Missouri and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Located at the center of the continent, at the junction of two of the country's largest rivers, Missouri is about as American as apple pie. Missourians did not shirk from the demands of World War II's home front: they produced the ammunition, produce, and minerals that powered the nation's war effort. St. Louis earned the nickname "bomb city" for all the ordnance the area produced, and Kansas City area businesses developed an entire regional economy around war production.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Sedalia Army Air Field (Courtesy photo, US Air Force / Strategic Air Command)

As Missouri's largest city, St. Louis played an outsized role in the home front effort. A full three quarters of factories in the Greater St. Louis area were working in war production.[1] At the time, the St. Louis Army Ammunition Plant was the world's largest small arms ammunition plant. The facility was government–owned but contractor–run, producing .30– and .50–caliber cartridges under the direction of U.S. Cartridge Co. At the same facility, the Chevrolet Division of General Motors fabricated 105–mm projectiles and the McQuay-Norris Manufacturing Co. made steel armor–piercing bullet cores.[2] Just south of St Louis lay Jefferson Barracks, the oldest continuously–operating military base west of the Mississippi River, which acted as a crossroads for the Army.[3] According to the Post's official history, "during World War II, Jefferson Barracks was the first and one of the largest Army Air Corps training centers in the United States in addition to being one of the country's greatest recruitment depots."[4]

Kansas City and the surrounding suburbs also played a significant role on the home front. The Lake City Army Ammunition Plant (LCAAP) in Independence was built during the rush to mobilization and served as a template for other government–built and –owned factories being operated by private contractors. The facility churned out 5.7 billion rounds of small arms ammunition, about 13% of the nation's production during the entire war.[5] Pratt & Whitney also built a facility in Kansas City to augment production already happening at their main plant in Connecticut. The plant produced 233,683 of its signature Wasp family of radial engines, helping make Pratt & Whitney the top producer of aircraft engines during the war."[6]

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[1] "Home Front: St. Louis," PBS video, 3 February 2020.
[2] "St. Louis Army Ammunition Plant… Written Historical and Descriptive Data," Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, p. 25, 28.
[3] Beatrice Thrapp, "Missouri and the War: Part II," *Missouri and the War*, a series from the *Missouri Historical Review* 37 (January 1943): 182.
[4] Jefferson Barracks Telephone Museum, "Jefferson Barracks Military Post."
[5] "Lake City Army Ammunition Plant… Written Historical and Descriptive Data," Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, p. 23, 27.
[6] "Pratt & Whitney Plant… Written Historical and Descriptive Data and Field Records," Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, p. 12-13.

Missouri's agricultural production surged in response to war demands, with a bumper harvest in 1942 and 4% gains across the board the next year.[7] Farm prices roughly doubled between 1939 and the end of the war, and farm income increased from $253 million in 1939 to $682 million in 1944.[8] Crops such as corn, turkey, tobacco, and lumber all increased production significantly. These gains were made despite a serious shortage of labor and machinery, which was mostly overcome by farmers working longer hours and by neighborhood exchanges of labor and equipment. A new mechanical corn picker helped dramatically. The number of tractors in Jefferson County rose from 600 to 911, and the value of crops harvested increased from $1.22 million in 1940 to $2.68 million in 1945.[9] A blacksmithing industry also temporarily reemerged to combat the lack of replacement parts for farm equipment.

Missouri mining and resource extraction also saw boom years during the war, facilitated by advances in mining technology. Refractory clays were mined as inputs for bricks, the lining of boilers and furnaces, and for Liberty ships. In 1943, Missouri ranked first in the nation in the production of fire clay. Missouri was also the largest lead-producing state in the union, producing nearly 40% of the nationwide total in 1943 at 257,145 tons. The state also responded to the heavy demand for coal after many war plants converted to coal for fuel and power. Missouri mineral production across the board increased from $51 million in 1939 to $90 million by 1943.[10]

