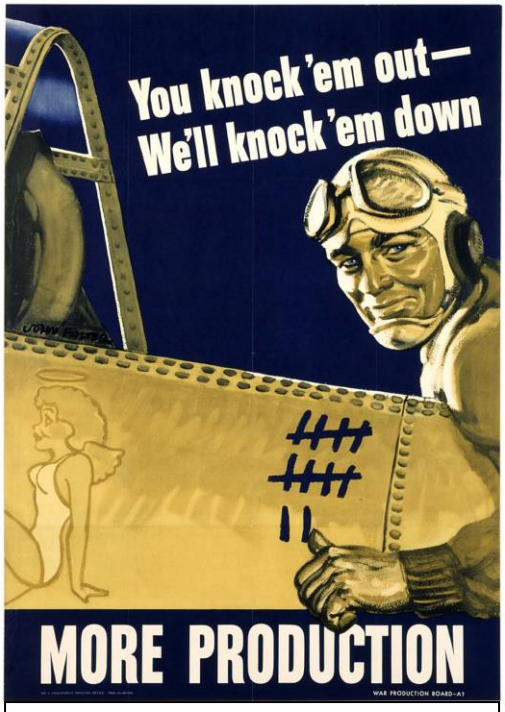
Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Homefront

Approximately 16 million Americans served in the various branches of the United States armed services during World War II. Each one of those 16 million people left loved ones behind on the homefront. From 1941 to 1945, American women faced a multitude of challenges they had never before faced. In addition to their time-honored roles as mother and nurturer, they now added father and provider to their growing list of responsibilities. Many joined the work force to aid in the depletion of factory workers the war had brought on. These jobs not only supplemented the meager government paychecks earned from a husband's military service, but they also helped to alleviate the loneliness felt by the absence of a loved one. World War II marked the beginning of women getting out of the kitchen and into the workforce en masse for the first time in American history. Women on the homefront proved that they could successfully contribute to and participate within American society, disproving previous concepts of a woman's abilities.

Women in American Industry

With the depletion of the male American work force during World War II, the American industry turned to previously neglected groups to fill the void. African Americans and women jumped at the chance to prove that they could contribute not only to the war effort but to society as a whole. The need for workers during wartime was great. In 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt stated that "in some communities employers dislike to hire women. In others they are reluctant to hire Negroes. We can no longer afford to indulge in such prejudice." Between 1940 and 1945, six million joined the American work force. Many of these women went to work in these traditionally male-dominated industries, such as aircraft and ship building. Additionally, more than a quarter of a million women joined the various branches of the military, for the first time working in roles other than that of a nurse. The women who took on these jobs also had to juggle responsibilities back home. In addition to their eight to ten hour shifts, women were expected to cook, clean and complete all the domestic chores they had done before the war.



You knock 'em out--We'll knock 'em down More Production, 1942, John Falter, lithograph, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Additionally, the confluence of women from different races and backgrounds in the workplace provided an environment that bred civility. Factory worker Inez Sauer recalls how her preconceptions about African Americans were false,

> *I learned that just because you're a woman and have never worked is no reason you can't learn. The job really broadened me. I had led a very sheltered life. I had had no contact with Negroes except as maids or gardeners. . . . I found that some of the black people I got to know there were very superior, and certainly equal to me – equal to anyone I ever knew. I learned that color has nothing at all to do with ability*.

War Communication

Communication between those serving in the military overseas and those left behind on the homefront was entirely reliant on letter writing. A lifeline between those separated by war, letter writing was a daily or weekly event in most households. Letters from servicemen helped to assuage the worries of those back home, while letters from the homefront reminded soldiers that they were not forgotten. Soldiers would write encouraging words, informing their loved ones that they were in good health, eating well, and safe from danger. Loved ones would often write of seemingly ordinary daily tasks and events that helped remind soldiers of the life they left behind.

