

The War at Home

The battlefields were in Europe, Asia, and Africa. But in a hundred small ways, World War II reached into the home of every American.

Newspaper columnist Mike Royko of Chicago was 9 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Suddenly all the young men he knew were off to war: "Our neighborhood was decimated. There were only kids, older guys, and women."

Those left behind may not have seen action at the front, but they filled vital roles at home. Women joined the armed forces for the first time and also took over some 6 million civilian jobs vacated by soldiers. Kids learned to recognize Japanese and German planes, and to turn off lights to guard against air raids that never happened. They collected rubber and scrap to be recycled into war goods.

For most people, the hardships imposed by the war were minimal. They could put up with rationed sugar, butter, meat, and gas in exchange for a well-paying job. Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast were a glaring exception. Afraid of spies, the government forced 200,000 people of Japanese descent to leave their homes and businesses and spend the war years in bleak internment camps.

Here are the recollections, good and bad, of four "soldiers" on the home front.

Sheril Cunning

She lived in Long Beach, California, during the war.

We were always playing war games. My sister and I had a plan. If the Japanese ever came through the front door, we had a back bedroom with a closet. We figured we could run in this closet and nobody would find us. But just in case they did, we would sprinkle ketchup on ourselves and play dead and then they wouldn't bother us.

There was so much that went around about torture. The Germans tortured and the Japanese tortured. I remember somebody telling us that the Japanese would put bamboo splints under your fingernails and light them on fire.

My mother and all the neighbors would get together around the dining-room table, and they'd be changing a sugar coupon for a bread or a meat coupon. It was like a giant Monopoly game.

There was a spirit of camaraderie. There was a large vacant lot and everybody got together and had a gigantic



communal Victory garden. My sister and I thought it was a wonderful place to go, because it was like Alice in Wonderland to get out there on a Saturday morning and all the neighbors were watering their squash and their green beans. They'd give things away to everybody.

Jack Ward

He grew up in a small town in Florida that housed a bombing range and a training base for pilots.

As kids, we did all sorts of things to help out with the war. We rounded up metal—everything from tin cans to railroad spikes—to be made into shells, airplane parts,

battleships, anything to fuel the war machine. Also, I knitted 9-inch wool squares for the Red Cross. They'd whip the squares together for what they needed for the troops—shawls or blankets or bandages.

We felt very responsible for civil defense. We learned the silhouettes of enemy aircraft—Messerschmitts, Stukas, Zeros—as well as the silhouettes of U.S., French, and British aircraft—so that we could determine if the planes overhead were friendly or unfriendly.

We were also concerned about sabotage. One Saturday, my buddies and I discovered a series of covered trenches. We realized that those trenches pointed right toward the bombing range. We thought that saboteurs had dug them to guide enemy aircraft to the bombing range, where the Air Force had top-secret equipment. We reported the trenches to the police—and later found out that they were part of a new sewer system.

Sarah Killingsworth

She was one of thousands of women who went to work in war industries when the men left for the front.

I was in the house one day and all of a sudden they started yellin' about the war, war, war. Roosevelt had declared war. Well, they know that when there's a war, somebody's gonna get a job. This was during the Depression, so I think people were kinda glad the war had started. Jobs kinda opened up for women that the men had. They started takin' applications at Douglas, to work in a defense plant. I was hired.

I do know one thing, this place was very segregated when I first come here. Oh, Los Angeles, you just couldn't go and sit down like you do now. You had to stick to the

restaurants and hotels where black people were. It wasn't until the war that it really opened up. They didn't mix the white and black in the war. But now it gives you a kind of independence because they felt that we gone off and fought, we should be equal. Everything started openin' up for us. We got to go places we had never been able to go before.

Peter Ota

He was one of some 200,000 Japanese-Americans who were removed to internment camps by government order in 1942.

We were evacuated to Santa Anita. At the time we didn't know where we were going, how long we'd be gone. We didn't know what to take. A toothbrush, toilet supplies, some clothes.

Santa Anita is a race track. The horse stables were converted into living quarters. My sister and I were fortunate enough to stay in a barracks. The people in the stables had to live with the stench. Everything was communal. We had absolutely no privacy. When you went to the toilet, it was very embarrassing for women especially. The parent actually lost control of the child. When I think back what happened to the Japanese family.

As a historian, you are trying to figure out exactly how the war affected people's lives. Pull out of these four oral histories eight ways in which the war touched life at home, and quote your source as evidence for each.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

Between the Lines

When people tell stories about their past, they don't just list a series of neutral details. They reveal whether their experience has been good, bad, exciting, boring, etc. See if you can come up with two adjectives describing what kind of experience each oral history subject had during the war. Then back up your choices with evidence from their remembrances.

9. Sheril Cunning _____
10. Jack Ward _____
11. Sarah Killingsworth _____
12. Peter Ota _____

Taking It Further

Find someone of your grandparents' generation who grew up during the war. Using the guide on page 31 of this book, interview that person and write up an oral history.