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Mobilizing the Women

BY IDA M. TARBELL

AMAZING things happen when men go to war. Look at Washington to-day. The Administration is riveting together the extremes of our social and political thinking. The ablest conservative talent and experience we have is working night and day carrying out the most radical notions of our times—and the undertaking passes almost without comment, such is its appeal to our common sense.

The governmental agency under which these new and revolutionary relations are working out is called the Council of National Defense. No matter when or how it came to be, it is enough that it is an agency authorized by Congress and that the Administration is using it with breadth of imagination as well as calm daring.

One of the many innovations of this Council of National Defense is an entirely original attempt to use the woman-power of the country. Here again it is not necessary to trace the origin of the experiment. The important thing now is the experiment itself. The point is that, voluntarily and experimentally, the Government should have called together a group of women to sit through the war and to devise practical schemes for using women in the work of national defense.

This experiment started last April when, quite unexpectedly to themselves and certainly to the dismay of some of them, nine women of the country were informed by the Secretary of War, who is the chairman of the Council of National Defense, that they were wanted in Washington.

If these women had been called in times of peace, it is probable that they would have felt that they had a right to say no, if their judgment so dictated. But this was war, and it seems not to

have occurred to any of them that it was a possible thing to say no, any more than it occurs to the honorable-minded boy who is drafted to rake up reasons why he shall not go into the Army.

The women promptly appeared in Washington. What were they to do? The best that they could get out of those who had brought them together was far from definite. Three words, arresting and arousing to the imagination—good words, full of possibilities—constituted, as far as they were able to discover, what the Government had in mind when it decided to call them. An advisory body was needed, they were told, something that could tell the council how the woman-power could be made effective. A clearing-house was needed; a place where projects could be sifted and accepted or declined. A channel was needed; a channel which would carry to women the requests of the Government. Fine words, of course, but how to translate them into as fine action—that was the problem for the Woman's Committee, as it at once began to be called.

The practical sense of the women who had been brought together, among whom were some of the most experienced organizers of women's work in the country, led them to say to one another at the start that if it was their business to co-ordinate the woman-power, to be a clearing-house and a channel, they must organize.

The plan of organization they worked out looked extraordinarily well on paper. It aimed to do one particular thing, and that was to take in every woman. It proposed to do this by asking the leaders of every organization in each State to come together in a preliminary meeting and there to form a permanent executive committee on which all these groups would be represented. It arranged that these central State groups should be duplicated in every town and every county. It asked these groups to pass on the word to the unorganized women everywhere that they were expected to co-operate. If this plan could be realized there would exist in each community groups of women made up of representatives of all of the clubs and associations, of all of the churches and social agencies, of all of the teachers and all unorganized individuals. These groups, by way of the State executive committee, would be kept in immediate touch with the national committee and would receive direct from it such requests as

the Government might make of them.

But could such an organization be made practical? Would the women rise to this all-inclusive appeal? Would they see it? The amazing and encouraging thing is that they did see it, see it much more clearly and go after it much more enthusiastically than the most sanguine of the committee could have expected at the start. State organizations have so multiplied since the plan of organization of the Woman's Committee was sent out in May that to-day the committee is organized in all the forty-eight States. Not only that, but Alaska, Porto Rico, the Hawaiian Islands, and Guam have the nucleus of groups. In some of the States the organizations are practically perfect. This is true in Illinois, but is to be expected there. It is true in Wyoming, where every one of the twenty-eight counties has a chairman, and every community a local chairman. For instance, in Albany County there are forty-two local chairmen. This organization is so complete that when it came to asking the women of Wyoming to sign the Hoover pledge card, the Food Administrator of the State declared that every woman in the State could be reached. That is, in the State of Wyoming there is to-day a division of the Woman's Committee so perfect in its organization that any piece of information or any request that Washington should have to make can be spread over the State in twenty-four hours' time in a way to reach practically all of the women. This is what the committee had in mind in planning its organization, and this is what it hopes to have soon in every State in the Union.