In 1942 the government provided servicemen with free mailing privileges, which no doubt helped the volume of mail sent back home to increase in epic proportions. It also circulated lists of names and addresses of soldiers to the American public encouraging them, especially young women, to write letters to soldiers whom they did not even know in an effort to bolster troop morale. This special type of mail came to be known as **V-Mail** or Victory Mail. V-Mail was written on a single sheet of paper, with the contents written on one side. The sheet was then folded in half and addressed on the blank side. Thus, V-Mail was advantageous because it was lighter and used less paper than traditional letters which required envelopes. For this reason V-Mail became the most popular way to reach one's loved one overseas. The mail was delivered twice a day in American towns and cities and became the highlight of one's day.

The letters that those on the homefront received were often censured. It was not uncommon for large portions to be cut out of a letter. Other forms of communication like newspapers and radio also under operated under strict orders to censure any potentially injurious information that could fall into the hands of the enemy. A popular saying at the time was, "A slip of the lips sinks ships," a reminder that one could inadvertently aid the enemy. To

combat this, some families and servicemen devised their own coded words so that they could secretly pass on messages. As war wife Shirley Hackett explained:

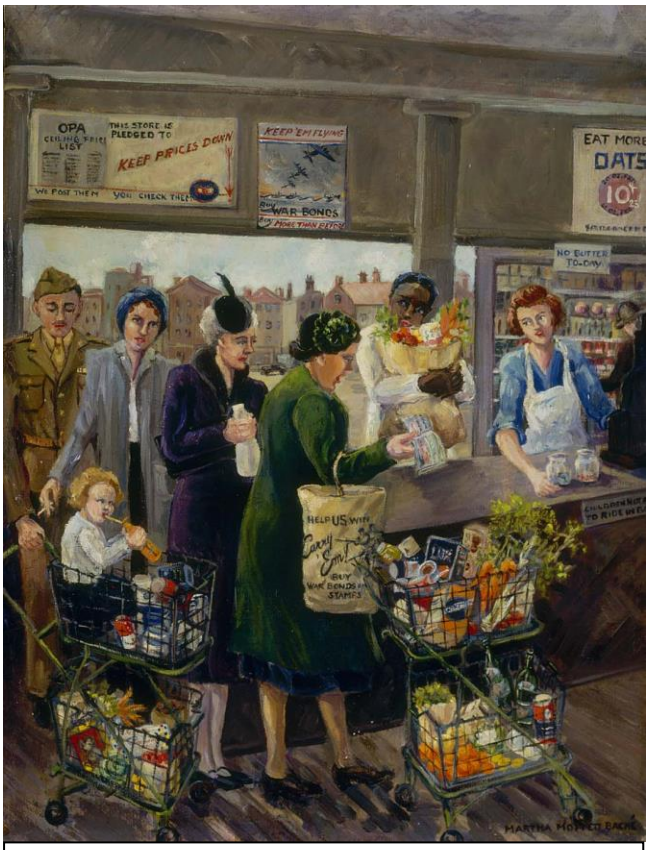
> *You lived for the mail, yet the mail was censored, and it was not priority-shipped; it was always left for the very last thing. My husband wrote to me every day, but I sometimes didn't hear from him for three months. When the mail did come, often it was censored so much that you couldn't possibly figure out what he wanted to tell you in the letter. We knew very little about what was actually going on in the battlefield until much later. You worried because you didn't know anything. We had radio, but the war news was censored and very little was in the newspapers that told you anything.*

Though letter writing must seem tedious to today's young generations, the letters were invaluable to the servicemen who received them. They provided support, strength and comfort in a war zone where there was none to be found. Soldier Elliot Johnson described what it was like for the servicemen to receive letter from loved ones:

> *While we were overseas, letters from our loved ones, including our girlfriends and wives, really sustained us. The mail came in very irregular batches, though. Sometimes for several weeks we wouldn't get any letters at all, then we would get an enormous amount of mail. And sometimes the letters that had been mailed first arrived many weeks after those which had been mailed last. But letters were a big part of our emotional stability, because they made us feel like we were still a part of the people back home, that we hadn't been forgotten*.

Radio and newsreels were other means by which the American people kept informed about the war overseas. Newsreels played in movie theaters before the featured film. For some families who were lucky enough to catch their loved one on the newsreel, projectionists would replay the newsreels over and over for the families after the main feature.

