

CHAPTER 1

“GET YOUR MAN WHILE YOU CAN”: ESTABLISHING THE HOME

During World War II, authors of women’s articles in *Ladies’ Home Journal* and columns in the *Wilmington Star News* depicted the home as an American institution. These wartime articles and columns utilized government propaganda to keep women firmly in the home. The popular press depicted the American home as an American institution with marriage as its cornerstone. Advertisements targeting women stressed the importance of establishing a home. Articles and columns placed a new sense of urgency on marriage. Romantic relationships were disrupted by abbreviated courtships and the deployment of servicemen. Relocations to new towns and moving in with parents or in-laws changed the way women established their homes. Regardless of the physical space, the domestic roles of women did not change. In fact, women were not only expected to date, marry, and establish a home; they were bombarded by images that urged them to do so with patriotic fervor. By getting married and establishing a home, women were aiding the war effort. Recollections of Wilmington women sixty years later showed evidence of such disruptions; however, many of the women interpreted their wartime courtships and marriage as a normal stage of maturation, despite the presence of war.

In an attempt to enlist citizens on the home front, advertisements in the *Wilmington Star News* pictured the American home and family as the institution that inspired American soldiers to fight. An advertisement for Pender Furniture pictured a cozy living room, complete with a glowing fireplace, above a caption that boasted American homes as the strength of the nation.¹ In the April 1942 issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Richard Pratt, the architectural editor for the magazine, featured blueprints to a

home he called a “Victory House”.² The next month, the locally owned Foster-Hill Realty Company boasted the construction of “Victory Homes”.³ By referring to the homes as “victory homes,” advertisers introduced the idea that purchasing a home could help win the war.

The home continued to be an American institution. Local companies such as Pender Furniture, Tide Water Power Company, and King Awning stressed the importance of maintaining homes to women, as their advertisements were printed on the society page. A full-page advertisement featured Uncle Sam and encouraged citizens to “KEEP UP THE HOMES OUR BOYS ARE FIGHTING FOR”.⁴ Maintaining their homes was not new to women, but maintaining their homes as a patriotic duty was new.

Women were told that their actions in the home could help to defeat the Axis. An advertisement for Tide Water Power Company urged women to enlist their homes “in the fight for Victory by conserving electricity.”⁵ Women did not need to be told to conserve electricity. They obviously monitored their use of electricity before the war. Their role in the home did not change, but women had taken on the additional symbolic role of a soldier on the home front.

The institution of the home could not be sold without the institution of marriage. Kingoff’s Jewelers, a local store, ran a series of advertisements during 1942 and 1943 for

¹ *Wilmington Star News* (Wilmington, North Carolina), 3 March 1942.

² Richard Pratt, “First Victory House,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1942, 47.

³ *Wilmington Star News*, 4 May 1942.

⁴ *Wilmington Star News*, 18 April 1943.

⁵ *Wilmington Star News*, 25 January 1944.

a “2 Diamond Victory Duo” complete with images of servicemen and their sweethearts.⁶ Writers for national and local articles urged women to marry. Writers presented marriage as a patriotic duty. Some writers claimed that married men made better soldiers than their single brothers. Even writers who acknowledged the risks of wartime marriages ultimately concluded that such marriages could be successful.

Three articles in the March and June 1942 issues of *Ladies' Home Journal* focused on the subject of marriage. Paul Popenoe's article spoke volumes through the title alone: “Marriage is Better than Courtship.” Marriage made people more responsible and mature because married couples worked through problems together.⁷ Gretta Palmer approached the subject with more caution noting that married soldiers had more to worry about. While this preoccupation could hinder the performance of soldiers, war marriages would continue and many would be successful.⁸ Henry McLemore claimed that the most successful soldiers were married men. He cited such great military men of the past as Napoleon, George Washington, and Douglas MacArthur. Marriage taught a man obedience and loyalty; both of which were characteristics of a good soldier.⁹ Marrying a soldier could make him more successful on the battlefield and that success could help win the war. War marriage came with certain risks, but writers continued to urge women to marry. Such disruptions as the separation of spouses and anxiety over the safety of husbands did not change women. Women were supposed to marry and establish a home.

⁶ *Wilmington Star News*, 8 March 1942; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 March 1943.

⁷ Paul Popenoe, “Marriage is Better than Courtship,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, March 1942.

⁸ Gretta Palmer, “Marriage and War,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, March 1942.

