

San Jose During World War II:
Small-town Support

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

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Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 1
Pearl Harbor	p. 2
San Jose State Spartans at Pearl Harbor	p. 3
Civil Defense	pp. 4-5
Japanese Internment	pp. 6-8
Local Organizations	pp. 9-10
Changes in the Work Force	pp. 11-13
Wartime Communication	pp. 14-15
Wartime Rationing	pp. 16-17
D-Day	pp. 18
Conclusion	p. 19
Endnotes	p. 20-21
Bibliography	p. 22

Introduction

The Second World War was a conflict that effected people everywhere, including those who dwelled in the small town of San Jose, California. Although San Jose did not have a monumental effect on the war, it certainly did its share. Whether planting victory gardens, housing soldiers, or sending troops to the front lines, San Jose participated in the war as many other cities across the nation did. From 1941 through 1945, living a in a world affected by war became a way of life.

Pearl Harbor

Before the United States entered the war, it seemed to many that the conflict was far off in Europe and Asia. Let the rest of the world handle their own problems was the general and isolationist thinking. However, as the war escalated in Europe it became increasingly clear that the United States would be drawn into the conflict. The fateful day that changed history came on the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941, at the naval harbor in Honolulu, Hawaii.

The event was the bombing of Pearl Harbor and is also known throughout history as "The Day of Infamy" from the radio speech given by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to a shocked nation. The Japanese air force destroyed nineteen U.S. Naval ships during the sneak attack. Many soldiers and civilians died during the attack. The United States declared war on Japan the next day. This is when the Second World War became truly global.

San Jose State Spartans at Pearl Harbor

That same morning of December 7, 1941, San Jose State's football team sat eating breakfast with their coach, Ben Winkelman, at the Waikiki Hotel in Honolulu. (1) Coincidentally, the team was in Hawaii to play in a tournament that happened to be the same weekend of the attack. While they were eating, they saw dark smoke in the distance, but thought nothing of it. Then, a man ran into their hotel and shouted that the Japanese were bombing U.S. ships. Suddenly, everyone panicked! The tournament was immediately canceled and all twenty-five players volunteered to join the Honolulu Police Department. The Spartans were given guns, gas masks, and helmets to help defend the island against a possible ground attack. Tensions ran high after the air attack, and strict blackouts were ordered throughout the Islands.

The team was ready to return home. They had done their part, and needed to get back to San Jose. Seven of the upperclassmen decided to remain in Honolulu and continue with police work. Jack Lercari was one of those who stayed behind, "Heck We were offered \$166 a month to stay. Good money at that time." (2) The rest of the team went home, not in a cruise ship as they had arrived, but in steerage on a liner. The ship also carried victims of the bombing. The team returned home safely and finished the season with a record of 5-3-3. (3)

Civil Defense

Meanwhile, as soon as the war broke out, San Jose became a center of military activity. The city organized a local defense council and went into action without delay. Members guarded bridges, railroad yards, and key industrial plants. Additional telephone switchboards were installed for communication between city officials and the military. Nervous citizens would often call in and report sightings of "strange" airplanes and "suspicious" looking people. (4)

The San Jose City Council held a standing room only meeting the day after Pearl Harbor. A calmer citizen later remembered, "People were so jittery that if anyone had popped a paper bag, half the town would have broken their damned necks jumping into the same manhole." (5) The City Council received many suggestions regarding how San Jose would be involved in the war effort. A member of a local horseman's group suggested that his cowboy-costumed organization round up all Japanese, wherever they were. (6)

Civil defense features including warning sirens were installed throughout the city. They were used to signal both air raids and blackouts. Newspapers published instructions to illustrate what to do if either of these events were to occur. San Jose was divided into 140 civil defense precincts. Each precinct was sub-divided into blocks. Each block had a warden whose picture and address was in the paper so people knew who they were. (7) My great-grandfather, Irving Levy, was the warden for his little street off of Lincoln

Avenue in old Willow Glen. Then called Clark way, the street's name has been changed to Bennett Way in more recent years. His job was to patrol the street during blackouts and ensure that all the houses were completely dark.

San Jose was also the neighbor to the Moffett Field Air Station in Sunnyvale. Moffett Field was a multi-million dollar U.S. Naval Air station which experienced great activity during World War II. Some of the important local aviators who were associated with Moffett Field during the war years were Cecil and Robert Reid, Russel Hill, Hudson Mead, and Wayne Clevenger. (8)

Japanese Internment

The United States had declared war on Japan, and in turn Germany and Italy declared war against the United States. It seemed as if instantaneously, Americans everywhere became suspicious of one another. However, the race that was persecuted the most severely as a result of these suspicions were the Japanese Americans. Almost immediately after the war's start, there was talk of evacuating those of Japanese decent from all West Coast areas, the fear being that these people may hold allegiance to their country of origin and become spies for Japan.

