

Michigan and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Few states transformed as rapidly during World War II as Michigan. Between 1940 and 1945, the Great Lakes State received more than ten percent of the U.S. government's war contracts, which amounted to over twenty billion dollars. Most of these contracts went to Detroit-area companies. As the epicenter of the automobile industry, these companies displayed an enormous capacity for manufacturing tanks, airplanes, and other war materials. The mass migration of workers to Detroit, however, strained housing and working conditions, resulting in heated debates and racial violence.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Michigan's automobile industry leaders welcomed the shift from automotive engineering and production toward the manufacturing of war materials early in the mobilization period. The US government agreed to build new infrastructure to meet the unprecedented industrial demands of converting to defense production. Factories were then turned over to be privately managed by companies such as Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler, which were all headquartered in Detroit.¹



Women Making Electric Harnesses for B-24 Bombers at the Phoenix Mill in Plymouth Township, Michigan. Credit: From the Collections of The Henry Ford.

Chrysler's Detroit Arsenal Tank Plant produced the M3 in 1940 before construction of the factory was even complete. A year later, it began producing M4 Sherman tanks, which were powered by five Chrysler six-cylinder engines welded together. By the end of the war, the Detroit Arsenal produced a quarter of all tanks nation-wide, becoming the "single largest producer of tanks anywhere in the world."² Chrysler engineers also played a role in building the atomic bomb, designing non-corrosive diffusers under top secret conditions. Willys-Overland and Ford produced over six hundred thousand jeeps during the war. The manufacturers worked together, which resulted in interchangeable parts and easier maintenance on the battlefield. In 1942, General Motors began producing its amphibious DUKW vehicle, affectionately referred to as the 'duck,' which boasted the ability to haul over five thousand pounds. The GM duck is most remembered for its contributions during the invasion of Normandy.³

The Ford Willow Run Bomber Plant, just outside of Detroit, became one of the largest manufacturing facilities on the planet during World War II, giving a concrete example of the massive scale of development in Michigan during the war. At its peak, Willow Run employed forty-two thousand people and produced 8,685 B-24 bombers during the war. If Detroit was the "Arsenal of Democracy" typified, then Willow Run was the archetypal production facility that churned out planes on a scale previously only dreamed of. The facility grew from a smattering of soybean fields on the rural outskirts of the city into an unprecedented display of wartime production that could produce a bomber an hour.⁴

¹ Phillip Korth, "Boom, Bust, and Bombs: The Michigan Economy, 1917-1945," in *Michigan: Visions of Our Past*, ed. Richard J. Hathaway (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1989), 230.

² "[Detroit Arsenal...](#)," Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service.

³ A. J. Baime, "[How Detroit Factories Retooled During WWII to Defeat Hitler](#)," History, March 2020.

⁴ Sarah Jo Peterson, "The Politics of Land Use and Housing in World War II Michigan: Building Bombers and Communities," PhD diss., (Yale University, 2002), iv. Baime, "How Detroit Factories Retooled."

While Michigan's automobile industry dominated the state's home front contributions, agriculture and mining were also important components. Michigan farms and canneries boosted production to meet increased demands from the large influx of workers and rationing. Despite agricultural labor shortages, Michigan farmers' income doubled between 1939 and 1945.⁵ Michigan's mining industry, grounded in the state's Upper Peninsula, was bolstered by war contracts and its direct associations with Detroit's munitions industry. Resource extraction peaked at ninety-three million tons in 1943. Ninety percent of the nation's iron ore passed through the Soo Locks in the town of Sault Ste. Marie on its way to Michigan factories and other Midwest sites. Connecting Lake Superior to the lower Great Lakes through the St. Mary's River, the locks were one of the busiest shipping channels in the world. By mid-1942, more than seven thousand soldiers from nearby Fort Brady guarded the locks and patrolled the area with anti-aircraft weaponry.⁶

Michigan's largest wartime military base was Fort Custer, located just west of Battle Creek. Custer saw approximately three hundred thousand soldiers pass through its gates during the war. At Selfridge Field, north of Detroit, pilots and support personnel trained together as a flight group for six months before being sent overseas. Selfridge hosted the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African Americans the United States fielded as pilots. An agreement between the Civilian Pilots Training Program and Michigan State College trained 300 pilots a month at the Capital City Airport in Lansing.⁷

