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WORLD WAR II SACRIFICES ON THE HOME FRONT IN HOUSTON COUNTY, TEXAS

By Lauren Schaubhut

"There is one front and one battle where everyone in the United States – Every man, woman, and child - is in action. That front is right here at home, in our daily lives and in our daily tasks."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, U. S. President
In a Radio Address to the Nation, April 28, 1942

World War II was not the longest war ever fought by the United States, nor was it the deadliest in terms of American lives lost, but it was the war from which no one escaped. Unlike the wars since, World War II touched every American life in some way. On the home front, even East Texans found the war years to be difficult. During the years between 1941 and 1945,¹ while soldiers were fighting to end this terrible war, the men and women left at home in Houston County fought their own battles. They lived their daily lives while preserving home and family with many fewer resources than before the war. Houston County, nestled in the Piney Woods region of East Texas, had an all-time high population of 31,137 in 1940.² At the start of the war, Houston County, with an area of 1,132 square miles, included the towns of Crockett, Lovelady, Weldon, Pearson Chapel, Grapeland, Kennard, and Austonio. Each of these had a few stores, a post office, and a school. Most of the people made their living off the land as farmers, ranchers, or timbermen.³

Life was not easy in a rural area and both men and women worked hard to scratch out a living from the land and its resources. When the war took almost a thousand men away from Houston County,⁴ times became even more difficult and the sacrifices greater for those left behind. The greatest sacrifice in any war is always the loss of lives, but the families on the home front in rural Houston County also sacrificed daily because of the rationing of food and consumer goods. They watched their communities and schools vanish as people moved away for jobs in wartime industries located in the larger cities. Through all of this the people of Houston County contributed to the war effort in their own ways and waited for their loved ones to come home.

Resources of all kinds were diverted to support the national war effort. One of the greatest challenges the people of Houston County had to face was the rationing of items that were needed for everyday living. In May 1942, the Office of Price Administration froze prices on almost everything, starting with sugar and coffee. War Ration books were issued to each family, which indicated how much one person could buy of certain products.⁵ Mae Huntsman and her husband owned and operated a general store in Pearson Chapel during the war years, and she recalls that many groceries such as coffee, sugar, lard, flour, cornmeal, bread, meat, butter, and milk had to be bought with ration coupons.

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Each coupon book was filled with stamps and each rationed item used a different number of stamps. The most valuable stamps were those used to purchase coffee. Families were allotted coupon stamps according to the number of members. Names were put on the coupon books and the stamps had to be torn out in the presence of the store owner so lost books could not be used by anyone else. It was illegal to use another person's stamps or to trade stamp coupons. To get around this law, one person would buy items needed by someone else and vice versa and then trade after leaving the store.⁶ Mildred Bruton of Lovelady, whose husband was stationed in the Philippines, recalls, "In order to buy the rationed items, I had to go to the Post Office and apply for a ration book of coupons. These came from the Post Office because that was the only government office in our town. No one could buy these items without a coupon unless you bought them on the "black market" and then you paid double for everything. We used the coffee grinds twice and recycled the excess food fat since you could take nothing for granted."⁷

Cornmeal was an important staple food in the South, so when the cornmeal coupon stamps were gone, people who had corn would take it to a nearby grist mill and grind their cornmeal. Once at home they put the ground corn through a wire sieve, kept the cornmeal to cook with, and fed the kernel husks to the pigs. People in rural areas did not have much money, but they did know how to provide food for their families.⁸

Canned goods were also rationed because steel was needed to make planes, ships, tanks, and other military equipment. For the same reason people could not buy items like refrigerators, washing machines, alarm clocks, bed-springs, or hairpins, as none were produced. People had to apply to local rationing boards for special certificates to buy items like typewriters and bicycles. And of course, there were no new cars produced during the war.⁹ Mae Huntsman remembers that commercial fishermen around the Crockett area were put out of work because of the rationing of lard, as there was nothing to fry the fish with. In those days, in the country, fish were always fried, never baked or broiled.¹⁰ The government encouraged Americans to conserve and recycle materials such as metal, paper, and rubber, which factories could then use for wartime production. Lots of everyday household trash had value: kitchen fats, old metal shovels, even empty metal lipstick tubes.¹¹ Also, because fresh ham was so expensive, a canned substitute for ham called *Spam* was first introduced during the war years.¹²

