

CHAPTER 2

“MOTHER HAS A BIG WAR JOB”: THE LIVING ROOM

During World War II, the majority of entertaining, socializing, and correspondence took place in the living room. Occasionally during evening activities that usually took place in the living room, blackout sirens sounded and families quickly covered windows. As they did before the war, advertisers targeted the living room as the center of family time and entertainment. During the war, however, the activities pictured in the living room focused on wartime activities. Women’s articles placed women in the center of the living room entertaining, writing to soldiers, or blacking out windows. Wilmington’s female population remembered these actions as part of their normal daily routines during the war. According to their recollections, activities that took place in the living room did not change, despite the attention the room received in advertisements and women’s articles.

Government propaganda targeted Americans more as members of a family than citizens of a nation. Images captured private interests such as family obligation instead of public and national interests such as stopping rogue governments.¹ The local newspaper targeted citizens, especially women, with the same general theme. Almost immediately after the war began, rhetoric aimed at women placed the responsibility of maintaining a positive morale in the home and in the country on women. A little over a month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Ruth Millett included a story in her column about women in New York who planned to wear black dresses until the end of the war.

¹ Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson, ed., *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 197-200.

The column pointed to the two-fold job that befell women during the war. First, women needed to inspire both civilian citizens such as husbands and children and those in the military to fight and sacrifice. Secondly, women needed to keep family morale high. Millett suggested that women who wear black would depress the mood of those around them. Instead, she suggested that women maintain a cheerful disposition, even while the country still mourned the losses they suffered the month before. Women should wear “a pretty dress and a smile.”² The duty of maintaining a happy household was not new to women, but the crisis of war made the task more urgent.

The morale of the entire nation depended on bolstering the morale of each family. Positive families equaled a positive nation. At the center of each family stood the wife or mother. Wartime articles placed the responsibility of positive family morale firmly on women. Millett devoted a column to the vital role that mothers played in the home during the war entitled, “Mother Has a Big War Job- Keeping the Home Cheerful.” She made it clear that women alone shouldered the responsibility of maintaining family morale and by extension, the morale of the nation, and she criticized their early efforts. “American women are falling down on the home defense job that they- and only they- can do, the job of protecting family life from depression, strain, and fear.”³ The role women played in setting the mood of their families was not unique to wartime, but the sense of urgency placed on this role was new.

The living room set the tone for a family’s mood. The room stood as the physical center of the home and provided family members with a safe and cozy place to congregate around a fireplace and connect with the world, through the radio. Articles in

² *Wilmington Star News* (Wilmington, North Carolina), 9 January 1942.

Ladies Home Journal those in the same messages as the *Wilmington Star News*. Writers depicted the living room as the center of family interaction and as the symbol of the general mood of the family.

During the war, *Ladies' Home Journal* used the series "How America Lives" as a means to introduce different American families to readers in order to promote such patriotic activities as taking defense jobs, canning food, and volunteering. The series featured families of various economic classes, ethnic backgrounds, and regions of the country in order to convey an important message, namely that that during war, the goals of all citizens were the same and vital to the war effort. Women performed most of these activities and the family unit stood at the center of the articles.⁴

In one edition of "How America Lives," *Ladies' Home Journal* redecorated the living room of a family whose mother worked in the defense industry. The author, Henrietta Murdock, suggested that the living room remain open, with plenty of floor space. The comfort of the room remained the focus of the article instead of style.⁵ Because family and social gatherings took place in the living room, a clean, pleasant setting would foster both the family unit and positive attitudes. In addition, the frugality of the decoration sent a clear message that Americans on the home front were responsible for maintaining a tight budget and investing in war bonds. The subtext was also clear that fancy redecorations were selfish and unpatriotic.

Advertisements and women's articles illustrated the living room as more than the center of family life. Entertaining took place in the living room as well. Again, women's

³ *Wilmington Star News*, 26 March 1942.

⁴ Nancy Walker, *Shaping Our Mothers' World: American Women's Magazines* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), Chapter 3.

duties as hostesses were pivotal. This time, women faced the responsibility of leading conversation to ensure that the atmosphere of the gathering remained cheerful and upbeat. The question of whether the very act of entertaining was appropriate during a national crisis became the topic of women's articles. Advice columns had much to say about gatherings deemed inappropriate, in bad taste, and unpatriotic.

