for their final job and location assignments, they had to find temporary housing, adjust to a new language, and learn a new city. “It’s a great life,” wrote Dee Smith. “But I couldn’t help thinking tonight as Helen & I sat & talked, how little we dreamed six months ago when we were

wrestling with Board of Education problems, that we should be talking at this time about our work in Paris, & actually be in Paris.”¹¹

To live frugally, most women shared rooms in modest boardinghouses. St. Paulite and former teacher Grace Mary Bell wrote about adjusting to her new roommate in Brest: “We are put on different work now so I don’t suppose I’ll see her except while she’s taking a bath. We get along fine because we never agree about anything and the same type of man never likes both of us.”¹² Even previously good friendships faced the challenges of close quarters. Dee Smith related

Ruby [Applebee] and I sat up until 1:30 Sat night a week ago arguing about whether or not there was such a thing as Heaven & finally I told her if we were to be friends any longer it was up to us to go to bed. She is a rank Socialist & doesn’t believe in Heaven or a personal God & you can imagine what lively arguments we have. We never get mad, luckily, but she thinks my ideas are queer & I think hers are awful.¹³

On rare days off, many volunteers hurried to find their friends and pack in

Dee Smith, who served as a secretary, described her uniform as “very business like and unbecoming . . . tho now that I am getting used to it, it isn’t so bad ☺ I guess I can stand it.”



Alice O'Brien wrote home from Orry-la-Ville, "Enclosed find a photo of Dode [Doris Kellogg] and me taken in the woods just outside the Canteen, with a group of men who are guards . . . My hands are behind me because they are covered in doughnut dough."

as much sightseeing as they could. Though the cathedrals' stained-glass windows were boarded over and many stores were closed and streets quiet, it was still France.¹⁴ They wrote home about visiting Notre Dame, Napoleon's tomb, the Tuileries, and day trips to Fontainebleau and Versailles. They met for luncheons, walks through the parks, and window shopping.

Along with the travelogues that peppered the women's letters, they tried to assuage family concerns about their safety and social impropriety. As soon as Marion Backus arrived in Paris, she wrote home about her transatlantic crossing: "One of the [fellow passengers] was a man about middle age and a true gentleman and is going to get my address here and has given me his so that if at any time he can be of any assistance to me I can call on him so now I feel as if I had one friend here. If any one gets worried about this just tell them he is married."¹⁵

Marion's father must have given her additional security in the form of a revolver. In two different letters she cryptically describes her gun as a baby. "The other night I was out for a walk with one of the boys and I took my baby and exercised him. Afterwards the young gentleman took him (the baby) and cleaned it up all nice. Thought this would interest father."¹⁶

Most women apparently trusted the chivalry of the men around them and wrote home frequently of their considerate treatment. Dee Smith mentioned twice in one letter how safe the streets were. "You can't go anywhere without seeing a khaki uniform, & we haven't had the least thing unpleasant happen. The French like us."¹⁷

Like all correspondents, however, the writers sometimes omitted information. Helen Sriver admitted to her friend Dee Smith, "I can't tell my mother I got to Marseille at 3 A.M. She hasn't gotten over my arriving in N.Y. at 11 P.M. yet, (I wasn't met)."¹⁸



LATE TRAIN ARRIVALS WERE JUST ONE OF MANY wartime annoyances. Flies, lice, fleas, hives, chilblains—nearly every woman complained of these. Food shortages, food and coal rationing, and high prices were popular topics, too. Marion Backus wrote: "Between cuties [*sic*], flees [*sic*], and hives I am having an interesting time. The last two bother me most. . . the only things I miss are pie and cake. When I get home am going to eat a dozen pies right straight at one lick, and then a strawberry short cake."¹⁹

Alice O'Brien dismissed these discomforts with suspiciously adamant protests.

