Kansans and the World War Experience

Introduction

The fiftieth anniversary of America's participation in the Second World War has understandably aroused much interest, numerous commemorative events, and considerable scholarship pertaining to this seminal event in the history of the United States and the world. Nationally, reminiscences, biographies, and some excellent home-front monographs have resulted; perhaps most notably among the new works is William M. Tuttle, Jr.'s widely acclaimed "Daddy's Gone To War": The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children. Tuttle, a professor of history at the University of Kansas, offered a home-front history from the perspective of America's wartime children. Although some of his informants were from Kansas, Tuttle's focus is the nation, as is that of many of the good World War II studies.

On a regional level, Gerald D. Nash's World War II and the West is quite a significant contribution. Here the author examines the process of restructuring "within the context of the American West" and analyzes the war's influence "on the economic life of the region," concluding that in the space of "four years the war had transformed a backward colonial region into an economic pacesetter for the nation." Nash's work is not exhaustive, however, and his prime area of concentration is the far West, the Rock-
ies and beyond. Do his conclusions apply to Kansas as well? It would appear so, at least in part; but the definitive answer must await a more thorough study of the Kansas home front. This special issue of Kansas History, even with its fine overview essay by Patrick G. O'Brien, is only a modest beginning.

While conducting research for a special exhibit that opened at the Kansas Museum of History on December 7, 1991, and preparing the text for a four-part photo essay published in Kansas History the following year, I was made aware of the dearth of good secondary writing in this rich field of study. Craig Miner has made some significant contributions in his history of Wichita, and military installations, POW camps, and the state's martial contributions have been reasonably well covered. But surprisingly little scholarly attention has been focused on the social, economic, and agricultural implications of the war on the Sunflower State.

In this issue, Judith Johnson provides insight into the lives and experiences of a few of Wichita's "Rosie the Riveters," but a comprehensive study of women in this and other wartime industries is yet to be done. Here, we get a glimpse at what war work meant to Johnson's subjects, but what did it mean to the state and the Kansas society during and after the war? What impact did these momentous developments have on family life? As Mary Martha Thomas wrote in Riveting and Rationing in Dixie: Alabama Women and the Second World War, a state-level study that in some respects could serve as a model for some energetic student of Kansas history, "Scholars disagree over the long-term impact of the war on women's role in American life and over whether the war period should be characterized as a time of continuity or of dramatic change in definitions of women's place." This debate plays itself out in the works of William Chafe, Susan M. Hartmann, Karen Anderson, and others who have contributed much to our understanding of the national picture for women, but the Kansas scene awaits critical analysis.

Along somewhat related lines, one can ask how the demographic trends, enhanced by the war, changed the state and its people. In 1942 the state agricultural census indicated that for the first time slightly more than 50 percent of all Kansans lived in "cities having 1,000 or more residents," and with the continuation of this rural/urban migration, urban Kansas would be increasingly dominant in the years ahead. Wartime urbanization may not have been as dramatic in Kansas as in many other places, but it was consequential, and the war's impact on and the social consequences of this shift, especially in Wichita and several other defense industry cities, certainly warrants further study.

And what of industry itself? After the war, Kansas can no longer be characterized as simply an agricultural state—if it ever could. Many war-related industries, some of which were born of government largess, made the transition and thrived; some of this war production was only good for the duration, but industrial expansion laid the foundation for a truly mixed Kansas economy. The politics of war contracts awarded to a Republican "isolationist" state is a topic rife with possibilities. As early as July 1940, the Topeka Daily Capital was reporting on a major effort by midwestern businessmen to acquire a fair share of the de-
defense industry build-up for the region. Kansas’ congressional delegation, state officials, and business and community leaders aggressively pursued lucrative federal contracts; and their efforts were not in vain. By November 1943 Oscar Stauffer, former chairman of the Kansas Industrial Development Commission, could report that Kansas had landed almost $3 billion in war contracts. “Latest WPB [War Production Board] figures show the nation’s per capita value for war supply and facility contracts to be $1,079,” said Stauffer. “Kansas has a per capita value of $1,621, exceeding thirty-nine states. This is the only state in the Great Plains region to exceed the United States average.” Why was this the case? What were the long-range implications? Some case studies, as well as a general survey, of the political and economic consequences of these developments and this “military-industrial complex” in Kansas would be welcome.

