

MOURNING AND THE MAKING OF A NATION:

The Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages, 1930-1933

On May 6, 1930, the S.S. *America* steamed out of Pier 4 from Hoboken, New Jersey, with 231 women aboard, all guests of the U.S. Government. With flags flying, band and drum corps playing, and hundreds of friends and relatives lining the pier to wave them off, this inaugural party of Gold Star Pilgrims embarked on their long-awaited, maiden voyage to Europe. There was the first of an eventual twenty vessels dispatched that summer to transport mothers and widows to American cemeteries in France, Belgium and Great Britain.

From this same pier in 1917/18, thousands of soldiers attached to the American Expeditionary Forces had sailed to participate in the Great War raging in Europe. By the armistice, there would be more than 75,000 American war dead, and of those, approximately 31,000 would forever lie buried in U.S. cemeteries overseas. The controversial decision to leave the deceased in foreign soil was both political and practical, but the unforeseen result was the legacy of the Gold Star Pilgrim.

Pilgrimages represent a point of intersection between individual loss and national community. They serve to unite groups and nations in remembrance, while offering an opportunity for participants to come to terms with grief, thus consigning the dead to memory. As such, pilgrimages are times of mourning, an attempt to find the sacred in a shared experience.

This paper represents a segment of a larger work in progress that explores the Gold Star Mothers' Pilgrimages within the larger framework of American commemoration after the First World War. Within this context, I hope to offer a closer, more manageable exploration of personal remembrance, grief, and the construction of meaning within fictive kinship units.

On the eve of the Great Depression, President Calvin Coolidge signed the long-disputed Pilgrimage bill before the end of his term in March 1929, thus allocating five million dollars to cover all expenses for pilgrimages that would take place from 1930 to 1933. Widows who had not remarried also received invitations, but only as an afterthought.

Gold Star Mothers, as they were known, derived their name from the star they were urged to display on service flags in their homes during the war. Each gold star publicly represented a son killed in war service and brought praise to women for sacrificing their child to the nation. While precise innovation of the gold star idea still cannot be explained, one theory persists. In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson approached the Women's Council on National Defense to request assistance with the issue of public mourning. The President believed that mourning dress of the period would have a deleterious effect on public morale as casualties grew. He asked for suggestions from the Council for an alternative to the traditional black wear, and the armband was the recommendation. Gold Star Mothers received official endorsement in 1918 when Wilson encouraged the women to display their gold star on an armband of black cloth, thus bringing further public recognition for their losses in the Great War.

Though first organised as members of American Legion auxiliary associations, the American Gold Star Mothers, Inc. were granted a Federal charter in 1928. A Washington, DC group, the first to incorporate, ultimately became both the largest and most politically powerful mothers' group in the nation. One issue dominated their efforts almost as soon as the Armistice was signed; it was a plea to Congress for organised, subsidised cemetery visits to Europe. Gold Star Mothers and their supporters, most notably, New York Congressman, Fiorello La Guardia, first introduced a bill to Congress in 1919, but timing was premature. Difficult logistical and economic questions were raised during Congressional hearings, but perhaps the most crucial issue was the state of the Western Front after the war. Here, early travellers to the battlefields were confronted by a landscape that

denied order and even civilisation. If the Pilgrimages had proceeded when first proposed, the result could have been catastrophic for all concerned. Europe's scarred battlefields offered only remorse to anyone considering abandoning their loved ones there.

At the time of the Armistice there were approximately 2,400 places in Europe where American dead lay temporarily buried. The original monuments--crude, improvised, and hastily built of field stones and wood by well-meaning survivors--soon became neglected obstacles in farmers' fields. Since little or no provision was made for upkeep, the make-shift memorials quickly deteriorated from weather and vandalism, became overgrown with weeds, and altogether presented a disgraceful appearance. A Belgian guidebook described Flanders as "nothing but a deserted sea, under whose waves corpses are sleeping."ⁱ

As crucial as the landscape, was the uncertainty that remained in America over what the war had accomplished. Historian Kurt Piehler writes "A majority of Americans were ambiguous about entering the war..." and "the loyalty of many newly arrived ethnic Americans, particularly German Americans, remained suspect, as the war exacerbated the divisions already present in society." In response, "After the Armistice, national leaders rushed to build monuments and create rituals honouring America's victory. Through these monuments and rituals, they hoped to camouflage the divisions caused by the war."ⁱⁱ

Instead of resolving sectional loyalties, malice engulfed efforts to commemorate the First World War as heated controversies developed over what types of monuments should be built at home, and fierce debates emerged over the question of whether the fallen of the war should be buried at home or remain abroad. At war's end, many argued that the war dead should remain interred overseas as a symbol of US commitment to Europe.

