

Winter 2019 Newsletter

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On the Home Front During WWII

By John Stratton

It is well known that Ankeny, Iowa became the locale of the Des Moines Ordnance Plant during World War II. The production capabilities of the plant and the impact it had on Ankeny are reasonably well known. But, how and why was the expanse of land south and west of Ankeny selected to be the home of the DMOP?

Chapter 2: Lobbying and Selection

Ankeny, Iowa, prior to the construction of the Des Moines Ordnance Plant was much like any Midwestern small town in 1940. With a population of 779 people it was small in comparison to its larger neighbor to the south, Des Moines, which had a population in 1940 of 159,819. But, as was the case of most communities of the 1940s, it remained reasonably self-sufficient for its citizens' needs. It contained a small business district primarily located along Third Street. The community had been closely associated to the coal mining ventures which had been prevalent in the nearby small towns of Oralabor, Carney, and Enterprise, but they had slowly been shuttered. By the 1930s many of the mining families remained, but they had to pursue other jobs to earn a living. The community had been impacted by the Great Depression, but was able to survive its severity and look toward an improved economic future.

Most of the land surrounding Ankeny had been used for farming operations, which was true of the lands soon to be purchased by the government for the Des Moines Ordnance Plant (DMOP). The ownership of the land generally reflected a land use of family farming. Most of the land located southwest of Ankeny was broken into tracts of small family farms, but by the mid 1930s one large corporate farm owned by the F.W. Fitch Company had substantial landholding of at least 558 acres, where it operated a newly erected state-of-the-art dairy facility. Another sign of progress for the community was also appearing by 1940 with the platting of North Hope Subdivision along U.S. Highway 69 at the south end of Ankeny.

The local newspaper, *The Ankeny Times*, offered the traditional subject matter expected in a small Iowa community. Articles generally revolved around the citizens and groups that called Ankeny home. Headlines announced the results of local elections, meetings to be held such as the Ankeny PTA and Ladies Aid. School-related articles predominated a great deal of the space. Articles reminded parents and students that school would soon begin, reported the results of recent sporting events, and explained the Vocational Agriculture Project that was currently underway. Marriages, obituaries, and visitors to the community were front page news along with the announcement that a report on "Farm Facts" would be offered by WOI Radio. Advertisements shared with the community what could be purchased at Logli Grocery Store, Fontana Bakery and Grocery, Ankeny Produce Company, Ankeny Feed and Coal, Kochheiser Shell Station and the specials found at local cafes. Industries for the community were small and generally oriented to the agricultural sector.

Chapter 2: Lobbying and Selection

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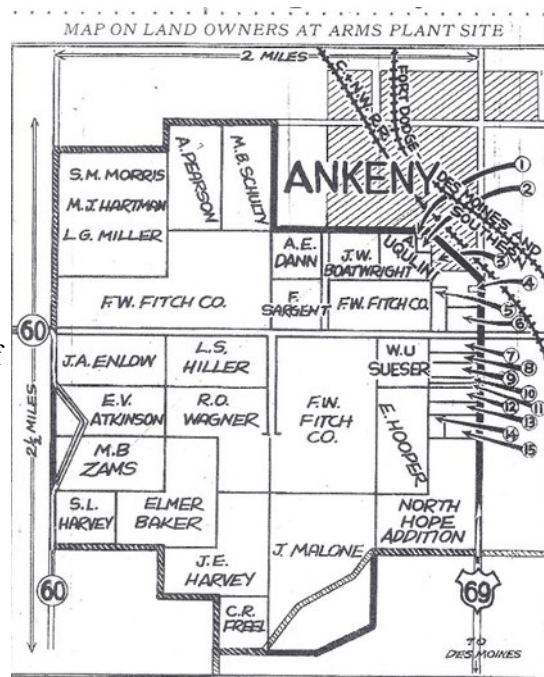
While the war in Europe had begun in September 1939, it had little impact upon the daily activities of Ankeny's residents during 1939 and 1940 as they continued the slow climb out of the Great Depression and toward future prosperity. School children, who numbered 334 in 1939-1940 and 317 in 1940-1941 school years, attended either the high school or the elementary school. There were 17 teachers for the entire school system. According to the publication, *Ankeny: The First One Hundred Years*, three "early" churches were found in town, the Church of the Brethren, the First United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ.