Once the very act of entertaining became the topic of articles and advertisements, women were confronted with contradicting messages. Millett's column on January 9, 1942 informed women that they should not feel guilty about entertaining.⁶ Months later, she zeroed in on specific forms of entertaining in two columns that ran just weeks apart. In her first column, she criticized women's clubs luncheons. According to Millett, luncheon meetings were frivolous and counterproductive because they required women to use rationed goods such as gasoline and rubber tires.⁷ Millett sought to enlighten women about the many changes in etiquette brought about by the war. In her second column, she took aim at dinner parties by declaring that such elaborate entertaining was in poor taste during the national crisis.⁸ Both columns painted women who engaged in these activities as unpatriotic.

Millett did not suggest that women cease to entertain during the war; rather she sought to educate women about the stipulations of wartime entertaining. The war disrupted entertaining. Such rationed goods as meat and sugar and gasoline and tires limited menus and travel.

⁵ Henrietta Murdock, "The Breckman's Living Room," *Ladies' Home Journal*, October 1942, 104, 114.

⁶ *Wilmington Star News*, 9 January 1942.

⁷ *Wilmington Star News*, 23 April 1942.

⁸ *Wilmington Star News*, 9 May 1942.

According to the society page, living room conversations inevitably focused on various facets of the war ranging from family budgets to family friends on active duty. Women received advice on how to converse about such topics and, more generally, about managing the attitude of those gathered together. A column titled “Mind Your Manners” asked readers if hostesses were responsible for keeping the conversation upbeat.⁹ Of course the answer was yes. Hostesses remained responsible for the morale of their living rooms.

More specifically, women were told how to speak to parents of servicemen. In an April 21st column of “Mind Your Manners” Millett asked, “when talking to persons who have a son in the service should you pull a long face and talk about how bad the war is?”¹⁰ No was the obvious answer, but the writer felt it necessary to remind women not only how to interact, but also how to maintain a positive morale among their family and friends, and by extension, the nation.

Advise columns provided women with valuable lessons about handling conversations that turned to discussions of family finances. Indeed, Millett devoted an entire column to the topic. She advised women to stay clear of this topic while entertaining because it was boring and could make guests feel uncomfortable.¹¹ Wartime budgets, like peacetime budgets were personal matters. While family budgets were changed due to the war, either because of an increase in salary in the defense industry or due to investments in war bonds, women were expected to keep their families’ finances private information. Once again, the advice columns reminded women that the morale

⁹ *Wilmington Star News*, 3 April 1942.

¹⁰ *Wilmington Star News*, 21 April 1942.

of the living room remained their responsibility, either while entertaining guests or sitting at home with their family.

Advertisers consciously compared the image of a woman in her living room to a soldier fighting for democracy. Similar to Millett's columns, one local furniture company linked patriotism to entertaining. Pender Furniture Company placed a quarter page advertisement depicting a woman sitting in a comfortable chair in front of a fireplace. Gazing wistfully into the air, she remembers the days before the war and longs for life after the war. The caption read, "all dressed up with no place to go? Yes she has places to go but she is patriotic!" The woman who remained at home fulfilled her duty to her country by conserving tires and gasoline. However the advertisement contradicted that same point when it stated, "...they will live more at home and of course entertain more."¹² A gathering hosted by one family required that another family use tires and gasoline.

The daily lives of women living in Wilmington changed dramatically as the city experienced an influx of war workers and soldiers. They faced such disruptions as anxiety over deployed sweethearts, raising children alone, and changes in their husbands' employment patterns.¹³ Wilmington's female population experienced these changes during the war; however, most women interviewed did not interpret these changes to their social routines as negative disruptions. Some women recalled changes to their routines, but sixty years after the war, they did not interpret these alterations as a hindrance. None

¹¹ *Wilmington Star News*, 11 April 1942.

¹² *Wilmington Star News*, 26 April 1942.

