

CEO document contents:

THE HOMEFRONT: THE JOLIET ARSENAL DURING WW II

Mary R. McCorvie

and

Patricia M. Welch

Shawnee National Forest

Important Work: 1940

A.W. Malone stepped down from one of the trucks and walked up to the farmers. "Boys," he said, "I have work to do for Uncle Sam. It is important work, in the interests of our national defense, and I hope you let me do it." Malone returned to the trucks, put a couple of planks on his shoulder, and walked thru the group of farmers.

And so began the construction of the Elwood Ordnance Plant and the Kankakee Ordnance Works in November of 1940.

U.S. Gears Up for War

The (confused and wasteful) experience of the mobilization effort during World War I taught the military that planning, particularly for priorities and balanced production, was key to a successful munitions procurement program. Although the country was intensely isolationist after WWI, planning efforts were begun in a small way soon after that war. These efforts grew with the increasing military tensions in the 1930s and the increased military budgets that corresponded to those tensions.

Armament planning was regarded as a necessity not only because of the past experience during WWI, but because there were strong signs that war could become a reality in the near future. During the 1930s, increasing military tensions abroad caused the military appropriation budget to rise; between 1934 and 1935 the budget rose from approximately \$7 million to \$11 million. In 1938, Germany's further aggressions caused an increased level of funding by Congress that allowed planning funds for Loading, Assembly and Packing (LAP) facilities, small arms ammunition, and equipment for powder production. In this same year so-called educational orders were authorized to be placed with private industries for certain material in short supply or that were difficult to manufacture. These educational orders were changed to defense contracts in 1940 after Germany invaded France.

Both the Elwood Ordnance Plant and Kankakee Ordnance Works (later known as the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant) were authorized in September 1940 during the "first wave" of GOCO plant construction. GOCO is short for Government-owned, Contractor-operated. The area is located in southern Will County, Illinois, approximately 16 miles south of Joliet. Ground was broken for both projects nearly two months later, due to a somewhat lengthy, and occasionally contentious, land acquisition process.

Both Elwood Ordnance Plant and Kankakee Ordnance Works started production on individual lines prior to the final completion of the plants. At Elwood Ordnance Plant operations on Group 2, a medium and major calibre loading line, was begun on July 12, 1941. Acid Area No. 1 (originally called Acid Area A) started production on September 8, 1941.

The mission of the Kankakee Ordnance Works during World War II was to produce TNT (trinitrotoluene), DNT (dinitrotoluene), tetryl, lead azide (the only plant in the GOCO system to supply this product) and the raw materials of sellite, nitric and sulfuric acids, and oleum used to produce explosives. The Elwood Ordnance Plant was the major recipient of KOW's products, shipped via an intraplant railroad line, although numerous ordnance plants and several foreign countries (through the Lend-Lease program) also received their prodigious output of explosives.

The mission at Elwood Ordnance Plant was the loading of shells, bombs, fuzes, detonators, boosters, and primers, and the production of ammonia nitrate (changed to a shell renovation plant in 1943). Both plants were noted for their ammunition production training schools during World War II. The Elwood Plant was nicknamed the "West Point" of ammunition, due to its extensive training program, which also provided instruction to personnel from other Allied Countries, including mainland China. Du Pont, the operating contractor of KOW until 1944, trained individuals from many of the GOCO system's other ordnance works.

The manufacturing area of the Kankakee Ordnance Works was composed of 12 TNT and six DNT lines, three acid areas, two tetryl lines, a lead azide plant, an oleum and two sellite plants.

The 10 loading lines of the Elwood Ordnance Plant consisted of four principal shell and bomb loading lines and six auxiliary loading lines for fuzes, boosters, detonators, and primers; and an ammonium nitrate plant. During WW II Elwood produced 3,118 2-ton bombs; 72,625 1-ton bombs; 337,882 1/2 ton bombs; 188,523 500 lbs. bombs; and 586,481 300- and 250-lbs. bombs.

Apart from munitions production, interesting aspects of the plant history during World War II include an agricultural leasing program, a camp for an African-American military police battalion, the contracted employment of Jamaicans and Barbadians at both facilities, and the possible existence of a POW camp. The agricultural lease program, still in place today, was instituted in the early 1940s at both facilities to put surplus land into serviceable use due to the critical food shortage at that time. Although not a part of KOW's operation during WWII, a significant portion of surplus land adjacent to the Des Plaines River was transferred to the Army for the location of an African-American military police battalion outpost known as Camp Des Plaines. In the last two years of the war, Jamaican and Barbadian workers were used at both plants in an attempt to alleviate the acute labor shortage experienced at that time. These workers were also housed at Camp Des Plaines. It also appears that a POW camp was established in the vicinity of the camp, although only limited oral information has been received about its existence. No written documentation has been found.

