

## Wisconsin and the World War II Home Front

### Introduction

As World War II approached, Wisconsin's economy, still recovering from the Great Depression, picked up. Concerns over military preparedness in the looming conflict sent many defense contracts out to the state's businesses, especially in Milwaukee, stimulating the economy and tightening labor markets. Wisconsin agriculture met the moment as well. The dairy sector led the way, but hemp, lumber, and plywood also significantly increased their production during the war.

### Mobilization: Military and Industry

One of the most visible impacts of the war was the reconstruction of the shipbuilding industry along Wisconsin's lakeshore. Inland shipbuilding posts like these were attractive to military planners because their interior position made them easier to defend than ocean ports. In Manitowoc—Wisconsin's designated American World War II Heritage City—the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company built submarines, tank landing crafts, and fuel barges. Employment peaked at 7,000 workers, including hundreds of women in skilled labor and administrative positions. By 1945, the company had built 28 submarines, far surpassing the ten originally requested by the federal government.<sup>1</sup>



*The submarine USS Hardhead on December 12, 1943, just after launching at the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company. Credit: P92-5-86, Wisconsin Maritime Museum Collection, copy and reuse restrictions apply.*

The Badger Army Ammunition Plant, located on the Sauk Prairie northwest of Madison, was one of Wisconsin's most important facilities in the war effort. For a time, it was the largest producer of ammunition in the world. Initially, there was an uproar when the Army announced the plan to build the plant, since the Sauk Prairie was among the most fertile land in the state. The 80 farmers who were to be displaced had already committed to raising 5.3 million pounds of milk, 175 million eggs, and 1.5 million pounds of pork more in 1942 than they had in 1941. Their pleas and boasts fell on deaf ears. On March 1, 1942, farmers watched as their multi-generational farmhouses and barns were bulldozed.<sup>2</sup>

Western Wisconsin was home to Camp McCoy, a training facility expanded during WWII to accommodate 35,000 soldiers. In the summer of 1942, the camp welcomed the 100th Infantry Battalion from Hawaii, the first all-Japanese-American fighting force.<sup>3</sup> Camp McCoy also served as an induction center for nurses, a foreign-national internment facility, and a POW Camp. It eventually housed 2,700 Japanese, 3,000 German, and 500 Korean POWs. The camp even held Kazuo Sakamaki for a time, the first POW of the war, captured at Pearl Harbor.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "American World War II Heritage City Program," *Wisconsin Maritime Museum at Manitowoc*, <https://www.wisconsinmaritime.org/about-us/wwii-american-heritage-city/>.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Baum, "Constructing and Deconstructing the Home Front: The Badger Army Ammunition Plant and Rural Wisconsin, 1941-1998," unpublished thesis, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Fall 2017, 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> National Park Service, "[World War II and the American Home Front: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study](#)," 144.

<sup>4</sup> Lou Ann Mittelstaedt and Kara Motosicky, "The Establishment of Fort McCoy: A Heart for Preparedness," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 92, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 35-36.

## **Mobilization: Changes for Workers**

As workers moved to urban areas for defense manufacturing jobs, many small towns and rural counties saw double-digit population declines, while Milwaukee County grew by 12.7%.<sup>5</sup> To fill male labor shortages, both manufacturing and agriculture sectors turned to women. At Allen Bradley in Milwaukee, women made up a third of the labor force by 1942, where they were “running drill presses, punch presses, screw machines, and other equipment that had been the exclusive province of males.”<sup>6</sup>

Other sources of labor included international workers, particularly from the West Indies, “Texas Mexicans,” and POW labor. A total of 22,000 German POWs spent time in Wisconsin, spread out in 38 camps. Those deemed a low security risk picked potatoes, corn, apples, cherries, and sugar beets, which were “a critical commodity used for making the industrial alcohol needed to manufacture munitions and synthetic rubber.” By the end of the war, there were three times more POWs in rural farm fields than its neighbor Minnesota.<sup>7</sup>

## **Discrimination and Fights for Equality**

Black and Native workers experienced discrimination and segregation in employment. Despite labor shortages across Wisconsin, employers consistently shunted African American workers from good paying white-collar jobs and into the most dirty, low-paying, and unpleasant work. A racial ideology pervaded this discrimination, with one employer explaining why his company didn’t employ black workers: “Well... we don't have a Foundry in our plant and that's the kind of work negroes are best suited for.” Partly to blame was the pressure from white union members, who wanted priority in hiring.

