

THE FORGOTTEN AMERICANS

DEAF WAR PLANT WORKERS DURING WORLD WAR II

by Barbara M. Kannappell

During the 50th anniversary of World War II celebrations from 1991 to 1995, the contributions of deaf people, minorities, and women were ignored. The only project to illustrate the contributions of minorities during the war were documentaries of African Americans, Native Americans and women pilots during World War II for the anniversary.

Prior to the celebrations, a deaf World War II project was created by a mandate at the 1994 NAD Convention requesting a project to reveal the efforts of deaf Americans during World War II. Mario J. Illi of Syracuse, NY proposed this mandate; he is no longer with us due to cancer. As a result of this mandate, the World War II project has accumulated a substantial amount of information that has helped us understand the contributions of deaf and hard of hearing Americans during the war.

The World War II project constructs the social history of deaf Americans in World War II and documents deaf Americans' rightful place in the mainstream history of World War II. The project explores how the deaf American community was strengthened during World War II, demonstrates that deaf Americans were efficient workers in defense plants, studies the role of the NAD in World War II, and compares deaf Americans with other minorities that were overlooked in the history of World War II. Hopefully this project will extend the research to other topics such as the role of deaf women and deaf African Americans in World War II, hearing children of deaf parents; deaf Americans in the military services; the U.S.S. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, and post-war problems for deaf Americans.

Firestone exodus

During World War II around 1,000 deaf Americans worked at the Goodyear and Firestone companies in Akron, Ohio. It is one of the most famous stories told about the role of deaf Americans during World War II. Many of the Firestone workers were recruited by Ben Schowe, Sr., a labor economics research specialist with the Firestone Company at the time. He was a well-known deaf person who successfully battled big insurance companies and government agencies that banned deaf employees from jobs sponsored by the Work Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression and World War II. Schowe brought in deaf workers to Firestone from states as far away as California, Texas, Florida, New York, South Dakota and Montana. Schowe would contact school authorities and rehabilitation officials in many states to find his potential workers. His efforts led the migration of many "handicapped" Americans to Akron to work and live during World War II.

In his booklet Schowe wrote for the NAD, *Deaf Workers On the Homefront*, he said that deaf Americans were already hired to work in both companies before World War I. The number of deaf Americans working swelled to 1,000 during and after World War I. The number of deaf employees decreased in the 1930s because of the Great Depression and increased again after the Pearl Harbor attack which entered the United States in World War II.

The NAD joins the war effort

The NAD played a very important role in both World War I and II. Dr. Tom L. Anderson, president of the NAD from 1940 to 1946, asked President Franklin D. Roosevelt to give deaf people who worked for the defense program a chance to work in the war plants. Dr. Anderson's request was reported by the Associated Press wires and printed in many newspapers.

The NAD Victory Fund purchased three clubmobiles (two shown below) for the American Red Cross.



Dr. Anderson also corresponded with Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, to express the desire of deaf people to serve their country and enter the workforce. Secretary Perkins agreed to provide new opportunities for deaf workers, however, she recommended that the initial step be taken with the state rehabilitation service and so the matter became a function of State Associations of the deaf.

The NAD established a Victory Fund drive as a gift from the deaf Americans to their fighting forces. Through the cooperation of the State Associations of the deaf, the fund collected \$7,641.39. The Victory Fund presented a check to the American Red Cross for the purchase of three "clubmobiles" and purchased \$5,300 worth of defense bonds.

Clubmobiles were ambulance station wagons used as mobile recreation units by the American Red Cross to serve air files, outposts, and bivouac areas in India, the Middle East, North Africa, Sicily, and Great Britain. The people operating the clubmobiles provided doughnuts and coffee to American soldiers in Europe or brought messengers from one place to another. When necessary, they were used as ambulances. On each clubmobile the words, "Presented by the Deaf of U.S.A. Through the NAD." was painted on the clubmobile door under the Red Cross insignia.

