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Doing Their Bit: Children and Young Adults Fight the War

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"The Great War," the “War to End All Wars,” commenced in late July 1914 following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria. It escalated into a conflagration between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, and the "allied" forces of Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and Japan. The United States chose to remain neutral. However, on May 1, 1915, a German submarine attacked and sank the British cruise ship, Lusitania. One hundred fifty-nine Americans, including twenty-six American children under the age of twelve, were lost, and thus occurred some of the first American casualties of a war in which their country was not even a participant.1

When one thinks of war, horrible images of death and destruction come to mind. Among those images, children frequently are shown as victims. But there are many ways children can be affected by war, even when they are thousands of miles away from the actual conflict. This article exposes some of those effects on children in Smith County, Texas.

The American declaration of war brought immediate excitement to Tyler and surrounding communities. On the evening of April 10, 1917, between 8,000-10,000 Smith County residents participated in a patriotic gathering on the square. Doc Witt’s band led the parade up North Broadway to the courthouse. Participants included Principal Stilwell of Tyler High School with two or three dozen students carrying a huge American flag accompanied by many other children from each of the city’s schools waving smaller flags. After numerous short speeches, the crowd joined together to sing “America.” For the next nineteen months, the lives of local children and young adults would be closely tied to the demands and expectations of the war.2

Some young men volunteered for the army immediately and left for training camps. Sarah McClendon, then seven years old, remembered her two older brothers, Sidney and Charles, being among the first to go. She was very proud of them. “I listened to all the talk about invading oppressors and I believed in what they were doing,” McClendon said, “I swore that if there was another war when I was older, I’d go too.” And she did: as a WAC in World War II.3
Other military units organized during the summer. Children would have watched the men drill like tin soldiers brought to life. At the same time, federal authorities ordered a general conscription for men aged 21 through 30. The thought of fathers possibly having to go to war terrified children old enough to realize what that would mean. Alma Moore Freeland, then an eighth grader, recalled:

The reality and enormity of the situation was brought home to me the day Papa had to register for the draft. I shall never forget that night, I’m sure I spent most of it in prayer and tears. I remember thinking “What shall we do if Papa has to go?” Mamma was also concerned for her brother whose departure seemed imminent. But he was reclassified for farm status.

As local men left for training camps, many women joined the workforce, both in offices and at Long-Hargrove overall factory which had landed a government uniform contract. This further disrupted the home life of families as mothers and older sisters put in long hours to replace family income.

The loss of farm workers paired with the need for increased food production meant that children were expected to help more in the fields. Alma Moore Freeland’s mother sent her children to their grandparents’ farm. According to Freeland, “We pulled a cotton sack and picked cotton, helped gather corn, dug potatoes, picked fruits and vegetables. We washed jars for canning; we kept the dried fruits and peas ‘turned’ and out of reach of animals and insects.”

The federal government also urged city children to join the cause of food conservation and production. Guidelines called for civilians, including children, to consume less wheat, beef, pork, dairy products, and sugar. They were instead to consume more corn, vegetables, fish, poultry, nuts, dried beans, molasses, and syrup. It was all for the soldiers and for the poor starving people of France and Belgium. Food became “a constant symbol of sacrifice” to children. Giving up wheat and sugar was a way for “little Americans” to “do their bit” for “our soldiers.”

Beyond food choices, school children also became involved in war gardens, particularly in the spring of 1918. According to Alma Moore Freeland, “Everybody was expected to help grow food; there was a victory garden in every available spot. No one was too old or too young to help in some way.” The Tyler newspaper highlighted Douglas School which had been given access to a lot nearby to be made into a school garden worked by twenty-eight boys. Beginning in mid-March the Tyler Board of Education decided to change school hours allowing students to get out earlier “for the purpose of engaging in work and the cultivation of home gardens.” Ed and Bud Story donated 1500 to 2000 tomato plants to the school children, allowing about thirty to each child. The Tyler High School junior class adopted planting an acre of potatoes as both a war measure and a fund raiser. Isaac Friedlander provided the land, Guaranty State Bank an interest-free loan based on a liberty bond, Parker and Pinkerton Grocery the seed potatoes, and East Texas Fertilizer Company the fertilizer at cost. Members of Tyler High’s Victory Thrift Club and War Service Club also planted and worked war and home gardens, raised chickens and pigs, distributed booklets on chicken raising, and distributed and got signed at least 250 War
By mid-May an estimated 1850 war gardens totaling 650 acres had been planted in Tyler, many of them tended by children and young teens. The crop value totaled approximately $46,250.8

