

DESTINATION, DELMARVA

A Window into the War

World War II brought a multitude of changes to homes and communities across the nation. Students will listen to how these changes impacted the residents of the Delmarva peninsula—an area comprised of Delaware and the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia. During the war, the region was subject to broader flows of migration and labor. The demand for munitions and agricultural resources, combined with the outflow of enlisted men and women, necessitated the rise of local industries drawing migrant workers from across the nation and world. Residents discussed the war in barbershops, churches, and homes, reinforcing existing social networks during times of uncertainty and crisis.

Insular communities connected to a national spirit of patriotism by way of radio and film, but were also attuned to wartime fears particular to the region, watching the skies and the seas anxiously for threat of European invasion. The war also brought foreigners to the doorstep of local farmers who employed and fed German prisoners of war in an effort to combat the labor shortage. Fear of the unknown and comfort in the familiar coexisted during the wartime years, challenging and reaffirming ties that made up the fabric of these Delmarva communities.

FULL STORY TRANSCRIPTS

CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITIES

Both homes and businesses adapted to wartime responsibilities while continuing to serve as places of community gathering. These sites of gathering reflected the importance of small-town social connections, evidenced by the clientele of James Mears' family barbershop—who accepted haircuts from a 9-year-old standing on a box of shotgun shells—and the lively celebrations at the Deaton's local tavern. The families of Douglass Gates and Louise Widdup both opened their homes to strangers, meeting defense workers and teachers from across the country, who quickly became akin to family themselves. Even as they expanded, these social networks remained intimate and were vital to sustaining the American war effort.

A Family of Barbers—James Mears

“I started working in the barber shop as a shoe shine boy at the age of probably nine. And then during the war, I helped prepare people to be ready to get their hair cut. We put the barber cloth around them, and it would be just my father, [he was] the only one who cut the hair. And there was two other boys besides myself, three of us, that weren't tall enough to work on the people. We had shotgun shell boxes that we stood up on so we could reach the customers. We would get them ready then my father would cut their hair. Then we would shave their necks, give them their tonics and shampoos. Back in those days, we gave a lot of tonics and shampoos and also

shaves. Many people came in for shaves. And finally, we got so we could shave too. Of course, this was straight razors. But my father did the main work. He trained us, and finally some customers would let us do it. They had the option. Some didn't feel comfortable with us little fellows. But they finally came to the place that did cut hair. But I didn't really care like that. Worked like my father and the rest of my family. There was four generations of our family that worked on some of the people in town. My great-grandfather was a barber, my grandfather owned the shop and had died by then and then my father and myself. So, actually, there was four generations that worked on some of the people in town. And they would tell us that."

Father's Tavern in the Community—Ralph Deaton

"My father's tavern also served as an outlet for most of the people in the community because in 1947, he bought a television set. Well, on up in Church Hill, there were only so many places that you could go and you could come to the beer garden. They used to have Wednesday night fights. They had fights on Friday nights in Madison Square Garden. I think Monday nights, they had fights in a place called United Arena over in D.C. But during that time, the tavern served as an outlet. The men came in. Plus, he had a couple of pool tables at the back of the beer garden. They came in. They shot pool. They watched fights, ball games and that type stuff. Well, see football hadn't gotten into the way it is now.

He had something usually for mostly everybody to do. Like the older men. See the men that were fifty, sixty years old during that time, they used to do what they called a promenade. It was something like a dance; it was a male and a female, but it was done to accordion music. Or the guys that were in the 20's, 30's, younger guys, they used to like to do what they called a spot dance. Up in the walls, you would have these pin-ups made out of crepe paper, and I think it was like fifteen bucks or twenty bucks or something. You put twenty bucks up on one of those things and they would play music on a jukebox. And then after a certain time, they would say, "Stop!" So when they stopped, the person that was under or nearest to where this spot was, where the money was, they would get the money. So this was different types of outlets that the beer garden was used for back during those times because it was probably the only place in the neighborhood you could go as an outlet."

Female Defense Workers—Douglass Gates

"Probably the most influential thing that I can remember is that we had a fairly large house, and we took in defense workers—females. I think one male we had at one time, but they were generally females. They worked in ship building in Wilmington. They had small plants, and they had other things too, I guess. I can't remember. But the thing that is most memorable for me is that in the evening (you know, no television in those days), we'd get down in the living room, and we had a piano. And the girls—there was always a piano player, there seemed to be. The girls would get down there and gather around the piano with me because I always stuck my nose in there and sing songs. As a result of that, you know, my head right now continues to be full of

nineteen twenties, thirties, forties songs. That's what we sang, and that's what I memorized with those gals, and it was wonderful. You know, this little twerp standing there and they're having a grand time, and I'm having a grand time too. I loved it [laughs]. And they'd pat me on the head, "Oh, Dougie, you're such a cute little kid," [laughs] and I knew I was, of course [laughs]."

