

Montana and the World War II Home Front

Introduction

Montana is characterized by mountains, deep valleys, vast forests, and rivers, which proved useful for strategic military operations during the war. The Treasure State's main contributions to the war effort, however, were agriculture and mining. Wartime demand made coal, copper, beef, wheat, and sugar beets all valuable items. Unlike other western states, Montana did not see the development of massive manufacturing plants and the federal dollars and jobs that followed.

Mobilization: Military and Industry

Wartime boosters in Montana sought job-heavy manufacturing plants that populated states like Utah, Washington, and California. However, their chances were slim due to federal prerequisites, such as large reserves of manpower, the preexisting presence of machine tool factories and forge shops, and the stipulation that no plant be constructed any closer than 200 miles to the Canadian border.¹ However, Montana proved to be a geographically strategic place for the war effort. East Base, constructed outside Great Falls



B-17 Aircraft crew-- Lewistown, Montana 1942. Credit: Montana History Portal, Lewistown Public Library.

in 1942, served as a departure point and air supply link for the Soviet Union and Asia. Additionally, the Army Corps of Engineers began constructing a road to connect Fairbanks, Alaska to the lower forty-eight states in 1942, which entered through Montana. When the Japanese occupied the Aleutian Islands, supplies were funneled to Alaska from East Base along this road.²

During the war, 7,000 planes left East Base for the USSR. Some of these planes carried large quantities of nuclear material. In March 1943, the first shipment of uranium left Great Falls for the USSR.³ East Base had three satellite bases. Cut Bank Airfield resided inside the Blackfeet Indian Reservation and had two runways for B-17 Flying Fortresses.⁴ The airfield in Glasgow housed bombing aircraft that trained at the Fort Peck Aerial Gunnery Range.⁵ Lewistown Satellite Airfield was one of four training airfields for B-17 Flying Fortress crew members and also included a storage site for the top-secret Norden Bombsight, an instrument important in the development of accurate bombing.⁶

Montana's mountains and winter conditions provided training for winterized units. One such unit was the joint US-Canadian top-secret force called the "Devil's Brigade," which trained in arctic warfare at Fort William Henry Harrison outside of Helena.⁷ Also near Helena was Camp Rimini, where the deep snow provided the perfect training ground for both men and dogs in the Arctic Search and Rescue Units

¹ W. J. Furdell, "The Great Falls Home Front during World War II," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 48, no. 4 (1998): 69.

² Montana Historical Society, "Chapter 19 - World War II in Montana," 381.

³ Gary Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II* (Missoula: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 4, 46, 75.

⁴ "[Cut Bank Municipal Airport and Army Air Base](#)," Historic Montana.

⁵ "[Forgotten Landmark-Glasgow Army Air Field, Glasgow \(MT\)](#)," Historic Highway Guides.

⁶ "[Lewistown Satellite Airfield Historic District](#)," National Park Service.

⁷ Montana Historical Society, "Chapter 19 - World War II in Montana," in *Montana: Stories of the Land*, n.d., 380.

of the Air Transport Command. Camp Rimini relied on the Forest Service's Smokejumper School in Missoula to train rescue crews and develop ways to parachute dogs and sleds into Arctic crash sites.⁸

Montana's main contributions to the war came through agriculture and mining. From 1942-45, the US military purchased almost \$25 million worth of Montana agricultural and industrial products. In the 1940s, Montana's agricultural profits increased 188%.⁹ Despite labor shortages, farmers pulled in a record crop of 915,000 tons of beets. The total value of Montana crops neared \$134 million in 1942, and 141,000 tons of sugar were produced.¹⁰ Government restrictions also impacted farmers. Gas rationing particularly troubled farmers, who had to truck commodities great distances, and the reduced speed limits threatened production.¹¹

Beyond agricultural production, Montana's most important wartime industry was mining. Most gold mines were closed to prioritize strategic minerals, highest among them being copper. The Forest Service constructed \$900,000 worth of new mining roads to 29 mines, facilitating a surge in Montana mining. The state's copper facilities were critical to the war effort, with only the Manhattan Project having a higher urgency rating. In 1942, they produced 250 million pounds of copper. Throughout the war, the mines produced 12% of the country's copper needs.¹² Miners in Butte worked deep underground in the mineral deposits' rich copper veins, while smelters at both Anaconda and Black Eagle melted down and processed the copper. The towns of Butte, Black Eagle, and Anaconda formed the copper empire of the Anaconda Mining Company (ACM), Montana's largest employer.¹³