While letters were welcomed, telegrams were not for they contained news of a tragic nature: the death of a serviceman, a missing-in-action notice, or news of a serious injury. Shirley Hackett recalled, "Everybody dreaded a telegram. You almost hated to answer the phone at times." Over the course of World War II 300,000 American soldiers were killed and an additional 700,000 sustained injuries in varying degrees of severity. For those that did not return home, their families hung white silk pennants adorned with gold stars as a notice that their loved one would not be returning home.



Wartime Marketing 1942, Martha Moffet Bache, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Rationing and Life on the Homefront

The onset of World War II had brought an end to the Great Depression due to the increase in commercial production. Industrial production was in full force as factories and farms raced to produce supplies for the war effort. While this occurred, rationing became a large part of everyday life for those on the homefront. Rationing food to the civilian population helped to make food and supplies available to the military. Civilian food shortages were common, as ships that would normally carry imported food were now diverted for military use.

Rubber became a scarce item as many rubber-producing areas in the Pacific had been invaded by the Japanese, effectively cutting off America's supply of rubber, required it be added to the growing list of rationed items. Gasoline was added shortly afterward, as the government hoped that by rationing fuel, people would be less likely to drive and unnecessarily wear down their vehicle's rubber tires. Stickers were placed on cars indicating the driver's gasoline consumption allowance. Those who relied on cars to get to work or provide emergency services were provided with more rations, while those who only drove for pleasure were rationed the least amount of gasoline. Mechanics were kept busy repairing cars as no new ones were being manufactured; all metal was being diverted for the building and maintenance of tanks and military equipment.

The first of the wartime rationing began in May of 1942 with sugar. **Ration books** were soon added for coffee, red meat and canned foods. Milk, eggs and butter, while not rationed, became scarce in some areas. One wife wrote her husband in 1943 about the shortages and rationing:

> *Last week we didn't have a scratch of butter in the house from Monday until Friday – and how I hate dry bread! It's a lot worse on we people in the country than it is on the city folks. They can go out and get some kind of meat every day while we have plenty of*

> *meatless days here. They can also stand in line for 2 or 3 hours for a pound of butter, but up here there are no lines as there is no butter and when there is a little butter everyone gets a ¼ of a pound. So you can imagine how far a ¼ of a pound goes in this family of five adults. And that's supposed to last us for a week.*

The government encouraged citizens to plant their own fruit and vegetable gardens to compensate for the produce that American farmers were sending to the military. These gardens quickly became known as **Victory Gardens**.

Women's magazines took on new roles, providing wartime advice and tips on keeping a family healthy, preparing meals with rationed food, solo parenting and shopping frugally. Food companies like General Mills created the persona of **Betty Crocker** and published a cookbook entitled *Your Share: How to Prepare Appetizing, Healthful Meals with Foods Available Today*. The cookbook advised women that they "must make a little do where there was an abundance before. In spite of sectional problems and shortages, you must prepare satisfying meals out of your share of what there is. You must heed the government request to increase the use of available foods, and save those that are scarce – and, at the same time, safeguard your family's nutrition." The image that was perpetuated of the female American homemaker was one who was self-reliant, efficient and the emotional support center of the home. Women were advised to cope with the pressures of wartime living "nobly and unselfishly." *Ladies' Home Journal* was considered one of the most trusted outlets for advice and the most read, boasting a circulation of more than four million.

Glossary

Betty Crocker: a persona for the General Mills Company. During the war, several Betty Crocker cookbooks were published instructing American women how to care and provide for their families when products were rationed.

Ration books: a collection of ration "coupons," which allowed the owner of the coupons a certain amount of product each month. Food, leather, rubber, clothing, and gasoline were some of the items rationed and especially needed for the war effort.

V-Mail: the primary mode of getting message to soldiers stationed abroad during WWII. Messages were censored, copied to film, and printed back onto paper for the intended recipient when it reached its destination. This system was much more cost effective for the military.

Victory Gardens: also known as *war gardens*, the government encouraged the planting of fruits, vegetables, and herbs were planted in private residences and in public parks to aid the war effort. By growing their own foods, American citizens aided the war effort by alleviating the labor shortage needed to harvest and transport these products. The gardens were also considered a morale booster for those on the homefront.