As Ankeny was located in the isolationist Midwest, it was largely unconcerned when European affairs attracted national attention, specifically the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 or Great Britain and France's consequent declaration of war on Germany on September 3. Headlines in the *Des Moines Register* and *Des Moines Tribune* announced these events to the citizens of Iowa, but nothing was to be found in the *Ankeny Times*. Roosevelt's September 3, 1939 Fireside Chat to the nation clearly expressed that the United States would remain neutral. "Let no man or woman thoughtlessly or falsely talk of America sending its armies to European fields. At this moment there is being prepared a proclamation of American neutrality... This nation will remain a neutral nation." Thus, by the spring of 1940 the war was far from the center of attention of the citizens of Ankeny. Still it was brought into their daily lives through newspaper articles about distant European events and the actions of President Roosevelt, as he prepared the country's national defense and offered aid to Great Britain.

Roosevelt stated to the nation, "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again; your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars", but, it had become apparent with the enactment in August 1940 of the Selective Service Act and with the call for the National Guard to active service that the United States was pushing its defense program forward. Although the United States was not technically at war, there was a desperate need to mobilize not only the military, but also business and industry, the agricultural sector, and the American citizens on the home front. "Roosevelt insisted on 'speed and speed now', but it took time for the economy to gear up, as the country's difficulties were immense." Placing the country on "war footing" for its own defense and offering economic and industrial support to Great Britain created significant issues to overcome.

It quickly became apparent in late 1939 and into 1940 that the Allies were desperately in need of arms and munitions to combat the Axis threat. Even though the United States took a neutral position in the European conflict, "public opinion, though solidly opposed to entering the war, was not exactly neutral. Polls showed that eighty percent wanted the Allies to win, and more than half favored giving aid to France and Britain so long as doing so presented little risk." With that knowledge the President in November 1939 moved Congress to repeal the Neutrality Acts of the 1930s, which placed an embargo on the sale of arms and ammunition to belligerent countries. Purchases now had to be on a "cash and carry" basis, but, as the United States military was in the beginning stages of expansion to meet its own needs it would be difficult to spare much. It was clear that the production facilities present during this time period would not be able to meet the increasing demands necessary for both the United States and those countries opposing German aggression.

A letter from Winston Churchill spurred Roosevelt to look at helping the British cause in a different light and create a system that would not require the "cash and carry". "The president's program changed to the unconventional idea that the United States could send Britain weapons and supplies without charge and then, after the war, be repaid not in dollars but "in kind". On December 29, 1940, President Roosevelt delivered the Fireside Chat commonly known as the "Arsenal of Democracy" speech. "Roosevelt summoned the American people to become 'the great arsenal of democracy' by showing 'the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war. This job cannot be done merely by superimposing on the existing productive facilities the added requirements for defense. Americans must discard the notion of business as usual.'" "An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States," more commonly known as the Lend-Lease Act, was passed by Congress in March 1941.



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It was through the appropriations of “An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States” that the Des Moines Ordnance Plant was established.

By mid-1940, the events at the national and international level were beginning to appear in the local news. The Des Moines newspapers continued to report on the state of affairs regarding the war in Europe and actions taken by the United States government, and even the *Ankeny Times* could not ignore what was occurring any longer. A picture caption announced to the residents that “The biggest peacetime military maneuver involving National Guard and regular troops occurred to train for Blitzkrieg Warfare.” Political cartoons proclaimed the reality that industries would need to retool for military production, and specifically mentioned the unpreparedness of the United States to meet the needs of national defense. By December, the reality of economic mobilization was becoming apparent as the paper announced that 5,000 industrial leaders met in New York in regards to the “Total Preparedness for America’s Future.” So, even though located far from the national stage news of defense preparation, aid to the Allies, and economic mobilization had reached the central Iowa area.

In May of 1940, a headline appeared in the *Des Moines Register* stating, “Seek to Bring Some Defense Work to Des Moines.” It then became clear that Iowa would not be left out of the economic mobilization occurring. Representatives of the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Des Moines Committee went to Washington, D.C. to lay the groundwork for local participation in the administration’s expanded national defense program. None of the projects being pushed at that time involved an ordnance production plant, but inroads had to be made at the national level quickly to allow the Des Moines area to compete with other communities nationwide. The group’s efforts were supported by the President’s announcement that all new facilities should be situated in the valley between the Alleghenies and the Rocky Mountains. Des Moines and its surrounding area were able to meet that stipulation.