Although people in rural areas like Houston County sacrificed because of the food rationing, they still fared better than did their relatives in urban areas. The rural folks grew large gardens, had chickens and eggs, and had cows that produced milk and furnished them fresh butter. Dr. Marvin Russell of Lovelady remembered that his father always had an excess of milk and butter from his cows that he shared with neighbors who were not so fortunate. That is, until the government officials made him take ration coupons for the milk and butter or throw it away.¹³

The first non-food item rationed during World War II was rubber. The

Japanese seized rubber plantations in the Dutch East Indies and French Indo-China that produced ninety percent of America's rubber for products including tires, rubber bands, toy balloons, and pencil erasers. President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked citizens to contribute their scrap rubber to collection stations. The U.S. Office of Price Administration established the "Idle Tire Purchase Plan," and could refuse anyone "Mile Rations" who owned tires not being used.¹⁴ Mildred Bruton recalled, "We could never get new tires, instead, we had to have our old tires retread."¹⁵

Gas was rationed nationwide beginning in December 1942. The national speed limit was set at thirty-five miles per hour, which was referred to as the "Victory Speed," and car pools were encouraged. All automobile owners received stickers to put in their windshields that denoted how much gas they could purchase. The typical car owner received an "A" sticker that allowed 150 miles of driving per month and three gallons of gas per week. Those who worked directly for the war effort, such as industrial workers, needed more fuel and were typically eligible for "B" gas rations that allowed up to eight gallons a week. The "C" stickers were given to doctors, ministers, railroad workers, and mail carriers. Congressmen had access to an unlimited amount of gas by virtue of "X" stickers.¹⁶ Mae Huntsman and her husband also sold gasoline and kerosene in their store, which some people used for electricity since electrical lines had not yet been run all over the county. Mrs. Huntsman said that if she and her husband could not turn in coupons for all the gas they sold, then the government would not allow them to have more gas to sell the next month.¹⁷ Special permits were allowed for postal workers because they had to drive out through the countryside to deliver the mail. Sometimes permits could be gotten for emergencies, however, Pauline Evans remembers, "I lived in Weldon with my two small children and it was mostly a town full of old people and 'war widows.' I mostly ran a car shuttle back and forth to the doctor in Trinity ten miles away for the older people. We tried to get emergency coupons because gas was so rationed, but we were never allowed any. There were lots of cars around, just no gas. Sometimes we younger girls would pool enough gas coupons and pile in one car and go to the movie theatre in Trinity. That was a real extravagant treat for us."¹⁸

Silk, nylon, cotton, and wool were in high demand for use in the war because these fabrics were used to make parachutes, military clothing, tents, and ammunition bags. Civilian items made from these products were difficult or impossible to obtain, such as silk hose for women.¹⁹ Mildred Bruton said that it was a real luxury to have a pair of silk hose. She recalls having only one pair of nylon hose during the war, which turned white from all the washings. During this time leg make-up was popular because some women did not have or could not afford to buy hose, even on the black market.²⁰ Elastic for underwear was not produced, so underwear had string ties. Cigarettes and soap were also rationed. Cigarettes became a large "black market" item since most of them were being sent to the soldiers.²¹ Mildred Bruton and Mac Huntsman both agreed that everyone helped everyone else struggle through those years of turmoil. Everyone seemed to share more, even if it was just a head of let-

tuce, a few eggs, or a cup of sugar.²² The frustration of not being able to obtain needed and wanted items mounted until the end of the war. When the war finally came to a close, industries returned to consumer production and Americans went on a buying spree of unprecedented proportions.²³

Because so many people moved to urban areas, towns in rural Houston County shrank in size during the war and so did their schools. One example was the town of Pearson Chapel. At the beginning of the war the town consisted of two stores, two churches, and a school with twelve grades. As families were lured to the big cities by high-paying government jobs, this town lost so much of its population that the school dropped to only seven grades. After the war ended, many of these families did not return to the small towns because they preferred having money in their pockets to barely scraping a living off the land. Eventually the Pearson Chapel School closed altogether and the children had to attend school in nearby Lovelady.²⁴ Today only a few houses remain in what was the town of Pearson Chapel.