All your letters carry messages of Sympathy such as—I must be working so hard—not enough food—not enough sleep—feet must be sore, etc. etc. I am sorry if my letters have given you that impression because it is not a true one. Of course we do work hard but we love it and nothing is as healthy as hard work. We have fine beds, and I assure you we use them a lot. I have never been better in my life—never—and I have everything I need.²⁰

Everything but intact socks, it appears. In July, Alice wrote, "Mugs [Marguerite Davis] came into the room last night and saw me darning socks by the feeble [candle] light and said that she realized, for the first time, how far we were from home. You bet we're a long way off

**“If others can speak this language, I can,
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so can I and if the rest can hold their jobs,
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when I start darning.” She went on to request that socks be sent from St. Paul. They arrived four months later, in the hands of Grace Mary Bell, an acquaintance who had signed on as a canteener. She described the meeting for Alice’s parents: “I delivered safely into her hands sundry articles at which point she devoutly remarked ‘Thank the Lord, I can stop darning!’”²¹

Cases of homesickness developed, too, though few would admit it. Dee Smith wrote from Paris with insightful candor:

The whole idea here is anything to keep the morale of the men as high as possible, & everyone is so proud of them that no one begrudges them a good time. It is fine for the girls, too, tho no one ever seems to think they may get lonely and discouraged. I have met an occasional one who was frankly homesick, & don’t doubt there are others who are, but keep it to themselves. I think I might be if I didn’t have lots of work, but I haven’t time to think of being homesick. I sometimes even forget there is a war.²²

Alone in a foreign land, fighting a war with an uncertain outcome, these women were determined not to let their comrades or their country down. Helen Scriver summed up these attitudes: “My conclusions are always the same, namely if others can speak this language, I can, if the rest can live in these houses, so can I and if the rest can hold their jobs, I must be able to hold mine. It is a good philosophy.”²³

Helen’s steadfast determination was common, and the volunteers’ unflinching efforts made the work of the American Red Cross possible. For example, nurse Marion Backus was transferred to Evacuation Hospital #110 in Villers-Daucourt in September 1918. After a long day of travel, she went on duty that night and stayed on for two weeks. “If anybody had told me that I could take care of more than two ether patients before I came over here I would have laughed and thought them joking. But now I can watch 45 in one ward, 36 in the next (each separate buildings) and 30 in the next and never wink an eye.”²⁴

In the fall of 1918, Marguerite Davis and Alice O’Brien watched as train after train of men unloaded at their camp near Chantilly. “We are awfully busy these days,” Alice wrote home. On September 7, their friend Doris Kellogg reported that, with just three other women, they served 1,157 meals in their canteen in three-and-a-half hours; on September 18, they dished up 1,300 meals, and on October 20, more than 1,600.²⁵



Hospital ward, Tours, where Verna Halsted distributed “every known variety of tobacco and the pipes to smoke with,” as well as cigarettes, gum, stationery, pencils, handkerchiefs, chocolate, newspapers, magazines, shaving kits, eggs, fruit, and fresh flowers

The hospitals were crowded with men needing more than medical care. Previously a doctor's assistant, Verna Halsted was familiar with sick patients. In France, she was responsible for "writing mortality letters to the nearest of kin of boys that died." In addition

As we usually saw the boys each day there were usually messages given to us for their "home folks." We also took care of any legal matters that might come up for the boys

such as allotments not being paid, providing them with legal advice if such were needed concerning their property etc. [*sic*] "back home." If boys were worried thru lack of mail about home folks we would cable to ascertain if all were well. . . . We had lists of missing men sent to us from Headquarters every 15 days & we would try to get information concerning these men from patients that were in same companies, etc. & were often successful in tracking men that had been reported missing.²⁶

At base hospitals and along transportation lines, Red Cross volunteers worked hard to entertain the soldiers. Mary White Jones, a teacher from Minneapolis, served as a recreational hut director at Allerey and Beau Desert from August 1918 to April 1919. Keeping hundreds of men entertained was no small feat. Her hut had a large reading room, theater dressing room, kitchen, and canteen. A chaplain, barber, and tailor were available; church services were held on Sundays. There were usually 400 soldiers in the hut at a time, with more coming and going. She organized theatrical events using the soldiers' talents and also exchanged orchestras, minstrels, vaudeville shows, and concerts with other units. Mary and her staff of three offered doughnuts, hot chocolate, cigarettes, and tobacco to fill out the day. Each evening, she organized sing-alongs, and Wednesdays were reserved for a dance or show.²⁷

At the other end of the spectrum were the necessary office jobs. Helen Scriver acknowledged the dullness of her position.

