Awakening a Collective Consciousness:
The Effects of World War II on Sweet Briar College

by

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"I pledge..." 

28·II·85

"WWII and the Image of Isolation: SBC in the 1940's"

Doing Sweet Briar History
Winter Term
Mr. Gerald Berg
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Given its undeserved reputation as an isolated finishing school, it is easy to imagine that Sweet Briar College remained unscathed by the ravages of the Second World War. On the contrary, the years spanning from 1940 to 1945 marked a major turning point in Sweet Briar history; the repercussions of the international crisis were profoundly felt on campus, and actually served to awaken the minds of many a Sweet Briar student. A new awareness for the rest of the world was felt, and as the role of American women changed in society as a result of the war, so did the aspirations and concerns of the Sweet Briar student.

What were the changes brought about at Sweet Briar between 1940 and 1945 as a result of World War II? This paper seeks to describe these changes, as well as trace the expanding awareness of the Sweet Briar student with regards to her knowledge of the world and the recognition of her own capabilities and strengths beyond the realm of homemaking.
Awakening a Collective Consciousness:

The Effects of World War II on Sweet Briar College

Despite its isolated location and sheltered atmosphere, Sweet Briar College and its community did not remain unaffected by World War II and underwent profound changes from 1940 and 1945. In the years prior to the United States' entry into the war, Sweet Briar had turned its attention toward the international crisis; in December of 1940, for instance, a branch of Bundles for Britain, Inc. was established at Sweet Briar. Activities such as supervised knitting for British armies and clothing drives called for the cooperation of the entire Sweet Briar community, and from January 13-18, 1941, an intensified drive resulted in the raising of $528.90 for the cause. As well as doing volunteer work for Britain, Sweet Briar students kept abreast of the war's progress through a regular column in the Sweet Briar News entitled "World News." As the international crisis worsened, however, the College began to examine its policies more closely, recognizing the possibility of U.S. intervention. At a meeting of the faculty on October 2, 1940, it was suggested by Miss Harriet Rogers that the school study local relief activities and organizations, consult government officials as to how the school could best utilize its facilities in an emergency, explore the ways in which young women could contribute to national service, and form a special committee to "consider ways and means whereby Sweet Briar can corporately make a contribution [to the war effort.]." It was Miss Rogers' fourth suggestion that gave rise to the formation of one of Sweet Briar's most important war-time innovations, the Committee on Emergency Service. Under the guidance of Miss Rogers, the
committee took shape and on November 6, 1940, she reported to the faculty on its progress. Besides calling for a survey to determine what causes should solicit college funds and the possibility of students performing service outside Sweet Briar College, Miss Rogers urged that the College community maintain a "responsible and cooperative attitude toward health, work, and general life." It was also on November 6 that Professor Beard spoke of the need for vocational guidance among the students, and reported that she had received requests for a placement bureau on campus. It is interesting to note that even before the U.S. became a belligerent in the war, Sweet Briar students displayed an interest in vocational training. This is one of the earliest indications of the way in which the awareness of the Sweet Briar student was changed by the war—they, like women all over the country, were becoming aware of their potential and the contributions they had to make to national service.

The new year was ushered in at Sweet Briar with a convocation on January 15, 1941, at which President Meta Glass discussed national service need. In her speech she stressed the need for "living a life as normal as possible," adding that the Sweet Briar community should begin its contribution to national defense and service by disciplining itself in "readiness for any emergency" that might arise. Nearly a month later, at a meeting of the faculty on February 5, 1941, the President circulated a letter introducing a new course entitled "Studies in the Present Crisis." Offered by a number of faculty members to juniors and seniors and incorporating several different departments, the course was offered in 1941-42, and again in 1942-43. Another innovation in early 1941 was the introduction of the Student Defenders of Democracy (SDD) at Sweet Briar. In the February 26
issue of the News, an article was published describing the SDD and encouraging Sweet Briar students to become involved,8 followed by a letter written by Patricia Clements on March 19, 1941 telling how students could become individual members. (Miss Clements was the Field Secretary of the SDD at this time.)9

While life on campus at Sweet Briar was gradually affected by the war, so was the livelihood of the College's foreign exchange programs. In May, 1941, when it became apparent that those students selected to spend their junior year in France would have to stay on campus, the French embassy in Washington remedied their loss by awarding three competitive prizes on the basis of achievement in the French language.10