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

At the start of the war, Missouri's population was split almost evenly between urban-dwellers and rural residents, with over two thirds of the rural population living and working on farms. There were about 244,000 African Americans in the state in 1940, about 6% of the population. 1.2 million people lived in either Kansas City or St. Louis, the only two cities above the 100k resident mark.[11] Across St. Louis, the war changed the size and shape of the workforce. Women were hired for the first time in many industries, including the city's ordnance plants.[12]

The women of Jefferson County, a rural area significant for its closeness and service to St. Louis, also pitched in to help with farm work: "Jefferson County farm women used surplus cotton to make 710 mattresses in 1942 and 1943. Women also learned to patch linoleum and rugs; to sharpen knives; to mend screens, electric cords, and pots and pans; to stop faucet leaks; and to take care of home equipment." 6,000 bushels of milkweed were even harvested by school children. Considered a weed by farmers, the plant was indispensable for filling flotation vests for airmen and sailors after the Japanese cut off the supply of kapok fiber from the Dutch East Indies.[13]

Anchored by the distribution bases Fort Leonard Wood and Camp Crowder, Missouri had about thirty POW Camps spread across the state. There were 25 boat camps along the Missouri and Mississippi

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[7] Dorothy Dysart Flynn, "Missouri and the War: Part VI," *Missouri and the War*, a series from the *Missouri Historical Review* 38 (January 1944): 173.
[8] Gerard Schultz, "Missouri and the War: Part XVI," *Missouri and the War*, a series from the *Missouri Historical Review* 40 (July 1946): 535.
[9] Stephen F. Huss, "Milkweed, Machine Guns and Cows: Jefferson County Farmers in World War II," *Missouri Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (April 1992): 280.
[10] Schultz, "Missouri and the War: Part XVI," 538.
[11] "1940 Census Data, Missouri," U.S. Census Bureau.
[12] Flynn, "Missouri and the War: Part VI," 177.
[13] Huss, ""Milkweed, Machine Guns and Cows," 274, 278-9.

Rivers. These were “floating operations” where prisoners lived on quarter boats and assisted the Army Corps of Engineers with river dredging operations. Branch camps were sited in agricultural regions, where POWs could assist with picking cotton, detasseling corn stalks, and harvesting potatoes. Branch camps provided crucial labor for short-term but intensive phases of agricultural activity. Many locals were not happy that the prisoners at the largest POW camp at Weingarten met with surprisingly good conditions, receiving the same housing, food, and recreation opportunities that GIs would have, including sports leagues, organized recreation, camp libraries, and money for daily beer purchases.[14]

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Missouri’s economic mobilization was not without social turbulence and racial strife. St. Louis was home to a March on Washington Movement chapter, designed to pressure the U.S. government to provide fair working conditions and desegregate the armed forces. The first major action was a rally at Kiel Auditorium on August 14, 1942, after the mass layoff of 145 African American workers at Carter Carburetor. No African Americans remained among the plant’s 3,000 workers. The opening speaker argued that if Americans didn’t bury domestic Jim Crowism alongside foreign Fascism, then the result would be more “riots, unpunished lynchings, unemployment, labor Union bars, and discrimination.” The rally built momentum for a march on Carter Carburetor two weeks later. The plant had a contract worth more than a million dollars from the federal government to manufacture artillery and bomb fuses, yet, they were in direct violation of Executive Order 8802, which forbade discrimination in war industries.[15]

The Movement followed these actions with a prayer demonstration at the St. Louis Memorial Plaza, before turning to a three-year-long campaign to integrate the small arms plant operated by U.S. Cartridge. The facility had a history of exclusion, especially against Black women. There was no opportunity for promotion out of low-paid roles and insulting racial conditions. The racial strife continued to bubble up until mid-1944 when U.S. Cartridge and labor and civic leaders arrived on “the St. Louis plan,” which called for sharply segregated workplaces to keep the peace and to offer some pathway for advancement within all-black departments. U.S. Cartridge created a completely segregated and independent unit called Unit 202, which employed, at its peak, 5,000 African Americans.[16]

Rural Missouri also struggled with discriminatory practices. Outside of St. Louis, in the Missouri Bottomlands, the Hellwig Brothers’ Farm saw nearly all sides of home front coercion and social turbulence in one space. 50 Mexican *braceros* arrived from the Texas borderlands for the spring spinach season of 1943. The *St. Louis Post- Dispatch* reported that “exhausted migrants labored ‘as much as 20 hours a day’... for at least three consecutive weeks.” 100 incarcerated Japanese Americans arrived next in July of 1943, “on loan” from the Arkansas Rohwer Relocation Center. Japanese Americans and *braceros* shared living and working spaces.[17] 65 Italian POWs arrived for the April 1944 spinach harvest, when the farm became a branch camp of Fort Leonard Wood. The Italians were later replaced with 100 German POWs.