Both facilities were closed in September 1945 and put on standby status under the control of the U.S. government. One month later, Elwood Ordnance Plant and Kankakee Ordnance Works were joined into a single unit and renamed the Joliet Arsenal. In December 1945, the Joliet Arsenal became the headquarters of the Field Director of Ammunition Plants (FDAP), which remained, through various name and administrative changes, until 1973. Post-World War II activities included the operation of a fertilizer program by E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Company in the Acids Areas of the former KOW. The fertilizer was manufactured for use in the European Recovery Program, known as the Marshall Plan. Operations at Elwood at this time included ammunition reclamation and

experimental bomb loading. The Elwood unit was in active production between 1951 and 1955 as a government-owned government-operated (GOGO) installation, while the Kankakee unit was again operated by the U.S. Rubber Company between 1951 and 1957. The same types of ammunition and explosives were produced at both facilities during the Korean War as had been produced during WW II.

The facility was redesignated the Joliet Army Ammunition Plant in August 1964. The following year, Uniroyal Inc., as the successor to the U.S. Rubber Company, became the operating contractor for the entire facility, which again produced ammunitions and explosives during the Vietnam War.

Declared inactive in 1976, the plant became the subject of extensive planning and coordination efforts to convert its holdings of over 23,000 acres to a 19,000-acre nature preserve, a 1,000-acre veterans' cemetery, and two industrial parks for the adjacent communities of Elwood and Wilmington.

The Homefront

The construction of the arsenal facilities directly affected three of the surrounding communities: Elwood, Joliet and Wilmington. While Joliet and Wilmington embraced the economic boom brought by the construction of the arsenal, Elwood was not so receptive to the influx of construction laborers needed to build the hundreds of buildings and bunkers, lay the hundreds of miles of railroad track and build the roads which would eventually bring the thousands of arsenal employees to work everyday. In 1940 Elwood had a population of 248 souls. Wilmington had a population of 1,900.

Will County had the highest unemployment in the state prior to the War Department's announcement of the construction of the Kankakee Ordnance Works and the Elwood Ordnance Plant. The Joliet Chamber of Commerce had lobbied

hard for the facility. Initially, three out of every five jobs were given to the farmers and farm laborers who had made their living within the confines of the arsenal grounds, while the remaining two jobs went to union men. Although local men, meaning men from Will and Grundy Counties, were favored for employment at the arsenal, eventually workers from at least 36 states were employed there, as well as guest workers from Jamaica and Barbados. At its peak during the summer of 1941, the two arsenal facilities employed 17,502 people...and still there was a chronic labor shortage. Although women were always intended for shell-loading work at Elwood, at Kankakee they were intended only for secretarial work. However, soon the Joliet Herald News announced "a new era for women workers will dawn at Joliet next month then the first of an army of women, at what has been announced as substantial wages, an ideal working conditions, will take their place in the fuse and booster department of the Elwood munitions plant." During the summer of 1942, 3,444 women, or 28% of the total Elwood workforce were employed there. During the summer of 1944, 738 women or 24% of the workforce were packing TNT and eventually performed all other tasks typically done by men, including working in the acid department.

One might wonder where these 17,502 and people lived and slept in communities which had formerly only housed approximately 2,148 people. Obviously overcrowding was going to be a serious matter. According to Chicago Sun and Tribune reporters, construction gangs reportedly "slept in garages, barns, cellars, attics, and spare rooms of private homes--wherever they could place a mattress or sling a hammock." In Wilmington "every house in town was open to them--not a spare room was left in a single dwelling. At that, men slept in haymows. The village hall and fire station and pump houses were made

into emergency quarters. In one large, well ventilated basement, 17 men slept." Some of the workers were not the most savory. Wilmington residents became familiar with the new labor force from the "pipe layers, fresh from the oil fields in Texas and Oklahoma, a rough-dressed, rough talking, hard drinking, belligerent army who kept the bartenders working most of the night, and the juke boxes playing." However, most of the construction workers who came to the area were hard working men who were willingly taken into the homes of the residents of Wilmington and Elwood." Such unlikely places as the Be-Gay Dress Shop in Wilmington served as clearinghouses for accommodations. The Misses Stanley and Alderson, and Mrs. Hopkins, owners of the dress shop helped find housing for over 1,000 people. "Frocks were pushed to the rear of the store as white-collar workers, men in greasy overalls, dredgers, pipe layers, mechanics and superintendents poured in, often 150 a day, looking for quarters for themselves and their families." In Joliet, Defense Homes Incorporated, a federal agency, began construction of 150 houses for defense workers. The subdivision, known as Marquette Gardens, incorporated 18 different house designs, including 2 and 3 bedrooms and rented from \$42.00-\$55.00 per month.

