

## California and the World War II Home Front

### Introduction

California became a vast network of home front production and military installations during World War II because of its many resources and access to the Pacific Ocean. While the war affected every part of the state, its three major cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego—made the largest contributions and experienced the biggest changes throughout the war years. These cities brought a large number of military personnel and workers into the state and tensions between the military and civilians remained high throughout the war.

### Mobilization: Military and Industry

During the war, Los Angeles County became the nation's fastest-growing region with the expansion of more than 1,000 plants and the construction of 479 new defense plants. By 1944, Los Angeles was home to 4,000 separate 'war plants' with the majority in aircraft manufacturing.<sup>1</sup> Smaller, more intricate work was achieved through subcontracting, which accounted for 38 percent of all work. This aerospace-electronics industrial complex became a major center of missile and defense electronics production, especially the



Photo by Nadaner Studios. Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front NHP. RORI 1039.

*Welders, Kaiser Cargo Inc, Richmond Shipyard No. 4 Day Shift. Credit: RORI 1039, Photo by Nadaner Studios Rosie The Riveter/ WWII Home Front National Historical Park.*

development of rocket technology.<sup>2</sup> Shipbuilding became the second largest manufacturing industry in Los Angeles. In 1940, Henry K. Kaiser and his associates organized the California Shipbuilding Corporation. In total, Los Angeles shipyards fulfilled more than 1.5 billion dollars in contracts.<sup>3</sup>

The San Francisco Bay Area contained the largest concentration of shipyards on the home front, including Kaiser's historic Richmond shipyards. Using innovative mass production techniques, Bay Area shipbuilders launched over 4,600 ships. These ships accounted for nearly 45% of all cargo tonnage and 20% of all warship tonnage built in the U.S. during the war.<sup>4</sup> Bethlehem Steel had several shipyards in the Bay Area, producing ships for the Maritime Commission's Long Range Shipbuilding Program. By 1940, smaller-scale shipping industries also took up defense contracts, including Moore Dry Dock in Oakland and Western Pipe and Steel Co. in San Francisco.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Verge, "The Impact of the Second World War on Los Angeles," *Pacific Historical Review* 63, no. 3 (1994): 291-293, 304-305.

<sup>2</sup> Allen J. Scott, "The aerospace-electronics industrial complex of Southern California: the formative years, 1940-1960" *Research Policy* 20, no. 5 (1991): 441-42.

<sup>3</sup> Verge, "The Impact of the Second World War on Los Angeles," 303.

<sup>4</sup> "Historic Richmond Shipyards," Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historical Park, National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/rori/learn/historyculture/historic-richmond-shipyards.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael McKenney Jr, "Steel Leviathans of the Bay: Shipbuilding in the San Francisco Bay Area During World War II," Masters Thesis, California State University, Sacramento, 2021: 9-10.

By selling large tracts of land to the U.S. Navy, San Diego became a large city through federal sponsorship.<sup>6</sup> Twenty-one different military installations stretched across the city, including the Eleventh Naval District Headquarters, the United States Naval Training Center, Naval Air Station San Diego, Miramar Naval Air Station, the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, and Camp Pendleton.<sup>7</sup> San Diego also found some economic success in defense contracts, particularly in the larger aerospace production happening across Southern California.

### **Mobilization: Changes for Workers**

California's three major cities experienced dramatic demographic changes. At its peak, Los Angeles's aircraft industry employed 228,400 workers. Industrial expansion in the Los Angeles area created 550,000 new defense jobs. Women filled many of these jobs: the number of women employees at the top six southern California aircraft plants grew from 143 in 1941 to nearly 65,000 by 1943. At the peak of the war, women comprised 42 percent of the aircraft industry's total workforce. To retain women workers, the industry effectively lobbied for the Lanham Act in 1942, which provided federal funding for on-site child-care centers.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to the war, East Bay cities were predominantly composed of white working-class and middle-class families, with a significant portion being immigrants. The greatest number of out-of-state migrants to the Bay Area during the war came from Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Between 1940 and 1944, the Black population in the Bay area grew from less than 20,000 to over 60,000. The East Bay communities saw the most significant Black population gains: 80 percent in Berkeley, 157 percent in Oakland, and over 1500 percent in Alameda and Richmond. Most of these migrants lived in segregated and poorly constructed temporary housing projects for defense workers near the water's edge. Suburban defense worker subdivisions were built exclusively for white workers, creating thousands of new homes in East Oakland, San Lorenzo, and San Pablo.<sup>9</sup>