School children also became involved in raising money through the purchase of Liberty Bonds and Stamps and Thrift Stamps, beginning with the Second Liberty Loan in the fall of 1917. S. S. McClendon, Tyler’s postmaster, dressed his two young daughters, Sarah and Mattie, in little Red Cross uniforms, and they sold war bonds at the post office. All Tyler area schools participated in the Liberty Stamp/Liberty Bond programs. In addition to raising money for that effort, the purchase of stamps and bonds became an effective tool to teach children the benefits of thrift. Perhaps even more important than the actual sale of stamps or bonds was the way children earned the money they used to buy their stamps. At Gary School, for instance, thirty to forty children picked cotton and peas, stacked cord wood, cleaned brick, dug flower pits, and served sandwiches and ice cream on the school grounds. Community leaders imposed peer pressure on the children and their parents by publishing the names of contributors to war stamps.9

Tyler High School students organized Thrift Clubs in each first period class with the goal of purchasing Thrift Stamps and War Savings Stamps. They adopted a variety of colorful names—Junior Patriots, Democratic Thrift Society, No Slackers War Savings Society, Kaiser Kanning Klub, Liberty Legion War Saving Society, Lone Star War Saving Society, Over the Top Thrift Society, Anti-Barbarian War Saving Society, For Uncle Sam’s Service Thrift Society, U.S.A. Girls War Saving Society, Uncle Sam’s Life Savers, Victory Thrift Club, Manual Training Thrift Club, and Save a Bit Club. All aimed to go “over the top” in reaching their Liberty Stamp and War Savings Stamps quotas.10

The Tyler High School Victory Thrift Club and the War Service Club also reported daily, in writing, every service each member rendered to the war. Besides war bonds and stamps and war gardening, they observed all food regulations (“wheatless” and “meatless” days), knitted soldier sweaters and made bandages for the Red Cross, sold and bought Junior Red Cross tags, contributed to the Belgian and Armenian Orphans’ Funds, contributed to the Blanket Fund, sent books and magazines to the camps, sent candy, gum and games to the soldiers, and made loose-leaf joke scrapbooks for the soldiers in hospitals at the request of Red Cross nurses. Students participated in every Liberty Loan and Red Cross parade.11

High school students also found other ways to demonstrate their thrift and their support of the war effort. During the Christmas season of 1917, teachers
and students of Tyler High School signed a formal agreement not to give or receive gifts unless the gifts were of a utilitarian nature.

“We, the undersigned students and teachers of the Tyler High School, recognizing the state and condition in which our country now is, and feeling that the true Christmas spirit this year should be patriotic, and desiring to aid in the saving campaign now inaugurated by our government, do hereby agree:

1. That we shall not give any presents to our friends and shall discourage our friends from giving to us, except in the case of presents already bought, or presents of a utilitarian nature, or presents consisting of savings certificates or presents for the aged, the little children, the soldiers, and for charitable purposes.

2. That we recommend to our friends that all presents given to us shall be either utilitarian or saving certificates.”

Encouraging and exhibiting patriotism in the schools became a primary focus during the war. The girls of the Tyler High domestic art classes purchased an American flag and presented it to their school to be hung in the assembly hall. The ceremony included a speech on the history and meaning of the flag and the singing of the “Star Spangled Banner” and “America.” This preceded the Texas law passed in March, 1918, which required that every school district provide a flag pole and a flag for each building, and that at least ten minutes of each day be spent in the “teaching of lessons of intelligent patriotism, including the needs of the State and Federal Governments, the duty of the citizen to the state, and the obligation of the state to the citizen.” In April the high school boys began military drill and soon thereafter plans were announced to buy one or more rifles and ammunition to be used at a rifle range to be established. In May, 1918, the Tyler Daily Courier-Times announced that the German language would no longer be taught in Tyler schools, a move common among Texas schools at the time. Instead, French would be taught. At the end of that month a service flag was presented to Tyler High with a star to represent each of the 152 students who had ever attended the high school who then served in the military during the war. There were 150 blue stars and two gold ones—Lt. Hubert Ferrell and Littleton Coker had already died. The complete list of names was read by Miss Alice Douglas, a teacher in the high school.