Mobilization: Changes for Workers

By the end of 1942, 34,000 Montanans had left the state to find industrial jobs on the West Coast, and nearly every county in Montana saw a population decline.¹⁴ A few places did see population increases. East Base had a profound impact on Great Falls, with the population increasing from 29,990 to 35,000 from 1940-1943, creating a housing problem in the town and tensions between the military presence and residents.¹⁵ On the eve of WWII, Montana was still largely agricultural, with 62% of its nearly half a million residents living in rural areas. One in ten Montana residents were foreign born, and 16,841 residents were Native American. The state also had a small Japanese population of 500, and 1,120 African Americans lived in the state.¹⁶

The biggest challenge farmers faced was the shortage of labor, and the solution required Montanans to overlook racial prejudices. Despite anti-Japanese sentiments, Montana farmers began to pull labor from Japanese American incarceration sites in California to help with record crop yields in 1942.¹⁷ However, this labor issue persisted with another crop boom in 1943. Before the arrival of POWs in 1944, Montana

⁸ Karen Fischer, "Training Sled Dogs at Camp Rimini, 1942-1944," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 34, no. 1 (1984): 11, 18.

⁹ Montana Historical Society, "Chapter 19 - World War II in Montana," 381.

¹⁰ Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 51.

¹¹ Scott C Loken, "Montana during World War Two" (MA thesis, University of Montana, 1993), 41, 42, 48.

¹² Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 52, 67, 90.

¹³ Matthew L Basso, *Meet Joe Copper: Masculinity and Race on Montana's World War II Home Front* (Chicago: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 4, 130.

¹⁴ Loken, "Montana during World War Two," 46. Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 206.

¹⁵ Furdell, "The Great Falls Home Front during World War II," 70.

¹⁶ Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 4.

¹⁷ Loken, "Montana during World War Two," 36.

sugar beet farmers relied on the arrival of more than 1,000 migrant Mexican laborers. Initial opposition to migrant labor eventually backed off under pressure from farmers. Schools also provided relief to Montana's agriculture, with 11,000 students assisting in the fields in the summer of 1943.¹⁸

Eastern Montana farmers saw POWs as one solution to labor shortages. Despite the efforts of Montana Governor Sam C. Ford and Senator James E. Murray, the state's request for permanent POW camps was declined. Montana farmers had to request labor from Camp Rupert in Idaho, which became the headquarters for nineteen temporary POW camps established in Montana during the fall of 1944. German POWs worked in the state's beet fields towards the close of the war.¹⁹

The acute labor shortages affecting Montana's mining became an issue of national importance. The white rank and file of Montana miners were resistant and even hostile to the introduction of both women and nonwhite relief workers. While women struggled to make it into the hypermasculine roles of mining and smelting, the Forest Service broke from its male dominated tradition and hired ten women to work as fire lookouts in Kootenai National Forest. The Forest Service also used around 360 Italian detainees from the Fort Missoula Alien and Detention Center.²⁰ Montana offered pacifist work for Mennonites, Quakers, Jehovah's Witnesses, Presbyterians, and Methodists through the Forest Service as well. Most famously, many conscientious objectors arrived in the state to work as "smokejumpers" who parachuted from planes to fight remote wildfires.²¹

Discrimination and Fights for Equality

Despite the Congress of Industrial Union's no-strike pledge during the war, wildcat strikes occurred in Montana. The state's miners felt that the introduction of Black and Mexican miners, as well as women, threatened the status of their white masculinity in an important wartime industry. Racially charged strikes and threats of strikes revealed the willingness of Montana miners to halt crucial copper production to maintain their status quo. One notable strike occurred at Mine Mill in Butte. Hiawatha Brown was hired by ACM in 1942 as the first African American to work in the Butte Mines. After Brown was hired, the War Department sent thirty-nine Black soldiers to the Butte mines to alleviate labor shortages. The ACM hired the Black soldiers, but the 8,000 white miners of the Butte Miners Union (BMU) refused to integrate and walked off the job. The Black soldiers never mined copper in Butte.²²

