More than a backyard Victory Garden: a Brooklyn College student drives a tractor as part of the war effort in 1942.

By Teresa Hayes, '85

Merle Puchkoff Pines, '47, has never been a farmer, nor is she a backyard gardener; but she speaks with authority on the subject of farming. "The real difference between peas and beans is ease of picking," she explained. "With peas you uproot the whole vine and strip off the pods while sitting. On the other hand, harvesting beans is backbreaking work. They ripen at different times, and you have to go down the rows and pick out the ripe ones."

The Westchester County elementary school teacher warms to the subject with the kind of assurance that comes only from hands-on experience. She is one of a small group of alumni who participated in the college's Morrisville Project during World War II.
Cadets cautiously befriend a farm horse.
College historian Murray M. Horowitz, '38, has called the college's farm-labor projects "perhaps the strangest offshoot of the war." Indeed, the projects constituted an extraordinary response to extraordinary times. The bombing of Pearl Harbor had shaken the Brooklyn campus as profoundly as it had shaken the rest of the nation. Cryptography was added to the curriculum, rationing changed daily routines of faculty and students, and male enrollment declined rapidly. As students gave blood or rolled miles of Red Cross bandages, many wondered how to make additional contributions to the war effort. For the adventurous, the Farm Cadet Victory Corps provided an answer.

In the spring of 1942, a call for "normal, reliable, and patriotic boys and girls" went out to high schools and colleges across the state, a call repeated each spring for the duration of the war. By joining the corps—formed by New York's Department of Education, the State War Council, and the United States Employment Service—students could help relieve the critical shortage of farm labor. The college sponsored three Victory Corps units that summer in Duchess County, where small groups of students harvested berries and beans under faculty supervisors.

Tanned and healthy, the students returned to classes in the fall with new confidence and an earned appreciation of the virtues of teamwork. Their faculty supervisors noted this and suggested in a report to President Harry D. Gideonse that, if integrated with an academic program, labor projects might prove valuable beyond the duration of the war.

Having long considered offering some sort of labor-camp experience to Brooklyn students, Gideonse approved the idea and appointed biology professor Ralph C. Benedict to head the effort. It was a fortunate appointment. Benedict, who had headed one of the college's Victory Corps units in Duchess County, became the driving force behind the Morrisville Project.

Never before had an urban college or university taken responsibility for organizing and administering a farm labor camp. The project's immediate objective, of course, was practical and patriotic: to help win the war on the home front by harvesting crops. However, since the goals of the project were twofold, an academic component had to be devised. Dr. Benedict and his associates wanted the courses to serve as a model for "education in wholeness," a "Brooklyn Bridge" between urban consumers and rural producers. To this end, a curriculum committee labored to adapt traditional courses to a nontraditional setting for the college. English literature might focus on the pastoral subjects of the Romantic poets; composition, on students' daily experiences and observations; sociology, on village and farm life.

All the while, negotiations for support from government agencies moved forward in fits and starts. At last, the State Agricultural Institute in Morrisville was designated a Brooklyn College summer campus; on June 28, 1943, 150 students, three times the size of an ordinary Victory Corps unit; eight faculty members; and their families arrived in the tiny upstate community. Former cadet Calvin Miller, '49, describes the summer campus as "cheerful and almost antiseptically clean." The institute specialized in dairy farming, and although its own educational program was suspended during the growing season, a year-round staff was in residence to tend the animals. For the next two summers, the staff would help ease novice cadets through the initial stages of culture shock, when ears accustomed to the screech of brakes were greeted instead by the squeal of pigs.

Most participants had never before spent a summer in the country, or even two weeks at camp. Living together as a community was a novel and enriching experience on many levels. "Working alongside my teachers in the fields gave me a whole new perspective," said Helen.
Epstein Getnick, '46. In the women’s dormitories of Brooks and Helyar, friendships were made that would last a lifetime. According to Betty Banoff Kamin, '46, the eight students on Helyar’s third floor wanted to share their lives forever. “We really meant it,” she said.

Adjusting to the rural community that surrounded them required more time for the Brooklyn cadets. “It was odd for us,” comments Doris Wallach Guttentag, '46. Everybody you knew was Jewish, but in Morrisville, they weren’t.” Eventually, however, the sense of isolation abated as cadets participated in village life. A few attended the United Church, where Phyllis Leshaw, '47, was occasionally a featured soloist. The church also offered its auditorium to students who wanted to conduct services in Hebrew.

Students were always welcome at the Saturday Grange meetings. “I loved the square dancing,” Helen Getnick recalls. “One night I was dancing with the president of the bank, when it hit me that this was the best illustration of the difference between small towns and big cities. I just couldn’t imagine myself cutting a reel with a New York bank president.”