⁹ Henry McLemore, “Married Men Make the Best Soldiers,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, June 1942.

On the society page of the *Wilmington Star News*, Ruth Millett shared the same opinion on marriage that the writers of *Ladies' Home Journal* expressed. Millett criticized psychologists who warned women of the potential failures of war marriages, but for different reasons. In a March 1942 column, she raised the point that a woman considering marriage at the onset of the war "...can't help but wonder if she may not seem a little too old- from a young man's point of view- in another five years." Her solution to this predicament was "get your man while you can."¹⁰ Millett continued to urge marriage and warned women that the happiness they felt in relationships at the time would vanish if they did not marry immediately.¹¹ Instead of marrying to make men better soldiers, and thus aid in the Allied victory, women should marry during the war in order to ensure they would find husbands. Finding a suitable mate was not a new goal for women, but Millett's wartime articles placed a new pressure on women. Even with the risks and disruptions in wartime marriages, expectations about marriage remained unchanged.

The national marriage rate increased during the war. During the decade of the 1940s, the percentage of women aged fourteen to thirty-four went from 48 to 62.¹² In New Hanover County, over 3,100 couples married between 1940 and 1945. Almost a third of the marriages took place in 1943.¹³ More people were financially able to marry

¹⁰ *Wilmington Star News*, 28 March 1942

¹¹ *Wilmington Star News*, 1 August 1942.

¹² D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 84.

¹³ New Hanover County Court Records.

because of wartime salaries. In addition, the potential separation caused many couples to hasten the decision to marry or to move up their wedding dates.¹⁴

The society page of the *Wilmington Star News* featured articles on planning war weddings. A national article from New York, published in May 1942, stated that although war brides married in haste, they wanted traditional gowns. The article went on to support hasty of weddings by noting that in wartime weddings, especially those with a groom in the service, formal etiquette regarding such details as invitations could be suspended.¹⁵ The theme of planning a wedding in a short amount of time continued throughout spring 1942. Columns provided alternatives to formal dresses and recipes for informal daytime receptions.¹⁶ While the preparation time for a wedding was abbreviated, mothers and brides were still responsible for planning a reception.

Women who accepted marriage proposals received advice on appropriate behavior while separated from their husbands. Women's articles outlined the proper behavior of wives and fiancés. Topics included the impact of separation on marriage, the subsequent new responsibilities women shouldered, the importance of respecting the privacy of husbands, and the significance of maintaining sexual vigilance. While the war changed marriage by separating spouses, expectations on women remained constant. Women were to marry; once they became wives, they were to trust their husbands and remain faithful.

¹⁴ Susan Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 164, 165.

¹⁵ *Wilmington Star News*, 15 May 1942.

¹⁶ *Wilmington Star News*, 20 May 1942.

By fall 1942, Millett was focused on the problem of separation on marriages. She acknowledged the complexity of the wife's job, raising the children alone while worried about her husband, but her conclusion about war marriages remained optimistic. She believed that couples could work through any situation that developed. Marriages that ended in divorce during the war would have met the same demise before the war.¹⁷ Paul Popenoe's article in *Ladies' Home Journal* encouraged women to work on such domestic skills as budgeting and cooking while separated from their husbands.¹⁸ As in peacetime, communication and partnership were vital to successful wartime marriages.

In April 1942, an article on trusting husbands appeared on the local society page. Millett wrote about a woman in Chicago who searched her husband's pockets and although a judge ruled it within her rights as a wife, her husband divorced her.¹⁹ The article clearly stated the importance of trusting and respecting husbands and their privacy, but failed to mention that wives should receive the same respect.

Writers for the society page briefly covered the topic of fidelity. The question of whether or not it was appropriate to attend parties while engaged was raised in "Mind Your Manners." Women were given the options of attending parties, or refraining from social events. The writer of the column suggested that women attend the parties.²⁰ The separation from fiancés created the possibility of dating other men. Such relationships could lead to sexual promiscuity. Women whose sweethearts were in the service were also encouraged to attend parties and socialize with locally stationed servicemen.

¹⁷ *Wilmington Star News*, 22 October 1942.

¹⁸ Paul Popenoe, "If You're a War Bride," *Ladies' Home Journal*, September 1942, 24, 70.

¹⁹ *Wilmington Star News*, 25 April 1942.

²⁰ *Wilmington Star News*, 15 October 1942.