In February of 1942, such a law was passed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The ordinance was called Executive Order 9066 and it ordained that all Japanese Americans be immediately evacuated from their West Coast homes. The order was quickly carried out, and approximately 110,000 Japanese people living in California, Oregon, Arizona, and Washington were forced to leave their homes and possessions. (9)

By August 30, 1942, all of the Japanese people in San Jose as was as other Californian coastal communities had been evacuated. (10) My great-grandfather, Irving Levy, recalls when all of the Japanese people who resided in San Jose were forced out and put into camps. "It was quite strange," he remembered, "These people were our neighbors and friends. We even did business with a few of them at the shoe store. At the time though, it was seen as a necessary precaution. We didn't know what could happen in those days. It was better to be safe." (11) Those people who could sell

their land made little or no profit receiving only five to forty cents on the dollar. (12) Many lost money on their homes, businesses, and possessions.

Some San Jose citizens, along with other Californians, raised their voices in protest. A San Jose State College sociology professor named Claude N. Settles voiced his opinion in front of the San Jose Kiwanis Club on September 28, 1942. (13) He strongly objected the evacuation of the Japanese. In his speech to the club, he was quoted as saying that the internment, "violated the principles of American democracy," and that the Japanese Americans were, "just as loyal Americans as anyone could wish." (14) Unfortunately, by the time that he and others expressed their concerns, the internment was already underway. Moreover, many people who heard their cries regarded it as nothing more than an opinion which they didn't agree with. Therefore, the Japanese were forced to stay in internment camps for the remaining three years of the war.

While there, the Japanese were subjected to harsh conditions. The internment camps were built in rural areas throughout the United States. These places had harsh, hot climates, and the people were exposed to desert and swamp-like environments. The barracks where they resided were built haphazardly, giving little or no consideration to the climate, or an individual's privacy. It was here, in these barbed wire surrounded camps, that the Japanese were pent up and treated like prisoners, rather than law abiding American citizens that they were.

After the war, measures were taken by the American Government to try and remedy this inexcusable act. Some of the

families received reparations for there pain, suffering, and financial losses. Also after the war, it was discovered that out of the ten people who were prosecuted for being Japanese spies, none of them were Japanese, they were all Caucasians. (15)

Local Organizations

Many organizations involved in the war effort were headquartered in San Jose. Major General Robert C. Richardson's Seventh Army was located downtown. He took over the entire ten story commercial building at 28 North First Street. (16) Soldiers could be seen on almost every street in town. The U.S.O. (United Service Organization) also had a San Jose office. They provided recreational activities and facilities for U.S. soldiers. A U.S.O. reception and recreation center was built at the south end of the downtown plaza. Between 1941 and 1946 over one million men received free sandwiches, coffee, milk, fruit, candy, cake, and cookies under the direction of Mrs. Mark Rifenbark. (17) Over 102 different local women's organizations donated the food, materials and time needed to make this possible. San Jose's volunteers made sure that homesick G.I.'s had turkey with all of the "fixins" during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

In addition, the U.S.O. held dances at different locations in San Jose almost every night of the week. About 1,500 war-time dances were chaperoned by senior hostesses who donated countless volunteer hours. (18) Free overnight lodging was provided for many of the soldiers through the Y.M.C.A., Y.W.C.A., C.W.C., Salvation Army and the Jewish Community Center. Local U.S.O. hostesses such as Mrs. Ramond B. Leland, Miss Ella Holtz, and Miss Verda Brown were among the many volunteers. David Bunker was a member of the local Plumber's Union that maintained facilities used for the war effort. (19)

Volunteer Boards formed across the country to register and enlist servicemen. San Jose's draft board was composed of mostly former military men. One of the draft board's functions was to spot men trying to avoid military service. San Jose, like other American communities, sent its fathers and sons off to war. Many of these young men never returned.

Changes in the Work Force

San Jose's and America's work force was forever changed by the War. The war effort required increased productivity from all facets of the U.S. economy. Santa Clara Valley farmers pushed crop yields to record levels to provide food for U.S. soldiers, citizens and many of our allies. The Joshua Henry Iron Works in San Jose was one example of a company that worked around the clock to produce engines used in military equipment.