In 1919, Secretary of War, Newton Baker, resolved the issue by insisting the War Department would honour its commitment to bring the dead home. Family members were asked to make the final decision on whether they wanted their next of kin to remain in France, or be brought home for internment in a national cemetery, or family plot. Once the debate concerning overseas versus domestic burial was resolved, the issue of Gold Star pilgrimages could proceed.

The weight of this decision must have been a difficult one for families in the United States. Next of kin were asked to make one final sacrifice for their country by agreeing to leave loved ones buried in Europe. Theodore Roosevelt added fuel to the debate in the aftermath of his son's death in July 1918, when he wrote to Army Chief of Staff, General Peyton March, "Mrs Roosevelt and I wish to enter a most respectful but most emphatic protest against the proposed course as far as our son Quentin is concerned. We have always believed that where the tree falls, there let it lay."ⁱⁱⁱ

The letter received widespread publicity, but the majority of Americans found Roosevelt's philosophy of sacrifice too great to bear and 70 percent chose to have their loved ones returned to the United States for burial. For the remaining bodies that were to lie buried in Europe, eight permanent American cemeteries were established by the War Department.

The decision to leave their loved ones overseas came at a high price for families. For them there would be no funeral service, no grave site nearby, nothing left to venerate and no closure or resolution so necessary in the grieving process. Attempts by the government to portray a united people who had willingly submerged their separate identities to the nation had faltered through the democratic process of choice.

Throughout the 1920s, Gold Star Mothers societies and their supporters lobbied Congress vigorously for a federally sponsored pilgrimage to Europe. Debates ranged from budgetary objections to

questions of logistics and more sensitive issues such as eligibility under the proposed legislation, since many believed that fathers should not be excluded. Stepmothers and adoptive mothers also claimed entitlement. The law maintained that only women who had served in *loco parentis* to a soldier less than one year before his death were eligible to travel and the deceased must be buried in one of the eight permanent American cemeteries in Europe. And, no siblings or other family members would be entitled to a government-sponsored trip.

When some in Congress and the War Department complained about the cost of the legislation, sponsors of proposed bills were quick to point out that mothers had actually saved the government money by not having their sons brought back to the United States. Responsibility for the logistical arrangements of the pilgrimage raised similar objections. The military were reluctant to use their meagre peacetime resources and the American Red Cross expressed ‘no opinion’ as to its interest in running the trips.

Undeniably, legislation endorsed the role of woman as nurturer and suggested a maternal bond that surpassed the paternal one, but an appreciation for the new found power, influence, and status these women gained in the fight for this legislation should not be overlooked. Nineteen-twenty saw the passage of both the 18th Amendment introducing Prohibition (for which women had been staunch supporters), and the 19th Amendment granting women’s suffrage. Women were gaining an unprecedented political voice throughout the decade as the Gold Star Pilgrimage legislation demonstrates.

Congressional testimonies, military correspondence, the media, and even voices of the Gold Star Mothers, illustrate what David Kennedy has referred to as a “baffling persistence of nineteenth-century culture in America during the war period.”^{iv} Lingering Victorian rhetoric included a view of motherhood as a woman’s greatest service to nation and society. But, by using the language of

the day, the Gold Star Mothers cleverly gained the much sought after legislation by working within the framework set by society.

Just as the military had used the myth of motherhood to its advantage, Gold Star Mothers were also finding the message useful, as correspondence between General Pershing and Gold Star association director, Mathilda Burling, richly illustrates. Burling requested the General's support for a bill to "make a pilgrimage to those Holy Shrines and kneel at those marble crosses and offer a prayer to the Almighty God." "...What would America have done had it not been for these mothers? We suffered to give life to those men. Without Mothers, America would have had no men to go forth and save our country and the most beautiful flag of the world" "Surely no one would want to deprive these mothers, who have buried their hearts with their darlings, of that little consolation to see that grave. To many, it might be her last wish before she joins her boy. ... The government can never repay us for our loss."^v

As former AEF Commander, Pershing's view of the Gold Star debate and the role he played in the pilgrimages is given no mention in his memoirs, or in subsequent biographies, though his position against repatriation has been well-documented. This would suggest the Pilgrimage episode held only minor importance to him, though he eventually participated, in an official capacity, at their Paris receptions. His response to her, two weeks later, indicated he was in favour of their efforts, "I am... interested in every movement in any way connected with our soldier dead, realising as I do the great sacrifice which they themselves made and the irreparable loss which their families sustained." The General's reply appears to be more in sympathy with the men he lost, noting that it was *they* who had made the sacrifice, and less with the heart rendering appeal of Mrs Burling.

He concluded by saying "It would be most unfortunate to have it [the pilgrimages] develop into

merely an ordinary sightseeing tour.” Pershing’s concern for the nature of the tour was most certainly a reference to the American Legion tour of September 1927.