War plant workers

There is well-known folk history about the wonderful community of deaf people working in the Goodyear Tire Company and the Firestone Company in Akron, Ohio. The research conducted by the World War II project found newspaper clippings about many deaf workers in war plants throughout the country. Schowe said that "During World War II, when it was the mark of resourceful management to keep production lines running with draft-exempt workers, no less than forty major employers in the United States authorized publication of stories about their 'highly satisfactory experience' with deaf workers."

The project has so far identified 33 states where deaf Americans worked in war plants and also identified approximately 700 worker names and war plant sites. Roughly 3,352 to 4,928 deaf workers were confirmed working at war plants throughout the country.

Contributing to America

Deaf people's contributions during World War II came in many forms. Not only did they work in war plants, but they also contributed money to the NAD Victory Fund. All over the United States, deaf people as well as State Associations of the deaf purchased defense bonds, participated in American Red Cross activities, and planted Victory Gardens to feed the armed forces.

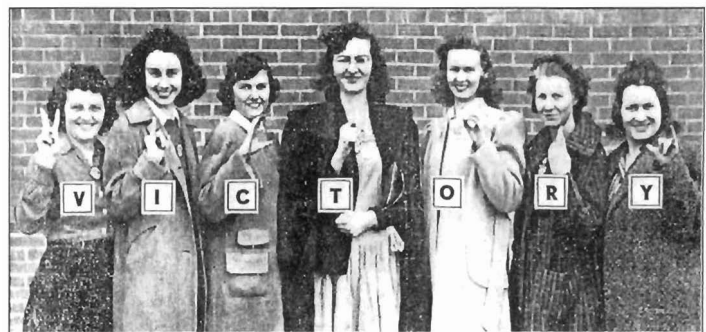
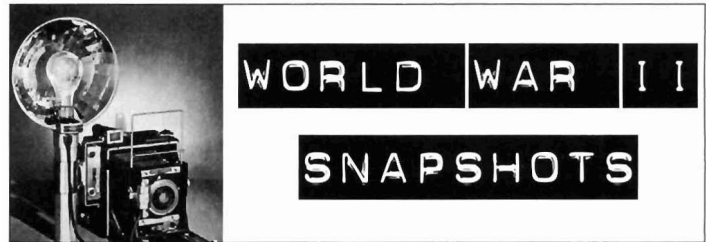
Students at the schools for the deaf all over America helped the war effort by selling war stamps and bonds, collecting scrap and paper. Deaf Boy Scout troops hosted paper drives and Junior Red Cross chapters for deaf girls were set up.

Wichita, Kansas had the only completely deaf auxiliary fireman unit in the United States Civilian Defense Corps. About two dozen deaf men were members of the unit. They trained and studied first aid, fire defense, gas defense, hose handling, among other things.

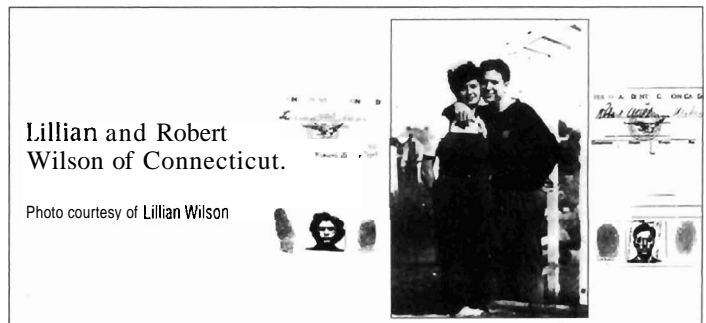
The World War II project hopes to produce a one-hour documentary videotape for public television, publish a resource book, and produce a CD-ROM.

If you have information about deaf people during World War II, please contact: Barbara Kannapell, Deaf People's Contributions during World War II, 4527 South Dakota Avenue, NE, Washington, DC 20017. 202-832-8078 FAX or KANNY@aol.com email.

Barbara M. Kannapell, Ph.D. is a Deaf Culture Consultant and the chairperson of the World War II project committee.



Iowa workers spelling "VICTORY". Photo courtesy of Gallaudet Archives



Lillian and Robert Wilson of Connecticut.

Photo courtesy of Lillian Wilson



Auxiliary Firemen in Kansas. Photo courtesy of Kansas School for the Deaf.