Getting used to Morrisville’s culinary fare posed a knottier problem. Food at the institute was starchy, plentiful, and, to the newcomers, exotic. The ubiquitous pork for dinner and peanut-butter-and-banana bag lunches evoked mutterings that grew louder as the weeks went on. Puzzled but sympathetic, the cafeteria staff tried to accommodate the students. One evening the startled diners were served a meal intended to make them feel at home: beside the usual ham and vegetables were bowls and bowls of watery, homemade sour cream. The food was memorable, if not traditional, and the gesture a generous one. Subsequent complaints were aired in the privacy of the dorms or in the barns, where cadets jumped on animal scales to check their weight—and in most cases, watched it slowly rise.

The women’s dormitories required patience of a different kind, for communal life would encompass the most private of functions. Innocent of partitions, the toilets in the Brooks and Helyar dormitories were clumped together in rows. Bathing, while not communal, was public: one tub per floor usually; its solitary splendor uncompromised by any concession to modesty. Within days of their arrival, the faint-hearted left. Those who persevered, however, developed ingenious solutions. During the critical hour between workday’s end and dinner, the eight occupants of Helyar’s third floor observed a strict schedule of tub rotation. Each night, a different young woman soaked first, blissfully but briefly, as mud dried and caked on the other seven.

While cadets have fond memories of dormitory life, their most vivid recollections are of fieldwork. Only one local grower, Grove W. Hinman, had agreed to furnish work for the inexperienced group, but because he owned a sizable farm of Madison County, his support was sufficient. Saturdays and thunderstorms excluded, Hinman’s trucks rolled onto the institute campus each morning. “We were herded in and packed upright like spears of asparagus,” recalls Harriet Weinstein Mitwell, '46. The ride itself was “delicious,” the custom lunched past fragrant hillsides, stopping now and again to deposit workers at the edges of dewy fields.

Neither cadets nor faculty supervisors had received instruction in the techniques of picking. City-soft hands grappled gamely with their leafy adversaries, but in the first weeks the harvest was small and the blisters numerous. The challenge was compounded almost daily by bizarre weather. While the rest of the East sheltered in drought, Madison County soaked up three times its average annual rainfall. Plantings were delayed, workdays lost, and as students crawled between rows of luxuriant greenery, they were alternately boiled and drenched.

“One day we were getting out of the trucks when my mother arrived for her first visit,” says Harriet Mitwell. “She took one look and burst into tears.” One storm forced cadets to take shelter in an abandoned barn; along with the black migrant workers they sometimes glimpsed in Hinman’s fields. A sense of kinship
developed that afternoon as the two groups of pickers talked shop and sang. Afterward, however, the encounter deeply disturbed the cadets; their new acquaintances, they learned, were at Morrisville not to help win the war, but to stay alive. To do so, children labored alongside parents. “Their poverty was abysmal,” Majorie Meyers Brockman, ’46, flatly states. “The experience was seminal in the formation of my social attitudes.”

Certainly, the encounter did nothing to offset the distrust the students already felt for their employing farmer. The contract Brooklyn College had signed with Hinman was the usual Victory Corps arrangement: the school agreed to supply the labor, the farmer to pay by the bushel. Students had been guaranteed a minimum payment of fifty cents for beans and slightly less for peas. Out of their earnings the cadets would pay two dollars a week for room and five dollars for board. Fast pickers, they were told, might clear as much as a hundred dollars over the summer, and even the slowest should be able to make some profit.

Although for many cadets these wages entailed some degree of financial hardship, they had come to Morrisville secure in the knowledge that they would at least earn enough to cover the costs of textbooks and transportation for the school year. Unfortunately the season’s total harvest amounted to only twenty-two thousand bushels—less than a quarter of the one hundred thousand bushels expected. Thirty-seven percent actually lost money, relying on contributions from their families to keep them at Morrisville. But students were motivated by patriotism, not profit. More than thirty cadets returned to Morrisville the following summer, including some who had finished the previous season in the red.

“We went,” said Marjorie Brockman “to make a contribution to the war effort in a very direct and noncontroversial way.”

The 1944 project suffered further setbacks, however; enrollment of new cadets was lower than in 1943, and to make up the difference, students were recruited from Madison and Midwood high schools. The mix of ages was not fortuitous: production dropped to sixteen thousand bushels. Amid the celebrations of V-E Day, plans for a third session were quietly laid aside.

The Morrisville project did not outlast the crisis that called it into being, but its accomplishments were numerous and solid. In practical terms, the thousands of bushels of peas and beans meant millions of portions on American tables. Most assuredly, the students who picked them for pennies gained rewards beyond price. An editorial of the last issue of the Beanspoker, the cadet newspaper, points out that the work-study program contributed to Brooklyn College’s reputation for expanding the frontiers of progressive education.

Many harvest moons have risen and set since eight young women in Helyar’s penthouse suite decided to live together forever. Although they are now scattered to the four points of the compass, they do keep in touch from places as distant as Israel and California and Missouri. For them, as for other project participants, Dr. Benedict’s “Brooklyn Bridge” is holding firm.