

Kansas and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

The history of Kansas in World War II is dominated by two industries: agriculture and aircraft manufacturing. The movement of people across the Sunflower State, especially from rural areas to the urban centers of Wichita and Kansas City, was driven by wartime demands placed on existing farms and expanding aircraft plants. The state also hosted major training bases and numerous POW camps.



B-29 Superfortresses at Boeing Plant in Wichita in 1945. Courtesy of Wichita State University Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives; Richard M. Long Collection, wsu_ms96-4.2.29.1

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Kansas state officials eagerly sought out defense contracts. The crown jewel of that effort was Wichita's contract to build B-29s at its small Boeing Stearman plant. Employing 700 in 1940, the Wichita factory boasted a workforce of 29,000 by 1944.¹ The Boeing boom, however, meant fewer hands in the fields.² Farm populations overall dropped from 607,000 to 495,000 between 1940 and 1945.³ Meanwhile, the state's industrial workforce grew from 137,811 in early 1940 to a peak of 284,264 in late 1943. Manufacturing wages steadily rose from an average of \$109 per month in 1940 to \$225 per month by 1944.⁴

The relatively young aircraft industry took off in Wichita during the war. In addition to its Boeing plant, Wichita was home to the Beech Aircraft Corporation, Cessna Aircraft

Company, and the Culver Aircraft Corporation. These small plane manufacturers accounted for 62 percent of the total increase in wartime manufacturing employment in Kansas, which generated 11,000 peripheral jobs in Wichita alone. The aircraft companies were able to utilize the massive influx of inexperienced workers thanks to new assembly-line production methods. Originally, Wichita-Boeing made small Stearman Kaydet trainer bi-planes. In July 1943, however, Boeing workers delivered their first B-29, destined for the Pacific Theater. Soon after, the new Pratt Army Airfield in southern Kansas became the nation's first B-29 station. Wichita-Boeing produced some 1,600 Superfortresses during the war, and at peak production, the assembly line cranked out four of the behemoths per day.⁵

The Army established sixteen airfields in Kansas. The Navy also set up air bases, including one in Hutchinson that claimed prime real estate: 2,500 acres, purchased from Amish farmers in 1942, with access to railroads, highways, natural gas, fuel, electricity, and open land nearby for expansion. During the war, the Navy leased an additional 44,000 acres from 55 Kansas farmers as practice fields, including a base at Olathe that trained roughly 8,000 pilots.⁶ Fort Riley, the state's long-standing cavalry-training base located near Topeka, also underwent expansion to eventually encompass 32,000 acres and a wartime total of 125,000 soldiers.⁷

¹ Patrick O'Brien, "Kansas at War: The Home Front: 1941-1945," *Kansas History* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 8-9, 20.

² Peter Fearon, "Ploughshares into Airplanes: Manufacturing Industry and Workers in Kansas During World War II," *Kansas History* 22, no. 4 (1999): 302.

³ O'Brien, "Kansas at War," 16.

⁴ Fearon, "Ploughshares into Airplanes," 299-300.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 301-302. O'Brien, "Kansas at War," 20, 24.

⁶ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 245-246.

⁷ "[History of Fort Riley and 1st Infantry Division](#)," U.S. Army.

The Kansas home front also welcomed a handful of other noteworthy industries. In the southeast corner of the state, the town of Parsons housed the Johns-Manville shell-loading plant, and nearby Baxter Springs had an ammonia-nitrate plant.⁸ A far larger munitions plant, Sunflower Ordnance, blossomed in the Eudora-DeSoto area in 1942. Costing more than \$120 million and covering 8,000 acres, the sprawling facilities displaced more than 75 farm families through eminent domain. Meanwhile, plant construction employed 1,800 plumbers and steamfitters alone, more than double Eudora's population in 1940. By late 1943, the plant employed 9,000 workers.⁹

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

While rapid industrial growth came at a cost for some Kansas farmers in the form of worker shortages and land loss, some managed to increase their acreage between 1940-45. Kansas played a critical role in feeding Americans through "an explosive increase of agricultural production" made possible by pesticides, fertilizers, and improved machinery. During the war, winter wheat harvests soared by an additional 71 million bushels while corn jumped up 61 million bushels.¹⁰ To fill the labor shortage, many farmers used prisoners of war. The state housed its 7,000 POWs at various locations, including camps at Salina and Concordia that ranked among the largest POW camps in the country. Kansas farmers could come to rural branch camps at 8am to pick up POWs for daily labor. Because German Americans were the largest ethnic group in the state, many Kansans had relatives living in these camps.¹¹

Women also helped fill the labor gap on farms through the Women's Land Army, a rising force of farm women. Upwards of 90 percent of these women were raised on farms but had not formerly worked the fields. In some counties, as much as 80 percent of the female population filled newly vacated farm positions.¹² Women also found new opportunities in the aircraft industry, and by 1944, Wichita's workforce was 43 percent female. Similar demographic trends took hold in Kansas City. At North American Aviation, which made half of the Armed Force's B-25 Mitchell bombers during the war, women constituted 39.2 percent of the company's workforce by 1944.¹³

