

Nevada and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

At the onset of WWII, Nevada had a small population of 100,000 and relied primarily on agriculture and mining.¹ By 1943, Nevada's mines produced \$56 million in output, a 150% increase from 1938, and agriculture profits doubled from \$16 million to \$32 million during the war.² Both military industrialization and gambling expanded rapidly during WWII as well. The state's large expanses of desert proved conducive to the military, which helped triple Las Vegas' population, turning the city into a "martial metropolis" and the new demographic and political center of the state.³

Mobilization: Military and Industry



McNeil Construction Co. Magnesium Plant. Las Vegas, Nevada. September 8, 1942. (Credit: *pho020374*, Victor Kunkel Photograph Collection. PH-00072. Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.)

Prior to WWII, New Deal programs brought \$70 million to Southern Nevada. The largest project was Boulder (now Hoover) Dam completed in 1935. The military, FBI, and Bureau of Reclamation all agreed that the dam, which provided nearly half of the power for Southern California's war industries, was a high value target. A direct attack never came, but a machine gun pillbox overlooking the dam stands testament to anxieties over a home front attack.⁴

The first taste of military industrialization came to Southern Nevada with the massive construction project of Basic Magnesium, Inc (BMI). US war efforts required an incredible amount of metal. The Boulder Dam and rich mineral deposits made Southern Nevada attractive for industrial sites. Authorized by the federal government in 1941, BMI cost \$150

million, required 16,000 workers, and was the second largest structural steel job in the world. When completed, BMI was the largest magnesium plant in the world, ranked second in industrial use of electricity, and produced 120 tons of magnesium daily. To address a severe housing shortage, the townsite of Henderson was built in 1944 to accommodate BMI workers.⁵

A few miles to the southeast of Henderson and Las Vegas, the Army constructed Camp Sibert (later Camp Williston) in Boulder City in 1940 with 1,000 soldiers to provide protection for Boulder Dam and aid Reclamation agents.⁶ Las Vegas was also home to the Las Vegas Gunnery School (renamed Nellis Air Force Base in 1950). By 1945 it was the nation's largest gunnery school after a \$2.7 million expansion. At its peak, the school graduated 4,000 students every 6 weeks.⁷

¹ Gerald D. Nash, "Planning for the Postwar City: The Urban West in World War II," *Arizona and the West* 27, no. 2 (1985): 109; Leisl Carr Childers, *The Size of the Risk: Histories of Multiple Use in the Great Basin* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

² E Russell R. Elliott and William D. Rowley, *History of Nevada: Second Edition* (UNP-Nebraska, 1987), 219-224.

³ Robert V. Nickel, "Dollars, Defense, and the Desert," *Psi Sigma Siren* 3, no. 1 (2005): 310.

⁴ Jim Bailey, "Reclamation, the Army, and Hoover Dam during World War II," Hoover Dam: 75th Anniversary History Symposium (2010), 49, 55.

⁵ Nickel, "Dollars, Defense, and the Desert," 309-309.

⁶ Bailey, "Reclamation, the Army, and Hoover Dam," 51.

⁷ Nickel, "Dollars, Defense, and the Desert," 306.

The Army and Navy established a handful of other military facilities in Nevada. Stead Army Air Base in Reno trained transport pilots and signal companies.⁸ Shortly before it closed in 1966, Apollo mission astronauts trained at the base.⁹ In Fallon, the Navy established a Naval air station with two 5,200-foot runways to train navy pilots in combat in the Pacific Theater.¹⁰

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

The large migration to the West Coast for defense jobs moved through Nevada. The state's population increased from 110,247 in 1940 to 160,083 by the end of the decade, with roughly half settling in the state's two major cities: Las Vegas and Reno.¹¹ The African American population increased from 644 in 1940 to 4,302 in 1950.¹² Many women entered the workforce for the first time to fill labor shortages that pervaded all aspects of the Nevada home front. Those who worked at BMI earned the nickname "Magnesium Maggies." With new disposable income and targeted advertisement campaigns, women became more visible in casinos. In Northern Nevada, casinos even began hiring women as dealers.¹³ Native workers also played a critical role in defense industries. The BMI workforce included local Shoshone, Washoe, and Paiutes but also Native workers who migrated from all over the western US.¹⁴ The state, while lacking POW camps, still utilized prison labor. Convicts from federal penitentiaries worked making cots and stretchers under the Department of Civilian Defense or in agricultural work.¹⁵

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

The large Black workforce at BMI experienced segregation and housing shortages. Many workers lived in tents and cars on the predominantly Black Westside of Las Vegas or in Henderson's segregated Carver Park.¹⁶ Most of the Black workers at the plant supported the CIO in opposition to the predominantly white AFL, creating a labor feud that involved the FEPC in 1943.¹⁷ An all Black unit, the 534th, that arrived at Camp Sibert in 1941 to provide security for BMI faced racism from the townspeople of Boulder City, including exclusion from USO dances. When military authorities grew concerned over a potential strike by Black workers at BMI, the military trained in white soldiers from California for fear that the Black soldiers would side with the strikers.¹⁸ Black residents and servicemen were also excluded from most gambling establishments in Nevada despite the fact many casinos and hotels showcased famous Black singers and performers.¹⁹

Other minorities faced discrimination in Nevada, including the small Japanese population. The Nevada Consolidated Copper Company fired most of its Japanese American employees at the demand of white

⁸ Elliott and Rowley, *History of Nevada*, 222.

