



THE WAR



A KEN BURNS FILM

On The Home Front

Subjects:

Social Studies, American History, World History, Civics

All the old iron beds were pulled out of the garages and they were put in the metal drives. The Boy Scouts did a great deal of that. The city took up the old streetcar lines. It went down Government and Dauphin Street, and we added those to the scrap pile. But everyone took part in World War II down to the youngest child.

— Katherine Phillips, THE WAR

Background:

Before World War II, the United States took an isolationist posture in world affairs. The population was far more concerned about its own economic well-being than it was with the political upheaval in Europe and Japan's imperialistic activities in Asia. Stories of Japanese and German military activity had been in the news since the mid-1930s, but for most Americans these seemed to be very distant events. America's military preparedness was not that of a nation expecting to go to war. Powerful isolationist factions, combined with a strong pacifist movement and a rejection of the League of Nations, kept the United States from having any resemblance to its militaristic counterparts in Europe and Asia. In 1939, the United States Army ranked 39th in the world, possessing a cavalry force of 50,000 and using horses to pull the artillery.

The U.S. government began to understand the threat level imposed by the Axis powers, and in November 1939 altered previous neutrality legislation to permit the shipment of war supplies to China and Europe on a cash-and-carry basis. In 1941, Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act, which actually placed the United States in a quasi-war between its merchant fleet and Hitler's submarines. But the American public was only semiconscious of these events, and in no way were the country's cities, small towns and agricultural regions ready for war. The "sleeping giant" wouldn't awaken until Sunday morning, December 7, 1941.

Once awakened, America began turning out war production at every level of its industry and agriculture. In the next four years, entire factories and the towns that they supported

began turning out war materiel at rates that would eventually outperform all the Axis powers combined.

By 1945, the United States had produced nearly 300,000 warplanes, more than 100,000 tanks, 87,000 warships and nearly 6 million tons of aircraft bombs. The government rationed everything from gasoline to silk. The civilian population chipped in as well, growing victory gardens and saving rubber from tires and grease from cooking stoves.

Towns like those featured in the film — Luverne, Minnesota; Sacramento, California; Waterbury, Connecticut; and Mobile, Alabama — would transform in ways never imaginable. These changes would have long-lasting repercussions on these towns and thousands like them all across the country long after the war ended.

In this lesson, students will examine and get a sense of life in America prior to its entry into the war. Then they will explore the changes brought on by wartime industry and how the people adjusted to life in the industrial boomtowns and reflect on socioeconomic changes in the character of these towns and the reasons for them.

Opening Activity:

Begin this lesson by having students take out a sheet of paper and complete a free writing exercise based on the following questions:

- How would you describe the character of your own neighborhood, city or town?
- What do people primarily do there for a living?
- What is the strongest memory you have of living there?
- Describe how a major event (natural disaster, major crime, or social or economic event) affected the town or neighborhood.
- How might it have changed the "character" of the town or neighborhood? How were people you knew affected by the event?

Activity 1: The Four Towns

Divide students into small groups of three to five and have them create a graphic organizer that outlines the names of

the four towns in the film, with columns for each town's main economic activity, remembrances from featured interviewees and the town's experience with social tensions. (Students will fill out their graphic organizer as they view the clip.)

Have students view "The Four Towns" clip on the web site, which explains the status of the four towns prior to America's entry into the war. After students have completed the graphic organizer, review and discuss their findings.

GO TO CLIP

(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5381&type=3)

Activity 2: Wartown

Continue to work in groups and watch the next segment, "Wartown". Upon completing their viewing, have the student groups review the opening statement from the segment:

NEWSREEL: An army of 150,000 men, women and children invaded an American city. Whites, Negroes, Indians, Creoles, Cajuns — they came from every corner of the land, their roots in every curve of the globe: Moscow, Indiana; Warsaw, North Dakota; Hamburg, California; Milan, Missouri; Baghdad, Kentucky. Some came out of patriotism, some out of grim necessity, some for a richer life; all came to do a war job. This could be any one of a hundred great American war centers. It happens to be Mobile, Alabama, but the story is the same in every wartown in America.