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

Many Michigan residents from rural areas set their sights on economic opportunities in Detroit and the surrounding areas, while workers from out of state did the same. As a result, the state's industrial employment skyrocketed past 1.2 million workers in 1943, a sixty percent rise from only three years prior. The state's Black population grew forty-eight percent between 1940 and 1943, and women's participation doubled in that same period. Growth overwhelmingly occurred in urban counties associated with war production in the preexisting automobile industry. In the Detroit area, the population increased fourteen and a half percent.⁸

One immediate impact of the war economy in Detroit was a dramatic expansion of employment opportunities for women in the manufacturing sector. In Plymouth Township, northwest of Detroit, Ford's Phoenix Mill only employed women workers, who were paid the same as male workers and produced defense materials such as electrical harnesses for B-24 bombers. Several Michigan education boards worked with federally funded childcare programs to help meet the needs of working mothers. By early 1945 twenty-eight communities housed 179 childcare facilities.⁹

The sudden explosion in workers sometimes proved problematic in terms of living conditions. At Willow Run, some workers and their families had little choice but to live in makeshift communities in tents and trailers on an orchard located a half mile from the plant. In August 1942, the Michigan State Police

⁵ Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 49.

⁶ Korth, "Boom, Bust, and Bombs," 232. Clive, *State of War*, 53, 119. Jake Noble, "[The Soo Locks in WWII](#)," Military History of the Upper Great Lakes, October 17, 2016.

⁷ "[Selfridge Field... Photographs and Written Historical and Descriptive Data](#)," Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service. "[Capital City Airport... Photographs and Written Historical and Descriptive Data](#)," Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service.

⁸ Alan Clive, "Women Workers in World War II: Michigan as a Test Case," *Labor History* 20, no. 1 (1979): 46-47. Clive, *State of War*, 94. Megan Shockley, "Working for Democracy: Working Class African-American Women, Citizenship, and Civil Rights in Detroit, 1940-1954," *Michigan Historical Review* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 128.

⁹ Clive, "Women Workers in World War II," 47, 61. "[Plymouth Township, Michigan](#)," National Park Service.

served the community with an eviction order, which displaced nearly sixty families and left them with few options but to join ninety families on a crowded two-acre lot nearby. Living conditions on the lot led to polluted water sources and outbreaks of disease. According to the wife of one Willow Run worker, "This is like the Grapes of Wrath the way we're living and being told to move on. The only difference is that we're getting money, but I don't know what good it is if we can't get any place to stay."¹⁰

Many Michigan farmers found themselves without the necessary labor force to carry out planting and harvesting when workers left for job opportunities in the state's urban centers. In some cases, farmers utilized the labor of German and Italian prisoners of war.¹¹ Fort Custer housed nearly six thousand POWs who were later assigned to smaller camps near agricultural areas. Additionally, approximately two thousand Mexican laborers with the Bracero Program traveled north to Michigan and provided much-needed agricultural labor for the cherry and sugar beet harvests of 1944.¹²

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Many women working in Detroit did not experience the same pay or job security as men working in the same sectors. For example, women in Detroit were paid only two-thirds of men's pay and were often treated as temporary employees.¹³ Racial discrimination targeted at African American women was also a common feature on many of Detroit's wartime factory floors. White women "frequently objected" to working alongside African American women, which culminated in a rubber plant walk out of more than two thousand white women workers demanding racially segregated restroom facilities.¹⁴ Middle class African American women worked assiduously for the rights of all women to work in the city's wartime manufacturing sectors. In April 1943, the NAACP organized an event to protest the automobile industry's treatment of African American women. More than five thousand people attended the rally and march, which ended in Cadillac Square.¹⁵

Unfortunately, racism and discrimination were not confined to Detroit's automobile industry. Starting in 1941, protests by local white residents accompanied every stage of the Sojourner Truth Housing Project. This 200-unit public housing development was designed for Black war workers and their families. When the first families moved into the housing in 1942, protests turned violent, setting a precedent for continued racial segregation in housing and ongoing racial unrest. In June 1943, Detroit erupted in racial violence that resulted in widespread property damage and the death of thirty-four people, twenty-five of whom were African American. The authorities also reported around 675 people injured.¹⁶ Many African American women arrested on the grounds of rioting were protecting their loved ones from police brutality and the violent actions of white rioters. Jobsite discrimination, harassment, lack of advancement opportunity, and housing shortages had all pushed the city to its breaking point.¹⁷

¹⁰ Peterson, "The Politics of Land Use and Housing in World War II Michigan," 203, 286.

