

Arizona and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

For decades before World War II, Arizona's economy had relied on the four Cs: cattle, copper, citrus, and cotton. War brought new investment into these economic sectors while opening new avenues of manufacturing. This turned small towns like Flagstaff and Glendale into major cities. The federal government built and expanded military bases across the state. These provided opportunities for many Arizonans. However, Japanese Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans also had to fight for respect during the war.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Even before World War II started, business leaders and state politicians in cities lobbied for military contracts. Two major selling points were Arizona's large amounts of open land and its proximity to California and the Pacific Theater. Companies like Goodyear, ALCOA, and AiResearch got defense contracts. They made vital military parts for B-29s, flight decks and pontoon bridges. Income from manufacturing in Tucson went from \$17 million in 1940 to \$85 million in 1945. The military also built its own industrial sites. The federal government spent \$30 million on the Navajo Ordnance Depot in Bellemont. It was the biggest ammunition arsenal in the country. The factory brought 15,000 people to the small town in addition to the Hopi and Navajo construction workers.¹

Military bases also opened across the state. Phoenix leased 1,500 acres of land to the federal government for military infrastructure. This included military bases like the Davis-Monthan Army Air Corps, which trained over 17,500 bomber pilots. Prisoner of War camps were also built and operated in Florence and Papago Park. 17,000 German, Italian, and Austrian prisoners lived and worked in these two camps during the war.



1 Buildings from Papago Prison Camp with a view of the existing butte in the background. Courtesy of Salt River Stories.

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Like many other parts of the country, many people moved in and out of Arizona during World War II. Part of this was migration to growing industrial cities. The other was enlistment. Both of these caused a labor shortage for cotton and other staple industries. Farmers used a mixture of convict labor, volunteers, and high school students for the 1942 fall harvest. For most of the war, however, Bracero guest workers from Mexico picked Arizona cotton. Despite pre-war anti-immigrant sentiment, Arizona

businesses relied on Mexican labor during the war. Of the 200,000 Mexican workers who came to the United States between 1942 and 1948, 6,000 worked in Arizona. In 1943, they picked about 60% of Maricopa County's cotton crop.²

A range of Arizona-born workers also started contributing to the war. Women also joined the workforce in many parts of Arizona. In some departments, women were 75% of the workers. The workforce changed in other ways. In addition to enlisting, many Navajo worked on military projects on or near their reservations. As demand for copper and zinc rose, the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers used calls for national unity to push for the end of the dual-wage system.³ The dual-wage system had legally allowed businesses to pay groups differently based on racial backgrounds. Though discrimination persisted, some wartime industries began to break barriers for workers.

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Arizona has always had a diverse population. A thriving middle class of "Spanish American" Arizonans fought against discrimination. Despite their efforts, many Mexican Americans were still segregated into lower-skill jobs. Testifying before the Senate Committee on Labor and Education in 1944, Carlos Castafieda argued that "even the urgent need of manpower...has not broken down the prejudice which bars a large number of skilled laborers from promotion in order that they might be utilized at their highest skill and thus contribute more fully and efficiently to the total war effort." The Braceros Farm Worker Program that brought Mexican low-paid workers only reinforced job discrimination.⁴

Arizona was also the site of two Japanese incarceration camps; both built on Indian reservations. The Colorado Relocation Center, better known as Poston, became the third largest "city" in Arizona because of the tens of thousands of Japanese Americans incarcerated there.⁵ It was on the Colorado River Tribes' Reservation despite the objections of tribal leaders. The Pima-Maricopa communities were also displaced for the Gila River Relocation Center.

Much of the labor for the camps fell the Japanese Americans imprisoned there, as well as the local Native Americans. Japanese Americans, including many incarcerated in Arizona, and Native Americans also volunteered for the war effort in large numbers despite discrimination.

