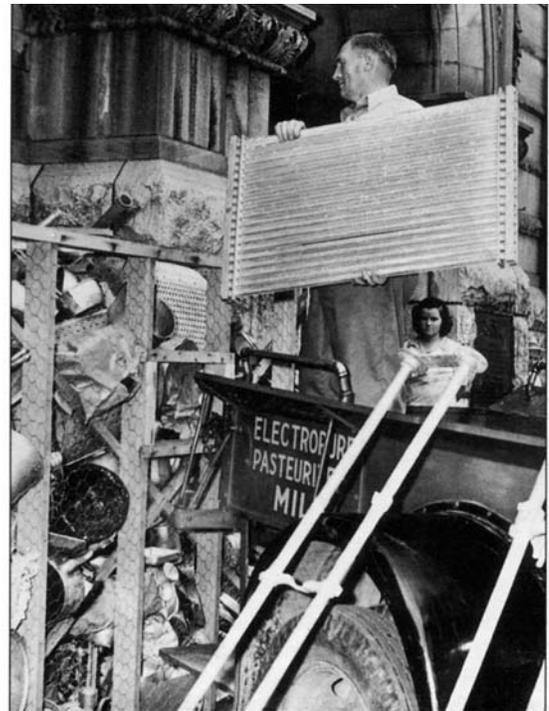


Remembering the 1940s

On December 8, 1941, the headlines reported the death of 1500 at Pearl Harbor from an attack by Japan. It was the day after the “day that would live in infamy.” A declaration of war by Congress at the request of President Franklin Roosevelt soon followed; the war would profoundly affect the nation throughout the 1940s and into the decades beyond. In the 1940s the United States led the world into the nuclear age and became its major military power. The decade was the beginning of significant social change, some of which would not be fully realized for many years after.

- The attack on Pearl Harbor and declaration of war, and Japanese bombings in the Philippines and across the Pacific mobilized the country. Young men rushed to enlist in the military, and many more were called up to serve through the activation of the draft. This large scale recruitment of young men for military service led to the hiring of an alternate workforce, consisting of women and older men, to perform the jobs the young men had left. Many of these jobs were in heavy industry, positions women had previously not held in significant numbers. Women had always worked in factories, but their work was generally low-paying and concentrated in specific industries (the textile industry, for example), with few supervisory and managerial positions open to them; wartime work gave them the opportunity to learn new skills and earn much higher salaries than before. Women proved effective and capable workers in these non-traditional fields. Although most women left these positions once the war was over, the lessons learned through these experiences were not completely lost and would set the foundation for more permanent social change. The status of women was also advanced by Eleanor Roosevelt, who always sought to encourage women to use their talents in all facets of life and delivered her own address on the night of Pearl Harbor. Women also enlisted during World War II, serving as WACs and WAVEs, performing duties both stateside and overseas in noncombatant roles.

- Civil Defense groups were organized in most communities, with groups trained to deal with potential attacks or invasions. Bomb shelters were established in public buildings and constructed in other locations; a practice that would continue during the Cold War era.
- People were also affected directly by the war through the rationing of consumer goods and other materials needed for the military. Gasoline, butter, sugar, coffee, nylon stockings and cigarettes were all rationed; long lines sometimes formed for the purchase of these items. Cohoesiers generally patronized local markets and groceries, making their purchases at the numerous neighborhood stores throughout the city, including Dziamba's and Potyrala's on Ontario Street, Heins' on Willow Street, Pondillo's on Van Schaick Island, Klar's on Columbia Street and Guzek's on Saratoga Street. Ration books became part of daily life, Victory Gardens were planted to conserve resources, and people collected and recycled tin cans and scrap metal. Most endured these discomforts and minor deprivations with good humor, as they felt part of a collective effort to help the troops and win the war.



Scrap metal collection in front of Cohoes City Hall during World War II.

- The Red Cross was also extremely active at home and overseas, with the Cohoes branch of the organization, established in 1917, doing its part. Local fund-raising activities included tag days, community sings, card parties and food sales.
- The USO (United Service Organization) was established to provide entertainment for servicemen. Many of the best-known movie stars and celebrities of the day made trips to the front to entertain the troops, including comedian Bob Hope, Kate Smith, who cheered the soldiers with her rendition of “God Bless America”, and columnist Hedda Hopper, who shared the latest Hollywood gossip with the GIs.

- The news and entertainment of the day was delivered to those at home by radio. Families gathered around nightly to hear President Roosevelt's "fireside chats", a constant since the days of the Depression. Popular radio personalities of the time included Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Kay Kyser, and Fibber McGee and Molly. Quiz and game shows also had a wide audience, with "Information Please" and "Truth or Consequences" drawing listeners around the country.



A 1940s photograph of Red Cross members in Cohoes.

- Movies also drew crowds, and the movie industry supported the war through its on-screen portrayals of the U.S. armed forces and their enemies. Other films of the era included the adaptation of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, with Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, and Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in the now-classic *Casablanca*. During those days, Cohoesers could go to the new Cohoes Theater (opened in August 1941), where there was always a double feature, cartoons, a newsreel, and bingo games and giveaways of dishes or other items. Cohoes also had the Regent and Rialto Theaters. Films were shown in the smaller theaters in places like Cohoes after they had a week's run in both Albany and Troy, first playing in Albany's Palace Theater, then in Proctor's in Troy.
- Other stars in the 1940s were Abbott and Costello, James Cagney, Mickey Rooney, Lucille Ball, Rita Hayworth, Bette Davis, Bing Crosby, Kay Starr and the Andrews Sisters. Popular tunes of the era included "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire" and "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy." The Big Bands were in full swing, with the Glenn Miller Orchestra, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman and others defining the era. Music was an essential element of night life, with New York City nightclubs such as the Copacabana and the Stork Club popular and trend-setting gathering places.
- Professional sports had its own stars, but would not go unaffected by world affairs. Joe Louis rose to the top in the boxing ring; his defeat of German Max Schmeling a few years earlier was a fight in which symbolism transcended sport. Joe Dimaggio and Ted Williams grabbed baseball headlines. Many of the sport's standouts would trade baseball uniforms for military uniforms, so the leagues played with depleted ranks during the war years. In the first half of 1941, Eddie Arcaro rode Whirlaway to a Triple Crown win.
- Mass communication and the advertising industry were spurred by the development of the new medium of television, which would also be a force in changing patterns of social interaction. At the start of 1945, there were only nine television stations operating in the entire nation; WRGB in Schenectady, on the air 9 hours a week, had the greatest amount of programming at the time. By 1948, there were 172,000 TV sets sold in the country.
- The defining event of the 1940s, World War II, would change the country in ways large and small for decades to come. The Depression that gripped the country ended, and the U.S. developed increased military and industrial power. A new middle class was created due to increased educational opportunity through the G.I. Bill, which opened higher education up to returning servicemen, many of whom were the first in their families to go to college. The immediate postwar years were also a time of growth of consumerism; following the years of the Depression and diversion of resources during the war years, industries retooled to produce automobiles, appliances, and other consumer goods.