Even though my job borders directly on the clerical I think I have been better placed than the majority. Over here you get what you get and make the best of it. I feel that I have been exceptionally well assigned considering what I hope that I can do and for that reason even though it seems less romantic to you in the states than bringing in the refugees I am satisfied.²⁸

"THE RED CROSS IS TRULY MARVELOUS," GUSHED Alice O'Brien. "Everything the army can not do they turn over to the Red Cross and it has never failed yet." Even as she was working behind the lines and her brother was enlisting, she still wondered if her family's contributions were adequate. "Do you think that, as a family, we have given enough? . . . Sell my car & give the proceeds to the R.C. . . . I work as hard as I can, live economically, and try to help financially when I can but

15 WHO SERVED

The experiences of these women, a sampling of the female Red Cross volunteers who returned the four-page questionnaire about their service to Minnesota's War Records Commission, provided the basis for this look at the spectrum of women's war work.

- + **Ruby Marie Applebee**, 29, Minneapolis: Stenographer, Paris and Bucharest
- + **Marion Backus**, 27, Minneapolis: Nurse in Paris, Beauvais, Chantilly, and Villers-Daucourt
- + **Grace Mary Bell**, 31, St. Paul: Canteener, Brest
- + **Marguerite Davis**, 27, St. Paul: Chauffeur with American Fund for French Wounded (AFFW), Paris; canteener, Toul, Chantilly, and Germany with Red Cross
- + **Julia Gray**, 40, Minneapolis: Canteener, Vierzon; shipping clerk, Paris
- + **Aileen Hagerty**, 33, Minneapolis: Secretary, Paris; canteener, Tours
- + **Verna Halsted**, 28, Duluth: Searcher, Tours
- + **Leila Heath**, 32, White Bear Lake: Hospital hut director, Angers and Bordeaux
- + **Mary White Jones**, 29, Minneapolis: Recreation hut director, Allerey and Beau Desert
- + **Margaret MacLaren**, 27, St. Paul: Canteener, Brest
- + **Alice O'Brien**, 27, St. Paul: Mechanic with AFFW, Paris; nurses' aid in Paris, canteener in Toul, and truck driver in Chantilly with Red Cross
- + **Helen Scriver**, 29, Minneapolis: Office clerk, Paris and Marseille
- + **Dee Smith**, 36, Minneapolis: Secretary, Paris
- + **Winifred Swift**, 26, Minneapolis: Chemist, Paris
- + **Rose Walsh**, 29, St. Paul: Canteener, Tours and Brest

“I’d love to get close to the guns.”

not having a private fortune of my own or the capacity for earning one, all I can do is to remind you of it, in case you should forget, and beg you to *shell over* for the next drive.”²⁹

Overall, the volunteers’ enormous pride in the Red Cross was entirely warranted. As Dee Smith wrote, “You can’t begin to tell the good the Red Cross are doing. There is absolutely nothing in the way of help for these poor people that they do not think of & do. It is the most wonderful organization ever imagined.” Smith’s pride was tinted with a different emotion, too. “I am happy to be here and never has anything been so satisfying, tho’ of course like all the Red Cross personnel, I’d love to get close to the guns.”³⁰

While work at the front had additional excitement, it also had additional danger. Inured to the frequent air raids over Chantilly, Alice O’Brien and Marguerite Davis began to remain in their rooms during the bombing rather than seek shelter in an underground “cave.” Eventually, Alice was sticking her head out of the window to watch the battles. “Heavens, what a sport,” wrote their friend Doris Kellogg, “to think those guns are after men. Isn’t it horrible? I can’t wait till tomorrow to hear the news, also to pick up the shrapnel that’s been hailing down on our roof and court.”³¹

Away from the front and the shrapnel, there were still plenty of dangers. Life was strenuous and difficult, and many of the women suffered serious illnesses. Alice O’Brien developed tonsillitis. Marion Backus came down with bronchial pneumonia and spent nearly two months in a hospital. The influenza pandemic swept through the bases, hospitals, and canteens. St. Paulite Ruth Cutler was in France for approximately four weeks before becoming ill with influenza and dying.³²

With typical wartime bravado, the women often downplayed dangers with humor. Alice O’Brien wrote an upbeat account of a bombing during her early days in Paris.

Dode [Kellogg], Mugs [Davis] and I were walking along the Place de [la] Concorde yesterday morning on our way to the Red Cross, talking excitedly about the offensive, when the Big Gun landed a shell a few blocks away with a bang that must have been heard in New York. Mugs gave one whoop and went three feet into the air.