With the advent of the 1941-42 academic year, the Sweet Briar News published an article fully describing and relating the activities of the Committee on Emergency Service to the student body. On October 16, an article was published describing it as a "joint committee of faculty, students, and members of the Sweet Briar community...set up...to explore the ways in which we could become and keep aware of the problems which the World War is bringing to the world as a whole and to each and every individual."11 The Committee had by this time greatly expanded and included such sub-committees as Relief, Health and Physical Education, and two more concerned with the discussion of general problems arising from the world crisis.12 The general committee greatly influenced campus life, serving to constantly remind Sweet Briar students of the world situation and encouraging them to be actively involved in the fund raisers, volunteer projects, and discussions of current problems sponsored by the sub-committees.

But what exactly was the student attitude regarding the war at
this time? The results of a Gallup poll taken at Sweet Briar were published in the News on October 29, 1941, showing these results: the majority of Sweet Briar students favored U.S. intervention—of the 290 polled, 67.5% favored intervention, 17.2% were isolationists, and 15.1% were pacifists. Interestingly, these results differed greatly from those of a poll of the American public; 21% voted for intervention, while 79% favored isolation.13

Although Sweet Briar opinion seemed to differ from that of the rest of the nation, November 12 saw a joining of Sweet Briar with other Americans in Civilian Defense Week. From November 11-16, 1941, civilians all over the nation waged a "war against waste," which at Sweet Briar incorporated the following: conserving electricity by switching off appliances, saving water, giving generously to relief funds, buying Defense Bonds and Saving Stamps, not wasting food, saving old clothing, and seeking training in practical skills. The article ended with an appeal to the Sweet Briar community to maintain a cheerful, positive attitude:

"To be effective, our conviction must be sincere, our efforts continuous."14

The "War Against Waste" was a topic that resurfaced a few weeks later, on November 29, when the Committee on Emergency Service held a meeting discussing the various aspects of the subject. It was stressed that a greater effort to conserve manpower and energy was needed, and ideas were suggested such as collecting old periodicals to fill the need for paper pulp, collecting old clothes, and turning out the lights in rooms not in use.15

As the nation was thrust into war in early December, 1941, however, Sweet Briar's activities concerning preparedness in the event of national emergency became part of its full-fledged involvement in
the war effort. An editorial in the *News* entitled "Business as Usual" on December 10, 1941, called for "calmness and determination" in the face of this new crisis:

"'Business as Usual' will mean in our case carrying on our college work as normally as possible...Let us keep our patriotism within the bounds of reason. We are a thinking community and as such we should have a clear-eyed view of the situation... In the years to come education is to count a great deal. The leaders of tomorrow will be the college undergraduates of today... So let our motto be, as is England's, 'Business as Usual.'"

This editorial demonstrated an ever-increasing sensitivity to the worsening world situation, as well as the students' acute sense of responsibility and their special role in the midst of war.

1942 and the nation's full involvement in the war brought still more changes to Sweet Briar life. The Committee on Emergency Service began considering measures for defense in air raids, deciding to consider black-out methods, as well. The college catalogue was affected at this time, too; at the January 13 meeting of the faculty, it was suggested that during the war years it might be appropriate to include in the catalogue a special reference to all academic courses and extra-curricular offerings made by the college to serve the present emergency. (This section was eventually entitled "War-Time Adjustments" and appeared in the catalogues for 1942-43, 1943-44, and 1944-45.) At the same faculty meeting, there was expressed dismay at the students' lack of concern for health and physical fitness, as the faculty believed that both things were very important in war-time. This concern was so great, in fact, that it caused the College to re-examine the importance of physical education and in 1942, physical education became a requirement for the B.A. degree. It was also suggested that in the second semester of the 1941-42 academic year new courses
with a vocational emphasis be offered; students had expressed interest in secretarial training, automotive training, and courses in decoding, to name a few. The students themselves proposed to discontinue certain extra-curricular activities in order to have time to participate in such courses. By February 4, 1942, five new courses had been established by a special faculty committee, including shorthand and typing, mechanical and engineering drawing, first aid, home nursing, and elementary lab technique. Students were so enthusiastic about taking the extra-curricular courses that they did so at their own expense, on their own time, and without receiving academic credit.