¹³ Martha Mary Thomas, *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie: Alabama Women and the Second World War* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1987), Chapter 6. By sharing the common region

of the women interviewed remembered tempering their conversations, or feeling responsible for either the attitudes of their guests or the atmosphere of their parties. Instead, their recollections stressed a consistency in their hostess role.

Of the fourteen women interviewed, only three women commented on entertaining during the war and only when asked. The majority of the women did not elaborate on entertaining because they remembered this activity as unchanged. Two women commented that entertaining ceased during the war. Aline Hartis recalled, “I didn’t entertain, no. Everybody was pretty busy.”¹⁴ Catherine Stribling, who was in high school during the war, remembered her mother’s social routine. “She used to play bridge all the time, she gave that up when she went to work.” In addition to the time war work demanded, she recalled her mother entertained in the home less often because, “...you didn’t do much entertaining because you couldn’t get food.”¹⁵ According to these recollections, war work and rationing adversely affected one’s ability to entertain. Both women, however, interpreted this lack as normal for a wartime situation. The use of collective pronouns in both recollections implied that the women interpreted their experiences as that of all women. They recalled that no one entertained and they viewed this absence as a normal response to war.

Mary Bellamy, who continued to entertain despite wartime disruptions, also interpreted her experiences as ordinary. She remembered her wartime social routines as both happy and satisfying. She reminisced about dinner parties. “You shared. If we

of the South, cities in Alabama and Wilmington shared experiences such as an increase in employment and the resulting population increase.

¹⁴ Aline Hartis, interview by author, 19 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

¹⁵ Catherine Stribling, interview by author, 9 December 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

didn't eat meat, we had soup and vegetables and everyone appreciated it."¹⁶ Like the women who recalled a dearth of social gatherings, Ms. Bellamy used language that put her in the collective category with all citizens. Thus, the women recalled their experiences as shared by all Americans.

In addition to the responsibility of maintaining upbeat conversations, government propaganda also held women accountable for the safety of soldiers. Locally, women received advice from the society page on how to correspond properly with servicemen. On the national level, the federal government sponsored a series of poster campaigns that encouraged citizens to be cautious of what they said to ensure the safety of soldiers. Both local and national images spoke more to women than men. In Wilmington, the majority of the propaganda discouraging war gossip appeared on the society page. More specifically, articles focused primarily on the actions of women. The target of women in the national poster campaign appeared more subtle, but played to emotions presumed to be felt more by women than men.

Wilmington's women were warned about engaging in loose conversation. Early in 1942, Millett wrote an article on war gossip, using the example of women knitting collectively for soldiers. Reckless conversation while knitting trumped patriotic intentions. Women who spoke about the deployment and location of soldiers amid the clacking of knitting needles placed men in harm's way.¹⁷ Millett failed to mention the consequences of such loose conversation. Perhaps Millett deemed consequences unnecessary or too unspeakable for an advice column. Even so, the message was clear.

¹⁶ Mary Bellamy, interview by author, 15 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

¹⁷ *Wilmington Star News*, 13 February 1942.

Women on the home front were responsible for the safety of soldiers on overseas missions.

Another column of “Mind Your Manners” took on the responsibility of explaining what damage might be done if women spoke recklessly about the war. In this column, Millett explained that women should not share the details of troop movement because enemies could use the information. Women who maintained their silence protected soldiers.¹⁸ That the topic of female conversation did not make the society page during peacetime suggests a new sense of urgency about female discussions during the war.

National posters illustrated a greater sense of urgency in the request that Americans not spread war gossip. The Office of War Information quickly developed a plan putting advertisers and volunteers to work on the design and distribution of posters.¹⁹ A poster from 1942 showed a compassionate Uncle Sam with concern in his eyes instead of the assertive man shown in recruitment posters. Instead of his finger pointing at the onlooker, it is placed over his lips to remind the public not to discuss information on troop movement or deployments. A year later, a poster featuring a soldier informed Americans, “the battle-wise infantryman is careful of what he says or writes. How about you?” The government raised the stakes in 1944 with a poster that became one of the most popular, and frequently reproduced image of the era. A cocker spaniel looks at the viewer from the back of a living room chair. On the wall behind the family pet hangs a gold star signifying a son lost in battle. Under the picture the caption reads,

¹⁸ *Wilmington Star News*, 21 April 1942.