The extraordinary response which multitudes of women's organizations gave the plan of the Woman's Committee from the start—something which more than one cynical onlooker declared impossible—is worth thinking about. What was behind it? Why did they at once come in? The organizations are in some cases antagonistic in purpose; they are often rivals, and, moreover, most of them had already plans of their own for war service developed when the Woman's Committee was put into the field. Why should they sink their ambitions, forget their rivalries and their animosities, and call themselves one in war work? The answer lies in the enlarged sense of nationality that we have been acquiring in the last twenty-five years.

A certain degree of the alacrity in the

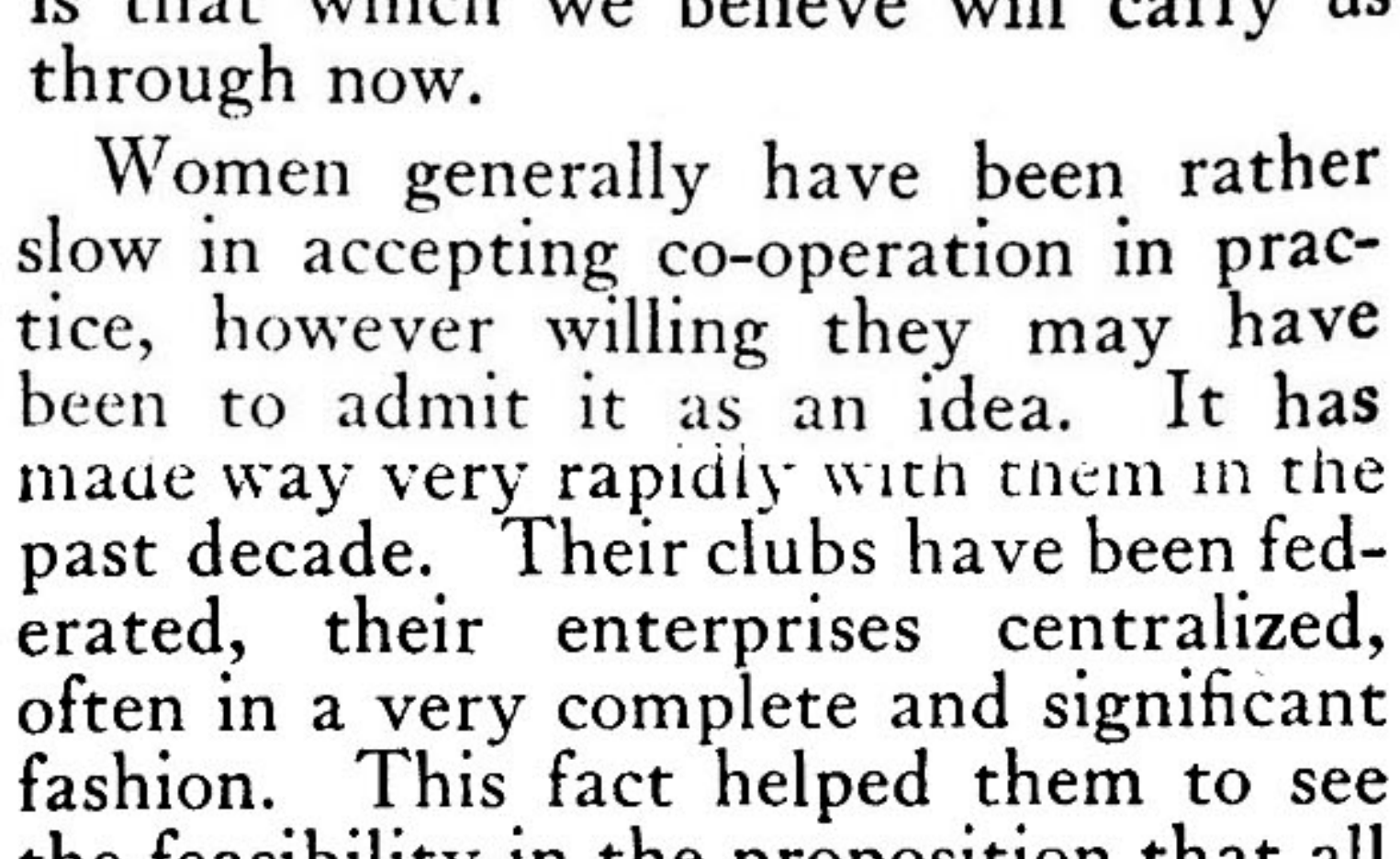
response came from an appreciation of the fact that this was the first time in history that a government had called a country's woman-power into co-operation. The summons made its impression. It was "recognizing" woman. The women rose to the recognition.