⁹ "Reno-Stead Airport History," Reno-Tahoe International Airport, April 28, 2014, <https://www.renoairport.com/reno-stead/about-airport/history.reno>.

¹⁰ "[Naval Air Station Fallon](#)," *Military Installations*.

¹¹ Elliott and Rowley, *History of Nevada*, 222.

¹² Eric Nelson Moody, "The Early Years of Casino Gambling in Nevada, 1931-1945" (Ph.D., United States -- Nevada, University of Nevada, Reno), 340.

¹³ Moody, "The Early Years of Casino Gambling in Nevada, 1931-1945," 328-330.

¹⁴ "[Magnesium Maggie Sculpture](#)," *Henderson*. "Indian Workers at BMI Plant Cling to Their Traditions Staging Dances and Powwows," *Basic Bombardier* 11, no. 9 (December 3, 1943).

¹⁵ Judith R Johnson, "Patriotic Prisoners And National Defense Penitentiaries of the Far Southwest in World War II," *Nevada Historical Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 210-11.

¹⁶ Nickel, "Dollars, Defense, and the Desert," 309.

¹⁷ Richard W. Mingus, "Breakdown in the Broker State: The CIO in Southern Nevada during World War II" (M.A., United States -- Nevada, University of Nevada, Las Vegas), 9-10.

¹⁸ Dennis McBride, "[Boulder City History](#)," *Boulder City Magazine* (April 2006).

¹⁹ Moody, "The Early Years of Casino Gambling in Nevada," 340.

employees.²⁰ Many counties feared that government officials would select Nevada, with its isolated sparse land, as the location for forced Japanese resettlement. The Clark County Defense Council created a resolution to block the relocation of several hundred Japanese Americans, arguing that proximity to Boulder Dam made the area ineligible for Japanese incarceration.²¹

Life on the Home Front

Nevadans supported the home front effort by buying war bonds and planting Victory Gardens. Clark County held scrap drives that used gas stations as collection sites. In two short months, residents contributed 450,000 pounds of scrap metal and rubber. When it came to rationing, however, Southern Nevadans resisted federal directives when shipping and gas restrictions threatened dairy supplies.²² Nevada's decade old gambling economy flourished with the influx of military personnel. Casinos and hotels partook in home front patriotism and bond drives. Las Vegas hotels ran special shows, accepting only war bonds as tickets for entry. After General John Dewitt showed concern over the "distraction" casinos presented for servicemen, casino owners voluntarily agreed to limited hours of operation.²³ Nevada's red-light districts attracted high numbers of servicemen as well until the Federal Security Agency pressured local communities to shutter all houses of prostitution in 1943.²⁴

After the War

Transformations made during WWII created the avenues for the military to develop and test nuclear weapons during the Cold War. Most notably, the Nevada Test Site saw over a thousand continental nuclear tests after it was established in 1951.²⁵ The environmental impact from both WWII industry and the Nevada Test Site has been hazardous, including groundwater and soil contamination and airborne radioactive fallout. Native communities in the area have suffered some of the highest rates of cancer in the nation and cleanup and Indigenous land advocacy efforts continue today.²⁶

Places of World War II History

- **Boulder City and Henderson:** These cities are jointly designated as a World War II Heritage City. Chosen for its proximity to Hoover Dam, the area became a vital center of military activity during WWII, including the construction of Camp Williston, to protect the dam, and the formation of Basic Magnesium Inc (BMI) in 1941, the largest magnesium plant in the world at the time.
- **Las Vegas Gunnery:** Renamed Nellis Air Force Base in 1950, it was the nation's largest gunnery school by 1945, graduating 4,000 students every six weeks.

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²⁰ Elliott and Rowley, *History of Nevada*, 221.

²¹ Russell, "A Fortunate Few," 47. Elliott and Rowley, *History of Nevada*.

²² Eugene P Moehring, "Las Vegas and the Second World War," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 29 (1986): 7, 9, 17; Keeton, "Price Ceilings and Rationing: The Base Ingredients of the Black Market Food Industry in Nevada During World War II," 35.

²³ Nickel, "Dollars, Defense, and the Desert," 314.

²⁴ Elliott and Rowley, *History of Nevada*, 222.

²⁵ Andrew G. Kirk, *Doom Towns: The People and Landscapes of Atomic Testing : A Graphic History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁶ Taylor Rose, "[Nevada Can't Shed Its Ugly Past While Continuing to Exploit Native People and Lands](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2023.