¹⁹ William L. Bird, Jr. and Harry R Rubenstein, *Design for Victory: World War II Posters of the American Home Front* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), Chapter 1.

“...because someone talked!”²⁰ As a result of wartime gossip, the pet occupies the chair instead of the beloved son.

These images played directly to the emotions of women and men, but they resounded more strongly to with wives, mothers, and sisters. The gender stereotypes of gossiping women strongly influenced the design of the posters. The designers believed that women identified more with a gentle Uncle Sam instead of an aggressive, rough man who spoke to potential soldiers. The poster depicting the gold star family pet played to emotions that made women more vulnerable than men. Women identified with the loss of a brother, sweetheart, or husband more readily than men did.

Wilmington women had no trouble recalling these warnings. Despite the attention placed on the subject, none of the women remembered war gossip as a particular problem. Estelle Edwards simply recalled, “Oh yea, we were warned about that all the time.”²¹ Ms. Bellamy remembered a specific saying, “‘loose lips sink ships’, and we were supposed to be careful of loose conversation.”²² Manette Mintz remembered the warnings, but deemed them unnecessary. She recalled conversations with soldiers and stated, “you didn’t ask, it was for their safety.”²³ The women remembered that they and their friends were wary of war gossip no matter the local and national warnings. Thus, they recalled themselves and their friends performing a patriotic duty that assisted in the war effort.

²⁰ Bird and Rubenstein, 41, 45.

²¹ Estelle Edwards, interview by author, 11 November 2002, Wilmington North Carolina, tape recording.

²² Mary Bellamy.

²³ Manette Mintz, interview by author, 21 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina.

The private act of communicating with loved ones and friends went public with the attention from local advertisers and women's columns. The locally owned Jewel Box advertised globes on sale pictured next to saluting servicemen and encouraged potential customers to "follow them around the world".²⁴ Women's columns on the society page offered advice on the related topics of how to write to servicemen, the etiquette of addressing letters, and issues of privacy.

The very personal act of writing letters to a brother, friend, or sweetheart went public on the society page of wartime Wilmington. A "Mind Your Manners" column urged women to write promptly to servicemen and to use the rank of the men in order to properly address letters. The last question in the column focused on privacy. The question asked, "should a girl show her friends the love letters written to her by a man in the service?" The answer read, "no!"²⁵ Women knew the importance of discretion, but required a reminder because they may be tempted to share the intimacies of letters from their sweethearts.

Parents received some advise about communicating with their sons. Although Millett addressed both parents, women were her obvious target. Millett suggested that the content of letters remain consistent with the way parents spoke to their sons when they had lived at home. Throughout the article, Millett placed the responsibility of initial correspondence on the parents since soldiers had less time to spend writing. She also warned parents to avoid any topics that may conjure up feelings of homesickness.²⁶ Parents shouldered the burden not only for initiating and maintaining communication, but

²⁴ *Wilmington Star News*, 20 March 1942.

²⁵ *Wilmington Star News*, 8 September 1942.

also for shoring up morale of their overseas sons. Even with sons thousands of miles from the family living room, mothers remained responsible for the positive morale of their families.

Letter writing became the primary means of communication during the war. Inevitable delays in the postal system often left women wondering if the soldier who wrote of his safety weeks before remained unharmed or even alive when the mail arrived.²⁷ No doubt Wilmington women experienced such anxieties, but none shared such recollections.

All the women interviewed remembered corresponding with soldiers. The letters they recalled were written primarily to sweethearts; a few also remembered writing to brothers, high school friends, and men they met at the local USO. The most elaborate memories of correspondence were those with boyfriends, fiancés, and husbands. Aline Hartis recalled the letters to her husband. “I don’t know how I wrote so many letters. I wrote to him everyday...”²⁸ Cornelia Campbell started a relationship through letters and continued it for some time before meeting the young man. “I had a pen pal, it was a year before we met each other. He had happened to see a picture of mine that one of the guys from this area had of me, and he wanted to write to me. So, the fellow wrote to me and said would it be all right if this guy wrote to me. So we corresponded for about a year.”²⁹

²⁶ *Wilmington Star News*, 4 February 1944.