San Diego did not experience the ethnic diversification and infusion of women in working spaces that San Francisco and Los Angeles did. However, from 1940 to 1946, San Diego's population grew from 192,486 residents to 320,000. Most of this growth came from the military population. The ensuing housing shortage amidst a population boom led many residents to live in "a large, hastily installed trailer park in pastoral Mission Valley, in old trolley cars, in all-night movie theaters, and in tents." In response, the federal government developed Linda Vista, "the largest single defense housing project and the largest low-income housing development in the world with a projected occupancy of 13,000 people."<sup>10</sup>

### **Discrimination and Fights for Equality**

One of the most powerful and lasting legacies of the WWII home front in California has been racial conflict and integration. New opportunities at defense plants drew thousands of white Southern migrants to Los Angeles. This created economic competition that pushed out Black workers, many of whom were migrants as well. The aircraft industry's principal union barred Black workers from

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<sup>6</sup> Abraham Shragge, "'A New Federal City': San Diego during World War II," *Pacific Historical Review* 63, no. 3 (1994): 334-335.

<sup>7</sup> Tamara Shaw, "Doing their part: The services of the san diego public library during World War II," *Library trends* 55, no. 3 (2007): 570

<sup>8</sup> Verge, "The Impact of the Second World War on Los Angeles," 301-302, 304-305.

<sup>9</sup> Marilyn S. Johnson, "War as Watershed: The East Bay and World War II," *Pacific Historical Review* 63, no. 3 (1994): 317, 318-320.

<sup>10</sup> Shragge, "'A New Federal City,'" 343-346.

membership until 1942, and Vultee Aircraft had a policy that barred the employment of non-white individuals. Local Black newspapers reported regularly on employment discrimination practices at defense plants. Despite their efforts, in June 1941, there were only four Black production workers in the aircraft industry in all of Southern California. The Negro Victory Committee of Los Angeles formed in April 1941 and organized five Black-owned markets to join the Victory Markets Cooperative. When a federal official claimed that Black women were not interested in defense jobs, the Victory Committee “encouraged Black women to flood the agency with job applications, organized a protest march, and finally forced federal officials from the War Manpower Commission to enter into negotiations.”<sup>11</sup>

The increased number of servicemen in Los Angeles also led to racial tensions with residents, particularly the local Latinx communities. Young Mexican American men known as “Zoot suiters” because of their popular attire, “resented the constant traffic of servicemen through their neighborhoods.” In turn, servicemen saw zoot suiters as draft dodgers. On the night of June 3, 1943, large-scale fighting and rioting broke out after a rumor spread that zoot suiters attacked servicemen near a dancehall in Venice. For ten days, the police and military officials failed to control the confrontational servicemen in what became known as the Zoot Suit Riots. The white rioters marched through the downtown area, stripping the clothing off any person they found wearing a zoot suit.<sup>12</sup>

California residents of Mexican descent also faced discrimination through the Bracero Program in rural California, which provided much needed labor to the state’s significant agricultural wartime economy. The first trainloads of Mexican workers arrived in late 1942 on the promise that they would receive the same wages as other workers in the area. Within two months of their arrival, workers went on strike for being paid a piece rate while their mostly white counterparts were paid hourly. Through negotiations with the Farm Security Administration and Mexican Consulate, workers returned to work after receiving an hourly rate of 65 cents by contract. However, Mexican farm workers across the state faced issues of misleading and unfulfilled contractual promises and poor working conditions. Some workers went on strike, while others broke their contracts to work in other, better-paying crops.<sup>13</sup>