Teachers Boarding in the House—Louise Widdup

"We had these teachers that graduated from McDaniel. So they both came from there, and they become teachers at our small community high school. And we had no motels, no places to stay. So the community came to my mother because she was a young woman and they thought maybe she could do it, would she please take in two school teachers which she did. There was time when we had five women and one man in our house with one bathroom. [laughs]. My father got up and went to the defense contract early so he got out of the house. But there were two teachers, me, mother, and another girl at that time in the house. And mother did that through—this was before the war—it started—it's '38 or '39, and she continued to do that until '45. And we had some wonderful teachers, and my parents were great folks so we kept in contact with almost all the teachers. That's why I know where they went, and what they did."

MOBILIZED FOR WAR

Communities on the Eastern Shore saw the construction of new munitions plants in places like Elkton, Maryland, and the DuPont plant in Seaford, Delaware. This construction fueled the demand for migrant workers, who rented rooms from local families. The rise of these defense industries allowed communities to contribute to the national war effort, but not without consequence. Ammunition factories, especially, brought the threat of attention and possible attack from the enemy. After a defense plant began operating in their town, Rene Coxon and Charlotte Slagle volunteered to become airplane spotters, phoning in to describe the location and movement of enemy aircraft. Secrecy was key to protecting Americans from attack by U-Boat, as Eddie Cook recalls hearing the popular phrase "loose lips sink ships" circulate at his local church.

Elkton Munitions Plant, Wartime Work, and Rooms for Rent—Mary Jane Rambo

"We had a local fireworks company right outside of town that became the manufacturer of most of the ammunition that was used in the Pacific during the war.

I went to business school for a semester—actually, the war was in progress when I graduated—and then they closed the college for two weeks for vacation. Instead of going back to school, I got a job at what was known then as the War Manpower Commission or the Employment Service. And it was designed to move people to areas where the help was needed to build ammunition or whatever else needed to be done. In doing so, they sent out people who recruited

into Virginia, West Virginia primarily, North Carolina, some in Pennsylvania and some up in New York. They brought people in here by busloads to work in the munitions factory.

All of the residents in a radius of like fifty miles were asked if they could spare a room to provide room for these workers. My mother did. We lived in a nice home about three blocks from here. She had many different roomers, but it was fun because they were nice people. We had one episode where a woman came up from West Virginia with her son who happened to be the same age as my brother who was in high school. They became buddies so he slept with my brother, and Mrs. Davis had her own room. It wasn't too long until my mother was inviting them to have dinner with us, and that's how they became part of our family. But we had several people from the South who lived with us during the war."

DuPont Plant—Elaine Figgs

"People worked here [Dupont Plant] from Salisbury, Georgetown, Easton. They all came because the money, for one thing, was more than they could make at any other job. People came from all areas around here to work there: Bridgeville, Laurel, you name it. They were the first nylon plant. I don't understand the working there, but there were a lot of jobs that were available. And they had lots of machines, and they made the nylon. And some of the nylon was used for parachutes."

Women Coming to Seaford to Work—Jennings Spicer

"What came here during the war were a lot of women from around the areas. They worked all shifts. Women in industry. They had brown slacks, light brown blouse, that's what they all wore. Men could wear what they wanted to wear, but the women didn't [unintelligible]. And a lot of people that lived in Cambridge, Georgetown, Milford, Dover, even Salisbury would come up here and buy a house and come up with the family or rent a room. Most of them, a lot of people, rented rooms. They just—there weren't any homes here. If you know where Morton Farms is out here, if you turn and go back over to the second stoplight, stop sign, turn right, you go down, turn left, all those homes are built by DuPont. Every one of them. DuPont built them because they had no place for their management. They all got that. Wage [unintelligible] people, they had to get their own wherever."

Volunteering for Airplane Spotting—Rene Coxon

"[When the war started], I lived in there for four years. From '41 until '45. And that's when our defense plant came to do the ammunition for war effort and some of us volunteered too. I happened to be one that volunteered for spotting airplanes. You all don't know it but we didn't have radar, right? So we spotted airplanes. We went to school, classes, and then I spotted airplanes under the big tree right at the end here. Our high school was right over here where your building is, your new building. On Washington Avenue was our high school. So, you learn what your enemy's airplanes were, you picked up the phone when you saw one, you described it,

which direction it was going, and somebody else picked it up on the other line. We only lived, maybe, is it two hours from Washington, to drive. But not according to how the crow flies, therefore, we were fairly close to Washington. And of course you had radar then, but not around like that.”