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[14] David Fielder, *The Enemy Among Us: POWs in Missouri During World War II* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, Distributed by University of Missouri Press, 2003), 3-4, 13, 282.
[15] David Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy: The March on Washington Movement, 1941-1946* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 105, 110.
[16] Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy,*115, 119.
[17] Samuel Klee, “Assembling ‘the Camp’: Agricultural Labor and the Wartime Carceral State in Chesterfield, Missouri, 1937-1972,” *Agricultural History* 95, no. 4 (2021): 638, 640.

Life on the Home Front

Missourians responded enthusiastically to home front demands. By the spring of 1943, 123,000 St. Louisans were enrolled in some kind of volunteer civilian defense duty.[18] Subcommittees were formed to oversee collection of scrap metal, household fats, tin cans, rubber, and paper. In July of 1942 the city pulled up 53,700 feet of unused streetcar lines to send to the effort.[19] Boy Scouts were involved in bond sales drives, incentivized by the promise of earning a little medal when they sold $3,000 worth. At the St. Louis Altenheim, a residential center for senior citizens, women did their part for the war by making 1200 garments for the Red Cross by early 1942.[20] Baseball also helped keep up home front morale, as the St. Louis Cardinals played in the World Series three years in a row, winning in 1942 and 1944.[21]

In Kansas City, civic pride ran high, with boosters pointing to record deposits at area banks.[22] The *Kansas City Times* ran a story in 1942 proudly claiming that the city had bought $2.7 million in bonds. In the same month an eleven acre piece of land was chosen to serve as a collection point for scrap rubber collected across Missouri and Kansas.[23] Later in the war, Kansas Citians easily met a $79 million quota in the third bond drive in only 21 days, and then turned around and raised $2.3 million for humanitarian aid, including food and medical supplies for 12 Allied nations, recreation opportunities for American servicemen, and home front health and welfare services.[24]

After the War

World War II transformed Missouri, helping to make the Midwest a national manufacturing center. Industrialization and employment opportunities continued to expand in the postwar era, as did discrimination in labor. After the war, places like the Hellwig Brother's farm looked back toward the *bracero* and H-2 visa programs for their labor pools, while recruiting African Americans moving north out of the Deep South. Returning Black veterans and residents challenged Jim Crow policies, and St. Louis became a hotspot of civil rights activism in the proceeding decades.

Places of World War II History

- **Johnson County and Warrensburg:** Designated as Missouri's American World War II Heritage City, this area included Sedalia Army Air Field, one of only eight sites in the U.S. dedicated to training glider pilots and Army paratroopers. The area also hosted the Navy's V-12 Officer Training Program.

- **Fort Leonard Wood:** The fort's construction on the Ozark plateau in late 1940 brought thousands of workers to the area and displaced about 200 farm families. During WWII, the fort served as an infantry and engineering training post and held thousands of German POWs.

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.

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[18] Juliet M. Gross, "Missouri and the War: Part III," *Missouri and the War*, a series from the *Missouri Historical Review* 37 (April 1943): 302.
[19] Bertha Gruber, "Missouri and the War: Part I," *Missouri and the War*, a series from the *Missouri Historical Review* 37 (October 1942): 49.
[20] Gruber, "Missouri and the War: Part I," 47-48.
[21] "Home Front: St. Louis," PBS video, 3 February 2020.
[22] Flynn, "Missouri and the War: Part VI," 174.
[23] Gruber, "Missouri and the War: Part I," 48, 50-51.
[24] Flynn, "Missouri and the War: Part VI," 180.