

Northern Michigan University

Michigan Farms During World
War II

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Michigan made many vital contributions toward the United States victory in World War II. Detroit was the pre-war capital of the automobile industry and earned for itself the title "the arsenal of democracy". But most people have forgotten how Michigan's agriculture also helped the war effort. Food, too, was a weapon, and the farmers here in Michigan and throughout the nation were encouraged to produce as much of this weapon as possible.

In the years prior to the war, Michigan's agriculture was in decline. In 1916, about half of Michigan's residents lived in rural areas; by 1930, fewer than one-third lived there. From 1920 to 1930, the number of farms fell by 14 percent to 170,000, farm acreage fell by 10.5 percent to 17 million in production, and the average farm size increased by 30 percent to 130 acres per farm.¹

But farmers in Michigan painfully recalled the experiences of World War I. They had responded to World War I by expanding their production acreage to meet the national and world demand for the need of food. The United States government, during World War I, provided thousands of tractors and plows for resale and provided farmers with a means to purchase scarce seed. At the end of World War I and into the 1920s farmers here in Michigan, and in the rest of the country, could only watch as the bottom fell out if the farm prices in a surplus ridden economy and a shortage of money to pay bills.²

From 1917 to 1928, tax delinquent acreage increased steadily from nearly 5 million acres to a little over 9 million acres per year³. Not all of this land was farmland, but much of it was particularly in central Michigan. The 1930s brought with it the depression and more bad luck and turmoil. In the

early 1930s farmers in Michigan found that they could only depend on each other. With little money coming in from crops, farmers found themselves unable to pay taxes or make their mortgage payments.⁴ As a result, counties and banks used court orders and foreclosure to recover their money through the sale of farms, household belongings, and farm implements. Local farmers gathered on the day of many of these sales and let it be known that if anyone made a competitive bid they would be in for a rough time⁵.

An auction in late January of 1933, near Howard City in Montcalm County, farmers offered only a few cents for each item. A grand piano was sold for only four cents and a hay elevator was sold for eleven cents. The entire proceeds for the sale was just \$2.40 and the purchasers returned the items to the original owner.⁶ In Gratiot county, farmers bid only \$3.85 for a piece of property and forced the bank to turn over the mortgage. Demonstrations like these also occurred in Straton in Manistee County. By the summer of 1933, desperate farmers were threatening to use violence to prevent judges and sheriffs from seizing their lands and homes as payment for delinquent taxes and unpaid mortgages. Fearing a riot, the Michigan Legislature postponed the repayment of delinquent taxes and land tax sales for a minimum of five years.⁷ This is the way it would stay until the start of World War II.

By 1939 the war in Europe was beginning and farmers were cautious. In 1940 Elmer A. Beaner, Michigan's Commissioner of Agriculture, said on October 10th. " This is a time for agriculture to keep its shirt on, and not step up production simply because we are told of the starving conditions and the need for food in the war torn countries"⁸.

In the fall of 1941, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was instructed by President Roosevelt to encourage Michigan farmers to produce more vegetables and dairy products for the Allies overseas and the United States Military. The USDA in 1941 set up defense boards comprised of local heads of federal agencies and the county agriculture agent. These boards were set up in every farming county in the nation. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, these boards became known as the war boards.⁹

In Michigan the county war boards were primarily made up of two full-time employees. The first of these was the county agent. He gave farmers technical advice by telling them how he could get the most from his crop. The other full time man was the Federal Security Administration agent. He helped by lending money to farmers at very low interest rates if they needed it. Most boards also had at least two local farmers who were paid three dollars for each day they worked on the board.¹⁰ The war board was a place that a farmer could go and get aid, sympathy, and understanding. This is where they also had to go if they wanted to purchase new machinery and get loans. The war boards here in Michigan were a success in one degree or another, although this was not true every where in the country. The Michigan farmers accepted and worked with the boards and tried to fulfill the needs that the Department of Agriculture established. The war board was also the place that the farmer had to go when they needed to get a draft deferment for their sons or hired man.

The Selective Service Act of 1940 was the beginning of the United States preparation for the eventuality of war. The act called for the first peacetime draft of American men in the history of the nation. This act also

started the labor shortage on Michigan farms that would be felt throughout the war. On November 12, 1942, the powerful farm bloc succeeded in getting passed through congress the Tyding Amendment giving agriculture a partial class deferment.