Parental/Social Discussions on the War—Eddie Cook

“I heard my mother [talk about the war] because when she went to church, and that was a big gathering back in those days, that’s where they went to get their news. ‘Course there was other farm families who had boys that looked older than us that was in the service. And they would talk, and she would repeat to us what so-and-so—, where the son was stationed and how secret this is. And we worried because they never knew, you know, back then. “Loose lips sink ships,” and they lived by that rule. And rightly so, because you never knew who was listening. You’ve heard all about the German subs coming up on the coast and what happened to them.”

POPULAR CULTURE: CONNECTING TO THE COUNTRY

Mediums of popular culture like music, dance, film reels, and the radio promoted national unity and encouraged patriotism. Karl Brown, Jr. sang patriotic anthems in the school choir, Virginia Babbitt danced to her heart’s delight with soldiers at the USO, and Fenton Martin’s high school stage was graced by the presence of metropolitan musical personalities— all expressions and indicators of wartime morale. Newspapers also kept communities current on national and international developments, most notably—for Arnold Spicer—by printing maps of U.S. troop movements in the Sunday edition.

USO Dances—Virginia Babbitt

“Oh, I just loved it because I just loved to dance. And that was when you were dancing—I don’t know whether y’all know that you could cut in, the boys could cut in. So you’d be dancing, and then another boy —sometimes you didn’t like it because you wanted to be dancing with that boy because some of them were really good dancers, you know. And I loved to dance. It was a lot of fun. And we would kinda sit down—it seems like to me that we would sit in chairs along the side, and then I guess the boys would come and ask you to dance. But I remember when I started dancing, I never sat down again. So I guess I just kept dancing. And they had really good bands.”

Patriotism in School Music—Karl Brown, Jr.

“One of the many things that we had was a pretty good music teacher, choir director, and I think one of the things that happened maybe not every day but several times a week was you’d have a music session. So what were you singing? It was not Rock-n-Roll. It was by a little after Pearl Harbor certainly and probably before, it was patriotic songs in many cases. “Anchors Aweigh” didn’t date from Pearl Harbor, you know. It was a song we could sing. And so it goes. I don’t

know what those songs all were, but you know those were the kinds of things that we would hear. And I think there's a certain amount of conditioning in that. Wouldn't that make sense?"

Wartime Entertainment—Fenton Martin

"I was on the stage crew at school. This was before electric stages at least down in little Portsmouth, Virginia. We had scenery that you had to take out of the storage room and hand carry it down a staircase and over to the stage. We had about a 500 person auditorium; it was the only one in town. [It was] one of the things that I did occasionally. Recording artists and other notables from as far away as New York would come down to Portsmouth and do their thing as a form of war time entertainment for service men and natives, whoever came to fill the auditorium. It's ridiculous, but the only name I can remember is Richard Tucker who was an opera star in the Met at the time. But you got to know whoever they were because they would hire you to come in the night and do the necessary preparation and curtain work while they were going from the wings out and back, so on and so forth. So the point of that is the high school did offer its facilities to public events that would not have been there if it had not had been for the war."

Following the War with Maps of Europe—Arnold Spicer

"Well, usually in the Sunday paper, there was always maps of activity that was going on here and there and everywhere else. Somehow or rather, I got a map of Europe. And to see where they were moving, I'd draw the lines on there. And 'cause it was a big map, about yea big, it covered up the kitchen table. I couldn't leave it out so I had to take it back. And I was forever drawing lines where they changed, even I think it had the very Northern part of Africa, and that's where the fighting was. Of course, as the troops moved up to Sicily and through Italy, of course Italy dropped out of the war shortly after Italy was invaded from the South. Then I followed it on that as it was going, of course it was better later on because all of the movement was toward Berlin and before that all of the movement was away from Berlin. So I think I got, matter of fact, I think I had so many marks on there, I got another map somewhere and started there. And I don't know where they are now."

FEAR AND FAMILIARITY

Some residents of the Eastern Shore met Germans face-to-face without leaving their homes. When able-bodied men like Allen Capel went off to war, their family farms faced a labor shortage alleviated in part by the nearby German prisoner of war camps. His sister Virginia describes how the prisoners were bussed in daily, labored by day, and were fed illegal lunches by her mother. Feelings about these foreigners spanned a spectrum from outright fear to tentative friendship, as some resented them from afar and others built relationships based on proximity and trust. While Ralph Deaton was wary of German prisoners housed close to his home, Shelly Spicer invited POW's to participate in a neighborhood baseball game. Howard

Cook describes the difficulty of reconciling the presence of Germans who “were good people” on one hand, yet deserving of retribution “for killing our men” on the other.