War-time changes extended into all areas of campus life; as prices rose all over the country for such items as coffee, bread, and milk, the Boxwood Inn was forced to raise its prices. The Inn, a popular student gathering place, raised many of its prices by two or three cents in the first week of January, 1942, much to the chagrin of the students. In May, students experienced rationing when the Inn was forced to limit each girl to purchasing one Coke each, as the Coca-Cola supply had been drastically reduced. Editorials asking students for their cooperation and patience began appearing in the News, as well as bold, full page ads for Defense Stamps and War Bonds. On February 11, 1942, a new feature called the "Defense Column" appeared in the News, relaying the projects of the Committee on War Service. (When the U.S. became a belligerent, the Committee on Emergency Service had changed its name.) Also, slogans such as "Sleep for Sanity!" and "Exercise for Health!" began appearing above the masthead of the paper on January 21, 1942, reflecting the College's concern for good health and well being.
On February 25, 1942, a proposal for a conference on war-time topics and priorities was presented at the faculty meeting. The purpose of such a conference was to stress "the seriousness of the situation [and] the great importance of understanding principles of the problems proposed for study." The proposed conference was named the Institute on National Needs and Resources, and took place the weekend of April 12, 1942. The Institute focused on topics such as mobilization of resources and national needs, industry and the war, the social aspects of the war emergency, and the role of the church in the present and post-war period. The Institute involved the entire student body, and met with success. Perhaps its greatest triumph was the further awakening of the collective student consciousness to the graphic reality of the war--this letter to the Editor from a sophomore was published in the April 22 issue of the News and demonstrates this point:

"It is wonderful to live in a dreamland, but we must face reality and we must prepare to do it now. Let's not lose those vivid discussions, that group spirit, and that broader outlook that we had last weekend. Stay awake, Sweet Briar!"

In May of 1943, the College published a booklet entitled *Sweet Briar College: A Report on the Development, Activities, and Present Status of the College*. President Glass assembled the information for the publication, describing many of the innovations that had taken place on campus in the years since the nation's intervention in the war. An interesting feature of the Bulletin is the way in which it records the way in which the students' aspirations and interests were affected. For example:
"Fewer students concentrate in science and mathematics, although the registration in 1942-43 has doubled in mathematics, chemistry, and physics, due doubtless to the present need for scientific training."\textsuperscript{30}

And, regarding marriage and post-college plans:

"As in other colleges, the students have been facing the questions of marriage, jobs, and service in the armed forces during the last two years... On the whole, completing their education seems important to the students, and their plans for service in the many places where women are greatly needed reflect their intention to prepare adequately for jobs..."\textsuperscript{31}

Two major curriculum changes that surfaced in 1942-43 were the reorganizing of the International Affairs major and the combining of courses for special training programs. The International Affairs major war re-oriented to "(a) give basic training to a selected group of students for cooperation in post-war reconstruction... and (b) to create such an understanding... as will enable students to assist in the formation of an enlightened public opinion..."\textsuperscript{32}. The latter innovation, the course groupings, was done as a method of guiding students toward study that was particularly useful as foundation for professions in demand at that time. One example of such a course combination was that for future nurses: a combination of zoology, chemistry, and a variety of psychology courses.\textsuperscript{33}

The end of the '42-43 school year brought a shortage of dining room staff, and the College decided to enlist the aid of students in serving meals.\textsuperscript{34} At first, this change was met with great student protest, but the words of President Glass soon silenced all complaints. According to the President:

"...my reply was that Sweet Briar was a woman's college, and that if we had food and could not get it on the table, I hoped we would starve. I then asked the students if they wished to discuss the matter and they said no."\textsuperscript{35}
The war effort continued full force throughout the 1943-44 school year; the Funds Committee continued its many charity drives and in order to conserve money, the staff of the yearbook, *The Briar Patch*, greatly simplified the 1944 volume. Photography was handled by the students, and the amount of copy was greatly reduced. In the pages of the annual, the staff wrote of their turning "to the potentialities of campus life" while putting their publication together. Once again, in the face of the international crisis, the students had looked to themselves and recognized their own strengths and abilities.

The 1944-45 year saw the early glimmerings of the dawn of post-war recovery. Although charity drives and other activities of the War Service Committee continued, mention of the Committee itself in the faculty minutes ended by April, 1945.

