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Fighting the War Through Gardening: Ballard High School's WWII Victory Garden

Green onions, peas, beans, carrots, cabbage. 800lbs of pumpkin. 300lbs of tomatoes. No this not a description of the produce available at the University Farmer's Market, but of a portion of the harvest of the 1942 Ballard High School's student victory garden. Like many other public schools and community centers during the war, Ballard High School's victory garden served as a symbol of patriotism. Its 150 daily student gardeners stood as concrete symbols of American patriotism and American willingness to carry out an extensive civilian defense and resource campaign. However, ostensibly a manifestation of wartime patriotism, Ballard High School's victory garden served the school in dynamic ways. It enriched science and home economics curriculum, provided fresh produce for the school's cafeteria, and served as a model garden for the community. By drawing on expert opinion and serving the needs of the community, Ballard High School's victory garden drew upon many of the progressive New Deal programs that defined Roosevelt's presidency.

The Patriotic Garden

The United States found itself in a food crisis when it entered WWII in December of 1941. Food shipped overseas to feed allied troops cut deeply into domestic supply. On top of that farm labor shortages were wide spread as farmers enlisted in the military and moved to cities to meet growing demands for war industry factory work. In order to combat the domestic food crisis, the federal government, in cooperation with county and municipal organizations, enacted several food campaigns in order to promote conservation, good nutrition, food preservation, and

wartime patriotism. None garnered public attention and coerced public action as much as the victory garden program. While assessing the victory garden program's actual influence on domestic food supply and food system resilience in comparison to other federal food programs such as the Braceros Mexican farm labor program and the summer youth to farm program is beyond the scope of this paper, the victory garden program made a lasting impact in cities across the United States through heavy campaigning by the Office of War Information (OWI) and Office of Price Administration (OPA) and through the creation of some 20 million home and community gardens across the American landscape.¹

But what prompted such fervent gardening? One practical reason many families began to garden was to make up for what they lacked in rationed foods. Sugar was rationed from nearly the beginning of the war and by the spring of 1943 the sale of meat, dairy, canned goods, and other common foodstuffs were controlled through ration books.² Gardening, then, gave access to fresh fruits and produce not necessarily available at the grocery store. Unlike President Bush's call to win the Iraq war through spending and consumerism, President Roosevelt and his many wartime programs spread the message of conservation. While rationing was perhaps the most concrete way conservation was enforced in US food policy during the war, propaganda also played an essential role in creating a national ethic of frugality and conservation. Citizens on the home front were constantly bombarded with posters, newspaper segments, and radio broadcasts from the government encouraging them to conserve under the guise of patriotism. Here are two posters produced by the federal government during the war that exemplify these qualities.

¹ Bentley (1998) pg 114

² "Rationing Brings Home Grown Foods" *Ballard Talisman*. Pg 3. March 10, 1943.



Both posters seek to intertwine two distinct things: patriotism, and food. Not only would a family have plenty of fresh vegetables if they grew a victory garden, they would also be “as patriotic as can be.” By conjuring up images of the victory garden as a home front battlefield, citizens, in particular men not deployed overseas, were made to feel as if they were fighting Hitler and Hirohito while tilling the garden. “Behind every man with a gun, stands a man with a hoe,” was a popular victory garden expression during the war.⁴ The two posters also enforce gender stereotypes about household work. While gardening was a task carried out by all members of the family, during the war it was especially marketed as a man’s job. The decision to put the son and father in the center of the poster was not an arbitrary decision. In contrast, food preservation, the other (often behind the scenes) half of the victory garden program, was

³ Both images from Northwestern University Digital Library World War II Poster Collection. First poster originally produced by the Office of War Information. Second poster originally produced by the War Food Administration. <http://digital.library.northwestern.edu/wwii-posters/>

⁴ Bentley (1998) pg 128

portrayed almost entirely as women's work. Because the canning of fruits and vegetables took place in the kitchen, it was seen as a taking place within the woman's sphere of work. And in order to compensate for the often tedious and time-consuming task of canning, propaganda posters emphasized the patriotic qualities of loyal mothers who happily canned their victory garden produce to meet their family's needs.

And thus have victory gardens been preserved in public memory. When Michelle Obama began her white house garden in 2009 to increase awareness about healthy eating habits and good nutrition, she alluded to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's WWII patriotic victory garden.⁵ Through gardens such as the Obamas' and the use of federal propaganda posters in teaching curriculum about WWII, victory gardens have been remembered for their patriotic and conservation elements. Yet this is only half of their story. Analysis of the structure and use of victory gardens, in particular school victory gardens, at the municipal and community level reveal a program that built off of progressive New Deal programs that had already been in place for a decade since the early years of the Great Depression. Within Seattle Ballard High School's victory garden serves as an excellent example of how the victory garden program sought to systematically increase food resilience through expert opinion and grassroots social organizations.

Ballard's Wartime Gardening Effort

During WWII, Ballard High School's small subsistence botany garden expanded into a $\frac{3}{4}$ acre victory garden.⁶ At its peak in 1943, 150 botany students worked in the garden.⁷ While Ballard was not the only Seattle public school to have a victory garden, its enormous size and

⁵ Burros, Marian. "Obamas to Plant Vegetable Garden at White House" *New York Times*. March 19, 2009.

⁶ "Ballard High's Victory Garden Produces Well" *Seattle Times*. Feb 20, 1943.