POWs Working on the Farm—Virginia Capel

“We had German prisoners here that came every morning, and then went back to their—not barracks, but to Centerville. They had them on buses and took them around to the people who wanted their help because all their men were gone. So my brother was a bombardier, and they were coming down from Maine, and the pilot says, ‘Mulligan, don’t you have family in this area?’ And he said, ‘Yeah.’ So they came over the farm, and the pilot looked down and saw many men out here in the yard, and he said, ‘Mulligan, what do you got out in your yard?’ Because they were putting up hay in the barn. And he [Mulligan] says they were German prisoners, and he [the pilot] got very angry. He [Mulligan] had to really convince them that, ‘Hey, I’m gone. Who is supposed to, you know—someone has to do the work.’ But it was amazing to see him standing at the door of that airplane going over, and it’s just like, ‘No, this is not possible.’ But yeah, it was fun.”

Feeding the POWs – Virginia Capel

“The first morning Dad picked up the men at the hill, they didn’t have anything to eat, and he said, ‘Oh, where is your food?’ So he called, the people, and said, ‘These men don’t have anything to eat.’ He says, ‘They left here with a buttered sandwich, and that’s what they get.’ So mother told them that we have a house out back, a little shack, and she said, ‘Go into it and I’ll hand lunch out to you.’ And if there were a different then the four that came regularly, and they were here for about 6 months, and if it was different than the four that usually came, they wouldn’t come up. Finally, Mom made arrangements if it happened that way, that they would come up singly, and the other guy wouldn’t know what they are doing. So they fed them. I mean they worked hard; they had to be fed. So they handed food out the back door, and it’s kind of always funny that we’ll hand out food out the back door to you because, you know, that’s what mom did for the prisoners.”

Childhood Fear of German POWs—Ralph Deaton

“That used to be a prison camp. That was a German prison camp. Back after the war, when they brought these German prisoners over here, they had them stationed over on 213 just outside of Churchill. And that’s something that scared me to death. ‘Cause back in 1945, I’m nine-years-old now. And I used to like to ride on the trucks with my father, grandfather, that type stuff. But if I found out that some of those prisoners were working out on the farms, I wasn’t going. You know, you’d be lying in bed at night; it seemed like to me I could feel these guys coming up out the woods or something like that. So, I was unnerved by the fact that, you know, the prison camp was that close.”

German POW Baseball Game—Shelley Spicer

“We had a superintendent in school. He was real conscious of sports, and he wanted us to be able to play sports in our senior year, our junior and senior year. A lot of these guys, they were coaches. They were gone. They were already in the service. So he was the superintendent of the school so he saw that we still had sports in other towns. We had a tough time getting there. We had to furnish our own transportation if it was an away game, and the tires were terrible to get. They were rationed car tires. So some of us boys had cheap cars. I didn’t, but we had cheap cars, and, of course we didn’t have no money because we were going to school. We bought cheap cars, and tires weren’t that slick. But we loaded up in these cars, about three cars, and go—we took probably about ten or eleven men, or boys, in our broken down cars and stuff like that, and we made it there. And when we got there, there was just a little booth at where we entered, and it was almost one man maybe two was able to get into it in case it rained. The fence was just a minor fence. The Germans wasn’t a lot of problem. So they had worked on playing baseball a little bit. They knew a little something about it because our superintendent of schools had talked with someone up there to start with, and I think he got somebody to go in there and kinda train them a little bit. So anyhow, we went in, and we played baseball with them, and it was kind of funny. I mean they couldn’t speak English, and we couldn’t speak German so we used sign language. But we made it, and they enjoyed it. They got more out of it because they didn’t know a thing about it when they got there, and so they enjoyed it. We played them, and, of course, we were better than they were, but we had training. But it was okay. We couldn’t make too much conversation, but we tried to explain something to them by using our hands or whatever. So it was okay.”