Local men left behind many jobs that needed to be done. The war created new employment opportunities for telephone operators, welders, pipe fitters, hospital attendants and many other positions. Cannery workers were also in great demand. Many men worked all day at their regular jobs only to go home for dinner before working an evening or graveyard shift at the local canneries. My great-grandfather, Irving Levy was an example of the San Joseans who did "double-duty" during the war. First, he would put in a full day's work at his shoe store, named Bloom's Fine Shoes which was located on First Street in Downtown San Jose. Then, he would go home, grab a quick bite to eat, and head back downtown to work in the canneries until ten or eleven at night. Although he and the other men were paid, it was a rather nominal amount, and most of them donated the money to the Red Cross and other organizations which supported the war. O'Brien's, a local ice cream parlor, needed soda fountain girls. San Jose's city buses had to replace washers and cleaners that were off to war.

When Tide Water Associated Oil needed gas station attendants a radical plan - for its time - was devised out of necessity. Women would do some of the same jobs that had always been held by men! The newspaper headlines read, "'Fill 'Er Up Miss' Byword in Local Gas Stations." (20) An article written by a local journalist, further explained the decision made by the gas company. "If our service station men are going into the armed services, let's get women to take their places," reasoned the article. (21) The women were trained how to use all of the service station equipment, and started their new jobs in light blue denim slacks with white broadcloth tops and overseas caps. Supposedly, the women were picked not for their looks, but for their "personalities and specific abilities." (22) The endeavor was seen as quite successful. This is illustrated by the quote, "'Public acceptance has certainly been up to expectations,' said a Mr. Coughran who was association with Tide Water Associated Oil company, 'which makes us think we've hit on a solution to a real problem.'" (23)

Upon examination of the changes that the war forced upon San Jose and the entire country, what stands out is the patriotic strength and selfless contributions of the average citizen who supported the war from home. By example, there was a shortage of cherry pickers near the end of the war. Rain had delayed the harvest and then suddenly the weather became sunny. Agriculture was Santa Clara County's number one industry at that time. Farmers were afraid the entire cherry crop would rot on the trees. The Santa Clara County Growers told Earl Adams, manager of the local Farm Labor Office, to send out an urgent alarm for at least fifty cherry pickers.

The notice said, "Cherry pickers urgently needed!" The call was answered by high school boys and men who reported to the Grower's South First Street office at seven o'clock in the morning. (24)

Wartime Communications

During World War II, San Joseans had an unprecedented access to information not available to past generations because of technology developed after the beginning of the twentieth century. Every home and business in San Jose would listen to the events of war unfolding on their radios. Newspapers wrote stories hours after eyewitness accounts were telephoned or telegraphed back to the newsroom. Often, these accounts were censored in order to prevent the Axis powers from getting sensitive information. Movie goers at the downtown Fox theater or the Garden Theater on Lincoln Avenue saw "newsreels" that included real battle footage and commentary from famous journalists like Walter Winchell.

A low tech method of local communication that was needed because of the war was San Jose's Messenger Service. Organized by the San Jose school districts Men's Clubs, the Messenger Service was a backup communication system for the entire city in case of an emergency. Over three-hundred and fifty San Jose high school and junior high boys delivered messages on bicycles. (25) They had their first drill on December 24, 1941, two weeks after Pearl Harbor. Under the plan, messages received by the civilian defense headquarters in City Hall would then be re-distributed to thirteen different district centers by way of cars. The senior high school messenger boys would then deliver the messages to the various precincts by way of bicycles. Once this was done, the junior high school boys would take the messages and via bicycles, distribute them throughout their own neighborhoods. (26)

Mail, as well as news reports, were subject to censorship. The government did not want information such as troop locations or battle preparations falling into enemy hands. To combat enemy espionage, letters headed overseas were first filtered through a domestic armed forces post office. Only after being screened could any mail be sent to Europe and Asia. Soldiers wrote back in the same fashion.

War Time Rationing

Domestic rationing was a major part of World War II. Those on the home front melted down jewelry and other household metal goods towards equipment needed for war. All automobile production was shifted to produce military vehicles. This too affected San Jose. "At that time, everything was rationed," recalled Irving Levy. (27) A local rationing board was established to determine how limited resources were to be distributed. Those who could justify extra gas rations were motorists engaged in defense work, farmers in agricultural work and public servants that required cars for their work. (28) Other than the preceding, gas was hard to come by and people were rationed to a few gallons. Every car had a stamp in the lower right corner of the windshield saying how many gallons they could buy at once. As a result, many traveled in carpools or by trains and buses.