GO TO CLIP

(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5373&type=3)

Now discuss the following questions:

1. This clip was shown in movie houses throughout the United States during the early days of World War II. It is obviously structured to be a morale booster. Look closely at how the script is written. What do you think is the overall theme of the clip? Why do you think the towns featured in the quote were selected for this newsreel clip? How do you think Americans in the early 1940s reacted to seeing scenes of hundreds of people heading off to work?
2. The clip describes how American factories geared up for war production and the challenge they faced converting car manufacturing with 15,000 parts to B-24 bomber manufacturing with 1,550,000 parts, producing one every 63 minutes. What type of logistics were necessary for this mobilization? How was the government involved?
3. Describe some of the changes that factories of civilian products would have to go through to convert to military production. What is mass production? What is an assembly line? How are jobs divided up? What other observations can you make from the newsreel footage about the factories, the laborers and the materials being produced? What was the impact of all this war production on American industry overall?
4. Referring to the newsreel footage presented in the segment, describe some of the changes that factories of civilian products would have to go through to convert to military production. What other observations can you make from the newsreel footage about the factories, the laborers and the materials being produced? What was the impact of all this war production on American industry overall?
5. Mobile, Alabama's employment doubled in shipbuilding and dry dock facilities as 150,000 people came in from all parts of the region to work in defense plants. Many of those people were from poor rural communities, including many African Americans. Describe some of the personal reasons why these people sought employment in Mobile and some of the challenges they faced once they got there. What were some reasons for the negative reactions residents of Mobile had toward the newcomers?
6. By 1943, six million women had entered the workforce, nearly half of them working in defense plants, doing jobs previously reserved for men. *Life* magazine paid tribute to these "Rosie the Riveters" as neither drudges nor slaves, but the heroines of a new order. What is meant by this statement? How did their experience change previous attitudes about women in the workplace? How did it affect women and their families? How did it affect society?
7. The original residents of Mobile also had to make adjustments to the influx of workers coming to work in the defense plants. Describe some of the strains the quick increase in population had on the town's infrastructure and services. Many of the people arriving from the rural areas did not have the same lifestyle as the permanent residents of Mobile. Describe some of the characteristics of their lifestyle and the reactions by the residents of Mobile. What was the ever-present binding force that was on all their minds, and how did it help to bring them all together?

Activity 3: Rationing and Recycling

Continue to work in groups and watch "Rationing and Recycling". Upon completing their viewing, have the student groups review and discuss the following questions:

GO TO CLIP

(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5373&type=3)

1. Develop a list of some of the major items that civilians in the United States rationed, recycled or just went without during World War II.
 2. How were these items used in the war effort?
 3. How did the Depression help prepare many Americans for doing without the "luxury" items? After the war, recycling was discontinued. It began again, slowly, after the 1960s on a volunteer basis. Why do you think Americans didn't continue to recycle items after the war?
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4. How do you explain the contradiction between Americans whose act of rationing and recycling made them feel they were part of the war effort and the emergence of a black market for goods during the war?
5. How did rationing and recycling contribute to a sense of community? Do you think Americans today would ration to contribute to a war effort? Explain your answer.

Extension Activities:

- Have students do some research at your local historical society or college to find out what your town did during the war. What industries moved there or were enhanced by the war effort? How did the influx of workers change the demographic characteristics of your community? What were some of the positive and negative effects on the community itself, its infrastructure and its people?
- Have students examine census records from the U.S. Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov>) that indicate changes in incomes, employment figures (total numbers and numbers in gender and race) and population shifts (increases or decreases during the war years). Have them record the information on a large chart or series of charts or create a PowerPoint presentation for the class.
- Have students develop a public service poster or Web site that encourages citizens to ration and recycle commonly used products.

Activity 4: The Scrapbook

Tell students that they are going to each create a scrapbook for a fictional family living in America on the eve of World War Two. Explain that the scrapbook will reflect the point of view of someone who stayed on the home front throughout the war. Begin by helping students to imagine what life was like in 1940. How would an average Sunday then differ from how we spend our Sundays today in terms of communication: no computers, cell phones, instant messaging or even television and entertainment: no video games, shopping malls, fast food restaurants, DVDs and again, no television, etc. Tell students that they are going to consider how suddenly daily life changed in 1941 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Introducing the Scrapbook

Ask students if they have ever kept a scrapbook themselves or if anyone in their family has kept one they could bring in to show the class. Numerous scrapbooks are available to look at online, and local historical societies may have some to show upon request. Tell students that the craze for keeping scrapbooks emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century with the development of easy-to-take photos and the wealth of paper memorabilia such as advertisements, playbills, labels and so forth, that people could easily collect and paste into a book to document their personal past. Explain that scrapbooks can be kept as events unfold as well as after the events as a way to memorialize them.

Now assign each student to be a resident of one of the four towns featured in *THE WAR* in 1940. Divide the class so that there are roughly equal members of each town. Distribute to the students the paper they will use for their scrapbooks, such as sheets of hole-punched heavy paper and ribbons with which to tie them together.