Working Alongside POWs—Howard Cook

“Yuh! My God! We had a POW—I’m glad you asked that question. We had a POW building up here as you go on Route 213 up here by Church Hill. They had prisoners there. We was husking corn, and my father [would] go up there, and we’d get four German prisoners. My father would go up there and pick them up, and they’d bring them back, and they’d husk corn for my father. So anyway, we’d go up there, and my father would get four of them, and I felt sorry for them. They come here, and they was well educated people. One of them was a doctor, and one, I don’t remember, but they was Germans. And I don’t think sometimes the people up there treated them right, but they was prisoners; they was killing our men. So they come here one day and my mother looked and see what they had—for bag for dinner. It wasn’t much. So my mother said, ‘You come on in the house,’ and my mother fed ’em everyday until [unintelligible], and they was so appreciative. I can’t find the letter. When they got out—one of them was a doctor—he wrote my mother a letter thanking her for the kindness she give him. But that’s what they was, prisoners of war. They were good people, but they couldn’t control their lives because of Hitler getting in.”

FEATURED STORIES TRANSCRIPTS

Female Defense Workers—Douglass Gates

“Probably the most influential thing that I can remember is that we had a fairly large house, and we took in defense workers—females. I think one male we had at one time, but they were generally females. They worked in ship building in Wilmington. They had small plants, and they had other things too, I guess. I can’t remember. But the thing that is most memorable for me is that in the evening (you know, no television in those days), we’d get down in the living room, and we had a piano. And the girls—there was always a piano player, there seemed to be. The girls would get down there and gather around the piano with me because I always stuck my nose in there and sing songs. As a result of that, you know, my head right now continues to be full of nineteen twenties, thirties, forties songs. That’s what we sang, and that’s what I memorized with those gals, and it was wonderful. You know, this little twerp standing there and they’re having a grand time, and I’m having a grand time too. I loved it [laughs]. And they’d pat me on the head, “Oh, Dougie, you’re such a cute little kid,” [laughs] and I knew I was, of course [laughs].”

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Additional Sources

Local Munitions Plants:

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https://www.cecildaily.com/bonus/memorial_day/memorial_day2015/the-less-told-ales-of-elkton-s-munition-plants-and/article_1380db43-80ec-5b36-b72b-c8b66a904484.html

2. Smithsonian Online Virtual Archives, DuPont Nylon Collection: Seaford, Delaware Plant primary sources: <https://sova.si.edu/details/NMAH.AC.0007#ref10>

3. Photographs and commercial featuring the DuPont Plant:

<https://thecoastalcompass.com/remembering-the-nylon-capital-of-the-world/>
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4. Ames History Museum, Aircraft Spotter Cards: <https://ameshistory.org/content/world-war-ii-aircraft-spotter-cards>

Prisoners of War:

1. German Prisoners of War in Delaware: <https://www.doverpost.com/news/20170529/german-pows-common-sight-in-delaware-during-world-war-ii>

2. German POW's on the American Homefront, Smithsonian Magazine:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/german-pows-on-the-american-homefront-141009996/>

3. Recollections from a former German POW housed in Church Hill, Maryland:

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4. German POW's who died in Maryland Honored, November 1981:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1981/11/16/german-pows-who-died-in-md-honored/800422ba-a9f4-4fcc-a580-7f9149b01e73/>

Questions to Consider

Key Questions:

1. How would you describe the communities of the Delmarva in a few words or phrases?
2. In what ways did communities and their citizens become involved in the war? In what ways did the war come to them, and how did they respond?
3. Why were workers coming to the Eastern Shore from the South and the West?
4. How did people react to German POWs working in the region? What informed differing opinions about the presence of POW's?

Extension Questions:

1. Was the rise of defense industries overall more beneficial or harmful to communities? Weigh the costs and benefits of the construction and operation of a new munitions factory.
2. What does Ralph Deaton mean when he describes his father's tavern as an "outlet?" Why might this have been especially important while the war was going on?
3. How did communities learn about the war? What messages did they receive from popular media?
4. Imagine you lived near Church Hill, Maryland in 1945, and you heard the news that German POW's would be arriving to a prison camp nearby. How would you feel, and why? What other factors might influence your reaction?
5. African Americans, living in a segregated Delmarvan society, often pointed to the way German POWs were treated as evidence for the need for civil rights reform. How would you go about making this argument?

Essay Questions:

1. Compare and contrast the ways the war impacted rural communities and urban areas. Are there more similarities or differences? As small, rural communities, what particular challenges or advantages may the communities of the Delmarva have experienced?
2. Listen to Karl Brown Jr.'s *Veterans Reentering the Community* (<https://nationalhomefrontproject.org/brown-karl/>) and Mackey Dutton's *Veteran Housing and Veterans Not Talking About the War* (<https://nationalhomefrontproject.org/dutton-mackey/>). How did the war continue to impact communities after its official end? What were some of the difficulties and challenges facing communities in the early post-war years? Extrapolate beyond the stories here about what lasting changes the war may have brought to the Delmarva region.