

GROWING UP ON THE HOME FRONT

Youth and Childhood During World War II

According to the 1940 U.S. Census, approximately 30% of the nation's population would have been under 18 years old at the beginning of the war in 1939. By listening to the voices of those who experienced the war as children and young adults, students will explore how World War II both interrupted the innocence of childhood and became internalized as part of daily life and childhood play. Students will hear how children learned about the war through a variety of sources, including school, movie newsreels, and the radio. Encouraged to collect newspapers and sell war bonds, children learned that it was everyone's responsibility to support the war effort. While their elders and childhood heroes went off to war, some children were put to work. Still others replaced "Cowboys and Indians" with "Germans and Americans" and played games of four-square. Although certain aspects of civilian mobilization on the Homefront lent themselves to childhood play and enthusiasm, children were also confronted with the chaos of air raid drills, the horror of concentration camps, and the fear that American cities would resemble the bombed-out streets of London.

FULL STORY TRANSCRIPTS

LEARNING ABOUT THE WAR

Education was incorporated into civilian mobilization on the Homefront, and children participated in air raid drills and the sale of war bonds in schools across the country. Both film and radio played an important role in disseminating news about the war, as Mickey Elsberg recalls viewing MovieTone newsreels in the theatre and Lew Halin ingeniously constructed his own radio to tune in to the KDKA station in Pittsburgh. After the dust of V-E Day had settled, Elsberg was exposed to another dimension of the war at Temple services, where his rabbi delivered sermons describing the horrors of life in concentration camps.

The War at School—Joan Rosenberg Kovachi

"Well, when we were at school, we had to practice what they called "air raid drills." A siren would sound, and we would have to crouch under our desks and wait until we heard the all-clear.

We were also encouraged to give money for [the] war bonds. They gave you a book and when you donated money, you got a stamp for the book. And when the book—I guess, if I can remember—was filled up, you got a war bond. It was something that you really, really wanted to do."

MovieTone News—Mickey Elsberg

"When you would go to the movies which we did, there was a local movie theater. And in those days, you bought a ticket, and you went into the movie theater, and you sat until essentially you started seeing again what you had seen when you first got there. And so you knew that it was time to leave because you had been there for the full cycle. It wasn't like today where you go in at an appointed time. And kids, especially in the winter and all, all the kids would be shunted off to the movies on Saturday 'cause it gave parents some free time. And I remember MovieTone News, which was part of the newsreels that would come on, and seeing pictures of naval battles

and other things as part of the news. So, we saw those. I guess they didn't figure that it was X-rated, and the kids shouldn't see violence so we saw it. It was interesting. I mean, at home we built forts out of spare lumber, and instead of cowboys and Indians, we played Americans and Japanese or Americans and Germans just because we'd heard."

Crystal Radios—Lew Halin

"We also built crystal radios so we could listen to the news, you know, when we had to go to bed, at night. There is a certain kind of natural crystal that will collect radio waves and rectify them. So if you have a little thing, it's called a whisker — a little, bare wire — you could put that down, and you went through a coil. And we used to take the oatmeal cartons, the Quaker Oat cartons, and we would wind a coil on the Quaker Oat cartons. You had to scrounge wire, 'cause there was no wire around, and you would wind this crystal and then — everybody had earphones cause you used to listen to the radios with earphones — and you could hook this up to your earphones, and you could actually hear AM radio stations. And I remember the challenge was to make one that could get KDKA in Pittsburgh, 'cause KDKA was, I think, the only clear channel radio station in the United States. You could hear all over the United States, 50,000 watts, I can still remember that."

Hearing About the Holocaust at Temple Services—Mickey Elsbeg

"Probably it was after the war when some of the war stories started coming back about concentration camps. I do have this vivid recollection because of my father's working schedule, he wouldn't go to High Holiday services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We didn't go every week. So my mother would take me to temple, to services, and the Rabbi's sermons. I distinctly remember those sermons describing what went on in the concentration camps and elsewhere, the pits that people were forced to dig, and they were all machine gunned and thrown into the pits. I was probably about seven or eight at that point, but I may have had some nightmares after that."