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Despite wartime industry opportunities, both women and African Americans faced discrimination in various forms. While aircraft companies officially welcomed women, they preferred unmarried women without family obligations. The federal government further specified in early 1942 that women entering its training programs in Wichita be single high school graduates, between 21 and 35 years old, shorter than 5'2", and weigh less than 135 pounds.¹⁴ In 1943, Wichita-Boeing instituted a physical fitness program for female workers, to build their supposedly low stamina. The program soon folded, as the women disregarded it. Women at the Hercules Powder Company, where they composed up to 50% of the workforce and built dangerous explosives, endured high levels of sexual harassment.¹⁵

⁸ Fearon, "Ploughshares into Airplanes," 304.

⁹ Thomas David Van Sant, *The Price of Victory: The Sunflower Ordnance Works and DeSoto and Eudora, Kansas* (M.A. thesis, Kansas State University, 1989), 6-7, 14-15, 18.

¹⁰ Michael J. Grant, "'Food Will Win the War and Write the Peace': The Federal Government and Kansas Farmers During World War II," *Kansas History* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1997-1998): 247-249.

¹¹ Patrick G. O'Brien, Thomas D. Isern, and R. Daniel Lumley, "Stalag Sunflower: German Prisoners of War in Kansas," *Kansas History* 7, no. 3 (Autumn 1984): 182-184, 187, 191-92.

¹² Caron Smith, "The Women's Land Army During World War II," *Kansas History* 14, no. 2 (1991), 85-86, 88.

¹³ Johnson, "Women Aircraft Workers," 42-43. Fearon, "Ploughshares into Airplanes," 311-312.

¹⁴ Judith R. Johnson, "Uncle Sam Wanted Them Too!: Women Aircraft Workers in Wichita During World War II," *Kansas History* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 4.

¹⁵ Van Sant, *Price of Victory*, 17-19.

Kansas Senator Arthur Capper worked to end state racial discrimination but found officials at Fort Riley unwilling to hire Black workers on the grounds that their private contractors would strike. Capper's pressure helped end this policy in 1941, just ahead of President Roosevelt issuing his worker antidiscrimination Executive Order 8802. However, that same year in Wichita, no Black workers were employed at any aircraft factories. This began to change in 1943, yet Black workers at Wichita-Boeing quickly learned that employment did not equate to normal advancement, and some decided to stage a sit-down strike. Initially, North American Aviation had only planned to employ Black workers as janitors, leading to a protest meeting of 3,500 Black men at Kansas City's Memorial Hall. After Executive Order 8802, North American realized discrimination might jeopardize its contracts. Soon after, the company agreed to hire Black men as welders and appoint a "Negro Personnel Counselor."¹⁶

Life on the Home Front

In the wake of Pearl Harbor, more than two-fifths of the state's adult population got involved in first aid and air raid warden training programs. Kansas also placed in the top three states in a 1942 national scrap metal drive, while Topeka boasted more than 17,000 victory gardens. The children of Kansas headed to the fields in search of milkweed pods, helping to provide enough for an estimated 50,000 life vests. As Kansans showed their civic pride, the government struggled to house its massive new population. By 1941, Wichita saw the arrival of twenty-two families each week, making it one of the fastest growing areas in the country. The city responded with "hot flops," shared units where shift workers rotated into beds that never lost their warmth. In 1941, the federal government planned three public housing projects. Planeview, nicknamed the "miracle city" for its rapid construction, stood apart with more than 4,000 units on 592 acres just north of Boeing. Opened in 1943, Planeview included a kindergarten, library services, religious programs, recreation areas, and a victory garden.¹⁷

After the War

Agriculture remained at the core of Kansas's economy after the war, but it continued to shift toward large-scale production. Manufacturing had a lasting impact, as the population continued to urbanize and Wichita remained a major aircraft production center. Returning soldiers took advantage of the G.I. Bill and invested in the state's educational institutions. The inroads women and Black Americans had made in many industries continued to be met with discrimination that fueled civil rights struggles in the proceeding decades. As the national movement grew, the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) put Kansas front and center in the fight for civil rights.

Places of World War II History

- **Wichita:** Kansas's designated World War II Heritage City, nicknamed the "Air Capitol of the World," was known for its manufacturing and production of military aircraft. Some 26,000 planes were produced, including 1600 B-29 Superfortress heavy bombers.
- **Camp Concordia:** The largest POW camp in Kansas held over 4,000 German prisoners at its peak. Located in the rural north of the state, the POWs provided crucial labor to local farmers.

By Travis Hancock, 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.

¹⁶ Fearon, "Ploughshares into Airplanes," 308-310. Macias, "Kansas City's Bomber Plant," 254.

¹⁷ O'Brien, "Kansas at War," 10-12, 15, 19-20. Julie Courtwright, "Want to Build a Miracle City?: War Housing in Wichita," *Kansas History* 23, no. 4, (Winter 2000-2001): 222-225.