

Texas and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

The Lone Star State entered WWII as a poor rural and agricultural state after suffering through the Great Depression. The war, however, transformed Texas into an economic powerhouse, home to a myriad of military bases and manufacturing plants. The state's large land mass, second only to Alaska, proved conducive to training Army pilots. Texas was also important to the war effort for its rich deposits of oil and gas and over 300 miles of coastline integral to the Navy's fleet building.¹ The state paid a heavy cost for the war, as 22,022 Texans died in service.²



Mary Josephine Farley, twenty-years-old, crew leader mechanic at Naval air base Corpus Christi, TX. August 1942. Photo by Howard R. Hollem, Office of War Information (Credit: Library of Congress)

Mobilization: Military and Industry

One of Texas's most important contributions to the war came from its vast reserves of oil and natural gas. In 1940, Texas produced nearly half a billion barrels of crude, comprising 36.5 percent of all domestic oil.³ Transporting Texas oil to the East Coast proved challenging due to the threat of German submarine attacks in the Gulf of Mexico. In response, the federal government built two massive overland pipelines, nicknamed the "Big Inch" and the "Little Big Inch," which each measured over 1,000 miles long.⁴ Completed in 1944, these pipelines carried over 350 million barrels of Texas oil to the East Coast.⁵ Uniquely, Texas retained control of drilling, production, and transport from federal oversight.⁶

Military presence came to Texas in the form of federal dollars and construction. In 1941 alone, the federal government invested \$500 million in the state. Between 1941-1944, Texas became the world's largest military training ground.¹⁵ major military sites prepared 1.2 million soldiers for war.⁷ The cities of Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio each became a "martial metropolis" in their own right. Petrochemical plants and shipbuilding dominated the industries in East Texas and along the Gulf Coast. Dallas and Fort Worth saw manufacturing plants for planes, as well as various military administrative offices. In central Texas, San Antonio housed numerous Army training bases. In all, there were 175 major military installations in the state. Texas counted 65 Army airfields, 35 Army forts or camps, and 7 naval stations.⁸

¹ Lance Bertelsen, "How Texas Won the Second World War," *Southwest Review* 76, no. 3 (1991): 315.

² Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2003), 397.

³ Diana Davids Hinton and Roger M. Olien, *Oil in Texas: The Gusher Age, 1895-1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 219-220.

⁴ Ralph Wooster, "East Texas in World War II," *East Texas Historical Journal* 45, no. 2 (September 2007): 72.

⁵ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 404.

⁶ Hinton and Olien, *Oil in Texas*, 223.

⁷ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 397, 401.

⁸ "Texas in World War II | THC.Texas.Gov - Texas Historical Commission," 5, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/military-sites/texas-world-war-ii>.

In Fort Worth alone, over a dozen facilities were established to aid in the war effort. These included a bomber plant, the Fort Worth Air Base, the Saginaw Airfield at Hicks Field, a Navy seaplane station on Lake Worth, a Quartermaster Depot, and a secret Marine glider base at Eagle Mountain Lake.⁹ Also in Fort Worth was the Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation (later Convair) plant, which manufactured bomber aircraft. The plant contained a mile-long assembly line that employed 38,000, and at its peak, produced 200 planes a month.¹⁰ The headquarters for the nation's flying training programs was seated in Fort Worth, which directed almost one eighth of all Army personnel.¹¹ Downtown also hosted the offices of the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), who trained at Avenger Airfield in Sweetwater from 1943 until WASP training was canceled in 1944. Many Sweetwater residents resented the all-female pilot group, viewing their independence and nontraditional behavior, such as smoking, drinking, and wearing pants, as scandalous.¹²

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Texas's population surged during the war, increasing by more than 1.2 million residents. By the end of the war, the majority of Texans lived in urban rather than rural areas for the first time. While many Black Texans left the state for work in California and northern cities, many Mexican Americans arrived, increasing the Chicano population to nearly one million in 1950. Like elsewhere, Texas experienced labor shortages and relied on Mexican labor and women to help the state's agriculture production, which churned out wheat, corn, vegetables, and citrus fruits. Cotton production decreased as many farmers switched to cattle to supply meat for the war effort.¹³

During the war, Texas had more than 60 prisoners of war camps, twice as many as any other state in the US. The main camps were established at Mexia, Hereford, Hearne, and Huntsville. By the end of the war, the Lone Star state had held nearly 80,000 POWs, including Germans, Italians, and some Japanese.¹⁴ These POWs were used as relief workers towards the close of the war in almost every sector of Texas' economy.¹⁵ In addition to POW camps, Texas held three internment camps for enemy aliens.¹⁶ The Immigration and Naturalization Service administered internment camps at Crystal City, Kenedy, and Seagoville, which held people of Japanese, German, and Italian descent, and sometimes internees from Latin American countries.

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Despite being legally classified as "white," Mexican Americans experienced discrimination in many wartime industries and fought throughout the war for equality.¹⁷ In 1943, Mexico barred the *Bracero Program*, a temporary agreement between Mexico and the United States that allowed millions of Mexican men to legally work in the US on short-term labor contracts, from operating in Texas. The

⁹ J'Nell L. Pate and Kay Granger, *Arsenal of Defense: Fort Worth's Military Legacy* (Texas State Historical Association, 2011), 105.

¹⁰ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 404. Pate and Granger, *Arsenal of Defense*, 77.

¹¹ Pate and Granger, *Arsenal of Defense*, 106.

¹² Thomas E. Alexander and Dan K. Utley, *Faded Glory: A Century of Forgotten Texas Military Sites, Then and Now* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 180, 182.

¹³ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 396, 404.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 402.