The Tyding Amendments allowed local draft boards to indefinitely defer any person deemed essential as long as the remained on the farm. To determine how essential a person was to the farmer, the USDA devised the war unit system. The system was based on the lowly cow. The care and milking of one cow constituted one unit, and, by some inept bureaucratic method, the USDA computed the difficulty, and the unit value, of all other farm chores in relation to that basic activity. To be eligible for deferment, 16 units were usually required but this varied widely in response to political pressure. By August of 1943, 47,606 Michigan men were being deferred but this number gradually went down to 34,198 in August of 1945.¹¹

Deferment not only froze manpower on the farm but protected many youths from combat overseas. This was a very sore point with organized labor in the United States. Throughout the war, farm representatives found themselves on the defensive on the draft issue. A county agent in his 1943 annual report wrote: " It has been said agriculture has become a haven for draft dodgers. If any man wants a good argument then send him to Salinac County. We can show them a great number of men on deferred farms who are producing plenty for the war effort".¹² To ensure that as many youths as possible qualified for exemption men were moved from farm to farm in order to ensue that they received enough units to be deferred. All these activities helped to raise crop production, but they also constituted a form of

special consideration for Michigan farmers on how they could keep some hired help.

Michigan farmers between World War I and World War II became increasingly dependent on migratory workers. Farmers preferred migratory labor to local labor because the housing could be just about anything and usually the farmer could hire the entire family and only have to pay them about \$640 for six to eight month of labor.¹³ The migrants, to Michigan, usually came from four different backgrounds; Chicanos, Mexicans, Arkies, and Caribbeanian.¹⁴

By far in the early part of the war Chicanos made up the largest percentage of the migratory labor force. However this quickly changed in the fall of 1942 when gasoline rationing began. Thousands of Chicanos fled the state in the fall of that year severally limiting the labor supply for farmers.¹⁵

The departure of the Chicanos led the United States government to entered into an agreement with the Mexican government that would allow over 60,000 Mexican Braceros to enter the United States to work on farms and railroads. It also led to the government to give Mexican laborers special gas rationing. Many Mexican laborers viewed this as an important bargaining chip when dealing with the farmers. In Oceana County in 1944, Lyle Thompkins, the county agent wrote in his annual report, " This year we have had more trouble than usual with our Mexican laborers. From the start of cherries they were continually striking for higher pay, and moving from one farm to another eventually ending up in groups on the street or congregating in the tavern".¹⁶ Eventually this was ended when Michigan farmers started to comply with the U. S. - Mexican labor agreement and

provide for health care and decent living conditions to the Mexican laborers.¹⁷

Labor shortages were further eased in 1943 with the introduction of German and Italian Prisoners - of - War (P.O.W.) that were assigned to work in Michigan's fields and food processing plants. Twenty P.O.W. camps were operated in Michigan from 1943 through 1946. The Upper Peninsula had five camps, located at in Port, Sawyer, AuTrain, Raco, and Evelyn . The U.P. camps housed nearly 1000 P.O.W.s at the height of the war. Camps in the lower peninsula were located at Fort Custer in Battle

Creek, which served as the state's initial induction and P.O.W. base, Hart, Fremont, Grant, Allegan, Odessa, Coloma, Waterloo, Blissfield, Dundee, Grosse Ile, Owosso, Freeland, and Romulus. Farmers contracted with the federal government in order to hire the services of P.O.W.s. The P.O.W.s were usually hired in a group of ten prisoners guarded by a single soldier. They worked 6-days per week eight hours a day.¹⁸ The farmers paid the government the local prevailing wage, usually \$0.50 to \$1.00 per hour.¹⁹ The government the paid the P.O.W.s \$0.80 per day in the form of coupons that were redeemable at the camps commissary. A farmer in Owosso recalled:

"At first we experienced a little difficulty with them because we didn't know how to handle them and because we spoke different languages. But after we got things straightened out everything worked out fine. We could never had done what we did if it had not been for the services of these prisoners."²⁰

Here in Michigan the state operated what was called the Emergency Farm Labor Program from 1943 to 1945. The 1944 statistics of this program show just how vast a labor pool Michigan agriculture needed. A total of 106,722 people were recruited to work on the farms that year, it was divided into 50,556 adult males, 13,751 adult females, and 42,465 children many of whom came from the inner cities and worked on farms during the summer. In addition, 2,013 Mexican nationals, 1779 Jamaicans, 4,500 P.O.W.s, and 5,500 southern migrants worked in Michigan fields that year.²¹

Labor wasn't the only problem with which the farmers had to deal. From November of 1942 to the end of the war, the government rationed a wide variety of materials. In order to purchase farm equipment such as combines, milkcans, and haybalers, the farmer had to go to the war board and prove a need for the equipment. The ability to purchase this type of equipment was usually made conditional only if the farmer promised to lend the machine to, or do custom work for, other farmers.²² Many farmers returned to the equipment that their grandfathers had used many years ago. Despite war imposed restrictions towards mechanization, it happened at an incredible rate. Many buckrakes were mounted to tractors or on to cars in order to rake hay and straw.

