

The 1940s & the Lingering Effects of World War 2

The 1940s were a time of growth and change for the United States, fueled by World War II. European intellectuals fled conflict zones, bringing new ideas along with them, that reached fruition in the United States following the war. A fast-paced war time economy revived America from the Great Depression, and changed the social structure of the workforce.

The United States did not enter World War 2 (1939–45) until after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. But even before then, the war had made an impact on American life. American manufacturers began to put more effort into supplying the wartime needs of Europe, creating shortages at home. By 1941, raw materials such as steel, rubber, nylon, silk, oil, and fabrics were in short supply. Automobile manufacturers gradually converted their factories to build airplanes, tanks, and other military vehicles. Clothing manufacturers made uniforms for the military. Shortages also changed the way civilian goods were designed. In order to use less fabric, clothes became tighter and more versatile. Buildings were simpler and more efficient, while furniture became less elaborate and more functional.

The Changing Role of Women:

With men off fighting the war, women took on many new roles. Factories needed helping hands to produce the materials needed for fighting, and even though it was a common belief during the Depression that women should stay at home, they were hired in the wartime economy. Almost 4 million women were hired for clerical jobs. 2.5 million went to work in factories, shipyards and other different types of manufacturing plants.

Rural dwellers began to move to the cities to work in the factories as well. This included millions of women, ethnic minorities, and teenagers. These groups had never worked together before, so there was often tension between them. Wartime jobs paid well, so many Americans found themselves better off than ever before. Yet, wartime shortages meant that Americans at home had very little on which to spend their money. Instead, they bought war bonds (often marketed by major film celebrities of the day), or saved in other ways. After the war, these savings fueled a period of mass consumerism, more intense than any other time in history. Most women would return back to their homes after the war, but it left an imprint on the minds of people, about just how productive women were in the workforce.

Even while working, women still played the role of homemaker to some extent. Not all females went to work, some still remained at home with the families they had had prior to the war starting. Women played major roles in the rationing efforts of the United States. They were responsible for the shopping, and what they purchased affected what the soldiers were supplied with during the war. Sugar, coffee, and meat were highly rationed foods. Due to the fact that beef was heavily restricted with rations, many people at home, began to eat horse meat. Fabrics were also rationed. Many women stopped wearing stockings to save silk which was needed to make parachutes. Instead, they would paint seams onto their legs. Though rationing was a sacrifice, most women were eager to help, viewing the rationing as their patriotic duty.

The Baby Boom:

The end of World War 2 sparked an event that still has an effect on our society today. Thousands of young American men had spent years away from their

wives and girlfriends because of World War II. You can imagine the joy they experienced upon being reunited. Not surprisingly, marriage rates soared in the postwar era. With the war over and the promise of American prosperity on the horizon, many couples decided this was the ideal time to begin a family, and an unusually high number of children were born, which created a generation commonly known as the “baby-boomers”; children born between 1948 and 1964.

The Creation of the Suburbs:

With the dramatic increase in new families, **suburbs** emerged as a popular place to live. Think of the neighbourhoods around Seneca. These pre-fabricated homes, placed just outside city limits, became all the rage. One of the most famous examples of the postwar “idealized” suburb was Levittown, New York. These communities were funded by G.I. Bills that were created to help military service men after the war. It also included free college and university for those who served during WW2.

We will see that these “**suburbs**” were not as “**wonderful**” as they were originally described. In truth, if you were not white, middle-class and of the Christian faith, you were not welcome in these “idealized” communities. More on this when we discuss the 1950s.

In many ways, the early postwar era was a socially conservative time. Gender roles for men and women were, more often than not, traditional and very clearly defined. When World War II ended, many women who had worked in factories during the war returned home to their former domestic way of life. The feminism so characteristic of the 1920s, was noticeably lacking throughout the post-war 1940s and into the 1950s.