The cavilers have denied that such a thing as nationality existed in the United States, but the war shows us—men and women—acting almost as one, and this can be said without forgetting the hostile demonstrations that have kept the secret service busy.

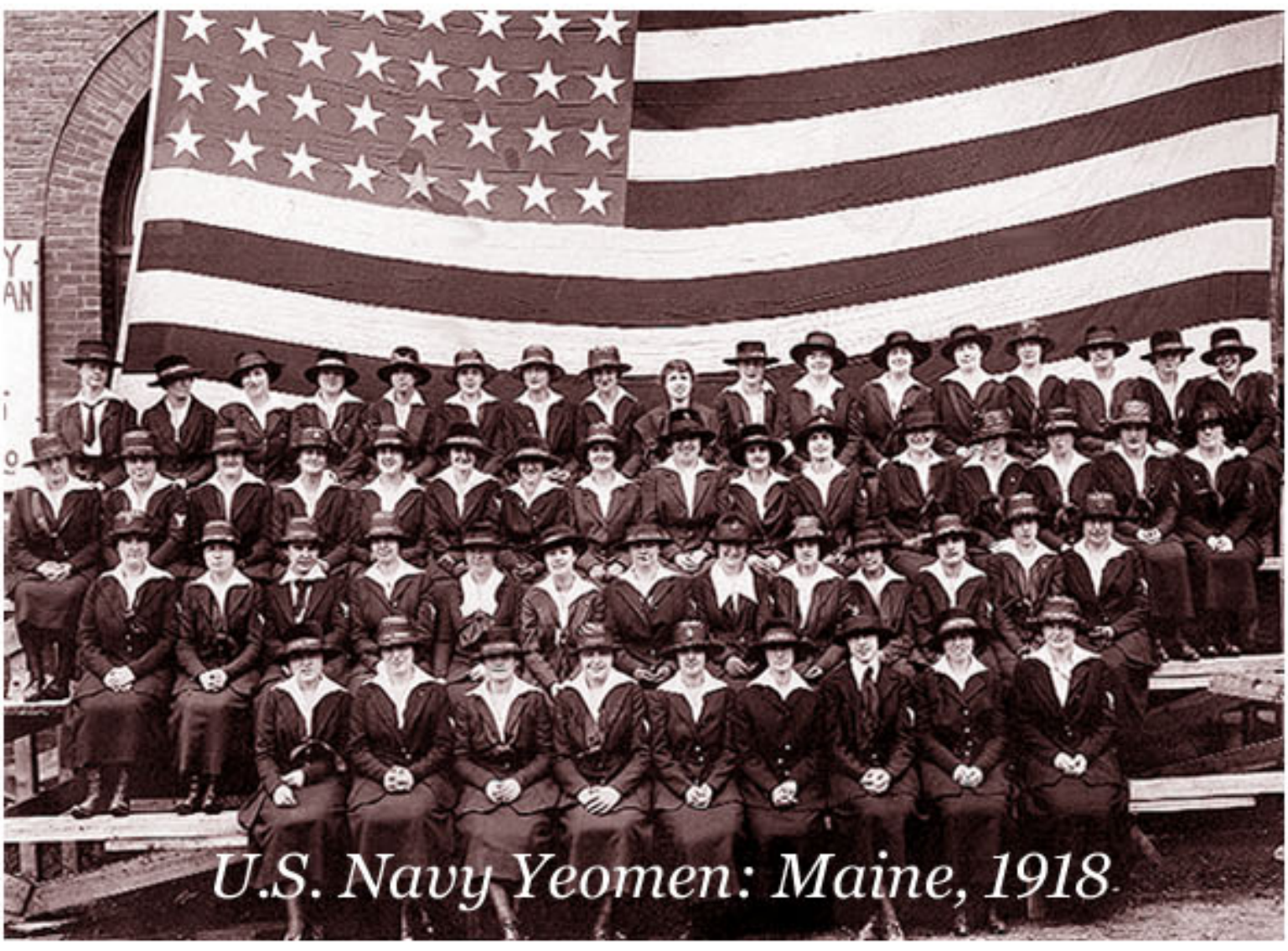
The country fell in line when diplomatic relations were broken, and from that time on it has agreed that if we were to succeed it must be by the largest-scale co-operation, the most perfectly centralized action. Nothing else can explain the almost unanimous response that has been given one after another of the tremendously revolutionary measures the Administration has proposed: "We must get behind, stand together, follow our leader." These are the phrases one hears everywhere. It is "our war" now, and the common verdict is that we shall win it only by organized co-operation. As a method of doing things on a large scale, co-operation has gained a powerful hold on this country in the last twenty years, and it is that which we believe will carry us through now.