Iowa was not alone in its attempt to attract national attention to the possibility of locating defense industries to the Midwest and Great Plains states. In a meeting held in Des Moines, representatives from seven neighboring states quickly noted that “Agricultural production was stressed as a vital military consideration,” but also promoted the idea that defense industries, especially those that could be of use in peacetime, be looked at to make sure that the industries were fitted to the localities in which they would operate. The events of World War II also were viewed with the possibility that the federal government would increase the financial support of this region with future construction, jobs and agricultural commodities. Thus, the lobbying processes that were undertaken by the Midwestern states and communities helped to bring it into the forefront of federal government activities regarding new plant placements. Iowa, and in this case specifically Des Moines and the surrounding area, found there was the opportunity to advance its own cause and take advantage of the defense buildup.

Iowa and many of its communities had already received defense projects. But, the factory work in the Des Moines area and throughout the state was generally much smaller in scale than many defense plants found elsewhere. These Iowa companies were still hoping to operate at full capacity with their existing facilities or expanding and installing new equipment to rush completion of important defense contract. Most anything imaginable for defense work could be found; machine-tooled parts for machine guns, helmet linings, gasoline cans, coveralls for navy personnel, and other manufacturing or agricultural commodities.

The largest new addition to the state was found near Burlington, Iowa, where a new shell-loading plant was being constructed beginning in January 1941 with dedication to take place in July. The Iowa Ordnance Plant at Burlington was constructed and placed into service prior to the one to be located in Ankeny. Therefore, it was visited frequently to observe the problems and subsequent solutions that would also be faced in the DMOP. By January 1941, defense contracts in Iowa, excluding the Iowa Ordnance Plant, had totaled \$30, 432,311. In May the *Des Moines Register* announced, “Des Moines Plants Busy Rushing Army Orders: A Prosperous Year is Predicted.” By this time nearly two million dollars in defense contracts had been signed, which had led to a seven-million-dollar boom in commercial and homebuilding. This meant that Des Moines experienced one of its most prosperous years in history. But, yet, this was without the large-scale new construction desired, the kind that accompanied aircraft manufacturing or ordnance facilities that were sprouting up throughout the country and Midwest.

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Finally, on May 24, the War Department gave its approval for the location of a small arms ammunition plant in Des Moines and had sent its recommendation to the Office of Production Management (OPM). One of the OPM's primary functions "was to coordinate and rationalize purchase of defense equipment and supplies by the Army, Army Air Corps, and Navy. Maritime Commission, and other agencies," and as the plant being planned was to be under the army's control, it was necessary to achieve OPM approval. It was noted that an independent manufacturer would operate the plant, but the recipient of the contract was not announced. It was known that this new plant was to be modeled after a plant constructed in St. Louis, Missouri, but the actual cost, location, contractor to build the plant, and numbers of employees were yet to be determined. It had also been announced that an initial order worth \$87,279,790 to manufacture .30-caliber cartridges for rifles and machine guns and .50-caliber cartridges for machine guns had been approved. It was projected that between 10,000 and 12,000 persons were eventually to be employed and perhaps half of that number would be women. So, the lobbying efforts of the Des Moines groups in conjunction with that of Senator Herring were making a defense plant near Des Moines a reality.

The speed at which decisions were made during this World War II defense mobilization era is astonishing when compared to normal levels of bureaucratic red tape often encountered in governmental operation. By June 25, two of the issues that had previously been unidentified to the general public were announced. The plant was to be located north of the city and under the operation of the United Rubber Company. The decision had also been made that four Iowa contractors would build the facility. On July 2, 1941, the long-awaited decision of the actual location was made. "The site of the Des Moines ammunition plant authorized by the government will be eight miles north of the center of the city," Senator Clyde L. Herring announced. "The plant will be south of Ankeny near Highway 69 and adjacent to the North Western railway." With this site selection, Ankeny, Iowa, was thrust into World War II.

A map of the City of Des Moines, Iowa, showing the locations of various schools. The map includes major roads like Highway 69 and Highway 60, and landmarks like the Des Moines River and the Raccoon River. Schools are marked with letters A through J. A large area in the center is shaded black, representing the downtown area. A hatched area is labeled 'Chicago'. Other labels include 'ANKENY', 'ORAL LABOR', 'CARNEY', 'SAYLORVILLE', 'MARQUISVILLE', and 'SAYLOR STA.'