WARTIME SACRIFICES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As greater numbers of men enlisted or were drafted into the armed forces following the attack on Pearl Harbor, citizens of all ages stepped in to fill their shoes. Lyle Feisel learned to drive a tractor at six years old to keep his family farm in Iowa afloat, while Rogers Smith volunteered for the local fire department alongside a Methodist minister, who operated the trucks since the boys were too young to drive. In her rural Los Angeles school, Barbara Finneson was instructed by her teacher that she would be expected to do her part for the war, and the school fulfilled their duty by collecting enough newspapers to buy the military a Jeep. Alice Bradshaw's brother attended MIT and graduated just in time to make room for a swell of returning veterans going to college under the GI Bill.

Kids Put to Work—Lyle Feisel

"One of the interesting things probably about the war—Pearl Harbor, I was 6 years old. And so, by the next summer, 1942, a lot of the young men in the area had gone away so the kids got put to work. At the ages of 6 and 7 and 8, I was driving tractors out in the field, you know. Can you imagine putting a 6-year-old on a tractor today? I was driving horses, haul hay up into the barn

and so on. And I worked not only on our farm, but, as I said earlier, we traded labor a lot. So I would go out and work for these other farmers on loan. And one of them had a tractor; it was an old tractor with a foot clutch. The tractors we had had a hand clutch, but this one had a foot clutch just like you'd have on a car except the springs on it were so stiff that I couldn't push in the clutch. So we would go out to the field, and the farmer that I was working with would get down, and he'd start the tractor up, and I would sit there and steer. And he'd be up on the hayrack loading the hay. We'd go around, and when it came time to stop, he would climb down and push in the clutch, and it would be fine. So that was very common. It wasn't just our family, there were 6- and 8- and 10-year-old kids working all over the Midwest. I guess, if you go back in history not so very long, it was not uncommon for 6- and 8-year-old's to be working in mines and factories and so on so we kinda went back to that for a few years."

Junior Fireman and the "Sky Pilot"—Rogers Smith

"The young men who had been active members of the fire department were not there. They were replaced by older men and we boys. At that time if you were 14, because of the necessity to have somebody to help, you could become a member of the fire department and the older ones trained us as best they could. The school, as you go into Churchill, sitting up on a hill, is an elementary school; it was where I went to high school. Now the fire department was in the center of town further down, maybe a half mile it was. When the fire siren blew, those of us who were members of the fire department could immediately get up from our desks and race down the street to the firehouse to help put out the fire wherever it was. So the man who drove the fire truck was a Methodist minister and he had no experience fighting fires or driving fire trucks, but he did it. His nickname was the sky pilot. (laughs) I'm not sure what the connection was to his ministry, and the fact that he was driving the fire truck, but it was an affectionate nickname. You know, he liked to be known as the sky pilot."

Story 3: Heroes Head Off to Fight—Howard Cook

"What was it like when you were younger seeing a lot of your heroes go off to fight in the war?"

Bob Feller, Ted Williams. Bob Feller and Ted Williams gave up their career. If Bob Feller hadn't gave up his career, God knows how many strikeouts he'd had, and if Ted Williams hadn't gave his up, he'd been the greatest home run hitter of all time. There's two guys that deserve recognition, those two; and there's plenty more down there, but those were two great ones. Johnny Pesky, he was a good one too, he gave up his career. But Bob Feller and Ted Williams. And then Yogi Berra give up a lot of his, and so did a lot of them did. A lot of them did. Frank Robinson did too."

School Efforts to Support the War—Barbara Finneson

"I just remember all of the teachers telling us that we would be expected to work. I remember them saying that we would do our part—whatever we could do as a school to help the war, it was to help the war and help in any way, and we did. And, of course, we became very patriotic, but nothing was ever said about any of the Japanese students in derogatory way or any way that I remember. They just didn't talk about it.

And then, you remember the story about us buying a Jeep. We saved newspapers, and we made enough money. I mean, we became very competitive, this little tiny school that was seven

bungalows in rural Los Angeles, if you can believe it. Got every scrap of newspaper we could, and the different grades were in competition to get the most newspaper. We went hither and yon as far as we could and got every paper we could. And sometimes the stacks, I swear they were as high as this ceiling before the trucks would come and take the papers away. And we tied them up in very neat bundles. We did all that stuff. We finally raised enough money so that we bought them a Jeep. They were so pleased that this little school had done that, that they gave everybody in the school a ride in the Jeep.”

