

North Dakota and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

North Dakota's unique experience during World War II is often overlooked, likely due to the state's lack of war-specific industrial production and its rural economy. However, North Dakotans responded to the war on the northern Great Plains by making agricultural production and civilian volunteer and defense efforts a cornerstone of their home front response. More than 58,000 North Dakotans also answered Uncle Sam's call for military service, including many from the state's sizable Indigenous population.¹ Marginalization, racism, exclusion, and exploitative labor of Native Americans and Japanese Americans also significantly shaped the North Dakota home front experience.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

North Dakota's war-specific industrial production pales in comparison to many other states and territories, but not for lack of effort from state manufacturers and policymakers. In 1940, Governor John Moses traveled to the nation's capital to promote the Flickertail State's industrial potential to federal officials. Moses wanted an exemption from the '200-mile rule,' which forbade defense production within that distance of an international border. Moses made a case for North Dakota's potential on the grounds of the state's "abundance of skilled and semiskilled workers, few labor difficulties, natural resources including water and lignite for the extraction of nitric acid for explosives."² Despite Moses' attempts to promote industrial potential, by 1942, the state had received only \$6 million of government orders.

The largest contract to land in the state went to Swimaster Manufacturing for their inflatable flotation devices. Other companies received subcontracts for machine components going into other products.³ In Valley City, North Dakota's designated World War II Heritage City, the Russell-Miller Milling Company received a war contract to manufacture over three thousand tons of granalko grits, converted from surplus wheat and used as fuel for torpedoes and as a component in synthetic rubber production.⁴

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

The Home Front period continued a trend in North Dakota of population decline and out-migration of skilled workers. Between 1939 and 1945, the state population fell from 644,000 to 510,000. The acuity of this demographic decline, among the most severe in the country, is perhaps North Dakota's most dramatic and unique experience during the war years. As a result, the state struggled to hold on to its workforce. Skilled mechanics, machinists, and electricians left for higher paying war industry jobs in other states. The statewide labor shortage had the potential to constrain North Dakota's lucrative agricultural economy based on wheat, corn, and cattle. After the fall harvest of 1941, more than five



"Retailers For Victory" parade in downtown Valley City to mark the opening of the War Bonds and Stamps sales promotion at local retailers. July 1, 1942. (Valley Times Record)

¹ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 364.

² Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴ *The Ward County Independent*, August 12, 1943.

hundred workers left North Dakota, which in the sparsely populated state meant the difference between a crop being harvested or rotting in the fields.⁵

In response to labor shortages, state officials, companies, and farmers experimented with new pools of labor. Mexican workers with the *Bracero* Program, white migrant laborers traveling from the northern plains to Texas, Japanese-American internees, and German POWs all played a role in meeting the labor demands of agricultural production. Women and children also participated in agricultural labor across the state. The estimated number of women in farm labor rose from approximately 4,879 in 1943 to 6,769 in 1948.⁶ In Valley City, the Geisler Implement Company held a “Tractorette” training program in 1942 to teach women and girls how to operate and service tractors and other farm machinery.⁷

The Valley City Mercy Hospital School of Nursing was also one of 1,100 schools nationwide to participate in the United States Cadet Nurse Corps. Cadet nurses at Mercy Hospital received a monthly stipend and scholarships to cover tuition and fees. The fifty-eight women who graduated from Mercy helped staff U.S. hospitals, aiding in the care of wounded soldiers when they returned home and preventing a collapse in civilian nursing during the war. Valley City also participated in another educational program run by the federal government, the Navy’s V-12 College Training program. By 1945, 532 men had gone through the V-12 program at Valley City State Teachers College.⁸

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Amid a statewide agricultural labor shortage, farmers near Bismarck relied on the labor of German and Italian internees at Fort Lincoln—located just five miles south of the state capital. During its time as an internment camp, Fort Lincoln held Italian and German POWs as well as Japanese and Japanese American citizens. Although some residents near the internment camp were uncomfortable with its proximity to their community, most accepted the POW camp for its ability to boost the local economy and viewed the German and Italian POWs with sympathy.⁹ This sympathy did not extend to internees of Japanese descent, who were often excluded from the state’s agricultural labor force. W. W. Murray, the president of the North Dakota Federation of Labor, argued that Japanese workers would not only compete with white North Dakotans for farm labor jobs, but also might “stay after the war is over, and the problems [would] far outweigh any benefits which might result.”¹⁰

