Kansas At War

Part 2

A Common Cause

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When war came to the United States and the call to arms was issued on December 8, 1941, most Americans enthusiastically joined the great crusade. By the tens of thousands Kansans entered the armed forces, many of them fighting and dying on distant overseas battlefields. Hundreds of thousands, however, experienced and fought the war on the home front, buying bonds, participating in civil defense activities, organizing scrap drives, tolerating shortages and rationing, working in war-related industries, and providing many other forms of support "for the duration."

The total war waged by the United States and its allies between 1941-1945 affected every facet of life in Kansas and the nation. Demographically, the trend toward urbanization, a hallmark of the last half century, accelerated. This movement off the farm and into the city was stimulated by the increasing number of good, relatively high-paying jobs, most of them created by or connected with war production or other defense operations. For the first time in 1942, the state agricultural census indicated that slightly more than 50 percent of the 1.8 million Kansans now lived in "cities having 1,000 or more residents."

As in the first war, bonds were sold to the citizenry to defray some of the costs of this horrendous conflict and as a means of holding down inflation. Government campaigns or bond drives, using slogans like "Back the Attack," "Own a Share of America," and "Triumph Over Tyranny," were designed to "make the country war minded" and give everyone a chance to participate; even schoolchildren could take part through the purchase of war savings stamps. In all there were seven war loan or bond drives, and Kansas far exceeded the state quotas set by the federal government for each.

★ *Scrap drive for Victory. Coffey County, 1940s.*

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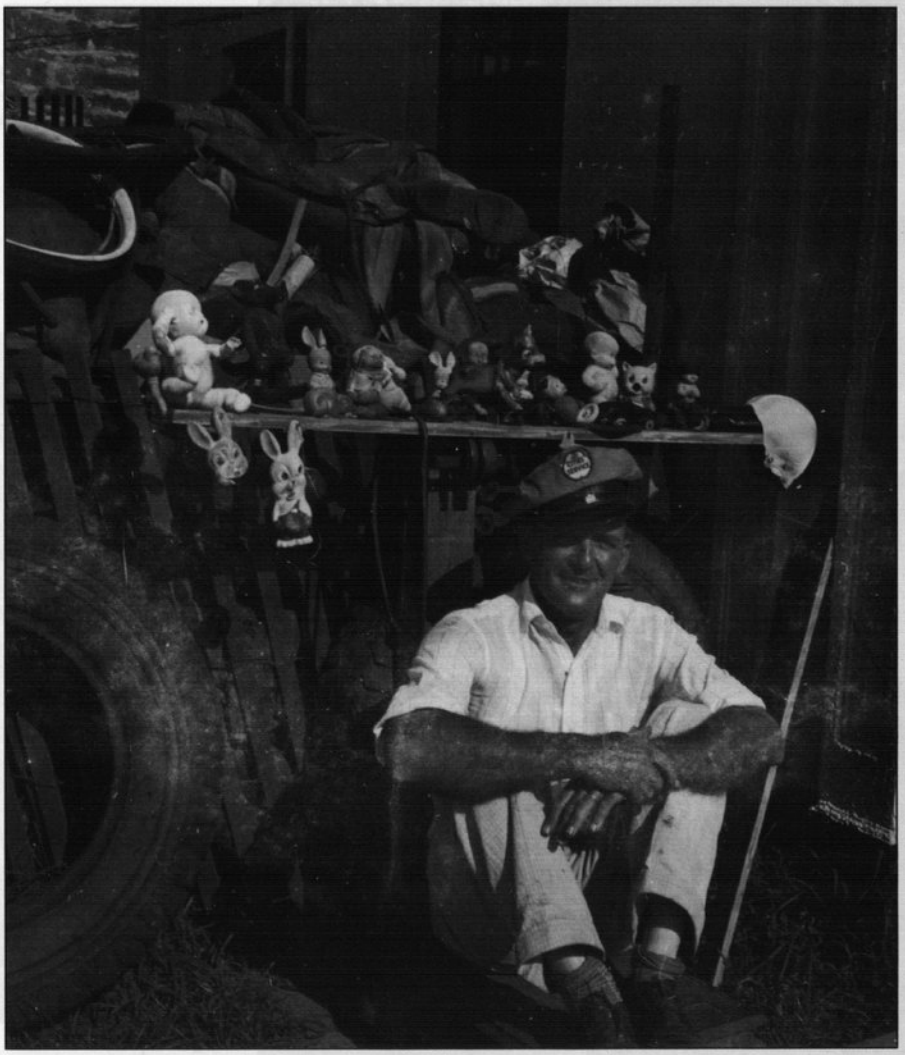
Schoolchildren "back the attack." Bond drive, Coffey County, 1940s.