Des Moines Ordnance Plant

**ON THE HOME FRONT DURING
World War II**

Sunday, March 1, at 1:00 p.m.

Ankeny Area Historical Society
301 SW Third Street
515-965-5795

John Stratton presents a program on the Des Moines Ordnance Plant starting back in early 1940 before the United States entered World War II joining the allied forces to defeat Germany, Japan and Italy. Don't miss the chance to learn more about Ankeny's amazing history!



Memorials

Memorial monies were donated to Ankeny Area Historical Society in memory of the following individuals:

Bev Gander Pritchard
Evelyn Hanke

Terry McAnally
Harold Linden

Loren Sampson

Donations

Kari Bethel
Marilyn Dennler
Marie Ballard
Eugene & Beverly Samuelson
Dee Reynolds
Carmine & Steve Boal
Katie Kendall

Bobbi Bentz
Karla Kasper
Tom & Joan Quinlin
Jane Warren
Lee & Cindy Lundstrom
Rick & Mary Hermann
Julia Shay

Evening Stars Quilters
Gurnsey Electric
Dennis & Sue Albaugh
Joann Burgess
Marilyn Neville
Tom & Joan Quinlin
Bonnie Ballard

Raise the Roof Donations

Thank you to all who have donated! We are getting closer to our goal! We should have a new house roof in the Spring/Summer of 2020!

Larry & Karla Wright
John Deere
Egidio & Rena Vanni

Tim Garner
MidAmerican Energy
Kip Lilly

AHS Class of 1967
Doug & Ellen Smith

Thank you so much for your memorials and donations!

New Members—Welcome!

Dick & Sue Rasmussen
Memorial Services of Iowa
Ankeny Animal Health Clinic
Eye Care Associates
Ballard Dental Associates
Wig & Pen Pizza Pub

Ken Nelson, State Farm Ins.
Luke Carlson Physical Therapy
Woody's Auto Repair
Nading Law Firm
Mark Gray Law

Iowa Financial Services
Halbrook Excavating
Gurnsey Electric
Northwest Bank
Zane & Janan Smith

***Thank you so much for your yearly membership!
Without your yearly donation we wouldn't
Be able to keep our doors open
For future generations to enjoy and learn
About Ankeny's Amazing History!***

AAHS Fall Festivities—Pumpkins...Pumpkins and Halloween Spooktacular and Chili Cookoff



AAHS Vintage Christmas and Cookie Walk



Check out our website! And follow us on Facebook!

Check out our webpage at Ankenyhistorical.org You can now pay for your membership online if you wish. As a member, you can now view our newsletters, upcoming events, flyers and pictures of Ankeny through the years.

Our monthly “Ankeny Through the Decades” feature is now in its fifth year! Members of the society review articles from Ankeny’s former newspapers: The Ankeny Times, Ankeny Today, and the Ankeny Press Citizen.

Dates for 2020

***Visit our Open Houses the
first Sunday of each month during the year
from 2:00pm—4:00pm!***

***January/February—Vintage Valentines on Display in
House Museum***

January 28—7:00 pm—Monthly Meeting

February 25—7:00pm—Monthly Meeting

***March 1 Open House—1:00pm—On the Home Front
During WWII—Program by John Stratton***

March 24—7:00pm—Monthly Meeting

April 7—Open House—New Champions Sports Exhibit

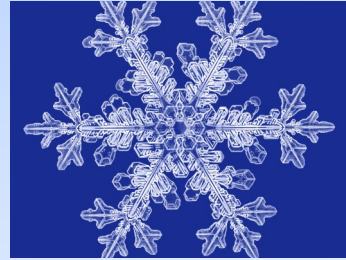
April 28—7:00pm—Monthly Meeting

May 26—7:00pm—Monthly Meeting

***Check out our website for upcoming
dates and programs @
ankenynhistorical.org and follow us
On Facebook!***

Mission:

***The Ankeny Area Historical Society's mission is to
inspire in our community a sense of meaning and
belonging by sharing the history and culture of the
Ankeny area.***



***Our House Museum is Open
Year Round on Tuesdays and Thursdays
9:00am-3:00pm!***