Race relations and the experience of Kansas’ black community as it relates to war production work, demographic adjustments, and many other facets of Kansas life during the 1940s is another neglected area. African Americans challenged the continued existence of the “color line” in a number of areas, and black leaders were quite outspoken on the subject of defense industry jobs and fair employment practices. The files of black newspapers like the Kansas City, Kansas, Plaindealer and Wichita’s Negro Star and the records of various NAACP chapters are rich sources for further investigation into these and other issues.

In this issue of Kansas History, Kristine McCusker does an exceptional job with the Lawrence campus in “The Forgotten Years of America’s Civil Rights Movement: Wartime Protests at the University of Kansas, 1939-1945,” but what of the state’s other colleges and universities? Many more questions remain with regard to the state’s other ethnic communities—Native American, Mexican, and Japanese, to name only the most obvious.

With its focus on the radical right, “Another Wichita Seditionist?” further develops our picture of Kansas antiwar sentiment. And we already know something of the moderate isolationist element and Arthur Capper’s pre-Pearl Harbor involvements thanks to Homer E. Socolofsky’s biographical study and John W. Partin’s 1979 Kansas History contribution, “The Dilemma of ‘A Good, Very Good Man.’”

Kansans, like most of the Midwest, was generally labeled isolationist, and some Kansans were openly hostile to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s effort to do all he could for Britain short of war. But others, like William Allen White of the Emporia Gazette, supported the president and advocated a policy of all aid short of active military involvement for those countries fighting against Nazi domination. In 1940 White believed “the future of Western Civilization is being decided upon the battlefield of Europe,” and the time had come for the U.S. to “throw its economic and moral weight on the side of the nations of western Europe . . . that constitute our first line of defense.” Kansas Gov. Payne Ratner, who successfully sought lucrative federal war contracts for his state, was among the early members of the White committee (officially the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies), which deserves more study despite the fine work already completed by William
Tuttle. How did the public really feel about aid to the Allies and preparedness? What of Kansans and the America First Committee?

Perhaps most surprising, by its absence from this issue of Kansas History and wartime Kansas historiography in general, is the shortage of good scholarship on agriculture during and immediately following the war. We always talk of prosperous farms and greatly expanded production during a period of unusually fine weather and high demand; but analysis of these truths and this pivotal era for Kansas farmers is in short supply. The classic study for the country remains Walter Wilcox's 1947 volume Farmers and the Second World War. It is not presumptuous to assert that Kansas deserves its own study. The farm-labor shortage received considerable contemporary media attention; but it has received relatively little from post-WWII scholars. “The rise of the custom combining industry,” writes Pat O'Brien, “was one consequence of the war”—a response to shortages of labor and machines. Thomas D. Isern, in Custom Combining on the Great Plains, gives this important facet of Plains agriculture its due; in recent years, the exception to general neglect has been Caron Smith’s look at “The Women’s Land Army During World War II.” In addition to labor and technology, what of the impact of “war crops”—soybeans, flax, and potatoes—on the postwar Kansas farm? How did the war and its legacy affect the nature of federal farm programs, land use, and a host of other ag-related issues? Also welcome would be a serious and detailed look at the production and application of a variety of new technologies, such as agricultural chemicals, in the wake of the Second World War.

We trust this special issue of Kansas History fills some of the void in the historiography of the Kansas home front, 1940-1945, and we earnestly hope that it stimulates some postanniversary scholarly interest in Kansas history during the 1940s. Many of the issues raised above and more are addressed in the following articles. As always, we hope to inform and entertain our readers; but perhaps most importantly, our true goal will be accomplished if the essays raise at least as many questions as they answer and thus inspire new research, writing, and article submissions to cover the innumerable topics we could not include.

I would like to thank Pat O'Brien who, in addition to contributing the following overview article, should be credited as a co-editor for this issue of Kansas History. His assistance was vital and much appreciated. And as always, special thanks are due my coworkers on the Society's publications staff—Bobbie Fray, managing editor, and Sue Novak, associate editor—for their usual excellence in editing, design, and production.

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