The following academic year was filled with post-war readjustments and changes. At a faculty meeting on October 3, 1945, the Committee on Advanced Standing decided to discontinue the war measure of counting quality points from other institutions in the Sweet Briar credit ration. The question of restoring the pre-war vacation dates was raised, with all the complications of changing vacation and exam times. (Vacation dates had been changed so as not to conflict with the RR travel of service men.) Also proposed at this meeting was the possibility of the College sponsoring an Institute on Reconstruction similar to the Institute on National Needs and Resources held in 1942. Two weeks later, the vacations were restored to their pre-war dates, and on November 7 the chairman of the Catalogue Committee announced that it wasn't necessary that year to restrict the size of the catalogue for economic purposes.

The new year brought still more changes; the Institute was sche-
dued for March 14-16, with lectures and panel discussions involving the entire Sweet Briar community. 43

Sweet Briar social life swung back into gear in the early post-war days, entertaining a greater number of male visitors than ever before, such that a "Date House" was constructed on campus to accommodate male guests. Sweet Briar girls enjoyed more freedom, as well, for during the war the chaperone system had been dropped and was never resumed. The absence of gasoline rationing and the multitudes of available veterans greatly enriched the Sweet Briar social scene in 1945 and 1946. 44

Thus ended half a decade of one of the most important eras in Sweet Briar history. The conflicts of World War II, while tearing nations apart all over the world and claiming hundreds of thousands of lives, actually served to liberate Sweet Briar in areas that sorely needed enlightenment. Sweet Briar fell quickly and easily in step with the rest of the nation as men went off to war and women suddenly recognized their own strengths and abilities outside the confines of their homes. Students at Sweet Briar from 1940 to 1945 became aware of their roles as citizens and new aspirations were awakened within them—they clamored for and were offered new opportunities in vocational training, and cultivated new strengths that they might never have discovered had it not been for the emergency situation presented by World War II.
Notes

1. Sweet Briar News. The following issues were consulted here: December 11, 1940; January 15, 1941; January 22, 1941.

2. Faculty Minutes. October 2, 1940.

3. Ibid. November 6, 1940.

4. Ibid.


6. Faculty Minutes. February 5, 1941.


9. Ibid. March 19, 1941.

10. Ibid. May 7, 1941.

11. Ibid. October 16, 1941.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid. October 29, 1941.


15. Ibid. December 3, 1941.

16. Ibid. December 10, 1941.


18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.


24. Ibid. May 13, 1942.

Notes (cont'd)

26. Faculty Minutes. February 25, 1942.
27. Ibid. March 11, 1942.
28. Ibid.
31. Ibid., p. 8.
32. Ibid., p. 9.
33. Ibid., p. 11.
34. Faculty Minutes. June 2, 1943.
37. Ibid.
38. Faculty Minutes. October 30, 1945.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid. October 22, 1945.
42. Ibid. November 7, 1945.
43. Ibid. March 6, 1945.
44. Stohlman, p. 208.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

College Catalogues, 1942-1945

Found in Room 2, Library, on the fourth shelf on the left side of the room. The catalogues provide information about the Sweet Briar curriculum and course offerings, as well as the changing objectives of the college.

Faculty Minutes; Vols. 11 and 12B (1939-1950)

Found in two notebooks on second shelf, right side of Room 1, Library, and labelled as follows:
"Volume 11, 1939-1944, Miss Glass"
"Volume 12B, 1944-1950, Faculty Meeting, Miss Glass-Lucas"
The Minutes for the meetings of the faculty are an outstanding record of changes initiated at Sweet Briar College from 1940-1945. The Minutes are especially useful in providing the reasons behind the origins of many curriculum changes.

Sweet Briar News (1940-1943)

Found in microform on first stack, Library. The articles and editorials found in issues from between 1940 and 1943 provide an excellent chronological view of the following: student knowledge of and reaction to the international situation, how the college was involved in the war effort, and innovations on campus as a result of the war.

The Briar Patch (1944)

Found in Room 2, Library, on first shelf along left wall. This volume of the college annual provides a limited look at the organizations and committees that were active on campus, and concise summaries of their functions. (Photographs provide diversion, but are not of particularly good use!)

Secondary Sources
