

WORLD WAR II

Chicagoans and World War II

December 7, 1941

As

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began

to

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By the end of the day, a time for heroes would begin. Chicagoans had just finished Sunday dinner on a chilly, gray afternoon that threatened snow. Many dozed over the comics, while others settled down to such radio broadcasts as the University of Chicago Forum and the New York Philharmonic. Suddenly, excited announcers interrupted with the news: the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor. It was December 7, 1941. Chicagoans immediately began calling neighbors and loved ones. About two hours later, special editions of the newspapers hit the streets, vendors shouting as loudly as they could. At Wrigley Field, where the Chicago Bears and Chicago Cardinals were playing, hundreds of fans wandered out to buy papers before half-time; soon the game was of very minor interest. Downtown, Chicago police cars began patrolling the city's bridges, shooing away Sunday strollers and matinee-goers, many of the latter learning the news only after exiting the theaters. As night fell, it began to snow.

The reaction to the news was a mixture of shock and the expected fulfillment of predictions. Chicagoans had been bitterly debating America's entry into the European war that had been raging since September 1939. Isolationists, led by *Chicago Tribune* publisher Col. Robert R. McCormick, had been engaged in the "war of the colonels" against Col. Frank Knox, publisher of the *Chicago Daily News*.

The latter and his fellow interventionists believed that American aid was needed to save Western Europe and its culture from obliteration by the Axis powers. Both sides realized that the flow of American-made war goods to the Allied powers had already helped pull the economy out of the Great Depression, but the commitment of troops was another issue. As the possibility of American involvement loomed, Chicagoans had already seen the first selective service draft in 1940, about the same time that scrap drives had begun collecting cast-off aluminum and other metals to be recycled into airplanes.

But the bombing of Pearl Harbor, followed quickly by declarations of war against Japan and Germany, nonetheless came as a shock. Americans thought that Japan and the United States were on their way to resolving their differences. Conversations on the streets of Chicago expressed concern for the Japanese people, whom Americans thought had been drawn into the conflict by their evil leaders and by Hitler. The most widespread belief was that Japan's inferior military would collapse with the first American assault in the Pacific. Germany was the real enemy.

Most Chicagoans were anxious to help the war cause. Thousands of young men volunteered for induction the following morning, but those who were indifferent quickly learned that there was no way to remain isolated from involvement on the home front. On the most personal family level, virtually everyone worried about friends, neighbors, and loved ones in the service. By mid-1944 each Chicago block had an average of seven men or women in the military. Not even boys and girls were immune from the war fervor. Commercially produced toys quickly adopted military themes—children could reenact the attack with a scaled-down Pearl Harbor—while school classes carved airplane models that were used in adult aeronautical training. Youngsters were also encouraged to use their special knowledge

- ❖ What and who was Wrigley Field used for?
- ❖ What was the "War of the Colonels"?
- ❖ Who would the US fight first?
- ❖ What is a "Latch-key Kid"?
- ❖ What did people take to the *Meat Market* and why?
- ❖ What did a Block Captain do?
- ❖ When were the Chicago blackouts and why did we have them?

of the neighborhood to ferret out metals and paper for recycling into military goods. Many of their mothers departed for the workplace, some driven by the necessity of their sudden status as single parents, others by the lure of high wages. With parents either at work or at war, thousands of "latch-key kids"—so named for what they carried on a string around their necks—came home from school to empty houses and responsibility for their own meals. Many others spent hours in daycare or other baby-sitting arrangements.

Every aspect of family life felt the impact of war. The regimen of skimp, save, and substitute reigned "for the duration." Food rationing, made necessary by the provisioning of troops and aid to the Allies, reshaped family diets through a complicated point system of coupons, tokens, and stamps. Sugar and meat were most tightly rationed, forcing consumers to experiment with new recipes and with such new products as Spam to save precious points. Victory gardens sprouted up in backyards, vacant fields, and in the parks; the additional produce not only added variety to the family meals but freed up ration points for other purchases. Meanwhile, household castoffs of all kinds suddenly gained new and valued uses. Tin cans and the evening newspaper ended up in collection bins. Even fats left over after cooking were collected at the meat market to be recycled into nitroglycerine bombs.

The most frustrated consumers were the workers who had survived the Great Depression by learning how to live on pennies and now found themselves earning wages that exceeded those of the prosperous 1920s: There was little to buy. The outbreak of war and the need to conserve raw materials had halted the production of over six hundred types of domestic goods ranging from rubber pants for infants to hairpins and radios. Out in the garage, strict rationing not only preserved petroleum supplies but also reduced the wear on precious natural rubber tires; the Pacific war cut off supplies, and an artificial substitute would not be available until the end of the war. Soaring gas and tire thefts made auto owners uneasy about parking on the streets.

An illegal black market satisfied some demands for tires and meat, while strict wage and price controls struggled to keep inflation in check. Workers were mainly encouraged to save rather than spend. Eight high-pressure campaigns promoted the purchase of defense bonds as an alternative to "mattress-stuffing." War equipment displays on State Street, ubiquitous posters, and catchy slogans for each bond drive enlisted the aid of citizens in meeting specific dollar goals. Hollywood stars led gigantic rallies at Soldier Field, while average citizens were solicited at the workplace and

at twenty-thousand sales locations to invest in a piece of the war.

Bond campaigns drew people nearer to those who lived next door or across the street. The neighborhood not only became a support system for families in need, but the city's massive civilian defense effort was organized around a hierarchy of districts, blocks, and volunteers. It was the responsibility of block captains to know everyone and when they might be home, educate citizens on what to do in the event of an enemy attack, and conduct drills. Fear drove some of the participation. Although Chicago was hundreds of miles from the coasts, the range of enemy aircraft remained unknown for much of the war. At the same time, attacks on American shipping off the coasts and the earlier bombing of the British population fueled popular enthusiasm for civilian defense. Tens of thousands of Chicagoans participated in disaster and first-aid training. The city also underwent mock bombings and air-raid siren tests. On August 12 and October 7, 1942, citywide blackouts were designed to demonstrate that even a city as large as Chicago could be made a difficult target to find in the dark.