Fort Huachuca in Cochise County housed two Black divisions, the 92nd and 93rd Infantry. They built a hospital with an all-Black staff. The hospital provided medical care for the Black divisions who couldn't receive care in segregated hospitals. It also served white officers and the local civilian population. The hospital provided many Arizonans with their first view of a Black professional class.⁶

Life on the Home Front

Arizonans came together for the war effort. The Phoenix Civil Defense Council had thousands of volunteers. In Coconino County, a man named Leo Weber organized a mounted patrol that included five hundred Navajo men.⁷ In some parts of the state, even high schoolers volunteered for the civil defense efforts.

Although Arizona society was segregated, Mexican American communities rallied for the war effort. Rose Rodriguz formed the Asociacion Hispano-Americana de Madres y Esposas in 1944 to boost the morale of Mexican American soldiers. Their efforts reinforced and supplemented similar wartime activities by Anglo women. A Phoenix group called Los Lenadores del Mundo sponsored a Diamond Jubilee to raise money.⁸ Native Americans, despite many living below the national poverty line, also

contributed to the war. A group of Navajo pledged \$3,000 to the Red Cross. They met their goal with goods including mutton, silver jewelry, and corn as well as cash.⁹

After the War

Arizona's population continued to grow after the war, especially with housing loans from the GI Bill and the spread of air conditioning. The industrial gains continued, including in scientific research and the growth of Arizona's education system. Latino and Native American communities continued to face challenges around racial discrimination in the postwar era.

Places of World War II History

- **Papago Park, Phoenix:** This current park with hiking and other recreational activities was the site of one of Arizona's prisoners of war camps. In December 1944, 25 German POWs tried to escape but could not face the desert environment outside the camp.
- **Poston Memorial Monument, Parker:** The memorial stands on the site where over 17,000 people of Japanese descent were incarcerated. It is on the land of the Colorado River Indian Tribe and was funded by survivors and descendants of the camps.
- **Gila River Relocation Center, Gila River Indian Reservation:** A few buildings remain at the Gila River Relocation Center, where over 13,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated. Visitors must seek permission from the Gila River Indian tribe, on whose land the site sits.
- **Williams Air Force Base, Mesa:** One of the United States Air Force bases built in Arizona during World War II. The people of Mesa lobbied for its construction and it trained hundreds of American and Chinese pilots. It is now a commercial airport, but some sites can still be seen.
- **Tempe:** Tempe is a designated American World War II Heritage City. In addition to the Papago Prisoner of War Camp, the city provided educational opportunities for men and women throughout the state to train to meet the needs of war.

By Nicholas Backman and Leah Baer, supervised by Dr. Matt Basso. Adapted by Alison Russell, a consulting historian with the National Park Service in partnership with the National Council on Public History.

¹ Brad Melton and Dean Smith, eds., *Arizona Goes to War: The Home Front and the Front Lines During World War II* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 10, 12; John S. Westerlund, "'U.S. Project Men Here': Building Navajo Ordnance Depot at Flagstaff," *The Journal of Arizona History* 42, no. 2 (2001): 201, 213, 211, 220-221;

² Melton and Smith, eds., *Arizona Goes to War*. 114-115.

³ Melton and Smith. *Arizona Goes to War*. 11, 109, 111; 113.

⁴ Quoted in Eric V. Meeks, "Protecting the 'White Citizen Worker': Race, Labor, and Citizenship in South-Central Arizona, 1929-1945," *Journal of the Southwest* 48, no. 1 (2006): 106-107.

⁵ Frujita-Rony, "Arizona and Japanese American History: The World War II Colorado River Relocation Center," 209, 219;

⁶ Pauline Peretz, "'No Experiment... at This Critical Time'? Racial Integration at Fort Huachuca's All-Black Hospital During World War II," *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 40, no. 1 (2019): 40-41, 54.

⁷ Melton and Smith, eds., *Arizona Goes to War*. 109.

⁸ Christine Marin, "Mexican-Americans on the Home Front: Community Organizations in Arizona During World War II," *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies* 4 (1993): 85., 77

⁹ Jere Franco. "Loyal and Heroic Service: The Navajos and World War II." *The Journal of American History* 27, No 4 (1986). 398-399.