Women generally have been rather slow in accepting co-operation in practice, however willing they may have been to admit it as an idea. It has made way very rapidly with them in the past decade. Their clubs have been federated, their enterprises centralized, often in a very complete and significant fashion. This fact helped them to see the feasibility in the proposition that all war work be centralized and carried on co-operatively.

If now and then a society balked at



The first women Marines



U.S. Navy Yeomen: Maine, 1918

the idea, failing to see the reason for it, it was no more than happened at first in the efforts to co-ordinate and centralize the defense activities of several of the States which had been forehanded in preparing for war. These States saw no practical reason why they should unite themselves to the National Council of Defense. They were ready! It did not take long arguments in most cases to persuade these independents that, however far they had carried preparedness, their efforts would count for little if unrelated to the national system; that if they expected to be really useful, they must fit themselves into the Government's plans. Not a few women and groups of women went through a similar experience in relation to the Woman's Committee.

The women had scarcely grasped the full measure of co-operation required of them before they discovered that they were to work under orders—the orders of men! Here was the situation: The Council of National Defense had formed a Woman's Committee. Its business was, like that of other committees, to advise the Council of National Defense as to any measures which ought to be taken to make more effective the woman-power of the country. It could advise as to how they could serve best, as to what was necessary to unify their spirit; to increase their understanding of the war situation and their relation to it. It could not, however, in the nature of the case carry out any measure until the council pronounced it wise. It was in exactly the same relation to the council as the Shipping Board, or the Commercial Economy Board, or any other committee. These various committees and sub-committees, numbering at least a hundred and enlisting the assistance of possibly a thousand of our ablest men, none of them have the power to carry out their own suggestions. Take, for instance, the

U.S. Army women attached to the Army Signal Corps

aviation program. The board in charge of aviation spent weeks perfecting the plans. It could not, however, take steps to realize them until the council had accepted them and Congress voted the funds.

This relation to the council created a fresh crop of problems for the women. Some of them arose from the defense work that had already been undertaken in the States. As already said, there was more than one State in the Union that was practically ready to go to war. On a few of these State Councils of Defense women had been appointed. Here comes a new committee launched by the Government, asking that women everywhere co-ordinate their work under its direction. How to adjust this national undertaking to the existing committee in the State Council of Defense was the problem.

Soon after the Woman's Committee was appointed, the National Council of Defense called to Washington representatives of all the State councils for the purpose of centralizing efforts. At this gathering the Woman's Committee was presented to the State councils and the practical suggestion was made that where States had already appointed a woman she be selected as chairman of the State Division of the Woman's Committee. As far as practical this has been done.

The response that the State councils have made to the suggestion of co-operation has been, on the whole, generous. In Massachusetts, where for many months a Committee of Safety had been fully organized, but where the women were not represented, provisions were at once made to take them in. Quarters were given them in the State House and an appropriation was put at their disposal. With practically no friction or misunderstanding the relation was immediately established and the machinery set in motion. Something of the same kind happened in New Mexico. It happened in Wyoming and at least partly

accounts for the completeness of the organization there.

The adjustment was a new experience for women as well as for men. In the last twenty or twenty-five years particularly energy and enthusiasm of women. It was very interesting as one went about the country or studied the reports of women's doings to observe how naturally and immediately they had seized on the increase in the home supply of food as real war work.

Here, then, in food production was a department ready-made by women themselves. The Woman's Committee did not hesitate to put it at the head of their program, feeling that much as had been done this year, more must be done next and as long as the war lasts.

