

Oklahoma and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

The combination of Oklahoma's past as former Indian Territory and the lingering effects of the Dust Bowl on agriculture make it a unique case study of home front changes. As one historian notes, "Fundamentally, the Great Plains was an agricultural region when the war began, and it remained so at war's end."¹ World War II did not leave behind a permanent military-industrial complex in Oklahoma. However, the war served as an economic boon to Oklahoma's two major cities, which saw modest increases in population and industry. For farms and ranches, the war drove commodity prices upwards.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Over the course of the war, Oklahoma received defense contracts three times the size of the state's manufacturing output in 1939. Tool and Die shops and other machining specialists expanded production in Oklahoma City (OKC) and Tulsa to meet the need from new aircraft production facilities, causing a ripple effect that moved money from the federal government to large corporations and into smaller communities via sub-contracts and expanded payroll.²



Nine British Royal Air Force pilots, at training at the Darr Aeronautics School in Kay County, Oklahoma, November 10, 1941. Thomas, Gene. [Photograph 2012.201.OVZ001.0774] The Gateway to Oklahoma History, Oklahoma Historical Society.

The number of clear-weather days in the state, plus its abundant flat land, made it ideal for flight schools. Eight or more municipal airports were converted into pilot training centers. The Darr Flight School in Ponca City, a designated World War II Heritage City, trained 1,100 pilots, many of whom were British RAF aviators. Most of the defense contracts awarded to Oklahoma by January 1942 landed in the OKC area, mostly at Tinker Field and aircraft factories. Within its first year, Tinker had a civilian workforce of 15,000 people, who kept busy repairing B-24 and B-27 bombers and fitting out B-29 bombers for combat operations.³ Douglas Aircraft Company built a \$20 million fabrication plant east of the base which employed an additional 23,000 workers. The facility put together "[m]ore than half of the ten thousand C-47 "Gooney Bird" cargo planes bought by the U.S. Army Air Force."⁴

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

² Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 35-36.

³ Oklahoma Senate, "Tinker Field," <https://oksenate.gov/education/senate-artwork/tinker-field>.

⁴ Oklahoma Historical Society, *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, "World War II."

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

The 1950 Census revealed a deepening population loss in Oklahoma, down 4.8% over the decade. Many residents chose to leave the state during the war, especially for lucrative war production jobs in California. However, in the same period, Oklahoma County grew by 32.1%, with OKC proper climbing 18.6%. Tulsa County also grew an impressive 28.6%. These growing cities reflected a divergence between urban and rural Oklahoma that shaped a changing workforce. Women in particular gained new employment opportunities. At the Douglas Aircraft factory outside OKC, more than half of all employees were women. 10,783 women also trained as WAVES at Oklahoma A&M College to support the US Naval Reserve.⁵

For Oklahoma's substantial and overwhelmingly rural Native population, the war presented new work opportunities. Chilocco Indian Agricultural School was one of the first to adapt an aircraft sheet metal course to defense needs. "In 1942, 175 students (male and female) completed the nine-week course and 85 percent of those found employment. By the following year, the school had trained almost 300 students," and hundreds were recruited into military service, with several becoming code talkers.⁶ Across the state, Kiowas living near the Anadarko agency found training in the fields of carpentry, auto mechanics, and surveying, with graduates finding employment quickly. At El Reno, some Native peoples worked as mechanics on PT-19 aircraft in the army training program at the local airport.⁷ These policies, combined with the opportunities found elsewhere, led to a depopulation of reservations.