The Legion’s annual convention was held in Paris that year to mark the tenth anniversary of America’s entry into the war. Though billed as a pilgrimage where veterans would have the opportunity to visit the grounds where their comrades died, what resulted was a drunken, rowdy, carnival atmosphere best symbolised by a “souvenir ashtray with a picture of a drunken American soldier, balancing a champagne glass in one hand, kissing a naked Frenchwoman.”^{vi} Anticipating events, a *Washington News* editorial published prior to the convention, claimed “France is still a house of mourning. America has forgotten the war and become the greatest, richest, happy-go-luckiest country on earth.” It’s hard to believe only ten years had passed since the war’s end and the expression of this sentiment.

Once the Pilgrimage legislation became law, Colonel Richard Ellis, of the Army’s Quartermaster Corps, was appointed Officer-in-Charge of the operation based in Paris. Relatives of more than 30,000 soldier dead were contacted, and just over 14,000 women were found eligible to make the two-week trip abroad. Eventually, approximately 6,000 accepted the government’s invitation, with the majority preferring to join in the first year. This number was divided into small parties to compensate for the lack of satisfactory accommodation in the small towns where the American cemeteries were located. This proved advantageous in other ways since the average age of Pilgrims was between 61 and 65 years, but many were over 70. As Colonel Ellis reported, “this made ordinary methods of touring entirely unsuitable and required special care and reduced the speed with which almost all operations could be conducted.”^{vii}

Aside from age, other factors required special consideration, such as the language barrier and the need for bi-lingual personnel; unfamiliarity with foreign customs to include food and everyday

living conditions; and, “the necessity to prevent over-emphasis of the sentimental side in order to prevent morbidity or hysteria.” The last point caused the military a great deal of concern since the potential problem of controlling thousands of grief-stricken women was regularly referred to in reports and general orders. Escorting officers were warned during orientation “You must consider the temper of the women and take that into consideration with the object of the Pilgrimage, which does not tend to a calm mental condition. Many of them will become hysterical, I have no doubt, upon the least provocation.”^{viii}

Twelve years after the war’s end, it appears military personnel still held the same persistent Victorian attitudes toward women that prevailed during wartime. Only two women were ever admitted into the *Sanitarium de la Malmaison* in Paris during the pilgrimages, presumably due to mental illness, but frequent warnings in Quartermaster Corps reports illustrate the prevalence of the motherhood myth.

The extent of planning and the lengths the Government went to ensure the comfort, safety, and content of the women is astonishing and certainly without precedent.

With characteristic American zeal, efficiency and speed, Ellis sought and received special permission to rearrange French custom to suit the military and their American ‘charges’. For example, national museums and places of interest granted special access at reduced entrance fees; permission was granted for cars to park in places usually prohibited; special trains with additional dining cars were arranged for the group; and, Invalides Station (normally reserved for state occasions) was made available for the pilgrims.

Similar privileges were also arranged with hotels to provide an “American breakfast” instead of the traditional light Continental fare; French bus companies were asked to provide ‘luxury’ vehicles

with the latest safety devices and blankets for the pilgrims; and, since it was reported that insufficient toilet facilities could be located near the cemeteries, special “rest houses” were constructed. Colonel Ellis’s report described the furnishings and style of these houses to be that which “one would expect to find in an attractive country-club.”

Within the first party of 231 women to sail, fifty-six were of foreign birth, with the majority claiming Germany as their former homeland. (Some would even continue on to visit other sons buried **in Germany**.) Women from all walks of life and regions of the country travelled together; Catholics, Protestants, and Jews--native born and foreign born, all sacrificed their sons to the nation and now shared the same feeling of loss. Just as war had been a bonding experience for their sons, the pilgrimages were an attempt to present a united nation sharing a common claim to sacrifice.

Many of the women making the voyage were so poor they were unable to buy even the suitcase they needed, but regardless of income or social level, all women were guests of the U.S. Government. From the moment they left their homes, all reasonable expenses were paid. They were greeted by civic officials in New York at a city hall reception, boarded luxury liners, travelled cabin class, stayed at first-class hotels, and had an army officer, physician and nurse accompany them abroad. Pilgrims were escorted to the graves of their sons and husbands, then each party spent a week in either Paris or London where they were honoured by the French or British government.

One accompanying journalist in 1930, wrote “As the soldiers and Marines were transported to Europe without consideration of their individual stations in life, so were these mothers and widows to follow that glorious trail in ships which have no class distinction—in ships whereon all would share alike.”^{ix} Yet, all women were not treated alike, despite the government’s best attempts to portray democratic platitudes to the contrary. African American women invited to participate in the pilgrimage did so on the same segregated basis as their sons and husbands who had fought and

died. They travelled as a separate group on commercial steamers, were accommodated in separate hotels, and rode separate trains upon arrival in France.