Necessity is the mother of inventions and a local antique trader named Lewis D. (Trader Lew) Bohnett Jr. came up with an idea to remedy his gasoline shortage. Mr. Bohnett conserved gas by rounding together ten ancient crowbait and five very old two-horses hacks. (29) A crowbait is an emaciated horse or cow, and a horse hack is an old worn out horse used for transportation rather than show. (30) He carted people around San Jose in a make-shift horse and buggy. His mode of transportation was not only better for rationing, but it also cost less. San Jose's City Council supported and recognized such resourcefulness by passing an ordinance that required automobiles to give horse carriages the right of way. (31)

Food was another rationed commodity. Some of the strictest rations applied to meat, butter and sugar. It was said in a newspaper report at the time that, "The American people learned the meaning of regulation." Many women took the initiative to lead the rationing effort. Women block leaders went around teaching others how to plant and grow "victory" gardens. Mrs. Lucy McClintock, a San Jose wartime resident said, "Food supply is one of the most important problems concerning the home front. The women's division wants to help establish as many war gardens in San Jose as possible." (32) Victory gardens were a popular way to show one's patriotism. Instead of buying farm grown produce, people grew their own fruits and vegetables to make more food available for the soldiers.

The American diet changed during World War II as a result of meat rationing. Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady, encouraged Americans to change customs by beginning dinner with salads so one would need less meat at the main course. Housewives were taught recipes that required less meat. Meat not consumed at American dining tables was canned and sent overseas. Canned foods sent off to war were called "C-rations."

D-Day

June 5, 1944, the day before the Allied forces began the D-Day invasion that turned the tide of the war, was much like many others during San Jose's war years. The weather was pleasant and hopes were running high that the war would end and loved ones would return home. The Willow Glen Presbyterian Church had just been built, and services were being held for the confirmation class at Temple Bikur Cholim. There was a hundredth anniversary celebration for the Y.M.C.A. being held at the civic auditorium that night at eight o'clock. Then, at twelve thirty-two in the morning, it was announced that the Allies had invaded France.

San Joseans awoke Tuesday morning to the electrifying news that General Dwight D. Eisenhower was leading Allied troops in Operation Overlord, the invasion of France at the beaches of Normandy. People stopped their daily routines and gathered at their places of worship and prayer. Everybody nervously listened to radios hoping for news of Allied success. San Jose and the nation rejoiced as it became evident the D-Day invasion was a success. Both San Jose High School and Lincoln High School canceled classes and held assemblies to celebrate the historic event. (33) The whole country seemed to stand still. Baseball games, radio shows, movies and other regularly scheduled events were canceled or postponed. San Joseans joined as the entire country listened to President Roosevelt's radio address following D-Day.

Conclusion

America's involvement in World War II spanned only four years but the profound effect on San Jose and its citizens brought about changes that still influence our lives today. Women entered the workforce, people had to make significant personal sacrifices and the community pulled together for a common cause. The world was never the same after World War II and neither was the Valley of the Heart's Delight.

Endnotes

1. Dan Hruby, "San Jose State's War Story: Pearl Harbor Fifty Years Later" (San Jose Mercury News, November 16, 1991), p. 1A.
2. Ibid., p. 1A.
3. Ibid., p. 1A.
4. Clyde Arbuckle, Clyde Arbuckle's History of San José (San Jose: Smith McKay Printing Co., Inc., 1985), p.360.
5. Ibid., p. 360.
6. Ibid., p. 360.
7. Ibid., p. 362.
8. Ibid., p. 473.
9. Japanese American Internment: Santa Clara Valley (<http://sciush.scu.edu/SCU/Programs/Diversity/>. Japanese American Internment Experience On-Line Exhibit. Netscape. April 21, 1998), p. 1.
10. Arbuckle, Op. Cit., p. 362.
11. Irving Levy (Resident of San Jose during World War II, San Francisco, CA. Interviewed at 2621 Thrasher Lane, San Jose, CA. April 10, 1998).
12. Arbuckle, Op. Cit., p. 362.
13. Ibid., p. 362.
14. Ibid., p. 362.
15. Debra La Fountaine and Pei P. Wang. Historical Backgrounds (1995).
16. Arbuckle, Op. Cit., p. 360.
17. Ibid., p. 361.

18. Ibid., p. 361.
19. Ibid., p. 361.
20. "'Fill 'Er Up Miss' Byword In Local Gas Stations" (San Jose Mercury News. June 24, 1942).
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Mike Hale "D-Day June 6, 1944: The Beginning of the End" (San Jose Mercury News, June 5, 1994), p. 1H.
25. "Emergency Messenger Service is Organized" (San Jose Mercury News. December 22, 1941).
26. Ibid.
27. Levy, Op. Cit.
28. Arbuckle, Op. Cit., p. 361.
29. Arbuckle, Op. Cit., p. 363.
30. Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Gramercy Books, 1996), pp. 482, 857.
31. Arbuckle, Op. Cit., p. 363.
32. Rolly Langley "Women Block Leaders to Aid Home Food Production" (San Jose Mercury News. February 6, 1943).
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