An old Frenchman was passing, many in fact, but this one in particular threw back his head and roared. I think it was the first good laugh he had since the war started and he went down the street doubled over in mirth.³³

GOOD HUMOR, RESOURCEFULNESS, AND FLEXIBILITY

were invaluable traits for Red Cross volunteers. When asked, these women dropped their work and jumped to do whatever was needed. Margaret MacLaren enlisted as a hospital worker, then began running a canteen. Soon, she was driving a supply truck. Minneapolis Winifred Swift volunteered as a physiological chemist at Red Cross Hospital #2 in Paris, helping to research the nature and treatment of gas gangrene. “During the heavy work following the offensive of spring 1918 and summer, research work was abandoned to give more hands for the task of caring for the wounded. . . . all spare moments were given to relieve the nurses of such work as might be done by those less trained.”³⁴

Alice O’Brien was another volunteer who rolled up her sleeves and worked wherever needed. Initially hired as a mechanic for the American Fund for French Wounded, she transferred to the Red Cross when work was slow. While waiting for her assignment in Paris, she became an auxiliary nurse. Months later, stationed as a canteener near Chantilly, she showed even more versatility: “Our Chauffeur [*sic*] is good because, at present, I am one of them. The driver of the Ford at Canteen #2 went on a spree and was peremptorily dismissed so I am filling his shoes. Do not know yet whether they are going to send us another man or send me a license and don’t much care.”³⁵

Leila A. Heath showed similar impatience with red tape and a can-do spirit. As the director of a hospital hut in Angers, she was responsible for seeing that the men were entertained as they recovered. After sending in ten different requisitions for candy and gum and having no answer for three weeks, Leila took matters into her own hands. She was determined to get candy for her boys for Christmas, particularly the gas patients who craved gum. She and a driver set off for the warehouse in Nantes on December 22, and after five hours of driving to Nantes and another five-and-a-half of being lost in the city, they arrived at the warehouse after it had closed. They waited



Canteens such as this one in Vierzon served hundreds of men quickly, cafeteria style. Besides meals, many also offered hot chocolate and light refreshments out a side window.

two hours, until a worker happened to come by to give them their cases of gum and candy. On their way back, they took a wrong turn in the dark, then ran out of gas. They spent the night in the car, its roof leaking rain. At 4:30 the next morning, Leila began a seven-mile walk in the mud to get gas. Fuel tank full, they headed home, only to be stymied again by four punctured tires and only three tubes. Leila abandoned the driver once more and hitched a ride back to her hospital. Upon arrival, she sent another car back for her driver and the candy. "I can assure you," she confided, "despite all the trouble, if you could have seen the boys' faces when I said 'I have candy.' It was worth it."³⁶

Keeping up the soldiers' morale was an important task. For some, like recreation hut director Mary White Jones, it was a formal job; for others, it was informal. Many expressed mixed emotions about this expectation: they enjoyed the attention but acknowledged the underlying frustration of being valued chiefly for their feminine charms. Alice O'Brien predicted that the attention she

received would increase when she went from serving at a French base to an American base. "It will be fun to be with our own boys and most of them are so delighted to see an American girl that you feel as tho you were helping your Country just to talk to them. Most of them are so lonesome that they try to put on a skit with everyone in skirts so it is not a real compliment to have them fall at your feet."³⁷

Grace Mary Bell had a similar reaction.

I dance my fool head off and grow to like dancing more and more—whatever will I do should I return to dear old Johnson [high school] where no one thinks of me as an "American Girl?" Really, most of us go to about four dances a week! There's a new order about sending officers to bed at ten o'clock so maybe we'll keep better hours.³⁸

At the base in Brest, Margaret MacLaren faced hazards besides late hours.

**“Of course, you had to dance every night.
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were walking all over our feet.”**

Of course, you had to dance every night . . . and there were about five girls and about five hundred boys, and you just think nothing of, change partners, change partners, and I danced in . . . what you'd call now, a hunting boot. I wrote my family to send me some heavy, heavy shoes, because they were walking all over our feet.³⁹

Margaret and the other Red Cross women were both challenging expectations and fulfilling them. They were single, well educated, risk taking, and “modern” enough to sign on for foreign war service, but they also gamely met the gender expectations of the times. If the volunteers saw a contradiction between driving supply trucks by day and dancing all night, they did not express it.

