CHAPTER

108 THE WAR AT HOME

The people on the home front were an important part of the war effort. This World War II poster encouraged women to become part of the fight, and to help win the war by doing the jobs the men had left behind.

One Sunday afternoon in May of 1943, thirty-eight planes flew over Birmingham, Alabama, dropping 10,000 bombs. First aid workers rushed out to tend the wounded, and 40,000 civilians guarded their property. When the two-hour raid was over, Birmingham's civil defense leaders agreed. Their city was more than ready to face an attack by enemy forces.

The people of Birmingham never had a chance to find out if they were right. The Sunday afternoon raid was only a drill. The "bombs" dropped by Civil Air Patrol planes were made by schoolchildren who filled them with flour to simulate smoke. The "wounded" were Boy Scout volunteers covered with catsup "blood." Similar drills were held in cities all over the country. But neither Birmingham nor any other city on the United States mainland was ever actually bombed during World War II.

The real bombing raids and battlefields may have been far away in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific islands. But to Americans at

home, the war was part of their everyday lives. The war often caused changes in their families and their work, the way they ate, and even where they lived.

Unequal Opportunities

Fighting the war required the labor of millions of people. About 12 million Americans joined the armed forces—more than twice as many as had served in World War I. The war industries demanded still more. Between 1941 and 1945, some 15 million Americans moved from their rural homes to seek jobs in shipyards, munitions factories, airplane factories, and other war-related shops. Even more found war jobs close to home.

The desperate need for workers led to expanding opportunities for some groups like African Americans, women, and the disabled, who had all been excluded from well-paying jobs before the war.

Because black men and women faced discrimination in the U.S. military, many of them sought jobs in the rapidly expanding war industries. Blacks served in all of the armed forces. The army accepted black soldiers, but segregated them in all-black units under the command of white officers. Still, by the end of the war, nearly three quarters of a million black soldiers were serving their country. White women were **recruited** (newly employed) for clerical and nursing jobs in the military. But strict **quotas** (number of people of a particular race or gender allowed specific jobs) kept all but a few black women out of these jobs.

African Americans found far greater opportunities on the home front. In 1941, President Roosevelt ordered government agencies and manufacturers with defense contracts to stop racial discrimination. He created the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to enforce this order. While the FEPC did not end discrimination, it did help black Americans get better-paying jobs while the war lasted. Thousands of blacks migrated to America's industrial cities where, as skilled workers, they could earn good wages, although never equal to those white workers earned.

Enter the Women

Black Americans were not the only ones who found new opportunities in war work. The federal government sponsored propaganda—newsreels, posters, magazine articles, even popular songs—to encourage women to take jobs in war industries. Women were hired to do all kinds of jobs that only men had done before the war.

Recycling became a major aspect of the war effort. These women sort empty toothpaste tubes so the metal can be reused.

An advertisement run by the Pennsylvania Railroad boasted of the kinds of jobs women were doing for the nation's railroads: "You see [women] . . . even in baggage

rooms, train dispatchers' offices, in shops and yards and as section hands."

In the advertisements and newsreels, these women were portrayed as patriotic housewives who answered their nation's need for workers. They got their nickname, Rosie the Riveter, from the capable and efficient women workers in the film of the same name. In reality, three out of four women employed in war industries had also worked before the war. They were mostly maids, waitresses, clerks, or low-paid factory workers. War work brought them better-paying, more interesting jobs. Many women, both single and married, expected to continue to make use of their training as welders, pipe fitters, or electricians after the war. They wanted to support themselves and their families. But with the end of the fighting, the women were fired. Their jobs were given to returning veterans.

"Make It Do, or Do Without"

Wartime jobs brought many workers more money than they had ever had before. But there were fewer things to spend it on. Most raw materials went into the war effort, and people at home faced shortages and **rationing** (dividing up of goods during times of scarcity) of many basic supplies. Sugar, coffee, tires, gasoline, nylon, even shoes were hard to come by. The government issued ration coupons for all of these goods.

Part of "the war at home" involved forcing millions of Japanese Americans to live in desolate "relocation" centers like this one.

Even when goods weren't rationed, the government encouraged people to use less so the soldiers could have more. "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without," became the slogan of the day. People took pride in showing how clever they could be about "making do." In a Rockford, Illinois school, students organized a "patriotic patches" club. Only those who wore patched hand-me-downs from an older brother or sister could join.

Using less of needed supplies was one way those at home could support the war. Another way was through **recycling** (treating materials to be used again). In communities all over the country, collection centers sprang up. Children and adults took part in drives to collect scrap iron, aluminum, rubber, and even kitchen grease, which could be used in making gunpowder for the war effort. Decorative iron fences, birdbaths, and lawn ornaments disappeared from some neighborhoods, to be melted down for bullets.

Victory Gardens and War Bonds

Just as during World War I, keeping food production high was a major concern. With so many farm workers in the armed forces, the federal government encouraged people to grow their own vegetables. "Victory gardens" sprang up all over the country. By the end of the war, almost a third

of America's fresh vegetables came from these gardens.

People also showed their support for the war by buying war bonds. When Americans "bought" bonds, they actually were lending money to the government to help pay for the war. Movie stars promoted bonds and neighbors went door-to-door selling them.

Homelessness

Many people would later remember World War II as a time when everyone pulled together and made sacrifices without grumbling. In some ways this was true. But there were also many real problems and there was real suffering. Almost 50,000 of America's 185,000 doctors were in the Army, leaving the civilian population desperately short of medical care.

The great migration of workers to cities with war industry factories led to severe housing shortages. Men and women with well-paying jobs sometimes found themselves living in automobiles or tents while they searched for housing. Day-care facilities provided by the government were inadequate. It was difficult for women working in factories to find appropriate care for their children.

In some cities, black families arriving to work in defense plants faced hatred and resentment from the white population. In the summer of 1943, rioting of whites against blacks in Detroit resulted in the deaths of 34 people and the injury of 800 more.

After the War

With the war over, many Americans turned their hopes for security and the good life toward their private lives. After 20 years of insecurity and sacrifice, they wanted stability. For many, this meant a home and family. They began marrying younger and having more children, creating what we now call the **baby boom.**

Chapter Check

WORD MATCH

1. quotas	**a.** newly employed
2. recruited	**b.** dividing up of goods during times of scarcity
3. rationing	**c.** treating or processing materials to be used again
4. recycling	**d.** the number of people of a particular race or gender allowed
5. baby boom	**e.** sudden rise in birthrate after WWII

QUICK QUIZ

1. Name some of the wartime industries created by the U.S. involvement in World War II. How did the war change the face of the American work force?
2. What hardships did the war create for Americans at home?

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What was meant by, "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without?" How do you think people would react to such an idea today?
2. Do you think that civilians should have been forced to give up their jobs after the war to returning veterans? Explain.