Most travel of any distance was by train because of gas rationing and the unavailability of tires. Many young wives accompanied their soldier husbands to their assigned bases in the United States, but had to go home and live with parents or alone with their children when the men were shipped to Europe or the Pacific.²⁵ Will and Mildred Bruton were newlyweds in September 1941 and lived at Shepard Air Base in Wichita Falls, Texas. Mildred remembers, "We had gone to a picture show and when we came out they were selling newspaper EXTRAS with the title *Japan Bombs Pearl Harbor*. We were young and carefree and didn't give much thought at the time as to how this would greatly change our lives." When Will was shipped out to the Philippines, Mildred and her newborn son rode the train back to Lovelady from Madison, Wisconsin, and lived with her mother-in-law until the war was over. Mildred said the trains were always packed with soldiers going from one base to another. She was lucky that she got a sleeping berth for the long trip. Others were not as fortunate, since soldiers always took priority on the trains.²⁶

Janette Young of Lovelady also remembered traveling by train during these years: "Travel by train was very slow. The good part was sleeping together with your husband in an upper berth and meeting and becoming friends with young couples from other parts of the country. The bad part was the coal cinders and soot in your eyes when the train windows had to be opened because in those days trains had no air conditioning."²⁷

Many men from Houston County volunteered to fight for the duration of the war, while others were drafted. By 1942, the draft was in full force. Single men aged eighteen and older were the first called, then married men with no children, then those with one child, then those with two. Men who had three or more children were exempt from military service. If a man was an only son and was needed to care for his family and parents, he could be exempt also. The military had special rules that applied to twins going into the service. They could be in the same squad and be based together overseas, but not all twins chose this. When Mae Huntsman's brother-in-law, Willis, of Pearson Chapel,

volunteered to serve, his twin brother Willard stayed at home. The letters that Willis sent home from Europe told of the hardships and horrors of the war there and advised his twin, who by then had been drafted, not to come to Europe. Willard took this advice and went to the Pacific. Both brothers fought bravely and came home as heroes. After returning home from Europe and finding no jobs in Houston County, Willis moved to Baytown, where he later married and raised two sons. His twin brother Willard was killed fighting in the Pacific in September 1943 and was buried at the Bynum Cemetery near the community of Shiloh.²⁸ He and nearly one hundred other young men from Houston County sacrificed their lives for their country.²⁹

During the war families listened to the radio every night, anxious to hear any news about the war. They did anything and everything that they could to bring the war to an end so their loved ones could return home. Still, the ultimate sacrifice was made by the husbands, sons, daughters, and brothers who never returned. When word came that the war had ended, people danced in the streets.³⁰ There were many celebrations, and the soldiers were welcomed home with great pride. The war scattered the population of Houston County to the four corners of the globe. Some never returned home and were buried on foreign soil, while others found new lives far away from the rural East Texas landscape that was forever changed by the war.

NOTES

The author dedicates this article to the memory of her grandmothers, Mildred P. Bruton (1919-2006) and Mildred C. Schaubhut (1915-2004), who endured the difficulties of life on the home front during the Second World War.

¹Stuart A. Kalleen, *World War II: The War at Home* (San Diego, 2001), p. 4.

²Eliza H. Bishop, ed., *History of Houston County* (Marceline, Missouri, 1987), p. 29.

³Mac Huntsman, interview by author, Lovelady, Texas. September 18, 2004.

⁴Bishop, *History of Houston County*, p. 29.

⁵Kalleen, *World War II: The War at Home*, p. 20.

⁶Huntsman interview.

⁷Mildred Bruton, interview by author, Lovelady, Texas. September 18, 2004.

⁸Huntsman interview.

⁹*The Gazette Newspaper. Food Supply Ration*. Cedar Rapids, Iowa. <http://www.gazetteonline.com>, accessed November 2004.

¹⁰Huntsman interview.

¹¹Kalleen, *World War II: The War at Home*, 15.

¹²Huntsman interview.

¹³Marvin Russell, interview by author, Lovelady, Texas. October 9, 2004.

¹⁴Cecil Clontz, *Your Car Is a War Car Now* <http://www.prewarbuick.com/id389.htm>, accessed November 2004.

¹⁵Bruton interview.

¹⁶Clontz, *Your Car Is a War Car Now*.

¹⁷Huntsman interview.

¹⁸Pauline Evans, interview by author, Lovelady, Texas, September 25, 2004.

¹⁹Kalleen, *World War II: The War at Home*, p. 48.

²⁰Bruton interview.

²¹Kalleen, *World War II: The War at Home*, p. 24.

²²Bruton interview; Huntsman interview.

²³Kalleen, *World War II: The War at Home*, p. 31.

²⁴Bishop, *History of Houston County*, p. 29.

²⁵Janette Young, interview by author, Lovelady, Texas, September 25, 2004.

²⁶Bruton interview.

²⁷Gene Russell, interview by author, Lovelady, Texas, October 9, 2004.

²⁸Huntsman interview.

²⁹Bishop, *History of Houston County*, p. 29.

³⁰Gene Russell interview.