An MIT Education for Free—Alice Bradshaw

“Oh, then my younger brother, he had a lucky break because when he graduated from high school, he went on over to the Navy recruitment office and signed up. Well, he was a very smart kid and worked very hard in school, and the next thing he knew, his assignment was to go up to MIT. So he did MIT in three years, and they really worked him! And then by the time he got out, the war was over. So he got his education thanks to Uncle Sam. But then many of the service people coming home too under the GI Bill [got an education]. That was a wonderful thing, unbelievable. I mean, you can’t imagine what that meant to people, changing their lives. And construction was open; it was just amazing.”

LIFE, DEATH, AND FEARING AN ATTACK AT HOME

For the narrators below, the war was synonymous with fear and danger: the shrill whine of an air raid siren, the tension of hiding in a dark crowded room, news footage of a bomb-ravaged London, Life magazine’s photographs displaying American casualties at Guadalcanal. As a child, Francie Miller had dreams of catching bombs falling on her mother’s Victory Garden and of escaping Europe through a trapdoor in her grandfather’s attic. Amidst the horror and death, the war saved Sybil Wolin’s life. After her appendix ruptured, she was treated with penicillin, a drug that underwent accelerated production and distribution because of the war.

Memories of Air Raid Drills—Philip Cicconi

“I can tell you that one of the scariest things for us, there would be air raid drills and blackouts. And when the sirens would sound, you know, you had to turn off all your lights, pull your curtains and shades and blinds, and be under a table, and I was terrified. You know, It was really scary. I had no idea. you know? I had no idea at all. I never projected far enough to say, Oh my God, there’s going to be a bomb on my head. It’s nothing like that. It was just like man, I don’t like this. This is really uncomfortable, you know? Hiding, lights out, people whispering, I don’t know what they were whispering for.”

Fear From Watching Air Raid Drills on Television—Frank Fiorello

“I was always afraid of the air raid because I thought for sure that they would come and we’d be bombed. Although we didn’t have a TV, we used to go down to the candy store. In the old times, the candy store had a TV, and you would go down there and you would watch the news. We didn’t even have a phone. The phone was in the candy store. If you wanted somebody, you’d call the candy store and they would send one of the young kids up to the house for the phone call. But mainly, the stories I told were of being afraid of being bombed.

KA: *You mentioned that you would watch the news at the candy store. Now, was that a very dramatic experience?*

Oh yeah, of course. Again, because everybody was there and everybody was in the same boat. We were all young kids and we were all kind of afraid. Again, eight and nine, very impressionable, and then you would see whatever they would show on the TV. If they showed you bombings, especially in London, which was really devastated, you'd see a lot of that and you think, "Oh my God, if this happened here."

It could have happened in our neighborhood because the borough of Queens, the East River just crossed it—we were right near Manhattan. So Manhattan would be the place they would bomb. They wouldn't really come after us. But who knew? Yes, we were afraid—very dramatic to watch the TV."

Images of American Casualties—Lew Halin

"One of the things that I think would be remarkable to put in your memory was that early on in the war, they did not allow any pictures or any notice about American casualties. And the first time that they allowed, any to my knowledge, I must predicate it with that statement—that the first time that there were any public pictures of American casualties was after the invasion of Guadalcanal. And there was a picture I'll never forget—pardon me — (tearful) of the beach at Guadalcanal with the bodies floating in the water. All these years later it still gets me. Did we know? No, we did not know very much. I guess the adults knew, I have to predicate that I was ten, and eleven, and twelve years old. I was only fourteen when the war ended, so I was relatively young early in the war. But I remember when *Life* magazine had that picture, and it was a big thing that was talked about on the radio — the first pictures of casualties that were coming back."

Nightmares About War—Francie Miller

"I have two dreams that are reoccurring still, and they have to come out of the war years. One of them was of myself rushing around in the garden. My mother is weeding, oblivious to the bombs dropping out of the sky. And I'm, you know, catching them, trying to keep her (laughs) from being blown up. That's one of the dreams that I have had. I don't have them anymore, but I had them a lot. So obviously there was something going on in the kid brain that was aware of stuff happening out there that I wasn't sort of processing. I don't think I have pictures of bombs dropping that I drew in kindergarten or anything. That dream was really something.

