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A Conversation with Meghan K. Winchell

Author of Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun: The Story of USO Hostesses during World War II

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Q: When and why was the USO established? Did women always play an important role in its ranks?

A: The USO was established in February 1941, before official US entry into the war. Middle-class and elite men and women created the organization to provide wholesome recreation for servicemen in their off-duty hours. Organizations that served soldiers and sailors during WWI, like the Salvation Army and the YMCA, came together to form the USO. One of their primary goals was to keep servicemen away from bars and brothels since venereal disease had historically been a problem for the military. Women always played an important role in the USO. Women made up the core of USO volunteers, serving as senior and junior hostesses. During the war era, the government and the public at large believed that women, more than men, could lift servicemen's morale. Many women were also drawn to USO service because it brought them into direct contact with servicemen. These interactions reminded them of their own sons, husbands, brothers, or boy friends who were overseas.

Q: What kinds of women were considered to be the ideal type for USO service? Did one have to be single to be a USO hostess?

A: The USO considered middle-class white women to be the ideal type of junior hostesses, because the organization assumed that these women were sexually respectable. Working class women served as USO hostesses, but the majority of hostesses came from traditional middle-class backgrounds. Junior hostesses did not have to be single. They could be married, but single women were usually the ones who wanted to be hostesses.

Q: The USO still exists today. Why is it important to understand its history? How has it evolved?

A: The USO has undergone many changes over the years. It no longer hosts dances for

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servicemen as it did during WWII or the Korean War, but it still provides crucial emotional and physical support for service personnel. Today, the USO is best known for the entertainment that it provides for servicemen and women overseas. It is important to understand the history of the USO because it is one of the largest civilian organizations to support service personnel. During WWII a majority of soldiers and sailors had contact with the USO in some form or another and the USO helped to shape the wartime experiences of those men and of women volunteers. Looking at the USO also helps Americans to understand the racial and gender politics of the WWII era.

Q: What was the appeal of USO service to these young women?

A: USO service was appealing to young women because they wanted to do something to contribute to the war effort and they wanted to meet servicemen. Many of the men their own age were in the service, so dancing on Saturday nights was fairly limited except in relation to the USO. Plus, the USO fashioned itself as a respectable organization. Young women could feel safe socializing with male soldiers and sailors in a chaperoned environment like the USO dancehall. In a word, USO service was fun. The USO wanted junior hostesses to take their work with servicemen seriously and many did. Nearly all of the hostesses I interviewed and those I read about enjoyed the time they spent with servicemen – dancing, playing games, chatting, and laughing. USO service was both a service and a pleasure.

Q: Your book relies heavily on oral interviews. How did you find these hostesses?

A: I was living in Arizona while I was conducting research for this book. Many people relocated to the southwest after the war or later as retirees. The Phoenix-based *Arizona Republic* newspaper ran a story about my project in which I asked former USO hostesses and veterans with USO memories to contact me. My phone started ringing at 7:30 that morning and letters poured in for weeks. I had struck gold! These women were eager to share their wartime stories with me and to reminisce about the USO. I was lucky to be living in the southwest at the time!

Q: How successfully did the USO manage racial integration during World War II? Did the USO meet the recreational needs of African American servicemen?

A: The USO was not very successful in managing racial integration during the war. The national USO had an admirable policy when it came to race relations. It was opposed to segregation according to race, but the USO was unwilling to integrate clubs if local communities opposed integration. The USO could have been a force for social change in this area, but individuals on the ground chose to avoid conflict with white communities and not force the issue of integration. As a result, the national USO and local black communities created separate USO clubs for black servicemen. Of course, clubs in large northern and western cities were integrated, but did not always welcome black women as hostesses. The USO attempted to meet the needs of black servicemen, but did not always succeed.

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Q: What about African American women who wanted to serve in the USO?

A: The African American community recruited young women to serve as hostesses in its own USO clubs and in some that were interracial. When white volunteers created most USO clubs, white service personnel were on their minds. The inclusion of black dance partners for black servicemen was somewhat of an afterthought. Black women who felt they were shut out of USO service often forced clubs, such as those in Philadelphia and Boston, to include them. Black women challenged the USO to include them in their programs.

Q: How did the roles of senior and junior hostesses differ?

A: Senior hostesses were women usually over the age of 35. Many of them acted as “mothers” to the servicemen by giving them advice, baking, and sewing for them. Senior hostesses also chaperoned junior hostesses at USO dances. Junior hostesses acted as companions for servicemen inside USO clubs—they danced with them, chatted and played games like ping-pong. Junior hostesses were around the same age as servicemen and helped to distract them from the war for a little while.