The Oklahoma landscape also became home to thirty-two POW Camps that held at least 20,000 German prisoners. Between September 1942 and October 1943, the federal government constructed prisoner facilities at Alva, Camp Gruber, Fort Reno, Sort Sill, McAlester, and Tonkawa. Most worked on farms, where they "picked row crops and cotton, harvested wheat and broom corn, manned the Santa Fe Railroad's ice plant at Waynoka, cut underbrush and timber in the basin of Lake Texoma, served as hospital orderlies, and worked on ranches."⁸

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Race relations in rural Oklahoma remained stable, as the state was overwhelmingly white or Native. Class relations in rural Oklahoma were also largely stable, as most farms were independent operations. The Farmers Union did advocate for their member's interests, and they were active agents in trying to solve the problem of labor shortage, but the Oklahoma countryside did not experience the waves of unionization or labor strife common in other states' home front experience. One exception was in Tulsa, which became the scene of a battle between unions. At issue was control over the workers of the Douglas Aircraft factory. In December 1942, workers walked off the job for a day, in opposition to appeals for unity and maximum defense production, to call attention to company rules that prevented them from logging more than 20 hours of overtime a week.⁹

⁵ Oklahoma Historical Society, *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, "Women and the World Wars," <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=WO0004>.

⁶ Grace Mary Gouveia, "'We Also Serve': American Indian Women's Role in World War II," *Michigan Historical Review* Vol 20 No 2 (1994), 167-168. For more on code talkers, see "Code Talkers: Why We Serve," *Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian*, <https://americanindian.si.edu/why-we-serve/topics/code-talkers/>.

⁷ Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 359-360.

⁸ Oklahoma Historical Society, *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, "Prisoner of War Camps," <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=PR016>.

⁹ Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 48-49.

Life on the Home Front

The war presented many changes and challenges for Oklahomans. The divorce rate in Oklahoma County climbed from 16% to 27% from 1940 to 1944, as families broke up under the pressure of war. Oklahomans were also less able to enjoy the simple things in life, such as a hearty dinner. Many meat packers shut their doors because their costs exceeded the federally determined price ceiling on retail beef. Oklahomans were often excoriated by federal officials who thought they came up short in rationing and scrap drives. A popular opinion in OKC was that rationing measures primarily benefited eastern consumers. Being largely rural, the Victory Garden concept did not catch on to the extent it did in other places. However, the Future Farmers of America played a large role in food-production efforts by planting victory gardens in conspicuous places and canning the produce as service projects.¹⁰

While the war put a hold on many leisure activities, it did not slow the Methodist Church's battle in Oklahoma against the sale of beer. They incorporated patriotic rhetoric in arguing that alcohol sales were as "dangerous as any axis power." The debate went nationwide when Oklahoma's wartime governor demanded that Congress stop the sale of liquor on federal property and succeeded in temporarily halting liquor sales at Fort Sill, "much to the displeasure of the officer corps." Even the state's robust bootleg industry seemed to dry up, as former bootleggers joined the military, found defense industry work, or turned to other jobs that weren't impacted by gasoline and tire shortages.¹¹

After the War

When the war ended, federal defense spending largely left to enhance military research in the Far West. Dramatic layoffs at Douglas Aircraft, Champion Refinery, and the Continental Oil Company, left many Oklahomans without employment. The Douglas base in OKC, now Tinker Air Force Base, did survive into the 21st century to become the largest single-site employer in the state, with 26,000 employees.¹² The visibility and prosperity brought to many Native Americans was also called into question, as postwar politics shifted toward Termination policies that sought to sever the relationship between the federal government and tribal governments and dismantle reservations while supporting assimilation into mainstream American society.¹³ However, Native movement to cities during WWII became the roots of a pan-Indian Civil Rights movement that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s.

Places of World War II History

- **Ponca City and Kay County:** Jointly designated a WWII Heritage City, this combined area was home to the Darr School of Aeronautics (which trained over a thousand British pilots), the Continental Oil Refinery, and the Tonkawa POW Camp.
- **Fort Reno:** 94-acres of Fort Reno, founded in 1874 to keep Eastern speculators off Native lands, served as an internment work-camp for German and Italian POWs. Mostly from General Rommel's Afrika Korps, and captured in North Africa, the POWs were hired by local farmers.

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¹⁰ Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 99, 103, 132, 135, 139, 145.

¹¹ Ibid., 100-101.

¹² Oklahoma Senate, "Tinker Field."

¹³ Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, 370.