The other one involved a trapdoor in my grandfather's closet, which actually went to our attic. But when I dreamed about it, it went to Europe directly. If I went into, through the trapdoor, I could find bombed-out Europe. And how I knew about it as a kid, I don't know. It must have been photographs. You know, [it was] newsreels. But I'd bring kids back through the trapdoor to my house. Then one day I went to sleep, I couldn't get through the trapdoor anymore, I was too big. Awhh, it was awful. I woke up weeping. But obviously, my subconscious had gotten tired of my thinking that I was going to be, rescuing kids from Europe, so it gave me a good knock on the head."

Penicillin—Sybil Wolin

"In 1944, my appendix ruptured and I had a massive bacterial infection throughout the whole peritoneal lining of my body. I was 4 years old and I got the drug. It was amazing. So there were

these wild stories going around. I remember my mother telling me that the doctors told her you, you know: “Frieda don’t worry. She’s not going to die; we have this wonder drug.” I knew it as the wonder drug. And I have memories of being in the hospital. This was not just stories that were being told to me afterwards. I have memories of receiving a blood transfusion. But there was a lot of confusion about who was getting this and why, and you know, my parents were certainly not on any inside track.

I guess because I was a child, and I was clearly dying, and I clearly could be helped. And that appendicitis, and infections from appendicitis, were common, so that if it worked on me, you know then they had a good thing. Because you know it was new, and curing bacterial infections were new . . . and so I got penicillin. And I lived. The war was for me in this bizarre, ironic way, it saved my life while people were dying. I mean that’s the thing: people were dying. My neighbors’ sons, you know, all over the world – all over Europe people were dying and I lived. Because the war accelerated the understanding and the production and distribution of penicillin.”

THE WAR AND DAILY LIFE

While the war disrupted many facets of life—like Jane Presser’s high school graduation—it also became incorporated into daily experiences, so much so that Linda Hall asked her mother what types of stories were going to appear on the front page of the newspaper when the country was no longer at war. Sometimes participation was born less out of patriotic fervor, and more out of routine, as illustrated in Donna Ellett’s account of newspaper collection and Douglass Gates’ experience with rationing. Life—and fun—continued to be a part of childhood during the war, although Leona Van Dyke did not go unpunished for using her father’s rationed gasoline to make mudpies in the yard.

Blackout During High School Graduation—Jane Presser

“It affected our graduation mostly. The high school students, of course, were not old enough to be in the service. But then graduation night was sort of interesting. You’ll be interested in this because you graduated in the same high school. Moorestown, I would say, is about 60 miles from the shoreline, and we were aware that German submarines did patrol the shoreline. And so, every once in a while, there would be a blackout, and it would last half an hour, and there would be 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 a week. We were graduating a certain night, and when the bleachers were all [full] in the gymnasium for graduation, and the graduation program started, and lo and behold, blackout. And we’re all on the bleachers, and our parents and friends are all on chairs on the gym floor. So what to do? Well, we sang school songs, and our parents who were from, obviously Moorestown, knew some of the school songs from when they were in school. And, of course, we all knew them very well because we’ve been singing them at football games, and so we sat there for the next half hour and sang Moorestown High School songs. Then the lights went on.”

The Newspaper—Linda Hall

“I remember asking my mother, “What’s on the front page of the newspapers when there is no war on?” That’s all I’d ever seen, all I’d ever seen. She would say, “Well, you know, they put the local news and put that on the front page then.””

Newspaper Collection for the War Effort—Donna Ellett

“KP: *When you said you collected the newspapers to have them—*

We turned them in and some truck came and got ‘em. I don’t know what it was used for, but that was quite a thing. The paper drive was always a big deal, and the Cub Scouts always collected them. All we ever heard was, “It’s for the war effort.” So I don’t know what they actually did with the newspapers or why we collected them, but I’m sure they had a purpose. But I don’t know what it was.

KP: *So you had no idea, you just—*

No, we just did it. [*laughs*] Everybody collected newspapers; newspaper collection was a thing.

KP: *You would collect them at each home?*

Yeah, we would go around the houses and collect them. And then we’d bundle them up. I can remember tying them up with string in so many packages, and then taking them to the school. Then a truck would come and pick them up and take them wherever they took them and do whatever they did with them.

