

WICHITA AND THE WAR

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Prior to the United States' entrance into World War II in 1941, the United States had been suffering a crisis that affected all parts of the nation, as well as the global economy: the Great Depression. There seemed to be no immediate way out for the citizens of the United States, even with the help of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and all of the "ABC" organizations that were built around it. However, there was one event that drove the country away from hardship and into an economic boom. President Roosevelt, although initially resisting involvement, found that unexpected circumstances required action; the event that propelled the United States into a boom economy was the Second World War.

World War II was now in full swing and the entire country began pitching in. Even places such as Wichita, Kansas benefited from the economic boom from the war and quickly grew in size and population. In 1930, Wichita wasn't even in the top seventy-five largest cities in the United States, with a population of 111,110 residents, nothing compared to the top five cities that each boasted a million or more in their population; by 1960, Wichita was ranked number fifty-one with a population of 254,698. However, it was between 1940 and 1950 when Wichita experienced its second biggest increase in population in the history of the city.¹ And, for Wichita, it was one specific industry that pushed the city to become one of the top ranked populations in the country: the aviation industry. Due to the aviation industry and the multiple companies located in the city or moving to the city, World War II was the biggest factor in Wichita's economic and social change in the 1940s.

Even before World War II, Wichita had already been named the "Air Capital of the World." Nowhere else in the world could a person find so many top-name general aviation

"In April 1940, more than seven months after the war began in Europe, the Roosevelt administration asked for the appropriations to build forty-seven new airplanes. Less than a week later, Hitler invaded Denmark. The conquest of Western Europe had begun. A month later, after the fall of Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway, Roosevelt amended his request. On May 16, he went to congress and asked for nearly one billion dollars to bolster American's defense, including 300 million dollars to build 50,000 airplanes. Congress quickly assented to Roosevelt's request."⁷

A little over a year and a half later, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and America officially entered the war.

The first company greatly affected by the war, and quite possibly one of the most important companies to be affected in Wichita, was the Boeing Company, formerly known as the Stearman Company. Until 1938, the Stearman Company had continued building aircraft in Wichita under its own name and with its own model designs. In 1938 it became the Stearman Division of Boeing Airplane Company.⁸ This explains why it is referred to as both Boeing and Stearman. It was in June of 1940 that Boeing received Wichita's biggest order to date; an order from the United States Navy worth \$3.8 million dollars. Later that same year in August, Boeing would receive a \$3 million dollar loan from the United States War Department to expand the Boeing factory. The expansion was for one single model: the B-29 Superfortress.

Boeing produced several aircraft including the PT-17 Kaydets, which were used as military training aircrafts. However, it was the B-29 Superfortress production that made greatest impact. In fact, Boeing Plant II was built specifically for its production and nearly 30,000 employees participated in the manufacture of the bombers.⁹ The concept for the B-29 began in February of 1940 when the Army requested a new, heavy, long-range bomber;¹⁰ Boeing

AT-17 Navigator.¹⁶ And, thus Wichita was leaving a lasting mark on the entire nation as Beech was leaving a lasting mark on the city's economy.

A third company that thrived due to the war was Cessna. Just like Beech and Boeing, Cessna prospered due to government contracts.¹⁷ Also just like Beech and Boeing, Cessna was forced to expand both its factory size and its employment. The company was employing 1,500 workers by February 1941, when it had only employed 200 people seven months prior. By 1944, Cessna occupied 468,000 square feet of factory space and employed over 6,000 workers. Some of these workers, but not a substantial, notable amount, were employed in Hutchinson, Kansas.¹⁸ Cessna's wartime production, along with helping Beech produce parts for Boeing's B-29 Superfortress, included an important aircraft of its own; that aircraft was the T-50 Bobcat. "The T-50 Bobcat, Cessna's first twin engine aircraft, was designed and built in 1938 in only nine months time. The U.S. Army used the T-50 as a trainer and production in 1940 had barely started before the military had ordered the new plane."¹⁹

There were several other companies who also reaped the benefits from World War II, including the Culver Aircraft Company, which moved to Wichita from Columbus, Ohio in late June of 1940,²⁰ but these three – Boeing, Beech, and Cessna – were the companies with the largest impact on Wichita's economy. In fact, there's one particular week of production in September of 1940 that stands out from all the rest; it's referred to as the \$30 Million Dollar Week, and it was just that. Boeing had a \$7 million dollar government contract. Cessna had a \$9.5 million dollar order from the Royal Canadian Air Force specifically for T-50 trainers. And finally, Beech received a \$13 million dollar agreement with the United States government. \$29.5 million dollars contracted between three companies in one week. This one week contributed to over half of the year's contracts between all companies in Wichita, which came to a total of \$53

of E. Gail Carpenter, a pastor at the First Presbyterian Church. As many Wichita boys were headed overseas to war, Carpenter decided to keep his former Sunday School students up to date on the happenings in Wichita by writing them letters once a month from March of 1942 to November of 1942. These letters provide a glimpse into Wichita as it turns from a city worn down from the Great Depression into a booming center of aircraft production.