With food production went conservation. Here again the women were already in action, busy laying their plans for conserving what of their produce they did not use. Canning had already become a staple of conservation. Indeed, it has been true ever since the war broke out that a group of women of whatever circumstances cannot be together ten minutes without discussing canning and canning experiences. I should say that the most popular publication among women in the last six months has been Benson's "Home Canning by the One-Period Cold Pack Method"!

As the Woman's Committee looked at it, all their voluntary effort needed to be tied to the Agricultural Department and the Food Commission in order that it might be developed and used to the best possible advantage. It became the business of the committee, therefore, to establish working relations with these agencies. A good beginning has been made. The Agricultural Department has generously assigned an expert as adviser to the committee. A member of the committee is in daily touch with the food-administration.

One danger that has threatened the food campaign has been "too many cooks"—most of them very good! Here were the established national and State agricultural departments doing admirable work, and speeding it up for war needs. Here were all sorts of excellent volunteer undertakings, and now comes along the Food Commission with its special war authority. Also a Woman's Committee charged by the Government to co-ordinate women's efforts. It would have been easy to make a mess of

it. If there had been less sense of the gravity of the situation, less realization that success depended on the combined efforts of everybody, there would have been a mess.

There has been much patience exercised, however, in tackling the problems which presented themselves. The handlings of the appointments for State Home Economics Directors is an illustration. The Woman's Committee had decided at the start it wanted one in each State. When the Food Commission appeared it naturally saw it must have one. There were, of course, in most of the States excellent home Economic departments in connection with public or private institutions. To make it possible for all of these interests to pull together was no simple matter, but it is being accomplished by selecting one director acceptable to all. A difficult but not impossible thing when everybody is intent on the cause—not on his personal choice. The food administration and the State chairman of the Woman's Committee are colleagues. The State Council of Defense co-operates with them. It looks as if efficient centralization was sure; as if, so far as food is concerned, the channel the Woman's Committee is digging would carry whatever the Government has to send.

The same kind of relation that is developing between the Woman's Committee and the food forces is coming with other departments of the Government. Almost from the start it has co-operated with the Commercial Economy Board of the Council of National Defense in its campaigns to reform the machinery by which the households of the country are served with bread and meat and with groceries and clothing. It is a complicated and wasteful machinery not built to do simply the necessary work of delivering at regular hours that which people cannot conveniently carry. It is built as a competitive tool—something to entice trade by its willingness to encourage whims, lack of foresight, effort, and responsibility.

In the case of bread it was proved that the method of handling it caused a waste of between 4 and 5 per cent. of all that was baked—enough to feed daily thousands of children. In the case of grocery deliveries it was found that we were employing one hundred men and as many horses and trucks, where a well-organized system would not require half the number. A reform of grocery-stores

alone would free fifty thousand men. But such reforms depend on the understanding and the backing of women. It was therefore to the Woman's Committee that the appeal for co-operation was made by the Commercial Economy Board.

The case was laid before the State divisions with the request that they pass it on to their local units for discussion and action. What was asked was that women put their minds on the system by which they are served, refuse to avail themselves of its wastefulness, find out how it can be reformed, demand and support only that. It is a piece of practical, economic work, interesting and useful in times of peace—absolutely imperative in this time of war. Nothing yet asked of women would so surely ease the strain on the industrial situation as the prompt freeing of the men and equipment tied up in the inefficient and unnecessary machinery which brings us daily what we need and want.

Here the Woman's Committee is asking something much more difficult to push than gardening and canning, making comfort-kits and establishing classes for training. It is really a high order of reform *propagandum*.

There is much effort of this character before the Woman's Committee; some of the most appealing and essential concerns the fate of children in war. It has seemed to the committee that it was especially their business to protect the child from the disintegrating influences which war always loosens; to insist that he have his school, his playground, his wholesome and developing influences. Naturally it sought here the counsel of the Children's Bureau. The head of that bureau, Julia Lathrop, has become the committee's adviser. It could have none so able, so understanding.

The committee is putting itself behind measures which require persistent watchfulness if they are to protect the child. One is the enforcing of the Federal law requiring all children of fourteen and under to be in school. There is always a temptation to feel in a great catastrophe like war that the organized forces of peace are of a lesser importance. Peace is a dream. Why keep up the fiction? Life is war and war is brute force. Why so much ado about training the mind and heart? The child, most sensitive of creatures, is easily invaded by the sense of the futility of civilizing influences. It responds to the war spirit. Schools always fall off in war times.