School students also had the opportunity to join the Junior Red Cross. By the end of the war membership numbered approximately 1900, from Tyler High School, the four Tyler elementary schools, Bullard, Lindale, and Winona. Mrs. Lester Smith and then Mrs. Frank Williams supervised the groups. They raised $507.11 by entertainments and tag days, in which solicitors gave “tags” for each donor to wear. Some also collected tin cans to sell as scrap and helped collect automobile tires and rubber hose to raise funds specifically for the Red Cross canteen at the Tyler depot. Junior Red Cross members mostly sewed for civilian war victims—93 chemises, 10 complete layettes, 13 baby sacks, 18 baby coats, and 46 pairs of booties, but they also knitted 81 pairs of hospital socks and 23 knitted caps for soldiers. Boys in manual training classes made all of the shipping boxes used by the Red Cross in Smith County. In the fall of 1918 Arkie Crutcher, chair of the Tyler Red Cross canteen, also offered prizes for hickory and walnut shells to be gathered by the children and sent to the War Department in making gas masks.

Letters from loved ones “somewhere in France” both reassured and probably frightened the children at home who received them or who overheard adults reading them. Louise Morris, age fifteen, received a letter from her father, Lt. Fred Morris with the 142nd Machine Gun Battalion, which was published in the Tyler paper on October 26, 1918. Evidently Louise had fretted about not being able to do more for the war effort because she wasn’t old enough to be a Red Cross nurse and join him in France. Her father reassured her that “you are bravely sacrificing more than a lot of girls older than you are. . . . I admire your spirit in wanting to take an active part in the fray, and get you a Hun, but not yet, my dear, . . . your dear sweet soul is worth more than the whole German nation.” A later letter home, also published, related how “One night while out of my hole a shell exploded near me, and I found myself getting up about thirty feet away badly stunned, but not hurt.” But what might the next shell do? Sarah McClendon’s brother Charles wrote “It is a joy to go through screaming hail of machine guns, and carry supplies that will aid the men who go up in the planes to toy with death, or who follow behind the barrages right through enemy first line. . . We get shelled at times, their planes try to chase and shoot or bomb us.” Would the next telegram bring news of death?
The excitement and fears of children during World War I were also exacerbated by rumors and popular culture. Within a day or two of the American declaration of war, the Tyler newspaper printed a tongue-in-cheek rumor of the sighting of a German submarine in Black Fork Creek near town. In November, 1917, it published a news article about the burning of two railroad bridges, one as close as Winona, possibly “the work of Pro-Germans who are seeking to wreck troop trains that are daily passing over the Cotton Belt.” Not only could that hurt the soldiers, but also the fathers who worked the Cotton Belt line out of Tyler. The fear of German infiltration showed up on the silent screens of the Electric Palace and the Queen Theatre in the films “The Hun Within” starring Dorothy Gish, “Joan of Plattsburg” in which the heroine saves her country from a band of enemy spies, and “The Eagle’s Eye,” “a grand expose of German intrigue in our own country.” One of the most popular films of the war was “The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin”—“See with your own eyes what this monster has done.” Children could watch the real war, in motion, in “Pershing’s Crusaders,” “the picture Uncle Sam wants you to see,” “your boy may be in it” or “Italy’s Flaming Front,” the first film of a whole battle.

As part of the Third Liberty Loan campaign, children could see actual weapons of war when a special train with two flatcars and an exhibition car pulled into Tyler from Troup. Public schools were released so that all could hear the speeches detailing “graphic description[s] of the warfare as carried on by the leaders of Prussianism” and see French 75 mm guns, among other war trophies.17

On November 11, 1918, the children and young people of Tyler joined in a full day of celebration for the end of The Great War. They participated in the grand parade— one float carried about fifty flag-waving school children. Multitudes of Tyler residents, of every age, joined in the general procession around the square, again and again. All were singing. No doubt but that many of the children expected their fathers, uncles, and older brothers to return home within the week. However, the primary Tyler unit, Co. C, 133rd Machine Gun Battalion, did not arrive home until June 14, 1919. Children would again make their contribution to the celebration—500 Junior Red Cross girls, dressed in white, scattering roses, led the returning heroes from the depot to the square. Boy Scouts assisted the Home Guard in policing the streets.18

These American children of the Great War became young adults in the Roaring Twenties, young parents in the Great Depression and, and were still of age to participate actively in World War II, the war they were promised would never come. Lessons learned during World War I regarding hard work, thrift, sacrifice, and patriotism would serve them well once more.
Footnotes

6. Freeland.
18. “Enthusiastic Crowds in Autos Start Early Celebrating,” *TDC-T*, November 11, 1918, p. 3; “Courier-Times Employees Head Parade at 6 This Morning,” *TDC-T*, November 11, 1918, p. 3; [History of the Smith County Chapter, American Red Cross] [p. 56, 60].