

Iowa and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

During World War II, Iowans enthusiastically embraced the home front war effort. The war dramatically reshaped the manufacturing sector of Iowa's economy, as many factories shifted from peacetime production to munitions. The war also significantly grew Iowa's agricultural production, even as many people left rural Iowa for the battlefield, cities, or higher-paying defense work elsewhere.

Mobilization: Military and Industry



Aerial photo of John Deere Company factory in Waterloo, Iowa, directly after World War II, approximately 1950. Credit: Photo Courtesy of the Grout Museum District, Waterloo, Iowa

In Iowa, the war bolstered the fortunes of large corporations, solidified the bottom lines of many smaller companies, and gave opportunities to some entrepreneurs like Roy Carver, who converted an unused sauerkraut factory into a military pump production facility.¹ Between 1939 and 1947, the value of manufacturing output in Iowa grew more than 275%.²

Waterloo, a city located in northeastern Iowa with a population just under 52,000 in 1940, grew significantly during the war. It became home to 17 war production facilities employing 10,000 men and 4,000 women. The facilities manufactured a wide range of items including tools for the military, trailers for the Seabees, covers for Army cots,

uniforms, and Army Air Force tow targets. Approximately 5,700 employees worked at the John Deere Tractor Company manufacturing aircraft parts, transmissions and final drives for tanks and tractors. The latter were essential for increasing agricultural output as the U.S. sought to feed not only military personnel, but also home front U.S. and civilians from Allied countries. The Rath Packing Company, which sent processed meats, boneless beef, and lard to the same recipients via the Lend-Lease Act (1941) and other programs, employed approximately 4,700 workers.³

Iowa also played a significant role in ammunition manufacturing. Ankeny, outside of Des Moines, housed the Des Moines Ordnance Plant (DMOP) that employed nearly 19,000 workers at its peak. Built on the site of former farms, the plant focused on the production of .30- and .50-caliber bullets and had the ability to produce 2.3 million rounds of ammunition per day. Burlington, on the Mississippi River, was home to the Iowa Ordnance Plant, which employed 12,000 workers and specialized in the loading of artillery shells and aerial bombs. The facility served as a tragic reminder that work on the home front could be deadly. Burlington suffered two ordnance plant explosions early in the war. The first occurred only five days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and cost 13 home front men their lives. The second took place on March 4, 1942, and resulted in the deaths of 20 workers.⁴

¹ Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 281.

² "World War II," Iowa Pathways.

³ Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 281.

⁴ Lisa Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa, 1939-1945* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2009), 56, 59-61, 65, 67, 70.

Iowa housed several significant military installations. Spencer Field offered glider training, via a contract with Hunter Flying Service, for the United States Army Air Force from 1942 to 1944. Sioux City Army Air Base became a major training center for B-24 Liberator and B-17 Flying Fortress crews. Iowa also played a key role in the Manhattan Project. Scientists at Iowa State College in Ames developed a method of producing high quality purified uranium that proved to be essential to the success of the development of the atomic bomb. Pivotal during the war, the Ames group's work continued in Iowa after the war.⁵

Agriculture also played a significant role in Iowa's WWII home front efforts. The government promoted farming as a patriotic occupation through slogans such as "1942—The Year of the Tractor as well as the Tank," "Battle lines of the food front," and "Plowshares are swords."⁶ Bolstered by increased farm mechanization, Iowa farmers recovered from the Great Depression and soon boasted their highest yields ever. In 1943 alone, "The fields and feedlots of Iowa produced 640 million bushels of corn, 39 million bushels of soybeans, 21 million head of hogs, 7 million pounds of milk, 70 million chickens and 326 million dozens of eggs; all new production records." Notably, Iowa farmers began growing hemp and soybeans in vast quantities. Previously imported from Japan, these products were needed to produce rope and oil.⁷

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

The growth in wartime manufacturing significantly reshaped Iowa's population: it brought people into towns and cities from rural areas. Changing gender relations comprised another important aspect of home front work in Iowa. Women found employment in virtually every sector: they labored in hemp plants, made up a significant percentage of the employees in munitions, and took on a variety of other previously male work like driving city buses.⁸

Officials at the Iowa Ordnance Plant expected women to make up 30 percent of the labor force, especially for fuse work, but also for loading and weighing shells. Men over the age of forty were another group of sought-after workers; they were thought to have better safety habits since they had reached "an age of caution." The DMOP initially only employed white men and women. By 1943 two-thirds of the plant's job ads targeted women, who were more readily available. Management could also turn a larger profit by employing women since they were paid significantly less than men.⁹

Farm work was not initially considered eligible for draft deferment, causing a labor shortage when many agricultural workers were drafted. Compounding this problem was the fact that an estimated 24,000 Iowans left the state looking for jobs in higher-paying defense-related work. Most of the men who left had previously worked on farms.¹⁰ Many farmers were forced to abandon prejudices that had kept them from hiring Black Americans, Mexican nationals, and women of all races. In 1944 1,100 Mexican workers arrived in Iowa to address farm labor shortages. By 1945, 1,500 Jamaican laborers were also working the land in Iowa.¹¹

⁵ Joanne Abel Goldman, "Mobilizing Science in the Heartland,: Iowa State College, the State University of Iowa, and National Science During World War II," *The Annals of Iowa* 59, no. 4 (October 2000): 375-385.

⁶ Quoted from Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa*, 25.

⁷ Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 281.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 281, 283.

⁹ Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa*, 69

¹⁰ Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 279. Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa*, 29.

¹¹ Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa*, 33, 38.

