

In World War I, the women of Carroll County stepped up and did their part – March 31, 2024

As Women's History Month draws to a close in 2024, let's take a look at the role some of Carroll's women played when the United States entered World War I. It was very impressive.

Women's right to vote was still a couple of years away when Congress declared war on Germany in the spring of 1917. Carroll County newspapers were full of stories about men going off to war, but they acknowledged that the people at home were doing their part as well.

Typical of that time, most married women whose names made the newspapers were listed by their husbands' names – Mrs. Robert Sargent Shriver, Mrs. Charles O. Clemson, and Mrs. John H. Cunningham were just a few of them. Maryland's governor selected Hilda Shriver to take over as chairperson of the Council of Defense for Carroll County – Women's Section in the fall of 1917 and she served through the rest of the war. Although the mother of two young sons at the time, she threw herself into the task, holding monthly meetings of more than 14 committees across the County and attending others in Baltimore at the state level. One of those young sons would later become the first director of the Peace Corps – R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.

Mary Gray Clemson, also a busy mother, served with Mary Irwin Cunningham on the committee to raise huge sums of money for multiple Liberty Loan campaigns. Asking people to contribute to the loans required house-to-house visits. In just one campaign, nine of Carroll's 14 election districts raised \$137,000 and the County stood ninth out of Maryland's 23 counties making its quota.

Recruiting membership in the Red Cross was another task involving the Women's Section. Ultimately 17,000 Carroll residents became members, approximately 50% of the population.

There was a "Thrift and Women in Industry Committee" which gave demonstrations in canning and cheese-making, encouraged war gardens, and offered suggestions on using meat substitutes. Still another committee addressed education and child welfare. That one encouraged home economics clubs for girls in the schools and agricultural clubs for boys. An important outgrowth of that committee after the war included more attention to the health and welfare of school children in general, particularly Carroll's children from low-income families. Officials recognized a need for more regular medical examinations and the services of a public health nurse – care lacking before the war.

In April 1918, the Red Cross, the Army Nurse Corps and the Council of National Defense put out a call for 30,000 young women across the country to enter the nursing profession. Women between the ages of 19 and 35 were eligible, and they had the option to be sent anywhere needed or to name where they would serve. There is evidence, however, that some local women joined the Army Nurse Corps as early as June 1917. At least eight Carroll women served at hospitals stateside, while five are known to have served overseas in England and/or France. Marie A. Franklin spent nearly two years abroad, as did Margaret Catherine Wohlgemuth. Jay Graybeal's book, "Carroll County and the Great War for Civilization: 1917-1919" includes the name Katherine Miller who served in the Army Nurse Corps overseas between August 1918 and July

1919. She apparently was in France at a hospital serving soldiers fighting in the Saint Mihiel Offensive of September 1918.

The “Canteen Committee” was a group of men and women which furnished hot meals for the men driving trucks that came through the County during the course of the war. Over 4,000 meals were served.

Captain John Weigle of Company H, First Maryland Infantry, extended his thanks to Carroll’s women for the “Comfort Kits” sent to his men abroad. Company H was part of a Maryland National Guard unit quickly called up to serve in France where it was incorporated into the 29th Division and fought until the war ended. These comfort kits apparently included a wide variety of items from bandages to sweaters to hand-knit washcloths and even canned food, whatever a group of women decided to put together as part of Red Cross efforts in communities like Mt. Airy, Manchester, Westminster, etc.

Car ownership and driving was significantly different among women during that era. Recognizing that fact, the Council of Defense - Women’s Section began a service called the Motor Messengers in the spring of 1918. Over 30 women volunteered to drive their own vehicles to transport others to conferences, for house-to-house canvassing, to meetings in Baltimore, and to a myriad of other activities supporting the war effort. The women donated their time, the use of their vehicles, and paid for the gasoline.

Dorothy Elderdice was 26 when she wrote and directed a huge patriotic pageant held at the Carroll County Court House on July 4, 1918. Over the course of her lifetime, Miss Elderdice was involved in many other activities promoting peace and freedom including one held at The Hague in the Netherlands after WWI. At age 71, she attended the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. Her support for progressive causes continued to her dying day.

An article in The [Carroll County] Times in September 1918 quoted experts who said, “Two million women have been enrolled in industry in this country since the beginning of this war.” It suggested that number might be doubled in a year as a result of the draft and withdrawal of men from industrial jobs. Instead of traveling to Baltimore for manufacturing jobs as they did during World War II, the women of Carroll County served their country in World War I by working closer to home.

In researching this article, the patriotism and generosity of Carroll Countians was evident everywhere. For more details about the roles of men and women, consult Jay Graybeal’s book which is widely available, and use the Carroll County Times Archive online. The names of those who played a part in the WW I effort might include one of your ancestors.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.

Image 1 – Source: Historical Society of Carroll County Caption: This photograph of Dorothy Elderdice, an important contributor to local history, was taken many years after she wrote and directed a patriotic pageant on July 4, 1918, at the Carroll County Court House.

Image 2 – Source: Carroll County Times Archives Caption: Hundreds of Carroll County residents turned out for this patriotic pageant presented on July 4, 1918.