Q: How did the USO deal with romance and romantic relationships between soldiers and hostesses?

A: The USO preferred that its hostesses not date servicemen since the “hasty war marriage” was a concern for all parents of teens and young adults during the war. The USO also wanted its hostesses to maintain positive reputations, so it discouraged dating. At the same time, it put young men and women together in classic courtship scenarios like dancing. As a result, it became a bit of an open secret that dating was taking place.

Q: Why has the image of Rosie the Riveter eclipsed the more traditionally feminine image of the USO hostess?

A: We remember Rosie today more than we do USO hostesses because the women who took jobs in heavy industry seemed to be doing something for the war that women did not usually do. For a middle-class woman to pick up a riveting gun and build a ship seemed to be revolutionary at the time, and we remember it that way. We know now that most of the Rosies were working class women who moved from service jobs to higher paying industrial work. Millions of middle-class women did enter the workforce to rivet and weld in shipyards. By the standards of the day, women who volunteered as hostesses were doing what women were supposed to do— baking, mothering, chaperoning, making conversation, and dancing. It is natural to remember the women who were breaking boundaries and challenging stereotypes more than those who were not.

Q: How were the “sexual reputations” of female USO candidates investigated and determined? What types of things excluded women from being admitted to the USO?

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A: USO hostesses were selected by word of mouth in small cities and towns, but those who volunteered in places like San Francisco had to supply two references. Many times ministers or rabbis served as character references. Senior hostesses checked those references, or recruited their daughters and her friends. The USO assumed that white women from middle-class backgrounds were automatically sexually respectable. They were suspicious when a young woman appeared to come from a poorer background or was a woman of color. A woman's age could exclude her from serving as a junior hostess, so could gossip or suspicion about how she treated a boyfriend. Other women were asked to stop attending USO dances if they did not show up on time for their shift or if they had too many absences.

Q: What kind of training did the USO hostesses receive?

A: USO hostesses did not receive much formal training at all. Charm classes were popular, but not required. Mostly, junior hostesses had to show up on time and be courteous to all servicemen. USO instruction booklets reminded them to dress in attractive fashions, but not be seductive or risqué in their choice of outfits. The YWCA created Girls Service Organizations that junior hostesses themselves managed. GSO's taught young women leadership and organizational skills. Senior hostesses often found themselves acting like counselors to homesick or lonely servicemen. These women were not trained counselors. Instead, they relied upon "motherly" skills that all women were expected to possess at the time.

Q: What kinds of rules did the hostesses have to follow? What happened to girls who broke the rules?

A: In some clubs dating was not allowed, but the most common rule was that junior hostesses were not allowed to leave USO premises with a male soldier or sailor. The USO understood that young men and women were going to date, but it did not want the clubs' reputation to suffer. Appearances were very important to the USO and that is why girls were not allowed to wander off with soldiers. This rule also made it possible for young women to say "no" to a persistent soldier if she was not interested in him. The rules served as a kind of protection for junior hostesses. Girls who broke the rules were asked not to return to the club, but instances of rule-breaking were not that common. The women I interviewed pointed out that nearly everyone who volunteered for the USO knew the organizations' positive reputation and did not want to tarnish it.

Q: What kinds of things did the hostesses do after the war? Did their USO service have a lasting impact on them?

A: These women did the same kinds of things after the war that other women did. They married, had children, and worked for pay. Some had careers. Volunteering for the USO encouraged social skills in many women and in some cases taught them how to be leaders. A good number of

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women met the men they would marry inside USO clubs. For those women, the USO had a lasting impact on their lives.

Q: How did you come up with this topic?

A: I have always been drawn to World War II. It was the kind of national experience that affected all Americans. As a women's historian, I started my research by looking at prostitution and the war. I was curious about the difference between "bad girls" and "good girls" and how those categories were created. Documents about prostitution mentioned "good girls" as often as they mentioned prostitutes. I quickly became more interested in these "good girls" and how the war affected their lives. The USO emerged as an organization where lots of young women spent their time during the war. I realized that we know so much about Rosie the Riveter and female soldiers, but not much at all about USO hostesses. I was hooked from that point on!

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety or in part with the following credit: A conversation with Meghan Winchell, author of **GOOD GIRLS, GOOD FOOD, GOOD FUN: THE STORY OF USO HOSTESSES DURING WORLD WAR II** (University of North Carolina Press, fall 2008). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/winchell

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