It is possible to prevent this to-day. We are warned. We have the law at our back. A general executive committee of women such as the Woman's Committee advises for every community can, by co-operation with the schools, reduce non-attendance to the minimum. To make the machinery for looking after the children through the war the most efficient possible the committee urges that teachers everywhere be represented on the organizations. Particularly in the country districts must they be depended upon to carry to the women the ideas, the information, the requests that they ought to receive directly and promptly from Washington.

Here, then, is a hint at the functions of the Woman's Committee as they have developed during the few brief months of its existence. What more it will do no one can say. That will depend entirely upon the course and the needs of the war itself.

The practical outcome of organization is, of course, the test of its usefulness. Unless it can do permanent things, it is little more than an entertaining exercise. Are there signs in this wholesale co-operative undertaking of women of new, practical, and permanent developments? It is natural that if there are it should be in connection with food. It was to the cry for raising more food that the women first answered. It was to the cry for conserving food that they answered, even to the extent of pledging their written word to do all that the food administration asked of them. Their operations have varied according to their localities. What was necessary in the city was unnecessary in the town. What the country needed was a different thing from what the rural district required. Out of it all, however, may emerge, in the not remote future, permanent food centers and exchanges in city and country.

It looks as if these exchanges might become thoroughly co-operative community affairs, their expenses borne by the community, their operations conducted for the benefit of all classes of the community, by a managing board. The first problem of the food raisers was how to take care of their stuff. They must can not only for their own households, but for the emergency relief of their communities and of course to contribute to our armies and to our allies. But any such wholesale canning meant a community canning center, and in many places community canning centers were started.

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Another imperative need was to take care of the over-crop that the patriotic zeal of the farmers and gardeners had brought into existence. The canning center took on another function—gathering up this surplus and bringing it in to be put up. Right away, however, it was discovered that it was practical not only to can this over-production, but to exchange it. Thus the canning center became a food exchange.

The question of storage began to puzzle the women, and in more than one place the canning center had become not only an exchange, but also a storage depot where in the towns the poor with little room may keep what they have themselves canned, or where they can buy at low cost the canned surplus; where the charities may look for help, and where the Red Cross may keep its jams and fruit butters.

Nor does it stop here. When the thing assumed this proportion it became apparent to the thoughtful in certain localities that they must not dislocate the commercial life of their community, but they must somehow work out a practical scheme of co-operation with the marketmen and dealers in fruits and vegetables, and they were asked to become members of the food board. In more than one place the community food center takes over at the end of the day what the marketman or dealer has on his hands that it may be either exchanged or canned or given to the poor.

In one center I found the women keenly interested in the problem of prices, and they were beginning, with the dealers in their town, a co-operative study of the price-fixing of food. It is easy to see how these women whose minds have dealt so keenly with the successive food problems may become dangerous opponents of food speculators and food hoardings. "Why," I heard a woman say, "should we have to pay sixty and seventy cents a dozen for eggs through the winter months? As I see it, the only reason is our own stupidity. Why should we not buy as the egg kings do when eggs are abundant and cheap and store in our community food center?"

If we can build up democratic all-serving food centers, why can we not intellectual and social centers where all women may grapple with community and national problems? It is nothing less that the Woman's Committee aims to achieve. Certainly there was never offered to women so wonderful an opportunity for the exercise of practical,

voluntary service. It is a call to the ideal citizenship—the citizenship unmixed with politics—action for the sake of the whole, without reward or recognition, based on a sense of national need and national good.

It is fair to look to this attempt for a better realization by women of what disinterested co-operative democracy means. The merging of great groups, the willingness to put aside, for a great national demand, our special and precious activity argues that, after all, we have in the bottom of our minds a comprehension that Democracy is a spirit, a faith; that it is not this or that cause, or this or that tool. It argues that, perhaps better than we realize, when the test comes we are willing to give up all lesser things and exercise the faith—let free the spirit. It is possible that what we have been needing is some tremendous call upon our faith and spirit, something so much bigger than any of the tools or causes for which we fight that there would be no question but that we should, not necessarily sink them, or forget them, or be less active in them, but that we should sense their relation to our faith.