CHAPTER VIII
THE ARMY OF SCHOOL GARDENERS
How the Children of America were Mobilized by the Government

As a factor in education the war garden and its successor, the victory garden, have established themselves in a way that will prove a permanent influence in American life. Through the schools millions of children have been awakened to the value of gardening as a patriotic effort of war time and an undertaking worth while at all times. They have been taught that nature is a generous giver who requires only to be encouraged. They have been impressed with the importance of food production and trained into an army of practical producers. The national benefit from such teaching and training cannot fail to be far-reaching in its effects and a lasting force in the lives of the future men and women of America.

In the development of school gardeners two ideas were given consideration. An immediate increase in food production went hand in hand with the educational value of the work. It was not expected, of course, that all school children would become immediate producers, but it was certain that the great volume of work undertaken in the schools would be of appreciable worth in swelling the total of war time food production and of even greater importance in creating a vast army of future citizens trained to intelligent application of the
principles of thrift, industry, service, patriotism and responsibility. The results have been highly gratifying to those concerned with the undertaking.

For the mobilization of the school children the logical agency was the United States Bureau of Education of the Department of the Interior. P. P. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education, approached the undertaking with broad vision and keen foresight characteristic of his administration of educational affairs for the Federal Government. Under his guidance there came into being the United States School Garden Army, mobilized with effective promptness and swung into action under the leadership of J. H. Francis as director. Dr. Francis is an educator of note who was drafted into this important work by Commissioner Claxton, and he brought to bear on the enterprise perception and aggressiveness which achieved results of national importance in comparatively brief time.

President Wilson was keenly interested in the United States School Garden Army. His cordial endorsement was expressed in a letter to Secretary Lane which served as the corner stone of the structure and an inspiration to the children of America. This letter was as follows:

February 25, 1918.

My dear Mr. Secretary:

I sincerely hope that you may be successful through the Bureau of Education in arousing the interest of teachers and children in the schools of the United States in the cultivation of home gardens. Every boy and girl who really sees what the home garden may mean will,
ALONG THE EAST RIVER FRONT

Supervised by competent instructors the school children of New York City produced some excellent results in the gardens which they planted in various sections of the city. The very orderly one here shown, with a large number of children industriously engaged, is in Thomas Jefferson Park, 114th Street and East River.
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I am sure, enter into the purpose with high spirits, because I am sure they would all like to feel that they are in fact fighting in France by joining the home garden army. They know that America has undertaken to send meat and wheat and flour and other foods for the support of the soldiers who are doing the fighting for the men and women who are making the munitions, and for the boys and girls of Western Europe, and that we must also feed ourselves while we are carrying on this war. The movement to establish gardens, therefore, and to have the children work in them is just as real and patriotic an effort as the building of ships or the firing of cannon. I hope that this spring every school will have a regiment in the Volunteer War Garden Army.

Cordially and sincerely yours,

Woodrow Wilson.

Hon. Franklin K. Lane,
Secretary of the Interior.

From the outset the United States School Garden Army allied itself with the National War Garden Commission for the conduct of the work for which it had been organized. This affiliation covered not only food production through gardening but also the work of food conservation through home canning and drying.

One of the first requisites of the newly formed army was that its membership should be reached with technical instructions so compiled as to be authoritative and so presented as to be easily understood. To accomplish this the United States School Garden Army utilized the publications of the National War Garden Commission.
In response to official request, these were furnished by the Commission in sufficient quantities for circulation among the schools of America. The Commission's book "War Vegetable Gardening" was made the standard book of instructions and it reached every school in the land through the machinery of the United States School Garden Army. In similar way the Commission's book on canning and drying was distributed and given official recognition in the educational world.

The satisfactory results achieved through the coöperation of the two organizations was given expression by Director Francis in the following letter to the Commission under date of October 5th, 1918:

My dear Mr. Ridsdale:

I do not feel that I should allow the Garden season of 1917-1918 to close without acknowledging to you the very great service the National War Garden Commission has rendered the United States School Garden Army organization, and telling you that we deeply appreciate the cordial, earnest way in which you have coöperated with us in working out our problem.

For 1919 the work of the United States School Garden Army was further expanded and standardized. Perceiving the value of school coöperation through the Bureau of Education, the National War Garden Commission prepared special printings of the victory editions of these books.

These are for the exclusive use of the United States School Garden Army. On the front cover of the school edition of each book appears a reproduction in the
ONE OF CLEVELAND’S SCHOOL GARDENS

Is it any wonder pupils take a pride in a garden like this? The picture shows the fine state of cultivation on the grounds of Rosedale school, in Cleveland. The combination of landscape beauty with vegetable growing commends itself to general attention.
original colors, of the poster by Maginel Wright Enright, which has become known as the pictorial trademark of the Army. This poster presents Uncle Sam as the Pied Piper of the Gardens, at the head of an army of children bearing garden tools as their weapons. As an introduction the books carry an official proclamation to the schools of America, calling on them for further work in the cause of food production and conservation. In his proclamation Director Francis says:

The food problems of peace give renewed emphasis to the demand for food production. With the ending of the conflict came the necessity for feeding many millions more of the people of Europe. Food Administrator Hoover tells us this country must send 20,000,000 tons of food overseas during the year ending July 1, 1919. To make this possible it is essential that production be carried on to the utmost of our possibilities. The farms have lost a large proportion of their manpower. Some one must take the places of the men who have left the farms and of the women who have gone into channels of industry in which they were not previously employed.

The boys and girls of America must help to do this. There is a mighty army of them, thirty to fifty million strong, who have heads, hearts, and hands, leisure time and patriotism to spare. There are also hundreds of thousands of acres of tillable land uncultivated. The problem is, therefore, to get these two factors together. It is a problem requiring careful, efficient organization. The organization is here, one of the most powerful in the country—the public school system of America. To build another capable of doing the work in hand would require years and cost millions. School gardens and
school-supervised home gardens have received serious attention, but only a negligible part of the work has been undertaken. The school system should and must undertake the work with seriousness and determination and give the world results that are real and adequate.

Superintendents of schools must make their schools a vital, an actual, force in giving more food to the world and in conserving what is produced. They must do this in addition to talking and writing about this somewhat spectacular and highly interesting phase of the school's part in the war. And this is their work, not to be sublet to other agencies who by the very nature of the problem can not solve it but can only contribute to its solution.

Commissioner Claxton and Director Francis are deeply gratified at the success of the garden movement among the school children and greatly impressed with its promise for the future. The interest thus awakened and the practical knowledge thus acquired by the young gardeners, they regard as one of the most important national benefits of the war and one which will be of immeasurable worth in its influence on American citizenship.