Community sympathy toward Italian and German POWs around Bismarck contrasted sharply with the ways in which many white North Dakotans viewed and treated local Native American communities. In Williston, farmers refused to hire Indigenous labor despite the severe labor shortage in the area. However, the Will Seed Company in Bismarck stood out as an exception for hiring Native Americans for full time employment during World War II, including many women. Mary Ketterling, a member of the Cheyenne River Lakota people, also recalled how “Indian people were well treated as customers... and remembered going to the store with her mother... to buy seed for Victory Gardens.”¹¹ Most Native

⁵ Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 496.

⁷ “‘Tractorette’ Training School To Open In Valley City Soon,” *Valley City Times Record*, May 13, 1942.

⁸ “Valley City, North Dakota,” National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/valley-city-north-dakota.htm>.

⁹ Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 314.

¹⁰ Murray quoted in Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 307.

¹¹ Schneider, “‘Corn in the Crib is Like Money in the Bank’: George F. Will and the Oscar H. Will & Company, 1917-1955,” 14.

peoples, however, faced vehement exclusion, leaving many with no choice but to rely on overcrowded reservation lands without inadequate facilities and infrastructure.¹²

Life on the Home Front

North Dakotans enthusiastically embraced Victory Gardens, war bond drives, scrap drives, and rationing efforts. Many residents also engaged in remarkable volunteer efforts to help their local community. In Valley City, volunteers formed the state's first Home Guard unit, Company F, only twelve hours after the governor called for companies across the state. The community banded together to raise funds to help supply the men who guarded an important rail-bridge.¹³ High school students and white collar employees in Barnes County all answered a 1943 call to help with the harvest as Victory Farm Volunteers.¹⁴ In Fargo, a nursery school that had begun as a relief project during the Great Depression, demonstrated flexibility to home front needs. Adaptations—such as extending hours of operation for working mothers and offering educational programs in addition to childcare needs—led to the Fargo Nursery School outlasting most Depression Era emergency schools.¹⁵

After the War

The acute population decline that North Dakota experienced during the war continued in its aftermath, and the state struggled to diversify its economy. While the war failed to increase manufacturing or the use of the state's natural resources, it did help relieve farmer debt. The total income of the state rose from \$218 million to \$813 million between 1940 and 1948.¹⁶ Native peoples residing in the state continued to face discrimination and lose land to the federal government, sparking an ongoing vibrant Indigenous civil rights movement. In the 1960s, the former Fort Lincoln intersected with the Tribal College Movement when a coalition of North Dakota tribes established the country's second tribal college at the former site in 1969.¹⁷

Places of World War II History

- **Valley City:** The residents of North Dakota's designated World War II Heritage City excelled at home front volunteerism, from scrap drives and victory gardens to war bonds and civil defense. The city also hosted the V-12 program and Cadet Nurse Corps.
- **Fort Lincoln:** During World War II, the former military post and CCC headquarters outside of Bismark became the largest male internment camp. Approximately 4,000 internees of German, Italian, and Japanese descent were imprisoned at the camp.

By Nicholas Backman, 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.

¹² Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 357.

¹³ "74 Already Sign for Company F – Military Unit Perfected Last Night Less than 12 Hours After Moses Message," *Valley City Times Record*, December 13, 1941. "Benefit Dance for Co. F. Set for May 17," *Valley City Times Record*, April 23, 1942.

¹⁴ "Students Urged to Volunteer in Farm Program," *Valley City Times Record*, June 4, 1943.

¹⁵ David and Danbom, "Survival through Adaptation: The Fargo Nursery School, 1933-1965": 2, 9-11.

¹⁶ Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 159, 402.

¹⁷ Brian Niiya, "[Memorializing a Shared History Between Native and Japanese American Communities at Fort Lincoln](#)," *Densho*, January 4, 2024.