²⁷ Archie Satterfield, *The Home Front: An Oral History of the War Years in America, 1941-1945* (New York: Playboy Press, 1981), 49.

²⁸ Aline Hartis.

²⁹ Cornelia Campbell, interview by author, 14 November 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

All women interviewed recalled writing to someone, even if only casually. Manette Mintz remembered that, “you wrote to many boys, but it was not a romantic thing.”³⁰ Women wrote to soldiers not only to communicate, but also because it was deemed a patriotic duty.

The distance war placed between lovers, family members, and friends disrupted relationships. Women altered their daily routines in order to find time for such prolific communication. Letters and v-mail became the only means of communication for many women. Women recalled writing letters to a husband, a potential sweetheart, or a childhood friend as a normal occurrence during the war. None of the women interviewed focused on the negative aspects of writing letters. No one complained about the inevitable delays in mail, the intrusion of government censors, or the longing to hear the voice of their loved ones. On the contrary, women remembered their letter writing experience as satisfying. Despite these disruptions, women interpreted their memories of wartime communication as normal under the circumstances.

Blackouts also brought the war directly into American living rooms. Locally, women received little advice about how to prepare for blackouts. A national article ran in the *Wilmington Star News* six weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The article made it very clear that women bore the responsibility of preparing the home for blackouts. Since blackouts required curtains, they became domesticated.

The theme of family morale carried into articles on blackouts. One article informed women, “you need’t put your home in mourning now for blackouts.” The article advised women to boost morale, even during blackouts by sewing curtains that

³⁰ Manette Mintz. All women interviewed recalled writing to someone.

were aesthetically pleasing and calming.³¹ If women blacked out their homes with cheerful curtains, their families would not feel frightened or disheartened. Rhetoric was carefully crafted to urge women to maintain a positive atmosphere at home, even as warning sirens sounded.

Women remembered blackouts in Wilmington as a routine part of the war. Most women recalled the logistics of blacking out a room. Some women remembered specific times the sirens sounded. A few women placed blackouts in the context of their social lives. Most of the women interviewed remembered the ways in which they blacked out their homes. Most women recalled, “great big heavy blankets over the windows at home.”³² Others shared recollections of block wardens. Eleanor Fick remembered blackouts at the family summer home on the beach and the heat that made the home uncomfortable because the curtains blocked the breeze.³³ These women remembered blackouts as something they took in stride.

A few women recalled specific blackouts and the emotions they generated. Ms. Stribling remembered, “The shipyard wouldn’t turn out lights during blackouts if it was a drill. But one night they ran the siren and you looked over there and the shipyard lights were off. Everybody said, ‘ooh, this must be something.’”³⁴ Ms. Hartis remembered a specific evening. “I remember one time, of course we all had the dark shades and at night kept them down if we had any lights on, but one night in the middle of the night the

³¹ *Wilmington Star News*, 17 January 1942.

³² Caroline Swails, interview by author, 12 December 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording; Cornelia Campbell; Eleanor Fick, interview by the author, 13 January 2003, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording; Mary Bellamy; Aline Hartis.

³³ Eleanor Fick.

³⁴ Catherine Stribling.

siren started so everyone got kind of excited and got up, but kept the shades down, but we found out that they had sighted a [German] submarine not far off the shore here.”³⁵

Blackouts clearly brought the war into everyone’s living room.

Government propaganda and women’s articles and columns regarding home activities such as entertainment, correspondence, and blackouts targeted women and their traditional gender roles. Such images brought the war directly into the living room and enlisted Americans on the home front to fight the war. Victory required the effort of every civilian, but especially women.³⁶ Women remained the center of family activities in the living room even as entertainment and correspondence changed during the war and blackouts disrupted family life. Interactions between family members, local friends, and soldiers overseas occurred in the living room. Women stood at the center of these rooms entertaining guests, corresponding with soldiers, and preparing for blackouts. Sixty years later, women in Wilmington remembered such activities as simply part of their daily routines.

³⁵ Aline Hartis.

³⁶ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 52, 53; Susan Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), Chapter 9.