



Macdonald Hall, Guelph

# Mary Wismer

Mary Wismer, studying to be a dietitian at the Macdonald Institute in Guelph during the First World War, was questioning her choice of career.

An instructor told the students that 50 military hospitals were expected to be opened after the war for returning disabled soldiers, and that “the coming years will demand women who can manage and provide” for their care.

In 1917, she wrote to Mennonite Bishop Samuel Coffman asking his advice on whether her Mennonite faith would permit her to work in a military hospital.



## MARY WISMER

Was born at Nithburg, Perth County, but early in her life her parents moved to Blair, and it was there and at Galt Business College that she received her education. Book-keeping and High Financing have been her special studies. Her business experience has developed a naturally keen and analytical mind to the point where nothing escapes. The little weaknesses and subtleties of her friends are as a mirror to her. Did anyone ever put anything over her? Hardly.

Her business shrewdness showed her the value of a Macdonald Institute Housekeepers' Certificate, so she laid aside the ledgers and enrolled, perforce, at the foot of her class. Since then, however, she declares that her one aim is to change her name so that the order of alphabetical precedence will not always bring her at the end of the list.

“Wizzie” is our class custodian and has lived up to her job of keeping us cheerful in spite of the confusing whirl of demonstrations and housekeeping duties. She not only keeps us smiling, but has also made excellent progress in cookery and is considered the class authority on the making of cornstarch puddings. Occasionally she diverts our minds from such light topics as proteins, halogens and food substitutes to moths, butterflies and birds, of which she is an energetic collector. Her classmates are not yet enthused to the point of staying up nights to catch them, but cheer up, “Wizzie,” there is no telling how far we will follow you when June comes around again.

Mary Wismer's yearbook profile, *Libranni*, 1919

Courtesy University of Guelph Archival and Special Collections

## Bishop Samuel Coffman's advice to Mary Wismer:

There will no doubt be many such requests for such service, but there may be other openings just as useful and as much needed in which you would not be restricted as far as your Christian faith is concerned. We believe in being both loyal and useful to our country, but there are different ways of being such and we should choose what will be useful and unquestionable as regards to our faith.

Vineland Ont., Nov 20, 1917.

Miss Mary Wismer,  
Box 59, MacDonald Hall,  
Guelph Ont.

Dear Sister in faith:- Greeting.

Your letter came to hand and was read with interest and concern. Your proposition is certainly a rather perplexing one and one that will need careful consideration since you are anxious to do the right thing and also afford a degree of pleasure to those who are most concerned about your future welfare.

There is one thing that you should take into consideration first. That is that you have already done a part of a year's work in the school and your course this year will require only a few more months to complete. Would it not be best, if you have the means and the opportunity to complete this course this year and then decide before Fall what you will do regarding entering the school again for the second year. If you have the means now to finish the second year you would be able to take care of it until such a time as you may have the opportunity to take the second year work if you should think it best not to take it at once. Circumstances may look more favorable to you to complete the work by next Fall. And, if conditions should be more unfavorable you could postpone the work for a year without too great loss.

With regard to the work for which you are fitting yourself, I wish that you would think the matter over a few times before you would think of attaching yourself to the military branch of the hospital service. There will no doubt be many requests for such service, but there may be other openings just as useful and as much needed in which you would not be restricted as far as your Christian faith is concerned. We believe in being both loyal and useful to our country, but there are different ways of being such and we should choose what will be useful and unquestionable as regards our faith. At present we are considering doing some kind of relief work in view of the fact that the Government has not required any of our members to do military service. We hope to find such work that will be outside of that which is connected with the active service of the army. We should thank God for our exemption from military service and show our thankfulness in an exceptional devotion to the work of relief.

Do not allow yourself to become unsettled in any of your purposes in life. You may change your methods and your times, but keep to your purposes, unless you should find yourself wholly unfitted for the work you have chosen or find that it unfits you for attaining your highest usefulness in life or interferes with your Christian profession and hopes of life and salvation. Keep your religion up above all other interests. We cannot afford to neglect that or make the least compromise without injury to our selves, our life and our cause, as well as weakening the cause to which we adhere. We have the best wishes for you and confidence in your trust and faith and your victory for the cause of Christ and the good you may do to others in your life's mission.

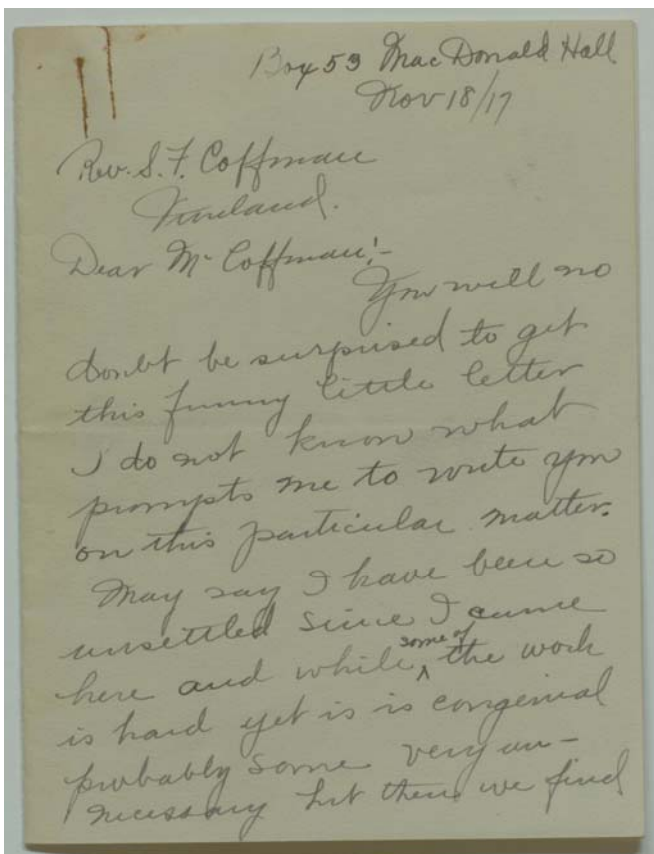
We are as well as usual. Others are also as far as we learn. Today is the sixteenth anniversary of our marriage. We celebrated with happy memories.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

*S. J. Coffman*



**Mary Wismer writes back to thank Bishop Coffman, and describes conversations with her classmates about the war:**



I can truthfully say [your letter] settled me more than anything has since I have been here. I read it...to a couple friends in the same box as myself and I think it was good for all of us.

[After attending several churches in the city] really a person hardly knows what is the really right thing. Men with apparent spirituality in

the pulpits urge the young men to go and even say “every shot you fire boys is for your God and your Country” and then pray God’s Blessing on the same.

We have argued it over here but of course get no farther as one can not make the other take the same view point. But the dreadful war goes on without Mercy, as casualty reports come in some girl’s Brother some lovers having been killed casts a gloom over the school to a more or less extent as it is the World over.