The need to enroll the entire population in the war effort was also addressed by state and local councils for defense, established in Kansas, as elsewhere, under the auspices of the national Office of Civilian Defense. Gov. Payne Ratner appointed the fifteen-member Kansas Council For Defense in May 1941 "to co-operate with other states and with the national council in furthering the nation's preparedness effort," and a real effort to organize locally was underway months before Pearl Harbor. Thereafter, this activity accelerated. By early February 1942, over four hundred local defense councils had been organized, and thousands of ordinary Kansans had enrolled for emergency wartime duty. The councils coordinated the activities of fifteen civilian defense services, everything from air-raid wardens to road repair crews, conducted training sessions for their various service volunteers, and offered courses in such things as nutrition, first aid, and auto mechanics.



★ *"Precious resources." Scrap drive, Coffey County, 1940s.*

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Hunting for junk—everything from baby carriages to overshoes to courtyard cannons. Scrap drive, Coffey County, 1940s.

Civilian defense officials, whether on the national, state, or local level, also admonished home-front citizens to "Save," "Share," and generally to conserve all sorts of precious resources. They conducted scrap drives and encouraged people to collect salvageable metal, tin cans, rubber, waste paper, silk and nylon hose, and used fats. In one month-long scrap drive in the fall of 1942, Kansans collected over 140,000 tons of scrap, 160 pounds per capita. Courtyard cannons and city streetcar rails were two major items that fell victim to community salvage efforts. For conservation purposes, men's suits were made without cuffs and vests, and tubeless tires for automobiles were introduced.

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In one month-long scrap drive, patriotic Kansans collected over 140,000 tons of scrap that could be used for armaments. Coffey County, 1940s.

★ *Scavenger hunt for Uncle Sam. Scrap drive, Coffey County, 1940s.*

"Victory Gardens" were another of the many activities encouraged and promoted by the state and local civilian defense councils. Newspapers published helpful information for would-be V-Gardeners, and national periodicals such as House and Garden, American Home, *and* Better Homes and Gardens *also backed the effort, providing readers with many "How-To" articles. In response, thousands of city folks joined their country cousins in planting and raising an assortment of fruits and vegetables. Many Kansans were thus supplied with fresh produce for their kitchen tables in the summer and canned items for consumption during the winter.*

★ *V-Gardeners at work. Wichita, 1942.*

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The "seeds of victory." Wichita, 1942.

"All of the news space usually devoted to the antics of ball players in spring training is just now devoted to the antics of Victory Gardeners," observed Wichitan E. Gail Carpenter in March of 1943:

> *Most folks are planning Victory gardens this year, not because they fear that they shall go hungry but because they realize that every pound of beans or peas and every peck of potatoes or tomatoes raised at home will permit just that much more space to be used for the transportation of war materials. And then too, there is the little matter of rationing. It will not take any ration points to pick a mess of beans in the garden.*