Students will use the clips and resources on this site to collect the following documents for their scrapbooks:

Document 1: Ask students to find on the Web some information about their “hometown” as it would have been in 1940 and a photograph of it they can download and paste into their scrapbook. If they use Google as their search engine tell them to click on “images” when looking for their photographs. Students should paste the image into their scrapbook and write a caption about it, such as when they were born there, their favorite things (or least favorite things) about where they grew up.

Document 2: Ask students to create one piece of memorabilia for something they were doing on the first Sunday of December, 1941 taking into consideration the upcoming holiday season, the weather where their fictional family lives, and so forth. Suggestions might be a movie or show ticket, an invitation to someone’s birthday, a religious event they attended and so forth.

Document 3: A news article about the attack at Pearl Harbor. This can be researched or downloaded from the Web, or researched and written by the student (in which case a Document Analysis Worksheet need not be filed).

Document 4: A photograph of a radio your family purchased recently, or an advertisement for one you want to buy. Write a caption on the role of the radio in your life at the moment.

Document 5: An image of President Roosevelt. Write a caption about how you feel about the president and his recent policies and how you expect them to impact on you and your family.

Document 6: A news clipping about how your hometown has changed since the war. This document can be written by the student (in which case a Document Analysis Worksheet need not be filed.) Or, the student can research and find an actual news clip from his or her hometown.

Mobile students should focus on the growth of industry and racial tensions. Waterbury students should focus on the growth of industry and new roles for women. Sacramento students should focus on the growth of industry and the internment of the city’s Japanese Americans. Luverne students can focus on the farming community, its role in the war, and include an article by Al McIntosh in the style of the *Rock County Star-Herald*.

Document 7: Download or make a map (like one you might have clipped from a newspaper) of the situation at the end of 1942 in the Pacific, North African, and European theaters of

war. In your caption describe how you feel at this point in time about the hope for an allied victory.

Documents 8, 9 and 10: Using what you have learned about rationing and recycling, download or create documents that show how each member of your family on the home front is contributing to the war effort. For example, a child of ten might be involved in scrap collections, the mother of the family might have a role in Civil Defense, while a grandfather plants a victory garden. Captions should reflect how the war is affecting each one of these people in the family.

Document 11: Sugar and butter were sparingly rationed during the war. Find a recipe for a birthday cake that uses the least amounts of sugar and butter you can find. Copy the recipe for your scrapbook and describe the birthday party in the caption.

Document 12: Because gas was vital to the war effort, most civilians were allowed to use only three gallons of gas a week. Figure out how many gallons of gas your real family currently uses a week and then formulate a means to live using only three gallons per week (e.g. car pooling, forgoing all unnecessary travel, etc).

Document 16: Research the American war effort in 1943 in either the Pacific front (fighting in the Aleutian Islands) or in Europe (invasion of Italy and Sicily). [Students can use what they learn from their textbooks, from watching more of the film *The War* especially the narrator's summaries at the opening and closing of each episode), or by researching primary source documents on the Web.] Include something in your scrapbook that reflects the progress of the war in headlines, the text of an FDR Fireside Chat about the battlefront, an article or photographs from a popular magazine. The captions you write should reflect your concerns for the one brother in your family as well as for the Witnesses to War from your hometown (if any) fighting on that front.

Extension Activity

Play authentic radio programs from
The Golden Age of Radio

(<http://www.archive.org/details/worldwarIInewsOTRKIBM>)

As a class discuss:

Why did civilian life change because of World War Two?
How did it change? Whom did it affect?

Did FDR's demands for sacrifice on the part of civilians have any other stated or unstated purposes?

How did his demands unify country?

How did they function as a distraction in times of worry and grief?

How did they help civilians feel connected to their loved ones on the front?

Visit the "SEARCH AND EXPLORE"

(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_home.htm)

section of THE WAR web site for more information about the home front World War II.

Standards

McREL (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning) at (<http://www.mcrel.org>)

United States History

Standard 25: Understands the causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad in reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs.

Level III (Grades 7-8)

Benchmark 7: Understands how World War II influenced American society

Benchmark 8: Understands how minority groups were affected by World War II

Level IV (Grades 9-12)

Benchmark 4: Understands how World War II influenced the homefront

Language Arts

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

- Uses strategies to address different audiences
- Writes expository compositions; synthesizes information from different sources
- Writes fictional, biographical, autobiographical and observational narrative compositions
- Writes descriptive compositions; reflects on personal experience
- Writes in response to literature; analyzes and interprets

Standard 2: Uses stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

- Uses precise and descriptive language
- Develops effective paragraphs in logical sequence; uses supporting details
- Varies sentence structures
- Uses a variety of transitional devices
- Develops personal styles and voice.

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