On the front lines of France, these women proved their mettle time and again. When faced with sexism, they responded pragmatically. Alice O'Brien took on the role of truck driver for her canteen but for weeks was not officially assigned that position, as it was a man's job. When she finally was assigned, she wrote

[Maj. Osborn] has always been prejudiced against women drivers and everyone said that he would never have them in his department but evidently he had changed his mind. Perhaps has been forced into doing it. However, I am a Chauffer [*sic*—have been for the past two weeks . . . I feel exactly like an Army supply wagon driver, which, of course, indirectly, I am.⁴⁰

The volunteers were well aware of their uncommon status as independent American women. Some, such as Doris Kellogg, hoped to inspire change. “You know I can't stand the attitude between [French] men and women here at all,” she wrote. “The men treat the women just as though they were only made to be a plaything and the silly women love it. I think we English and American women may do something more for France than war work if we can sow some seeds of social conscience in the French women's brains.” Marion Backus, for her part, ap-



Margaret MacLaren continued to volunteer for the Red Cross throughout her life. Proud of her World War I service, she donned her canteener uniform to talk about her experiences.

preciated the efforts of her European sisters. “The French and English girls have made wonderful drivers on the ambulance. They have more patience than the men and so drive steadier.”⁴¹

Alice O'Brien clearly understood that identity and behavior were being shaped by gender, culture, and class.

The French women do what they can but most of them have not been trained to be independent, as the Americans have, so are hampered in their war work. The class that is helping most are the women of the poor who you see doing almost all the work that was done by men, running shops, street cars, subways, porters in the stations, driving wagons and doing all sorts of odd jobs.⁴²

The freedom and responsibility that Red Cross volunteers enjoyed abroad contrasted sharply with life back in the United States, where the nationwide right to vote would elude women for another two years and

anti-suffragists were still arguing that women lacked the mental faculties to be able to follow complex political debates. The chair of the woman's auxiliary of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety was asserting that "the highest patriotic service [women] can render their country is to keep its womanhood clean in thought and deed."⁴³ The women volunteers of the Red Cross ignored the limiting roles and limited expectations for their sex. They knew they had a higher patriotic service: working behind the battlefields. They were crossing gender boundaries, not just international ones.

THEIR EXPERIENCES IN WORLD WAR I BECAME

central touchstones in the lives of many of these women. Immediately after the armistice, some returned home and took up their former lives.⁴⁴ Others completed a longer service, staying abroad until late 1919. Many became active in the Women's Overseas Service League.

Inspired by her experience in France, hospital worker and canteener Margaret MacLaren returned to the Twin Cities determined to continue to volunteer and serve her community. Though she later traveled in Europe for pleasure, in Minnesota she was active in many civic, cultural, and charitable organizations, including the Minnesota Museum of Art and Schubert Club. Her true passion, however, was the Red Cross. Her parents had been founders of the St. Paul chapter in 1917, and Margaret continued active service in it well into her eighties. She volunteered in the home services department and served as secretary on the board of directors. Margaret was a founder of the St. Paul Regional Blood Center in 1948 and provided financial support for the successively larger chapter houses. When she died in 1981 at the age of 90, she was described in the same words that typified her life as a volunteer in France: "a fighter who worked to get things done" and an "enthusiastic" and "energetic" "broad thinker."⁴⁵

Marguerite Davis, who had worked as a canteener in Chantilly, Toul, and then Germany, returned to St. Paul and took up where she had left off: as a tennis star. Before the war, she had won the St. Paul, Minnesota, Northwestern, and Western championships. Afterwards, she won numerous state championships and held the Northwestern title until 1929. She was once ranked twelfth nationally for women's singles players and was still a star in her sixties, winning the Northwestern doubles titles in 1956 and 1958. In addition, she started her own travel agency and traveled to Finland, Africa, and

Russia. She, too, was involved in many civic and cultural organizations, including the Women's Overseas Service League, the Business and Professional Women's Club, and the Minneapolis symphony. She continued to travel and socialize until her death in 1963.⁴⁶