However, with these new freedoms, women were expected to remain faithful to their fiancés. Married women were not mentioned in the column. Not even the disruption of war made it permissible for married women to socialize with other men.

Millett offered advice to women on how to treat friends separated from their husbands by the war. She advised women to seek the opinion of war wives, to compliment them lavishly on clothing and meals they prepared, and tease them to make them laugh.²¹ Husbands sent overseas could not give such attention, so it should come from other women. Married women were to remain as faithful to their husbands during the war as they were in peacetime.

Writers of women's articles also offered advice on the relocation many war brides faced. The column "Mind Your Manners" ran a series of questions and answers regarding the appropriate behavior of women in a new town. The column advised women to treat hostesses graciously and not feel as if it was a burden to inquire about the town. The answer to the last question advised women new to town to return calls to hostesses even if they did not intend on making the town their permanent home.²² The writer addressed the behavior of both local and transient women. Women did not need to be told how to be gracious hostesses or guests, but writers emphasized such behavior nonetheless.

In another column, Millett advised women on their general outlook on the living situations they encountered. She stated, "for if she isn't resourceful and easily adaptable to fast-changing circumstances, the 1942 bride isn't going to be very happy or make a

²¹ *Wilmington Star News*, 2 March 1943.

²² *Wilmington Star News*, 26 May 1942.

very good marriage.”²³ Millett returned to the topic weeks later. She warned that women who did not maintain a positive outlook about their temporary housing were sure to disappoint their husbands.²⁴ Less than ideal housing was not a reason for women to fail to maintain a home and a positive attitude. Wartime housing for women who relocated was not the same as it would be in her hometown, but their domestic duty to establish a home remained unchanged.

Millett advised against living at home with one’s parents because this practice stunted women’s growth as wives. Mothers and fathers would continue to treat newly married women as daughters, not wives. Young wives who lived on their own learned valuable skills that made them successful wives.²⁵ Millett also offered advice to women who had children. The situation would remain happy if the daughter remembered, “... the house belongs to Mama and Papa.” She should look after her children herself and not spend time around the house leisurely.²⁶ The article did not take into consideration the financial need to live with parents. Instead, Millett focused on the continuity of women’s domestic duties.

Women interviewed recalled such disruptions as abbreviated courtships, postponed engagements, hasty weddings, and relocation; however, these women did not interpret these differences as negative disruptions. Sixty years later, they remembered their courtships and weddings as normal. Women used collective pronouns such as “you” and “we” when they discussed their own experiences. This implied that they

²³ *Wilmington Star News*, 10 January 1942.

²⁴ *Wilmington Star News*, 25 January 1942.

²⁵ *Wilmington Star News*, 11 October 1942.

²⁶ *Wilmington Star News*, 12 January 1942.

remembered their own experiences as similar to their contemporaries. Although the war altered romantic relationships and changed living conditions, women remembered their experiences as similar to prewar conditions.

Two women remembered their postponements of steady dating and engagement as different but not out of the ordinary. Manette Mintz said she did “not do a lot of steady dating because of the situation.” She did date, but her courtships remained casual. She dated men in the shipyard where she worked and met men at nearby Camp Davis. When asked how the war affected romantic relationships she responded, “You didn’t make any commitments because you didn’t know what the next day would bring.”²⁷ Mary Bellamy recalled her marriage proposal. “Actually, he proposed when I was seventeen and I said, ‘I have a scholarship to East Carolina.’ After the war, it was always after the war. You always postponed. So you knew you had to do part of the things you wanted to do, for your education and for your profession.”²⁸ The language both women used was striking in that it included all women. They interpreted their past experiences as similar to other women; and thus, indicative of the era.

The war brought a sense of urgency to romantic relationships for two women. Catherine Stribling and Estelle Edwards reacted to the war by committing to sweethearts and moving up their engagements. Although this was the opposite reaction of Ms. Mintz and Ms. Bellamy, both women used collective pronouns. They recalled making the same decisions that other women made. Ms. Stribling remembered how the war affected romantic relationships. “Well, I think that there was an immediacy and a hurry about romances because you never knew from one day to the next when your sweetheart was

²⁷ Manette Mintz, interview by author, 21 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina.

going to get sent overseas and killed. You know, you sort of lived for today and didn't think much about tomorrow."²⁹ Ms. Edwards echoed that sentiment, "well, we didn't know when the war was going to end. We didn't even consider that one."³⁰

The haste and excitement that surrounded war weddings remained in the minds of women who lived in Wilmington during the war. "Lots of young people got married immediately... Many of the high school girls, as soon as they finished school, got married."³¹ Even without the blessings of parents, some marriages took place during the war. Ms. Edwards married a man in the service without her father's consent and therefore, without his presence at the ceremony. Her daughter, who was present at the interview, remembered, "...but granddaddy refused to go because daddy was not a hometown boy, not someone he knew. So my grandfather refused to go to the wedding."³² Even in wartime, women complied with the social and cultural expectations that went with marriage.