When it came to women, Wichita was not far behind the popular scene of "Rosie the Riveter." Women began flocking to the companies in the aviation industry in search of work and to replace the men who had left for war.²⁴ The entry of those women into the wartime workforce was stimulated by the efforts of the War Manpower Commission: an agency of the United States government charged with balancing the labor needs of agriculture, industry, and armed forces.²⁵ In early 1942, the federal government announced plans to offer mass training programs in Wichita to prepare workers for building airplanes. In Carpenter's second letter to his former students, who he addresses simply as soldiers and then later on as "The Gang," he mentions Wichita's women in the workforce:

If you were in Wichita today you would be riding the bus with the rest of us and unless you could persuade some old lady to give you her seat you would stand up and like it. It used to be that we stood on the five o'clock bus until it got between East High and Hillside. Now the bus is still full when we reach Roosevelt. Each day I notice that a good share of the women on the buses are dressed coveralls with an identification tag and a Cessna, Beech, or Boeing insignia very much in evidence. The checkered cabs are being driven by women, who are all dolled up in snappy uniforms.²⁶

So, not only were women entering the manufacturing industry, but they were also finding other jobs around the city to help out the war effort.

Both single and married women answered the call, although, at the time, single women were required to be twenty-one years old before entering the workforce.²⁷ When it came to the married women, this created problems in the household because the primary caregiver to the

It was the early part of last week that I took a little business trip to Ponca City and Enid [both in Oklahoma] and then back to Wichita. It has occurred to me since, that there were a few things about the trip which reflect dimly lit times in which we live – and perhaps the conduct and the attitudes of the folks back home.

In the first place, trips of any kind are less frequent than they used to be. A few months ago it was not unusual to find half a dozen representatives of an oil company watching a single well, each man in his own car. And when business takes one to Ponca City, it is arranged that there is business also in Arkansas City and Enid. We must kill as many birds as possible with one set of tires.³²

He continues on later in his letter addressing the usage of cars and speeding: “There is little of the good old-fashioned speeding because the other fellow is saving his car and his rubber too. It is rather interesting to have the police department report that our attempt to conserve rubber has actually conserved human life. There are fewer accidents since Pearl Harbor.”³³

And, along with the carpooling and buses, biking became a new, regular form of transportation for both airport factory workers and other residents of Wichita:

Twenty-five new buses have been put into service in Wichita, six on the regular City Routes and the rest on the Airplane Factory Routes. The new buses have no chromium trim. The seat rails are painted and the hand rails are of stainless steel, which stains readily. Bicycle parking racks are beginning to be seen in front of sub-contracting shops and downtown department stores.³⁴

“Wichita also saw a change in the city’s diversity. In addition to the people moving in from surrounding rural areas, thousands of migrants, including African-Americans and white southerners, came to Wichita.”³⁵

Along with the change in people and population, there also came a change in scenery. In his first letter, Carpenter discusses this change in his letter written in March:

When one drives out of town, it is always a good chance to take care of some of the Sunday Afternoon Superintending which we did only a few Sundays ago at the airplane factories. We go by Boeing to see how nearly completed the new plant is, or to see what changes are being made at the Airport, or how the new highway which will soon carry us half mile west of the Boeing plant, is progressing.³⁶

Carpenter addresses this again in his eighth letter:

1. "Population of the Largest 75 Cities: 1900 to 1996," accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/99statab/sec31.pdf>.
2. Kansas Aviation Museum, *Wichita: The Air Capital*, October 18, 2014.
3. Jay M. Price, *Wichita's Legacy of Flight* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2003), 7.
4. *Ibid.*, 60.
5. Price, Jay M. and Keith Wondra, *Wichita: 1930-2000* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2013), 40.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Susan Thompson, *Prairie Runways: The History of Wichita's Original Municipal Airport*, (Mennonite: Newton, 2000), 80-81.
8. Kansas Aviation Museum, *Boeing*, October 18, 2014.
9. Price, *Wichita's Legacy of Flight*, 62.
10. *The Wichita Eagle*, January 29, 2011, <http://www.kansas.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/the-story-of-kansas/article1056213.html>.
11. Kansas Aviation Museum, *Boeing*, October 18, 2014.
12. Price and Wondra, *Wichita: 1930-2000*, 39.
13. Kansas Aviation Museum, *War Time Production*, October 18, 2014.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Price, *Wichita's Legacy of Flight*, 60.
16. Kansas Aviation Museum, *War Time Production*, October 18, 2014.
17. Price, *Wichita's Legacy of Flight*, 61.
18. Kansas Aviation Museum, *Cessna*, October 18, 2014.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Thompson, 80-81.
21. *Ibid.*, 83.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Kansas Aviation Museum, October 18, 2014.
24. Price, *Wichita's Legacy of Flight*, 65.
25. Kansas Aviation Museum, October 18, 2014.
26. Charles William Sloan Jr., "The Newletters: E. Gail Carpenter Describes Life on the Home Front," *Kansas History*, December 1988, 58-61.
27. Judith R. Johnson, "Uncle Sam Wanted Them Too! Women Aircraft Workers in Wichita During World War II," *Kansas History*, March 1994, 41.
28. Price, *Wichita's Legacy of Flight*, 65.
29. *Ibid.*, 65-67.
30. Sloan, 62-63.
31. "A Flight Through Time," Kansas Aviation Museum, accessed October 7, 2014, <https://www.kansasaviationmuseum.org/timeline.php>.
32. Sloan, 57-58.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 62-63.
35. Price, *Wichita's Legacy of Flight*, 65.
36. Sloan, 57-58.
37. *Ibid.*, 68-69.
38. "Populations of Cities in Kansas," Accessed November 12, 2014, <http://www.ipsr.ku.edu/ksdata/ksah/population/2pop33.pdf>.
39. Price, *Wichita's Legacy of Flight*, 62.

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