Alice O'Brien returned to St. Paul and turned her attentions to activism, travel, art collecting, philanthropy, and her beloved Women's City Club. In the early 1920s, Alice traveled to China, where she collected fine art. In 1927 she journeyed with three friends and a professional photographer to Africa, trekking up the Congo River and across land to the continent's eastern coast. Back in St. Paul in 1928, she took up the cause of the Women's City Club. As chairman of the building committee from 1929 to 1936, Alice led the efforts to choose a site, select an architect, draw up the plans, and raise money for a clubhouse. She completed all of her tasks in the first two years of the Great Depression and oversaw the opening of a fashionable and popular club in 1931. Throughout her life, Alice continued to advocate for causes such as the Children's Hospital of St. Paul, Camp Courage, and surgical research at the University of Minnesota. Her love for conservation led her to donate 180 acres of land to the state in honor of her father, William O'Brien, and she continued to work with the Jay N. (Ding) Darling Foundation in Florida until her death in 1962.⁴⁷

AS THESE EXAMPLES SHOW, MANY OF THE WOMEN

who served in the Red Cross in France continued to tackle social and civic challenges in their home state. After entertaining more than 400 men, serving 1,600 meals, nursing 111 ether patients, dealing with kilometers of red tape, walking through miles of mud, or picking shrapnel out of their gardens, they were not going to be held back by conventional attitudes about what women could achieve. Most women returned with their courage and resolve strengthened by their service in France. Their experiences made them strong, and they left a legacy that continues to inspire us nearly 100 years later. □

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Notes

1. Marion Backus to Dear Family, Nov. 26, 1918, Marion Backus Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); all Backus letters cited are in this collection. Villers-Daucourt Evacuation Hospital #110 was near the town now known as Villers-en-Argonne.

2. H. G. Clemens, "St. Paul's Most Remarkable Achievement," *St. Paul Daily News*, Aug. 25, 1918; Minneapolis Chapter Red Cross, "Annual Statement . . . October 1918"; and Minneapolis Chapter Chairman to J. T. Pearson, May 21, 1917, Base Hospital #26 Papers—all in American Red Cross Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. *The Work of the American Red Cross During the War* (Washington, D.C.: American Red Cross, Oct. 1919), 11; Red Cross award certificate for MacLaren donation, Alice and Todd Johnson private collection; Alice O'Brien to William and Julia O'Brien, May 28, 1918, Alvina O'Brien private collection. All O'Brien letters cited are in this collection.

3. The War Records Commission's World War I Military Service Records, State Archives, MHS, has files for 120 Red Cross women who served in positions other than nurse. Certainly, there were more volunteers who never returned a questionnaire to the commission. For comparison, 76 files document women who worked for other social agencies (Salvation Army, YWCA) and 256 document men in similar positions.

4. Here and below, *American Red Cross During the War*, 51–64.

5. *American Red Cross During the War*, 46–47; Foster Rhea Dulles, *The American Red Cross: A History* (New York: Harper, 1950), 143–45.

6. Red Cross Foreign Service, "Qualifications necessary for women stenographers, bookkeepers and clerical help," Dee Smith Papers, MHS. As of August 1918, the sisters of soldiers were allowed to enroll if they promised not to visit their brothers; *Northern Division Bulletin* (Minneapolis), Aug. 15, 1918, p. 1. Of the 5,860 who worked in France, 802 received no pay; *American Red Cross During the War*, 45–47.

7. Margaret MacLaren, interview by Randi Sulkin, 1980, transcript, American Red Cross Twin Cities' Chapter archives, Minneapolis. Margaret's last name was sometimes recorded as McLaren.

8. Helen Scriver to Dear Eugene, Sept. 15, 1918, Helen Scriver Papers, MHS; all Scriver letters cited are in this collection. When women could not volunteer if their brothers were enlisted, the opposite was not true.

9. Dee Smith to Dear Folks, Aug. 30, 1918, Smith papers; all Smith letters cited are in this collection. Alice O'Brien to Julia O'Brien, July [~19], 1918.

10. Bureau of Personnel to Grace Mary Bell, Sept. 9, 1918, Grace Mary Bell file, Red Cross Northern Division Records, MHS;

Red Cross Foreign Service, "Qualifications necessary," Smith papers; Bureau of Personnel, "Instructions regarding Four Loyalty Letters," Red Cross Literature, Women's Division, Minnesota Commission of Public Safety Records, State Archives, MHS; Smith to Dear Folks, Sept. 28, 1918; O'Brien to Robert O'Brien, Apr. 23, 1918; Doris Kellogg, *Canteening Under Two Flags: Letters of Doris Kellogg* (East Aurora, NY: Roycrofters, 1920), 35.