¹⁵ Arnold P. Krammer, "When the 'Afrika Korps' Came to Texas," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (1977): 268.

¹⁶ "Texas in World War II | THC.Texas.Gov - Texas Historical Commission," 5.

¹⁷ Emilio Zamora, "The Failed Promise of Wartime Opportunity for Mexicans in the Texas Oil Industry," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 95, no. 3 (1992): 325.

Mexican government and activists cited harsh conditions and extreme racial discrimination against Mexican laborers.¹⁸ Texas growers urged Congress to lift the ban, but it remained in place due to its popularity in Mexico.¹⁹ Along the Gulf Coast, Mexican laborers unionized to fight discrimination at two of Corpus Christi's largest war plants, where American Smelting and Southern Alkali denied Mexicans equal employment opportunities. Though Mexican workers organized an ethnically mixed union and obtain a charter from the AFL, "they were unable to influence the union to challenge the company's practice of racial segregation."²⁰

African Americans also faced discrimination that came with new wartime job opportunities. During the war, the number of African Americans in Texas doubled from 150,000 to 295,000. Many African Americans played a vital role in wartime industries, but they faced segregated assembly lines and were paid less at coastal oil refineries.²¹ Convair segregated employees and operated under Jim Crow laws, including at the Liberator village, a rushed barrack style housing project across from the plant.²² From 1942-1944, the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) fought Convair to allow African Americans into the all-white training facilities at the bomber plant. With the assistance of local unions, African Americans made some progress.²³

Racial tensions, however, often erupted in violence. Racial violence against Black Texans, including lynchings received little sympathy from Texas politicians.²⁴ The largest eruption of violence occurred in June 1943 in Beaumont, where one third of the population was African American. One of the least known racial conflicts from WWII, the race riot began after rumors spread among shipyard workers that a Black man allegedly assaulted a white woman. A mob of several thousand white residents marched towards the city's Black districts, where 15 hours of rioting, arson, and looting occurred. The Texas governor called in martial law and deployed 3,000 state guards and Texas Rangers. In the aftermath, three were dead and more than 200 were injured. The labor pool dwindled as more than 2,000 Black Americans left the city over the next week.²⁵

Life on Home Front

Across the state, Texans rallied to aid in home front efforts, including civil defense preparedness. For example, 20,000 civilians who enlisted with the National Youth Administration were employed at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi during the war.²⁶ In Nueces County, women joined civilian corps, such as the Red Cross and the Civil Air Patrol. They also volunteered with Home Demonstration Clubs

¹⁸ Otey M. Scruggs, "Texas and the Bracero Program, 1942-1947," *Pacific Historical Review* 32, no. 3 (1963): 254.

¹⁹ Thomas A. Guglielmo, "Fighting for Caucasian Rights: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the Transnational Struggle for Civil Rights in World War II Texas," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (2006): 1218.

²⁰ Emilio Zamora, *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics during World War II*, 1st ed. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 181.

²¹ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 405.

²² Richard F. Selcer, *A History of Fort Worth in Black & White: 165 Years of African-American Life* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2013), 367.

²³ Joseph Abel, "African Americans, Labor Unions, and the Struggle for Fair Employment in the Aircraft Manufacturing Industry of Texas, 1941-1945," *The Journal of Southern History* 77, no. 3 (2011): 595, 600.

²⁴ Wooster, "East Texas in World War II," 50.

²⁵ Marilynn S. Johnson, "Gender, Race, and Rumours: Re-Examining the 1943 Race Riots," *Gender & History* 10, no. 2 (1998): 256-58.

²⁶ "Place: South Texas Coastal Bend Area & Corpus Christi, Texas," National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/places/awwiihc-south-texas-bend-area.htm>.

to help grow victory gardens, sell dairy products to ease shortages, and teach canning to thousands of rural families.²⁷ Many Texans, however, were irked by gas rationing, as nearly 80% of the nation's gasoline came from Texas refineries.²⁸ Governor Stevenson even argued against gas rationing, saying gas was as necessary in Texas as "the saddle, the rifle, the ax, and the Bible." However, most Texans came to accept gas rationing as an important part of the war effort.²⁹

After the War

The industrialization, urbanization, and economic diversification that WWII brought to Texas led to a postwar economic boom. However, the rise of the loosely regulated petrochemical industry and toxic waste and contamination from military and industrial sites have had a lasting negative impact on the environment. Home front racial tensions and violence continued after the war, but the greater visibility of racial discrimination during WWII laid the foundation for postwar civil rights activism.

Places of World War II History

- **South Texas Coastal Bend Area and Corpus Christi:** These coastal cities are jointly designated as a World War II Heritage City. The Naval Air Station at Corpus Christi, the "University of the Air," was the largest naval training facility in the world at its completion. The area was known for its outstanding civil defense preparedness and volunteer efforts.
- **Camp Mabry:** Based in Austin, the Mabry Ordnance Shop was the first to use a conveyor belt with a system made entirely from scrap and waste material. It was also notable for hiring disabled veterans, who composed half of the shop's workforce.
- **Fort Sam Houston:** Today a National Historic Landmark, the Third, Sixth, Ninth, Tenth, and Fifteenth Armies trained and deployed from the fort based in San Antonio, which was the largest army post in the nation in 1940. Many of the top commanders during the war were Fort Sam Houston alumni, including General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

By John Flynn, 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.

²⁷ "Nueces County Farm Women Contribute to Victory Programs," *The Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, January 23, 1944.

²⁸ Hinton and Olien, *Oil in Texas*, 219.

²⁹ Campbell, *Gone to Texas*, 402.