The racial biases and wartime hysteria of white Californians played a significant role in Japanese Americans’ mass eviction from the state. Many Los Angeles residents became swept up in anti-Japanese hysteria after Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor. Over 60,000 Japanese Americans in Los Angeles were removed from their homes and businesses in the wake of Executive Order 9066. Before being sent to camps across the country, internees spent two months living in horse stables at the Santa Anita and Hollywood Park racetracks.<sup>14</sup> In San Diego, fearing sabotage of local crops, the county Agricultural Department instituted a program to test all produce from local Japanese American farmers.<sup>15</sup> Not all Californians favored Japanese American incarceration. In San Francisco, prominent University figures organized the Fair Play Committee to advocate for government evaluations of loyalty rather than mass evacuations. The Northern California American Civil Liberties Union (NCACLU) spoke out in direct opposition to the national ACLU’s support for Japanese American incarceration.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Verge, “The Impact of the Second World War on Los Angeles,” 298-301.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 306-307.

<sup>13</sup> Don Mitchell, “Battlefields: Braceros, agribusiness, and the violent reproduction of the California agricultural landscape during World War II,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 36, no. 2 (2010): 143-144, 147.

<sup>14</sup> Verge, “The Impact of the Second World War on Los Angeles,” 296.

<sup>15</sup> Shragge, “A New Federal City”: San Diego during World War II,” 353.

<sup>16</sup> Ellen Eisenberg, “As Truly American as Your Son”: Voicing Opposition to Internment in Three West Coast Cities,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104, no. 4 (2003): 549-553.

## Life on the Home Front

Californians eagerly bought war bonds, planted victory gardens, volunteered their time, and donated blood. Women's home front life especially changed. For example, in the absence of their male colleagues away at the frontlines, women students at the University of California at Berkeley enrolled in male-dominated programs such as mathematics, chemistry, and engineering to prepare for employment in defense plants. For the first time, they filled campus leadership positions such as student government presidencies and led political engagement on campus.<sup>17</sup> The massive influx of workers and servicemen also altered life on California's home front. Southern migrants brought their music to the Bay Area. They organized bands and rented dance halls to sponsor "Victory Barn Dances" for local shipyard workers. The presence of southern residents also gave rise to Evangelicalism, with some forty new Evangelical churches springing up in the Richmond area, often in the storefronts of defense worker neighborhoods.<sup>18</sup> The influx of servicemen contributed to a vibrant queer culture and nightlife, including famous havens such as the Black Cat and Mona's 440 Club in San Francisco.<sup>19</sup>

## After the War

California's incredible growth in population and industry during WWII was instrumental in making it an economic, industrial, and technological powerhouse. Major postwar challenges included reintegrating returning veterans and addressing wartime racial dynamics, which both increased and limited state diversity. Housing remained a critical issue, and the postwar suburban and highway sprawl was marked by racial discrimination and poor environmental effects, including smog. The return of thousands of incarcerated Japanese Americans illustrated the lasting impacts of wartime policies. Many Japanese Americans did not return to their neighborhoods for fear that they might be rounded up again, undermining what were once prosperous and tightly knit communities. Those who lost their homes and businesses were only able to recoup at most ten percent of their claims through the Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act of 1948. Survivors had to wait forty years for additional reparations.<sup>20</sup>

## Places of World War II History

- **Richmond:** Designated as California's American World War II Heritage City and home to [Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Historical Park](#), Richmond's Kaiser shipyards produced 747 ships during the war, more than any other complex in the country. The city was also notable for 24-hour childcare, prepaid health insurance, and its federal housing program.
- **Manzanar War Relocation Center:** Today, a [National Historic Site](#), over 11,000 Japanese Americans were uprooted from their homes and incarcerated at Manzanar from 1942-45.
- **Naval Ordnance Test Station China Lake:** Established in Southern California in late 1943, the Navy developed, produced, and tested rockets and other new weapons in cooperation with the California Institute of Technology. Their work also supported the Manhattan Project.

*By Eliza McKinney, 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.*

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Dorn, "'A Woman's World': The University of California, Berkeley, During the Second World War," *History of Education Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2008): 534-535.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, "War as Watershed: The East Bay and World War II," 321.

<sup>19</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming out under fire: The history of gay men and women in World War II* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010): 109.

<sup>20</sup> Shragge, "A New Federal City": San Diego during World War II," 353.