The NAACP and the Milwaukee Urban League fought back. They collected affidavits describing racial discrimination in Milwaukee companies that had received millions of dollars in defense contracts as evidence for the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). In 1942, the FEPC cited five Milwaukee companies for racial discrimination and were given notice to “accept applicants for all classifications of employment without regard to race, color, creed or national origin” with failure to comply possibly resulting in fines or suspension of contracts. Black women had less success when voicing claims to the FEPC and sometimes reached out directly to Eleanor Roosevelt for support.<sup>8</sup>

## **Life on the Home Front**

Like Americans in other states, Wisconsinites threw themselves into the war effort by joining local civilian defense organizations, cultivating victory gardens, participating in material drives, and purchasing war bonds. The people of Manitowoc County, for example, raised more than \$44 million across eight war loan campaigns. For those fortunate enough to work for a big company, they enjoyed all-employee music groups, sports teams, and various clubs in their leisure time.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “1950 Census: Wisconsin,”

<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/pc-02/pc-2-38.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> John Gurda, “Profits and Patriotism: Milwaukee Industry in World War II,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 78, no. 1 (1994): 31.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Razner and Sharon Roznik, “‘Just Like Us’: How Wisconsin held captive, and made peace with, German POWs in World War II,” *FDL Reporter*, April 1, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 152, 166, 171.

<sup>9</sup> Gurda, “Profits and Patriotism,” 27-28.

When compared to the WWI home front, there was surprisingly little strife among German Americans perhaps due to increased assimilation or a more widespread patriotic unity.<sup>10</sup> Less surprising was a May 1943 crackdown on Milwaukee's gay bars servicing sailors from the Great Lakes Naval Station.<sup>11</sup> The city also experienced a moral panic over "Victory Girls" who entertained servicemen. Recent scholarship has framed the panic as a direct result of women entering the workforce and gaining independence.<sup>12</sup>

For the Oneida people of Wisconsin, the home front brought many unwelcome changes to those living on the reservation. They saw a dramatic decline in deer populations, a food staple for generations. Commercial fertilizers and pesticides—introduced in staggering volumes on the farms that bordered the reservation—filled the streams and rivers with loam, sediment, and chemical pollution. Many Onedia and Ojibwe families chose to move to the city to find better living conditions and employment opportunities, with the Badger Army Ammunition Plant proving a big draw for Native women.<sup>13</sup>

### After the War

Several groups and sites serve today in the task of keeping the story of Wisconsin's WWII home front alive, such as the Wisconsin War Memorial and Milwaukee County War Memorial Center. For those seeking a more tactile remembrance, the *USS COBIA*, a GATO class submarine, is moored in Manitowoc, offering tours to the public.<sup>14</sup> The Department of Defense decommissioned the Badger Ammunition Plant in 1997 and transferred lands to three primary landowners, including the Ho-Chunk. Clean up and rewilding efforts continue today under a shared land stewardship vision.<sup>15</sup>

### Places of World War II History

- **Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company:** Notably built 28 Gato and Balao Class submarines during WWII. Now part of Wisconsin's designated American World War II Heritage City, the company is commemorated at Wisconsin's Maritime Museum.
- **Badger Army Ammunition Plant:** The sprawling 7,300-acre plant—once the world's largest munitions factory—built during WWII, produced propellant for ammunition until it was decommissioned in 1997.
- **Fort McCoy:** During WWII, Camp McCoy expanded to house and train 35,000 soldiers. It also served as an incarceration and POW camp. Today, the renamed Fort McCoy still serves as an active training base and the largest employer in Monroe County.

*By Scott Morris, supervised by Dr. Matt Basso. Adapted by Dr. Nicole Martin, a consulting historian with the National Park Service in partnership with the National Council on Public History.*

---

<sup>10</sup> Razner and Roznik, "Just Like Us."

<sup>11</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 114.

<sup>12</sup> Charissa Keup, "Delinquency, Sex, and Milwaukee Girls During the Second World War," *Milwaukee County History* 1, no. 4 (2010), 75-79.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon L. McLester, *A Nation within a Nation: Voices of the Oneidas in Wisconsin* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2010), 83, 86.

<sup>14</sup> "Place: Manitowoc, Wisconsin," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/places/manitowoc-wisconsin.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Patrice Kohl, "Rewilding the Badger Army Ammunition Plant," *Edge Effects*, updated October 12, 2019, <https://edgeeffects.net/rewilding/>.