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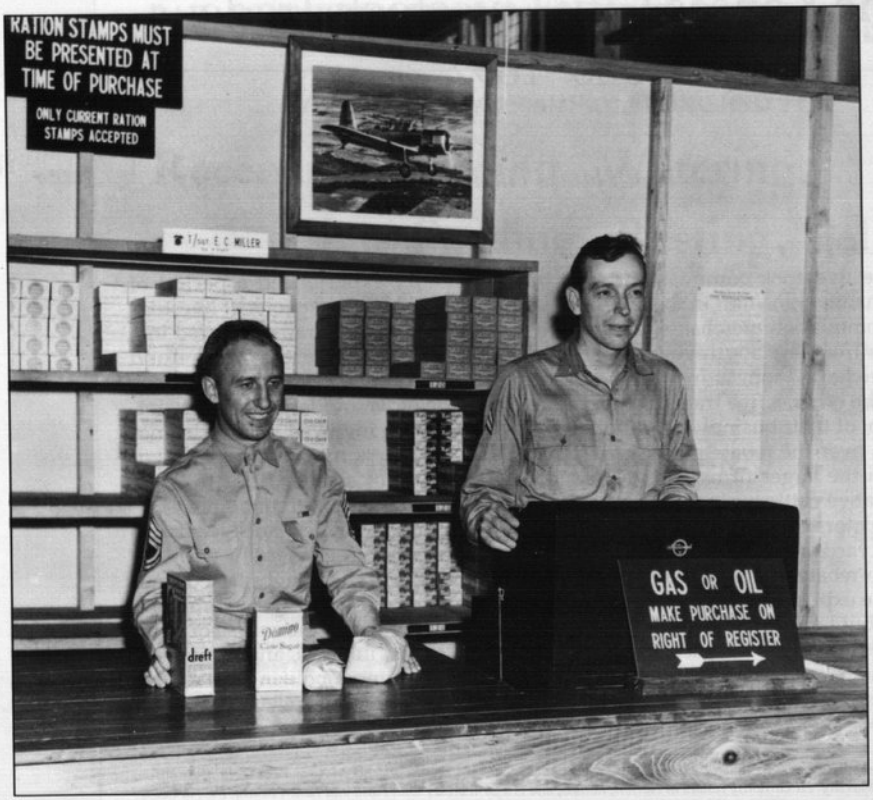
During the war years, "backyard farmers" produced one-third of all fresh vegetables consumed throughout the country. Wichita, 1942.

★ *"All over the city" vacant lots sprouted with peas, beans, lettuce, radishes, and corn. Wichita, 1942.*

A month later Carpenter wrote that "Vacant lots all over the City [were] beginning to sprout with peas, beans, lettuce, radishes, and corn," and in May he reported that Wichita's "Victory gardens" appear to be "a huge success. The city is full of them." That year's Topeka effort was also successful. "The 1943 vegetable crop season," according to the Topeka Area Civilian Defense Council, "will long be remembered by the Victory gardeners who labored hard to supply civilian food in answer to national emergency call." Topeka reportedly had 17,710 V-Gardeners, with 2,500 in surrounding rural areas; they produced 4 million pounds of food, despite generally "unfavorable" weather conditions for vegetable production in the early spring.

Rationing was another wartime reality that forced average Kansans to make adjustments in their life styles. Total war meant that many vital "war materials" such as rubber and gasoline were in short supply, and thus their sale and consumption was restricted. Initially, gasoline was rationed as a means of limiting the use of automobiles, thus saving rubber, and not because petroleum was in short supply. The speed limit, pegged at 35 miles per hour during most of the war, was reduced on the nation's highways also to diminish fuel consumption; many people simply chose not to travel by car because of increased travel time at the lower speeds. Meat, sugar, and other food stuffs were rationed, and the civilian population was encouraged to conserve these items. Some turned to the "black market," but most learned to "make-do or do-without."



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Stamps, points, and tokens—they all added up to limited food and limited gas. In 1942, America started "going by the book"—the ration book. Strother Field, Winfield, 1940s.

For the most part, Kansans seemed to pull together amazingly well to do their part in this "common cause." They could take pride in their home-front record, said Sen. Arthur Capper on V-J Day: "Kansas has always made good when put to the test." On August 15, 1945, they also could and did rejoice in victory; and, as part of the celebration, for the first time in nearly three years, "went in droves to the few open service stations . . . and ordered attendants to `fill 'er up'." KH