⁷ *Ibid*.

effect on the community were; and they were due in large part to Ballard botany teacher Leah Griffin. Her role as the victory garden's "scientific expert" echoes progressive New Deal strategies for engaging the community and the environment.

As early as 1920 Griffin exercised her scientific and leadership capabilities during a Seattle Public School West Side gardening fair exhibit.⁸ As event supervisor she organized and oversaw the event, which was an opportunity for schools and communities in West Seattle to show off their gardens and their produce. When she was transferred to Ballard High School to work as a botany teacher later in the decade, she took Ballard's "dry gray fill" of a garden and turned it into a city attraction producing just shy of 300 thousand sprouts by 1932.⁹ But this garden was for show, not consumption. Sweet pea flowers, chrysanthemums, roses, and lupines filled the garden plots and greenhouse. Griffin did not start growing a subsistence vegetable garden until a year or two before WWII. On weekends and in free time she remained an active community leader for gardening and conservation, organizing community events and speaking at gardening and conservation conventions.¹⁰ With her past experience in community organizing and gardening, it is no surprise that she worked closely with the Seattle Civilian War Commission's Victory Garden Campaign once it began operation in early 1942.

This Victory Garden Campaign was Seattle's centralized effort to organize its citizens to grow war gardens. Originally led by Ernest Campbell, assistant superintendent to the Seattle Public Schools, the campaign sought to emphasize the city's schools as centers of gardening and food preservation. The three goals stated by the campaign at the start of the war were:

- 1) To encourage home and community gardens...
- 2) To foster instruction in gardening methods through classes in public schools

⁸ "Garden Exhibit for West Siders" *Seattle Times*. Sept 27, 1920.

⁹ "How Does Your Garden Grow? 'Fine,' Answers Ballard High" *Seattle Times*. June 4, 1932.

¹⁰ "Conservation Meeting" *Seattle Times*. Jan 30, 1940.

- 3) To educate gardeners in health and nutrition, and in vegetable and fruit canning, drying and refrigeration¹¹

This mission statement placed Leah Griffin and her subsistence-now-victory garden at the forefront of Seattle's victory garden campaign. Over the course of the war, Griffin taught gardening to her students during the school day and to community members during the evening in special community gardening workshops.¹² She also worked with her students to produce two gardening films, which used scientific knowledge to explain gardening techniques, soil conservation, and crop rotation.¹³ Her hard work not only benefitted Ballard High School, but also the local community.

During the fall of 1942 Ballard's school victory garden produced half a ton of squash, 800lbs of pumpkin, 300lbs of tomatoes, and an abundance of many other vegetables.¹⁴ Their benefit to the school did not end with their harvest by the botany students. Food from the garden went straight to the school's cafeteria to supplement school lunches with fresh produce and to the home economics classrooms where students learned first hand the science behind food preservation and canning.¹⁵ The botany students and home economics students also enriched the community by providing thousands of vegetable starts to eager victory gardeners and by operating a community canning center on school grounds.¹⁶ These benefits and services provided by the garden went beyond the government rhetoric of patriotism and encouraged greater cooperation between the Ballard community and their urban environment.

¹¹ "Save on Seeds, Victory Garden Planters Urged" *Seattle Times*. Mar 1, 1942.

¹² "Victory Garden Classes Held Twice Weekly" *Seattle Times*. Jan 31, 1943.

¹³ *Seattle Schools Monthly Bulletin*. Vol XXI No. 8. April 1945. Seattle Public Schools Archive.

¹⁴ "Ballard High's Victory Garden Produces Well" *Seattle Times*. Feb 20, 1943.

¹⁵ "10,000 Pupils to Help in Garden" *Seattle Times*. May 5, 1943.

¹⁶ "School Board to Buy Bonds" *Seattle Times*. Sept 9, 1943.



Property of Museum of History & Industry, Seattle

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Beginning with the Tennessee Valley Authority Act of 1933, President Roosevelt and his New Deal programs sought to engage the government and citizens in ways far beyond his progressive forerunners had done. Through expert knowledge and planning, New Deal programs sought to engage the working class and put them on the path towards modernism. They did this through faith in positive government intervention, commitment to economic justice, and support of local “grassroots” community organizations.¹⁸ While WWII usually marks the end of traditional New Deal programs as federal resources were consolidated for the war effort, the war programs themselves share many of the attributes of the New Deal programs.

The victory garden program of WWII echoes many of these ideals as the federal government struggled with how to overcome the food crisis of WWII. Leah Griffin became a community garden leader during the war and it was due to her scientific and community-

¹⁷ “Ballard High School Victory Garden, Seattle, February 16, 1943” Property of MOHAI.

¹⁸ Nash, Linda. “Planning the American Landscape: The New Deal, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Columbia Basin Project.” Class Lecture. Nov 12, 2013.

organizing background that Ballard's school victory garden grew to such prominence. Produce from the garden benefitted everyone involved and resonated with New Deal egalitarian practices. Even the premise of the victory garden program reveals its working-class New Deal roots. From the beginning the victory garden program was built upon the notion that every American with a yard – or even a potted windowsill – could become a victory gardener and help fight alongside the soldiers. The victory garden program encouraged strong community relationships and by the end of the war garden communities, often centered around schools and churches, could be found not just in Seattle but across the country. Under the guise of patriotism Ballard High School's victory garden produced not only fruits and vegetables, but also community and environmental interaction.

Works Cited

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