

Indiana and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Indiana made significant contributions to the WWII home front in the realms of industrial production, agriculture, and mining. Northern Indiana cities produced military trucks and engines, while southern Indiana cities located near the Ohio River worked in the shipbuilding and water shipping industries. The Hoosier State's capital, Indianapolis, was particularly notable for its wartime drug manufacturing.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Diverse wartime investment in the state attracted many migrants, as Indiana's population increased by half a million between 1940 and 1950.¹ Many of these residents had first come to mine coal that fueled the trains that gave Indiana its official motto as the "Crossroads of America." The state produced fifteen million tons of coal in 1939, and more than twenty-six million tons in 1944. Other migrants came to work in agriculture, providing a boost to the state's agricultural production, which increased by 49 percent during the war.²



LST-157 was launched on October 31, 1942, in Evansville, Indiana and participated in operations such as the invasion of Normandy in June 1944. Credit: University of Southern Indiana, Rice Library Digital Collections.

In the state's north, South Bend's Studebaker factory switched from commercial car production to making US6 cargo trucks. At its peak, the factory turned out 6,000 vehicles per month, toward the company's total wartime output of 197,678 trucks.³ In 1943, Studebaker became the sole supplier of Cyclone engines for the B-17 Super Fortress plane, producing 30,000 across its three midwestern factories. Studebaker also helped develop and mass produce the M-29 Weasel, an amphibious mini tank used in all the war's theatres. These dynamic exports brought \$1.2 billion in profits by the war's end.⁴

Nearby LaPorte County, which had a 1940 population of 16,000, built itself up to accommodate 21,000 factory workers at the Kingsbury Ordnance Plant. Workers on the 13,000-acre campus engaged in one of the country's largest ordnance assembly lines.⁵ In the southern part of the state, the Indiana Ordnance Plant at Charlestown was a hub for railways and had access to a plentiful water supply in the Ohio River. The town of 939 residents came to host more than 30,000 workers, who produced 500 million pounds of smokeless powder, an artillery and ammunition propellant used in a range of World War II munitions.⁶ Ordnance production and testing also occurred at the Jefferson Proving Ground. Built in 1940 by the War Department, the 56,000-acre grounds in southeastern Indiana became a leading national test site for all manner of explosives.⁷

¹ Lynn Turner, "Indiana in World War II—A Progress Report," *Indiana Magazine of History* LII, no. 1 (March 1955): 13.

² R. C. Freytag, "The Indiana Coal Industry's Part in World War II," *Indiana Magazine of History* 41, no. 3 (September 1945): 265-266. Turner, "Progress Report," 4.

³ Fred Crismon, *U. S. Military Wheeled Vehicles* (Victory WWII Publishing Limited, 2001).

⁴ Ben Wilson, "Engines of War: The Studebaker Corporation and World War II," Ball State University B.A. thesis (2019), 13, 17, 25, 128-29.

⁵ "[The Kingsbury Ordnance Plant](#)," Indiana Public Media.

⁶ "[WWII Army Munitions Plant](#)," Indiana Historical Bureau. Nicole Poletika, "[World War II Comes to Indiana: The Indiana Army Ammunition Plant, Part I](#)," *Untold Indiana*, Indiana Historical Bureau. Turner, "A Progress Report," 6.

⁷ Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (New York: New Press, 2001).

The mid-sized industrial city of Evansville represented a particularly successful story on the Hoosier home front. Badly bruised by the Great Depression, the city's leaders were eager to leap at any opportunity and lobbied the War Department for contracts. By the war's end, Evansville boasted the production of 167 landing ship tanks at its own Navy shipyard, and 6,670 P-47 Thunderbolt fighter aircraft through Republic Aviation. No other city in the U.S. produced both vessels. Nearby, the Servel Corporation made wing panels for the Thunderbolts, while Hoosier Cardinal made plastic domes for P-29 fighters. In just under five months, Evansville's Chrysler plant transformed into the Evansville Ordnance Plant, maker of some three billion rounds of .45-caliber bullets—96 percent of the .45-caliber ammunition produced in the entire country during the war.⁸

The Eli Lilly Company in Indianapolis took on the complex challenge of producing blood plasma, ultimately producing ten thousand units per week, 20 percent of the national total, in coordination with the American Red Cross. In addition, Lilly produced the encephalitis vaccine and developed mass-production methods for penicillin, leaving behind the tedious method of culturing penicillin in milk bottles for an innovative eight-thousand-gallon tank culture.⁹ If drug manufacturing seems an unlikely association for the "Racing Capital of the World," the production of high-speed engines at the Allison Engine Company appears far more natural. Rather than working on auto engines, the company most associated with the Indy 500 made 70,000 liquid-cooled V-1710 engines for fighter planes.¹⁰

Along with growth in defense manufacturing, Indiana saw an increase in military installations. Entering the war years with two military facilities, Fort Benjamin Harrison near Indianapolis and the Jeffersonville Quartermaster Depot in Jeffersonville, Indiana exited WWII with seven air bases, six depots, and five training camps.¹¹ Of these, the Freeman Army Airfield, near Seymour in south Indiana, and Camp Atterbury, near Edinburgh in south-central Indiana, were especially significant. Freeman served as a training base for the famous Tuskegee Redwings, while Camp Atterbury trained four U.S. Army infantry divisions, treated 85,000 patients at its hospital, and included a POW camp.¹²

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Both women and African Americans experienced the greatest gains in work opportunities in Indiana during the war. The Indiana Ordnance Plant demanded a skilled workforce that included thousands of women and Black laborers. Women moved from positions as lab technicians and mail runners to attending powder-cutting machines and packing powder bags. African Americans rose from janitorial duties to work as plant operators and chemists, even as restrooms and company housing remained segregated.¹³ In 1943, a group of women known as the Curtiss-Wright Cadettes began training in the Navy's V-12 program at Purdue University to work on aircraft.¹⁴ Roosevelt's Committee on Fair Employment Practice commended Evansville's Chrysler and Sunbeam for their extensive hiring of African Americans. Chrysler employed 1,186 Black workers, or 11.5 percent of its workforce, by 1944.¹⁵

⁸ James L. MacLeod, *Evansville in World War II* (Charleston: The History Press, 2015), 12-14, 22-25.