Another key source of farm labor came from Prisoner of War camps located in Algona and Clarinda. Algona, a town with a population of 5,000 in 1941, soon became the temporary home to 3,000 German and Italian POWs. Additionally, Algona served as an important POW hub, sending 10,000 prisoners to 30 branch camps in the region.¹² Prisoners performed farm labor, filled sandbags to serve as levees during floods, and repaired fences and farm machinery. Local farmers, who retained strong roots to their German ancestry, were largely welcoming of German and Italian prisoners. By contrast, Japanese prisoners of war accounted for a very small proportion of POWs: only 500 came to Iowa during the war.¹³ Japanese prisoners in Iowa did not receive the same treatment as Germans and Italians. They were paid \$0.10 per day—\$0.70 less than their European counterparts—and local farmers were hesitant to use them as farm hands due to racist stereotypes.¹⁴

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Iowa also struggled with changing race relations in economic sectors other than farming. Most factories refused to employ Black Americans. In 1942 Elizabeth Shackelford, an 18-year-old Black woman, sued DMOP, claiming that the plant “refused to employ [people] in the capacity for which they are best qualified.” Eventually 4% of DMOP employees were Black, which matched the Black/white ratio in Iowa at the time.¹⁵ Black women similarly faced challenges in gaining acceptance in Iowa’s food processing industry. Union rules and union leadership played a key role in forging inroads. When a white female union leader told her fellow white female employees that Black women were joining the workforce, many of the white women said, “Well, I won’t work with them.” The union leader responded, “It looks like we’re going to have to hire all black girls in here if all of you are going to quit.” She then noted that the white women reluctantly changed their minds but eventually came to fully accept the women.¹⁶

Fort Des Moines housed a Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC, later shortened to WAC) officer training school beginning in 1942. Initially the school was only for white women, but under pressure from the African American community and its allies, the military allowed 40 Black women to join the 400 white women in the first cohort. Racist beliefs about Black inferiority shaped the military’s recruitment effort.¹⁷ An Army order insisted that “There will be no discrimination in the type of duties to which Negro women in the WAC may be assigned.” However, at Fort Des Moines “white, Puerto Rican, Chinese, Japanese and Native-American women slept, ate and trained together while African American women had separate facilities and training.” In November 1942 Black and white WAC facilities merged. An official investigation found there was no racial discrimination within WAC. Black WACs testified otherwise. They also experienced racism in the towns they were stationed.¹⁸

Life on the Home Front

While patriotism was evident everywhere in Iowa, rural Iowans particularly shone. 4-H groups went all out to support war bond sales, including going door-to-door.¹⁹ Iowans were also committed to scrap,

¹² “[Traces of POW History in Iowa](#),” Iowa Pathways, 2007.

¹³ Dan Eshelman, *Camp Clarinda: The War Comes to the Heartland*, 2000.

¹⁴ Chad Timm, “Working with the Enemy: Axis Prisoners of War in Iowa during World War II,” *The Annals of Iowa* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2011), 90.

¹⁵ Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa*, 67-69.

¹⁶ Shelton Stromquist, *Solidarity & Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor in the Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 137.

¹⁷ “[Female Black Officers Train in Des Moines in World War II](#),” Iowa Pathways.

¹⁸ Bill Silag, ed. *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000* (Des Moines: State Historical Society of Iowa, 2001), 122.

¹⁹ Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 284.

waste paper, and milkweed pod drives. Clarinda Iowa's iron drive was undertaken "like a military operation." Iowa's salvage division reported more than five million pounds of wastepaper came in from a third of Iowa's counties alone in the last half of 1943. And many Iowans who were children during the war fondly recall the search for milkweed-pods in the fall of 1944. The pods were used to help fill one million life jackets.²⁰

Iowa's home front effort was also marked by one of the most famous losses of war. In late 1942, the five Sullivan brothers from Waterloo, Iowa, died together on the same ship in the Pacific. Their story was told in the 1944 film, *The Sullivans*, which helped galvanize the nation as it entered the third year of the war. The brothers' parents then traveled across the country to share their story at defense plants and shipyards to raise war bonds and boost morale. Along with Grant Wood's painting of rural family life, which appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1942 under the title "For What Are We Fighting," Iowa came to stand for "the steady heart of a nation at war," according to *Life* magazine.²¹

After the War

World War II accelerated industrialization, urbanization, and a shift to modern, industrial-scale farming in Iowa. The increase in food production coupled with the rise of monocropping practices resulted in poor soil conservation and long-term environmental effects. With the help of the G.I. Bill, many returning veterans chose not to go back to the farm or factories and instead pursued careers as teachers, engineers, or accountants.²² While home front mobilization changed gender and race relations and made Iowans more accepting of diverse work roles, both women and racial minorities continued to face discrimination that shaped future civil rights struggles.

Places of World War II History

- **Waterloo:** Designated as Iowa's American World War II Heritage City, Waterloo produced a massive industrial output with John Deere supplying the Army with tank transmissions and airplane parts and Rath Packing Company feeding the troops. The city was also notable for the deaths of the five Sullivan brothers, who were killed together while serving in the Pacific.
- **Fort Des Moines Historic Complex:** A National Historic Landmark today, the fort gained recognition as the home of the first WAAC Training Center during WWII, where more than 72,000 women completed training to assist the military mission.
- **Camp Algona:** This base POW camp sent 10,000 German and Italian prisoners to over 30 branch camps during WWII. The POWs performed important farm labor and sometimes formed close relationships with the local population. Today, a nativity scene built by prisoners is still displayed in Algona and the public can visit the Camp Algona POW Museum.

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²⁰ Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa*, 103-106.

²¹ Marty Knepper and John Lawrence, "World War II and Iowa: Hollywood's Pastoral Myth for the Nation," in *Representing the Rural*, edited by Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2006): 323.

²² Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land*, 286.