

### ***Band of Sisters* by Lauren Willig**

Alumni Betsy Rutherford delivers an impassioned speech to the Smith College Club in 1917, encouraging the women to consider the idea of banding together to help the war devastated villages in northern France. Rutherford recruits 18 young women and in late July 1917, they set sail from New York.

This group will soon find they are accepting a challenge unlike anything they have ever known on this trip to the very edge of the WW I battlefield. They find the villagers living in bombed ruins and underground cellars, with very little to eat, no clean water, and no means of support. The relief unit provides food, seeds, livestock, medical help and encouragement. They begin working with the children, hoping to restore some semblance of normal life and “school”, while still close enough to the front lines of battle that they often hear the fighting and see the artillery light the night skies. The volunteers themselves personally struggle as well, as repairing trucks and milking cows were not skills they needed at home but now find essential.

Like many writers of historical fiction, Willig found her story for *Band of Sisters* while researching a different writing project. She was looking for information on Picard Christmas traditions, and instead stumbled into an interesting story about a group of American women who arranged Christmas parties for French villagers within miles of the battlefields around Grecourt, in northern France. Fascinated, Willig continued to look until she found more information in the actual journals and letters written by the Relief Unit members themselves. *Band of Sisters* was written using these sources.