In Wilmington, government housing was begun in 1942 and consisted of three subdivisions of prefabricated houses and seven army barracks. The barracks were divided into one- and two-room apartments, and provided bachelors quarters as well. A 200 unit trailer park was also located in there. Another trailer park was begun on the island in the Kankakee River in downtown Wilmington. Originally a picnic grove with bathing, fishing and boating, the camp developed when Mayer Oswald sent the owners of five trailers there to spend the night. The trailer park took on a life of its own and soon contained at least 100

trailers and included such amenities as gravel road and walkways, a laundry, water and sewage, and electricity.

There were so many young people attending school in Wilmington in 1941 that the school day was divided into morning and afternoon shifts. Both Elwood and Wilmington had lost a number of rural schools that had been located on the Arsenal grounds. There were "classrooms everywhere you could think of that would be halfway suitable for a classroom, such as the Presbyterian basement." Eventually the federal government built two new school buildings to accommodate the 150% + influx of students.

The Story Continues...

The story does not end there. On March 10, 1997 15,080.5 acres of the former Joliet Arsenal was transferred from the US Department of Defence to the USDA Forest Service to be managed as the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. The purpose of the transfer is to restore the site to its original splendor as a tallgrass prairie. It is located near the confluence of the Des Plaines and Kankakee Rivers in northeastern Illinois, an area known to have been occupied by Potawatomi Indians, as well as smaller numbers of Ottawa and Chippewa and other northern Native American groups. We thought it appropriate to give the National Prairie a Potawatomi name because of their long occupation of the general area during the late 1600s through the early 1800s. "Midewin" is the Potawatomi name for their "Grand Medicine Society" or "Medicine Lodge Society", an inter-band group which used their power and influence to not only heal individuals, but also keep the greater Potawatomi society in balance. The word literally means "mystic doings". The Midewin Society not only taught herbal knowledge, proper ethical behavior and honoring of manitou to maintain health, it also functioned as a cohesive element within the village, strengthening the

bonds between tribal clans and other kin groups. Midewin membership included many different clans, as well as many age groups and both sexes, forming a very cohesive unit. In addition, there were also "Mide" (Mitawin, Midewiwin, Madodiswon) societies in other Native American groups such as the Chippewa and Ottawa, among others. Because these three groups shared this concept of healing, this made a strong bond between them and led to a fairly cohesive confederation. In short, the Midewin acted to unify not only villages but also various tribes within the Great Lakes area.

From TNT to T & Es

The word "Midewin" was chosen because the Midewin Society, as a healing society, embodies our hopes for the grasslands. The Joliet Army Arsenal has served as an industrial munitions center since 1940. Prior to that the arsenal grounds were agricultural fields and pastures, many of which were drained wetlands. In acquiring the Joliet Army Arsenal grounds the Forest Service hopes to restore the area to its former natural beauty of marshes and tallgrass prairies with grazing herds of elk and bison. We hope to heal and restore the land, and in turn, have this restored prairie serve as a green oasis amid Chicago's industrial development and urban sprawl. The Illinois Land Conservation Act of 1995 established the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie to be managed for National Forest System purposes, including the following:

- To manage the natural resources of the MNTP in a manner that will conserve and enhance the native populations and habitats of fish, wildlife and plants;

- To provide opportunities for scientific, environmental, and land use education and research;

To allow the continuation of agricultural uses of lands within the MNTP consistent with the legislation;

and, To provide a variety of recreation opportunities.

Public and private support of the Prairie has been very strong. Since its beginning, funding from state and local governments, private foundations, corporations, and conservation and environmental organizations have reached \$4,212. In keeping with this congressional mission, volunteers have already logged well over 17,000 hours of volunteer labor, including leading tour groups, build prairie plant beds and other projects. New biological studies have discovered previously unrecorded threatened and endangered plant species. To date, 600 plant species have been recorded at Midewin, of which nearly half were prairie plants. Work continues at Midewin toward the restoration of of what was formerly cultivated fields and TNT lines to the beauty and splendor of a tallgrass prairie.

Thank you