¹¹ Clive, *State of War*, 46; Nora Faires, "Transition and Turmoil: Social and Political Development in Michigan, 1917-1945," in *Michigan: Visions of Our Past*, 209.

¹² Gregory Sumner, "[Michigan History: State Was Home to 6,000 POWs during WWII](#)," *Detroit Free Press*, March 3, 2019. Clive, *State of War*, 46.

¹³ Jeremy Kilar, "From Forest and Field to Factory: Michigan Workers and the Labor Movement, 1837-1945," in *Michigan: Visions of Our Past*, 251.

¹⁴ Karen Tucker Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II," *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 1 (June 1982): 86.

¹⁵ Shockley, "Working for Democracy," 130-31, 140.

¹⁶ Clive, "Women workers in World War II," 52-53. Anne-Lise Halvorsen and Jeffrey E. Mirel, "Intercultural education in Detroit, 1943-1954," *Paedagogica Historica* 49, no. 3 (2013): 363.

¹⁷ Marilynn S. Johnson, "Gender, Race, and Rumors: Re-examining the 1943 Race Riots," *Gender & History* 10, no. 2 (August 1998): 255.

The approximately half a million workers from other parts of the US who came to participate in Detroit's defense industries quickly became familiarized with an ongoing vibrant but complicated relationship between area labor unions and the automobile industry. Ford had a reputation for firing union supporters, despite court orders prohibiting the company from doing so. However, in 1941, the United Automobile Workers (UAW) struck at the company's Rouge plant. Shortly thereafter, workers held an election where more than seventy percent of employees voted in favor of the UAW.¹⁸ The UAW advocated for modern housing and transportation, which proved to be a significant growing pain of Detroit's rapid mobilization and adaptation to the war industry.¹⁹

Life on the Home Front

The influx of workers seeking to contribute to the industrial demands of war impacted consumption in Michigan, especially in urban Detroit and its expanding suburban peripheries. While luxury goods were not a prominent feature of Michigan life, Detroit department store sales of items such as expensive watches, fur coats, and dove skin gloves increased in the 1940s. The rationing of gasoline and rubber hit particularly hard in the state that ushered in the family automobile a half generation before. Many Detroiters turned to the city's public transit system.²⁰ Michiganders of all ages contributed to the war effort through volunteer efforts, such as war bond drives, victory gardens, and Red Cross fundraisers.

After the War

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Michigan experienced a postwar boom. The generous wages and benefits secured by union contracts at all the major automobile firms resulted in home ownership and college savings for a majority of Detroit residents in the 1950s. However, the large-scale migration of white residents from Detroit's urban center, coupled with automation and decentralization in the automobile industry, eventually devastated the once thriving city. As conditions worsened, Detroit erupted into one of the worst race riots in American history in 1967. At the same time, the state as a whole grappled with the effects of severe wartime industrial pollution, especially water contamination.²¹

Places of World War II History

- **Plymouth Township:** Michigan's designated World War II Heritage City was home to the Phoenix Mill Ford Plant. Largely employing women, the plant produced electrical harnesses for B-24 Liberator bombers being assembled at Ford's nearby Willow Run Bomber Plant.
- **Detroit Arsenal Tank Plant:** This Chrysler-managed plant produced a quarter of the tanks made in the US during WWII, primarily M3 and M4 Sherman tanks.
- **Soo Locks:** Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966, the Soo Locks played a critical role during WWII. 90% of the nation's iron ore passed through the locks on their way to Detroit-area factories and other Midwest sites, prompting a heavy military presence.

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¹⁸ Kilar, "From Forest and Field to Factory," 250-251.

¹⁹ Peterson, "The Politics of Land Use and Housing in World War II Michigan," 2.

²⁰ Clive, *State of War*, 50-51. Faires, "Transition and Turmoil," 209.

²¹ Thomas Sugrue, "[Motor City: The Story of Detroit](#)," *History Now*, no. 11 (Spring 2007).