Neither protests of African American organisations nor the refusal of some African American Gold Star Mothers to take part in the pilgrimage could persuade the War Department to alter its policy on segregation.

After the last ship returned to the U.S. in 1933, memories of the pilgrimages were, for the most part, overshadowed by time and later wars. And, except for one or two contemporary historians, they remain an obscure event that has escaped critical scrutiny. When they are recalled, it is with saccharine praise, such as in the following passage: “The unprecedented and incredibly generous offer was a shining moment for the US Congress and...grateful citizens of the country—and, above all, for the widows and mothers who had given their husbands and sons to World War I.”^x

I would suggest a more realistic justification to be a Republican Administration’s attempts to secure the one million votes represented by an extremely powerful American Legion including its accompanying auxiliary component of women voters. The organisation endorsed the Pilgrimages in October 1928, along with numerous other resolutions that eventually became law.

Questions regarding the government’s justification to fund this project, while legitimate, ignore a critical (and, I would argue, more significant) analysis of the participants and the long-term effects of collective memory. Memory traces in diaries and correspondence left by pilgrims show a distinct absence of mourning. Instead, their recollections read like typical tourist accounts of vacations abroad featuring detailed descriptions of dinner receptions, room furnishings, tea parties, attractions visited, and frequently include amusing commentaries on French culture. One would think childhood memories and poignant reflections of last moments spent with the deceased would be

triggered by their journey, but these expressions, for the most part, are totally absent from their writings. Military officials prepared for fits of female hysteria, but there were none. Instead of a pilgrimage of mourning, a gaping hole existed where grief should have been.

By contrast, words of angst and despair often flowed from pens of mothers begging the government to send the bodies of their deceased home. Numerous letters from the same women were sent repeatedly to the War Department pleading for some scrap of information regarding the deceased's location or the probable date of his body's return. Both groups of women suffered the loss of their loved ones to an ambiguous cause, but their responses to that grief were distinctly different.

What factors might have contributed to the decision of both groups? Were there inherent familial differences that may have influenced their decisions? How could one remain untouched when travelling across the ravaged, battle-scarred terrain where your loved one spent his last hours? How could the emotive sight of thousands of white crosses of death cause these pilgrims no evidence of pain? Had twelve years' time really healed old wounds so well?

Evidence suggests that the women who joined the government's pilgrimage were as ethnically, socially, and economically diverse as their counterparts who chose repatriation. Yet, they were amongst a minority of 30% who surrendered their loved ones to a final resting place abroad.

I suggest that the pilgrimages (as designed by the government) were an antithesis to mourning, an alternative to the expression of personal loss. Like our overseas monuments, they represented an opportunity for publicly confirming national glory. A display of personal grief in public would have been an admittance of doubt about the righteous cause of sacrifice made on such a grand scale for questionable aims. Expressions of mourning were unwelcome in American society as demonstrated during the war by Wilson, who strove to promote a subtle rather than conventional display of

grief. Similarly, the military feared public grief even as it brought the pilgrims face to face with death. Survivors of the conflict, American Legion veterans, preferred celebration to commemoration; and, those who made the greatest sacrifice, the mothers and widows, seemed just as reluctant to mourn their loss even as they stood by their loved ones' graveside.

At first glance, no obvious meaning may be attached to this pilgrimage experience. However, I would argue that the paradigm of the Gold Star Mothers offers numerous opportunities for further inquiry into the long-term effects of personal and collective memory. I suggest the government used this unparalleled event to create meaning from the void of uncertainty surrounding U.S. participation in the War. But, just as monuments were built too late and too far from 'home', so too, were the pilgrimages too little, too late, to avoid the legacy of a 'Forgotten War'.

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ⁱ David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 114.

ⁱⁱ G.Kurt Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way*, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 94.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Graham, unpublished paper, "Quentin Roosevelt and the Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages", (September 2001), quoted with author's permission.

^{iv} Mark Meigs, *Optimism at Armageddon: Voices of American Participants in the First World War* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1997), 5.

^v Mathilda Burling, Richmond Hill, NY to General John J Pershing (November 1928), Pershing Papers, Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, container #37).

^{vi} Harvey Levenstein, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 274.

^{vii} Col Richard T. Ellis, USA, QMC, "Report on the activities in Europe of the American Pilgrimage Gold Star Mothers and Widows, 1930", March 7, 1931, Quartermaster Files, Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages, Record Group 92, National Archives.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} William Shepherd, journalist for the *New York Evening Post*, GRS history, Chapter IX, Quartermaster Files, GSMP, RG 92, National Archives

^x Mary Sine Clark, "If they consent to leave them over there", *Virginia Cavalcade* (Summer 2001), 135.