⁹ James Madison, *Eli Lilly, A Life: 1885-1977* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1989), 105-108.

¹⁰ Casey Pfeiffer, "[Start Your Aircraft Engines!: Aviation Accomplishments in Speedway During World War II](#)," *Untold Indiana*, Indiana Historical Bureau.

¹¹ Turner, "Progress Report," 4.

¹² *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, Oxford Oral History Series (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Nicole Kobrowski, "[Camp Atterbury](#)," *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis* (2021).

¹³ Nicole Poletika, "[World War II Comes to Indiana: The Indiana Army Ammunition Plant, Part II](#)," *Untold Indiana*, Indiana Historical Bureau.

¹⁴ "[Curtis-Wright Cadettes: Historical Information](#)," Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University.

¹⁵ MacLeod, *Evansville*, 64-65

To help alleviate labor shortages in farming and the canning industry, Indiana utilized the labor of prisoners of war, including thousands of German and Italian POWs imprisoned at Camp Atterbury. In total, Indiana hosted 15,000 POWs across its various POW camps and branch camps, including at Austin, Windfall, Vincennes, Morristown, Eaton, and Fort Benjamin Harrison.¹⁶

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

While many Indiana war industries hired African American laborers in unprecedented numbers, others did not. In Evansville, local businesses, like International Steel and Hoosier Lamp and Stamping, remained all white. Meanwhile, Black workers who reported getting paid well during the war still went home to segregated communities. Jim Crow affected Black troops in Evansville, too. Barred from nearly all mainstream accommodations in the city, including the USO, Black troops instead frequented the “Lincoln USO” in the Lincoln Gardens WPA housing project. And even in the bastion of progress, the Chrysler plant, white workers went on strike to protest Black hirings in 1943.¹⁷

Freeman Army Airfield is best known as the site of a protest by more than 100 Tuskegee Airmen against segregation at the base’s officers’ clubs. Following a mass court martial initiated by the base’s white commander, who also put in place the segregation policy, President Truman intervened, with the result that only one Black serviceman was found guilty. His \$150 fine was paid by his supporters, but the Freeman Airfield incident and other injustices faced by the highly effective Redwings and other Black troops reflect the racism that pervaded the home front.¹⁸

Life on the Home Front

As elsewhere in the county, Indiana civilians experienced great sacrifice during the war in the form of rationing of basic food items and gasoline, blackouts, and air raid drills. Entertainment was restricted under war demands, which included the closures of the Indiana State Fair and the Indy 500. Many civilians engaged in volunteer efforts that included scrap drives, victory gardens, and stamp sales.¹⁹ The Hoosier population purchased over three billion dollars in war bonds, while Studebaker employees alone invested \$26 million in war bonds.²⁰ Within one year of opening, the Evansville Red Cross Canteen served an average of 1,500 servicemembers a day and provided over 120,000 pounds of meat, 1,200 gallons of ice cream, and 2,300 cakes.²¹

After the War

Manufacturing continued to be critical to Indiana’s economy after the war, as factories shifted back to consumer goods from military production. The war manufacturing boom, however, had a lasting negative environmental impact in the form of water and soil contamination, air pollution, and discarded hazardous materials. The GI Bill helped create mass education and suburbanization in the state, but these gains were not equally distributed. Ongoing racial segregation and discrimination, including in the form of racial covenants, became a springboard for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.²²

¹⁶ Ryan Schwier, “[Eden for the Enemy Prisoners’: The Role of International Humanitarian Law in Indiana During World War II](#),” Indiana Legal Archive, August 31, 2015.

¹⁷ MacLeod, *Evansville*, 64-66.

¹⁸ Michael Hankins, “[Mutiny at Freeman Field: The Tuskegee Airmen on Trial, Part II](#),” *Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum* website, June 9, 2020.

¹⁹ James Madison, “[Hoosiers at War: An Overview of Indiana during World War II](#),” Indian Historical Bureau.

²⁰ Turner, “Progress Report,” 3. Wilson, “Engines of War,” 28-29.

²¹ “Canteen to Celebrate Birthday; 400,000 Soldiers Served,” *The Evansville Courier*, June 6, 1943, 16.

²² Madison, “Hoosiers at War.”

Places of World War II History

- **Evansville:** 75% of the factories in Indiana's designated World War II Heritage City received military contracts and 15 businesses received the Army-Navy's coveted "E" awards. Chrysler (ordnance plant), the Evansville Shipyard, the Republic Aviation Company, and the Red Cross Canteen were all especially noteworthy for their home front contributions.
- **Indiana Ordnance Plant:** In a state known for its many ordnance plants, this Charleston-based plant stood out for its massive population boom and 500 million pounds of smokeless powder it produced during the war.
- **Eli Lilly Company:** This Indianapolis-based company expanded from making insulin to mass-producing penicillin, processing over two million pints of blood plasma for the American Red Cross, and manufacturing important vaccines during WWII.

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