KP: *Did you and your brother ever question it?*

No. When you’re ten years old, you don’t really think about it. They just said, “Collect newspapers,” so we collected newspapers. [*laughs*]

Childhood and the War—Douglass Gates

“You know, on the one hand, when I think back on it, we were fairly protected from it for the most part except to the extent that we were cheerleaders. I think that that was pretty effective, the way in which that happened. [Playing] four square in favor of the war and killing Japanese and killing Germans and getting it over so Uncle John could come back home. Never felt really deprived. I think the whole thing about rationing and so forth seemed to be more of a game that we played, that we participated in. “Oh, well, we can’t do that.” Or we—“Uncle Joe wants to borrow the car.” “Well,” my father says, “Well, make sure he puts gas in it and uses his own ration stamps so I don’t have to use mine.” You know all that was sort of a game. That’s how I remember it, not so much as a tragedy that it was for so many people. Not so much of a happy game, but, you know, something you participated in, and yet you were so remote from it, protected from it.”

Making Mudpies with Rationed Gasoline—Leona Van Dyke

“The gasoline, for example. I grew up in Dorchester County, so I grew down the road a bit, on a farm. My father once a month would go down to Federalsburg and get his monthly allotment for gas and oil for – you didn’t have the type of farming equipment you have now-a-days, you had horses, but you also did have a tractor here and there and of course trucks. One thing I will never forget is he went one day to get his allotment and he came home and he was very busy and instead of putting it away he put it under a tree out in the backyard, and I was very good at making mud pies. (Laughter) I spent quite a bit of time making mud pies out of those cans I can

still remember them because I got a hand to my backside when he decided that I should have known better. I used it all.

Did you feel like you should have known better? I mean, were you told what was going on?

I was probably 6, mud pies were okay, because farm kids did all sorts of things like that. Dig a hole, get some water, and make mud pies, and do all kinds of things; it was a favorite pastime! And so if you had fuel or oil in a can, well, that made it even better than the water!”

FEATURED STORIES TRANSCRIPTS

The War at School—Joan Rosenberg Kovachi

“Well, when we were at school, we had to practice what they called “air raid drills.” A siren would sound, and we would have to crouch under our desks and wait until we heard the all-clear.

We were also encouraged to give money for [the] war bonds. They gave you a book and when you donated money, you got a stamp for the book. And when the book—I guess, if I can remember—was filled up, you got a war bond. It was something that you really, really wanted to do.”

Kids Put to Work—Lyle Feisel

“One of the interesting things probably about the war—Pearl Harbor, I was 6 years old. And so, by the next summer, 1942, a lot of the young men in the area had gone away so the kids got put to work. At the ages of 6 and 7 and 8, I was driving tractors out in the field, you know. Can you imagine putting a 6-year-old on a tractor today? I was driving horses, haul hay up into the barn and so on. And I worked not only on our farm, but, as I said earlier, we traded labor a lot. So I would go out and work for these other farmers on loan. And one of them had a tractor; it was an old tractor with a foot clutch. The tractors we had had a hand clutch, but this one had a foot clutch just like you’d have on a car except the springs on it were so stiff that I couldn’t push in the clutch. So we would go out to the field, and the farmer that I was working with would get down, and he’d start the tractor up, and I would sit there and steer. And he’d be up on the hayrack loading the hay. We’d go around, and when it came time to stop, he would climb down and push in the clutch, and it would be fine. So that was very common. It wasn’t just our family, there were 6- and 8- and 10-year-old kids working all over the Midwest. I guess, if you go back in history not so very long, it was not uncommon for 6 and 8-year-old’s to be working in mines and factories and so on so we kinda went back to that for a few years.”

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Questions to Consider

Key Questions:

1. How did the war impact the lives of children on the Home Front?
2. Where did children learn about the war? What did they take away from those lessons?
3. How did the war alter traditional childhood roles?
4. How did children react to the war? What emotions did they experience?
5. How did the war become incorporated into daily life and childhood play?

Extension Questions:

1. How were children expected to play a role in civilian mobilization on the Home Front?
2. What factors could explain opposing perspectives toward participating in the war effort? What explains why one person might think of rationing as a “game,” and another as their “patriotic duty?”
3. How do these stories illustrate the difficulty of drawing generalized conclusions from emotional experiences?

Essay Questions:

1. Using evidence from the selected stories, argue whether the war largely disrupted the innocence of childhood or became “normalized” as part of daily life.

2. To what extent did children understand the consequences and implications of the United States' involvement in a world war?