Beyond the exclusion of Black miners in Butte, African Americans faced discrimination in other realms. Octavia Bridgewater, a Black nurse from Helena, fought for racial equality for nurses. After Army Nurse Corps began accepting Black nurses in 1941, Bridgewater was accepted for service in 1942. Throughout the war and after, Bridgewater pressed for equal treatment and better opportunities for Black nurses.²³ African Americans serving at East Base experienced segregation in the form of separate and unequal USO buildings for white and Black servicemen.²⁴

¹⁸ Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 87.

¹⁹ T. Jaehn, "Unlikely Harvesters: German Prisoners of War as Agricultural Workers in the Northwest," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 50, no. 3 (2000): 51.

²⁰ Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 89.

²¹ Robert C. Cottrell, *Smokejumpers of the Civilian Public Service in World War II: Conscientious Objectors as Firefighters for the National Forest Service* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2006), 198.

²² Basso, *Meet Joe Copper*: 161, 163, 188, 196, 250.

²³ Kathleen Elizabeth Werner, "Mobilizing the Rural Home Front: The Extension Service, Montana, Women, and World War II" (MA thesis, Montana State University, 2003), 25.

²⁴ Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 95.

Racial discrimination plagued other parts of the Montana home front as well. Despite acute labor shortages, many Montanans opposed bringing in Japanese workers. Anti-Japanese sentiment in Montana resulted in a series of local actions. In 1942, in Whitefish, a resolution was passed that called for dismissal of all Japanese workers employed by Great Northern Railway, and the Anaconda Commercial Club opposed any admission of “Japanese refugee students” to Montana colleges.²⁵

Life on the Home Front

By the end of 1941, Montanans had already purchased over \$9 million in war bonds. In 1943, the average Montanan spent more than \$14 above the national average on war bonds. Along the home front, the Montana Extension Service (MES) aimed to bring rural women into the war effort. The MES presented home management programs in 23 of Montana's 56 counties with the motto “Salvage, Save, and Renovate.”²⁶ Local 4-H clubs and agricultural extension agents oversaw the execution of victory gardens in Park County, and victory gardens produced half of the food used by state institutions in 1943.²⁷ The “Campfire Girls” in Great Falls collected 12,700 pounds of scrap grease to preserve the glycerin that could be used in explosives. By October 1942, 40,498 pounds of scrap metal were collected by the Cascade County Salvage Committee. Even two 5,285-pound cannons from the Civil War were taken down from their decorative positions at the courthouse and scrapped.²⁸

After the War

Montana's economy continued to grow after the war, as the food and natural resources that the state provided were in high demand. Timber, for example, fueled expanding U.S. housing needs. Over time, the discovery of new oil fields created oil boomtowns and led to petroleum overtaking copper in revenue value. Dependency on raw extraction has resulted in long-term degradation of local ecosystems in the form of soil and water contamination. New farm machinery replacing farm workers continued the depopulation of rural Montana. Many Black miners left for industrial centers on the West Coast, while the Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs fought to end public segregation in the 1950s. Montana tribes strongly resisted assimilation and termination efforts in the postwar era.

Places of World War II History

- **Lewistown Satellite Airfield:** Over 1,000 GIs trained with B-17 Flying Fortresses, as well as the top secret Norden bombsight, at this airfield located in Montana's designated World War II Heritage City. It is now a historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
- **Fort Missoula Alien Detention Center:** A Justice Department-run internment camp that held both stranded Italian seamen and Japanese incarcerated, including those believed to be West Coast leaders and later Japanese immigrants from Hawaii and Japanese Latin Americans.

By John Flynn, 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.

²⁵ Kevin C. McCann, “Japanese Americans in Montana: A History of Their Presence and Treatment Before, During, and After World War II” (Carroll College, 1982), 22, 27, 30.

²⁶ Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 20. Werner, “Mobilizing the Rural Home Front,” 28.

²⁷ Glynn, *Montana's Home Front During World War II*, 76.

²⁸ Furdell, “The Great Falls Home Front during World War II,” 67.