11. Smith to Dear Folks, Sept. 8, 1918.

12. Grace Mary Bell to Dear Edna, Dec. 27, 1918, Edna Moore Papers, MHS.

13. Smith to Dear Mother and Cora, Nov. 19, 1918.

14. O'Brien to her family, Apr. 21 1918, to Robert O'Brien, Apr. 23, 1918.

15. Backus to Dear Folks, May 19, 1918.

16. Backus to Dear Folks, Aug. 27, 1918.

17. Smith to Dear Folks, Sept. 8, 1918.

18. Scriver to Dear Dee, Oct. 12, 1918.

19. Backus to Dear Folks, July 2, 1918.

20. O'Brien to William and Julia O'Brien, Aug. 28, 1918.

21. O'Brien to William and Julia O'Brien, July 16, 1918; Grace Mary Bell to Mrs. O'Brien, Nov. 8, 1918, O'Brien collection.

22. Smith to Dear Folks, Oct. 9, 1918.

23. Scriver to Dear Eugene, Sept. 28, 1918.

24. Backus to Dear Family, Nov. 26, 1918.

25. O'Brien to William and Julia O'Brien, Aug. 18, 1918; Kellogg, *Canteening*, 152, 156, 180.

26. Verna Halsted Turner file, World War I Military Service Records, MHS.

27. Mary White Jones file, World War I Military Service Records.

28. Scriver to Dear Everyone, Oct. 20, 1918.

29. O'Brien to William and Julia O'Brien, Oct. 22, 1918.

30. Smith to Dear Folks, Sept. 8, 1918.

31. Kellogg, *Canteening*, 141.

32. For Cutler, see *Drug & Chemical Markets* (New York), Jan. 15, 1919, p. 13, and Passport Applications, Jan. 2, 1906–Mar. 31, 1925, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., www.ancestry.com (accessed Jan. 26, 2012); for O'Brien, see Kellogg, *Canteening*, 131; for Backus, see Backus to Dear Family, Nov. 26, 1918.

33. O'Brien to William and Julia O'Brien, May 28, 1918.

34. MacLaren interview; Winifred Swift Taylor file, World War I Military Service Records.

35. O'Brien to William John O'Brien, July 31, 1918.

36. Leila A. Heath file, World War I Military Service Records.

37. O'Brien to Robert O'Brien et al., Oct. 17, 1918.

38. Bell to Moore, Dec. 27, 1918, Moore papers.

39. MacLaren interview.

40. O'Brien to William and Julia O'Brien, Aug. 4, 1918.

41. Kellogg, *Canteening*, 42–43; Backus to Dearest Folks, July 28, 1918 (letter begins July 26).

42. O'Brien to her family, Apr. 21, 1918.

43. "Silly Girls will be Sent Home, and Disorderly Ones Arrested," *Minneapolis Evening Tribune*, June 15, 1918, scrapbook, Women's Division, Minnesota Commission of Public Safety Records, MHS.

44. Proportionately few of these women ever married; of the 15 in this article, three did so, seven remained single, and the marital status of five could not be found.

45. "MacLaren of Red Cross Dies," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Dec. 11, 1981, clipping, Johnson family collection; American Red Cross, St. Paul Area Chapter, 1981–82 *Annual Report: Faces Behind the Institution*, 10. Postcards in the Johnson collection describe MacLaren's ambitious trips across Europe in the 1920s.

46. *St. Paul Dispatch*, Mar. 24, 1961, p. 25, Mar. 16, 1963, p. 2.

47. Eileen Manning Michels, "Alice O'Brien: Volunteer and Philanthropist," in *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), 146–50; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Nov. 11, 1962, second sec., p. 17.

The photo on p. 28 is courtesy the Alvina O'Brien private collection; p. 33, courtesy the Alice and Todd Johnson private collection. All other illustrations are in MHS collections, including the canteen interior (Julia Gray file) and hospital interior (Verna Halsted Turner file), War Records Commission WWI Military Service Records.



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