Relocation disrupted courtships and marriages, but women who were separated from their husbands did not interpret their situations as unique. Wilmington grew with war workers and the families of servicemen from nearby military camps.³³ Some families boarded newcomers who came to town. One woman remembered how her

²⁸ Mary Bellamy, interview by author, 15 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

²⁹ Catherine Stribling, interview by author, 9 December 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

³⁰ Estelle Edwards, interview by author, 11 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

³¹ Mary Bellamy.

³² Estelle Edwards.

³³ The population of New Hanover County jumped from 47,939 in 1940 to 63,272 in 1950. The population increase was a combination of many factors, including defense jobs at the North Carolina Shipbuilding Corporation, and the nearby military bases of Camp Davis, Camp Lejeune, and Fort Fisher. United States Census.

mother took people in to the family home. “She closed off the “L” from the main house and rented it to a couple. And then I remember her renting a room in our house- there were people pretty desperate for places. People wanting to come to be near servicemen.”³⁴

Likewise, some women from Wilmington left for the duration of their husbands’ service. Ms. Edwards moved to Greenville, South Carolina and Aline Hartis moved to Carlsbad, New Mexico. Both women found themselves in a new area, but did not remember this experience as unique. Ms. Edwards recalled her experience in Greenville. “We shared a house with another couple, a military couple. It was fine, we got along real well. She was a school teacher and she really taught me a lot about how to buy groceries, fix a lot of different foods and all, because I had never done a lot of cooking at that time.”³⁵ At some time during the war, both women returned home to Wilmington to live with their parents.³⁶ Women relocated in order to maintain the domestic role of wife. Before their husbands’ inevitable deploys, the women maintained their homes and prepared meals. It was not until after their husbands went overseas that the women returned to Wilmington to live with their parents.

Many women interviewed recalled smaller weddings under hasty circumstances rather than large, formal, well-planned gatherings.³⁷ Ms. Edwards shared the way in which her soldier boyfriend offered his wartime proposal. “He wrote it in a letter, and

³⁴ Caroline Swails, interview by author, 12 December 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

³⁵ Estelle Edwards.

³⁶ Estelle Edwards; Aline Hartis, interview by author, 19 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

³⁷ Manette Mintz; Mary Bellamy; Estelle Edwards; Cornelia Campbell, interview by author, 14 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

then he called, too.”³⁸ She recalled her wedding. “Well, we were married at the air force base- it was just a wooden chapel, with wooden benches. No music. We just went in and the chaplain was there and that was it.”³⁹ The compressed amount of time military leave gave soldiers made the traditional peacetime weddings disappear. Ms. Hartis remembered the preparations for her own wedding. “His mother and father and sister and my mother and father and I drove his (her husband’s) car out to Carlsbad, they came back on the bus. And we were married at the chapel in Carlsbad, New Mexico.”⁴⁰ She also recalled the marriage of a friend. “They had been going together quite a bit and they decided they wanted to get married before he went overseas, so that was a rushed thing.”⁴¹ The circumstances of the war made traditional well-planned weddings impossible in many cases, but women continued to marry and establish homes.

Government propaganda and women’s articles and advice columns inundated women with images of patriotic domesticity. Despite such changes to dating and marriages brought about by brief courtships, hurriedly prepared weddings, and separation from husbands, propaganda and women’s articles perpetuated the traditional duties of women as wives and upheld the centrality of the institution of the American home. Women received advice on when to marry, how to remain good wives during their separations from their husbands, and how to establish a proper home no matter the circumstances. Maintaining these domestic responsibilities at home would win the war overseas. Sixty years after Wilmington women dated and married under these adverse

³⁸ Estelle Edwards.

³⁹ Estelle Edwards.

⁴⁰ Aline Hartis.

⁴¹ Aline Hartis.

circumstances, they remembered their courtships, marriages, and homes as relatively unchanged.