The largest problem that farmers had to put up with was one that neither they or the government could do anything about. In 1942 and 1943

too much rain fell in the early spring causing very wet conditions and flooding and in 1944 not enough rain fell. The fruit and vegetable crop here in Michigan was destroyed in 1945 by a late killer frost in April of that year.²³

Unfortunately frost was not the only thing that was killing on Michigan farms. In the summers of 1943 and 1945 meat shortages in both Detroit and Grand Rapids led to cattle rustling. Farmers in Kent, Muskegon, Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Washtenaw, and Livingston Counties faced this problem. Farmers had to begin night patrols with loaded shotguns in order to protect their herds and search for these elusive thieves. The rustlers usually slaughtered and dressed their kills right on the spot. Although no arrests were made by the farmers during this time several seizures of illegal meat was made by the state police from stores in both cities.²⁴

The state of Michigan's agriculture ever since the end of World War II has been in a steady decline. When the GIs came home after the war they were no longer content to stay on the farms or in the narrow confines of rural agriculture life. As these men came home, they were looking for something different. They took their wives and children and moved to the cities and the new suburbs that were springing up in the areas around the cities. It is these same suburbs that are growing and taking over farmland that has led to the disappearance of many farms in Michigan. Today there are less than 65,000 farms still in production accounting for less than 10.5 million acres of farmland.²⁵ This is less than two-thirds of that in 1940 and 105,000 fewer farms in the state. I think that Curtis Stadtfeld, who grew up on a Mecosta county farm during WW II, summarizes what has happened to

the farmers here in Michigan. " For us of the farm, unfeeling and unthinking as it may seem, World War II was a time of optimism, buoyancy, long days of enthusiasm, and a time of last promises. For one thing we felt that it marked the end of the depression... The mortgages had been paid off, though the farmers were far from wealthy... The future seemed clear. The buildings had been freshly painted, except for the barns, and everybody was ready for the post war boom."²⁶

Michigan farmers contributed a large amount of food for the war effort, while at the same time not over growing in size. Farmers here in Michigan over came many obstacles during the war. Farmers both here in Michigan and in the rest of the nation need to be commended for the great job that they did during World War II.

End Notes

1. Hathaway, Michigan Visions of Our Past. (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press), 1989, 223.
2. Rubenstein and Ziewacz, Michigan a History of the Great lakes States. (Arlington Heights, Illinois). 1981, 196.
3. Ibid., 44.
4. Ibid., 44.
5. Hathaway, Michigan Visions of Our Past. (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press), 1989, 223.
6. Ibid., 223.
7. Rubenstein and Ziewacz, Michigan a History of the Great lakes States. (Arlington Heights, Illinois). 1981, 196.
8. Clive, State of was Michigan in World War II. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), 1979, 44.
9. Hathaway, Michigan Visions of Our Past. (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press), 1989, 229.
10. Clive, State of was Michigan in World War II. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), 1979, 44.
11. Ibid., 44.
12. Life Magazine, " -Farming for the Department of Agriculture Faces Big Job". 26 January 1943, 63.
13. Boyer, Clark, and Kett, The Enduring Vision. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath And Company), 1990, 938.
14. Clive, State of was Michigan in World War II. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), 1979, 45.

15. Ibid., 46.
16. Ibid., 47.
17. Ibid., 47.
18. Rubenstein and Ziewacz, Michigan a History of the Great lakes States. (Arlington Heights, Illinois). 1981, 207.
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20. Hathaway , Michigan Visions of Our Past. (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press), 1989, 225.
21. Boys, Clark, and Kett, The Enduring Vision.(Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath And Company), 1990, 938.
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25. Detroit News, June 5, 1943, 7(A).
26. U.S. Department of Agriculture, " Agriculture Statistics", 1984, Vol.1, Pt.4, 41.
27. Clive, State of was Michigan in World War II. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press), 1979, 50.

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