

A Berkshire Housewife's Chronicle

by Bertha E. Prew

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The impact of World War II on daily life in the Berkshires was slow and gradual. Perhaps the most memorable immediate effect to many of us survivors of the Great Depression and its close-following successor, the Recession of 1938, was that GE rehired workers.

When the Recession hit, my husband [Philip E. Prew] was laid off at GE and we retreated to Middlefield. There we rented an old farmhouse a mile or two from the dairy farm run by my in-laws. It was a nice house with a large kitchen dominated by a huge blue-enameled wood range but there was no electricity to activate the wringer washer I would have liked to use, with an active two-year-old and a new baby to care for. My husband kept us going by working at odd jobs while I tended infants and canned vegetables from the garden.

In mid-1939, my husband was again one of GE's 4,500 workers and we recklessly traded in the black 1930 Model A Ford for a spiffy 1935 gray one with a trunk, no less. In October of 1939 we plunged again, this time buying a house in Hinsdale, a bargain at \$1,900, with wide floor boards, a pantry and large rooms. We bought it with an HOLC loan and a lot of courage, as every room had plaster missing from walls and ceiling. Paint peeled everywhere. The cellar stairs had been used as kindling to start the old monster of a coal furnace squatting in the dark stone-walled cellar. So, while Poland was falling and Britain was desperately trying to hang on, we were scrapping and painting and papering, all the time under a cloud of anxiety: We didn't know then that bombs would not fall on Massachusetts.

1940 turned out to be a difficult year. The war in Europe went badly with Dunkirk in May and the fall of Paris in June. In my own life there was the sudden death of my husband in August and the birth of my daughter in September. Then, too, the times were bewildering. At the same time that the mass October 16th registration of twenty-one to twenty-five year olds was being held, GE was organizing a four-section train of 49 cars to take 4,000 employees and their families, my parents among them, to New York City for the wind up of the World's Fair. There, President Charles Wilson of GE took the occasion to announce GE's plans for a \$1,500,000 plastics plant to be built on Plastics Avenue in Pittsfield.

This news was heartening to me, as I knew that sooner or later I must get a job. It indicated returning economic health, as did the loyal construction trade's completion of 119 single houses. Also, the Wyandotte Mill in Pittsfield had been awarded a government contract for 250,000 blankets. The Pittsfield Chamber of Commerce hailed the year's employment figures as the highest since 1917.

Still, there seemed to be no pressure building to hire women for factory work in Pittsfield, no matter how Rosie the Riveter flourished in the big California aircraft factories. In Berkshire County, the emphasis, for women, was still on aid for Great Britain. Country women knit 2,500 sweaters and made up 2,000 kit bags to be shipped out by the Red Cross under the direction of Mrs. Hugh Roney and Mrs. Daniel Beers. The committee for the Defense of British Homes collected 14 steel helmets, 6 revolvers, 6 rifles, 2 shotguns and 4 pairs of binoculars, all of which were displayed for a few days in the window of Kelsey's Market on North Street before being sent off to London.

1941 started out with a cold snowy January. Dedicated skiers continued to race the awesome Thunderbolt Trail on Mount Greylock. Ski trains full of New Yorkers and, sometimes celebrities like Gloria Swanson kept the dual rope tow at Bouquet's humming. The war was out there somewhere, a series of disasters we tried to follow on large wall maps put out by United Press, available at *The Eagle* for fifteen cents. As boundaries of countries and places names changed, we listened to the news on the radio and gave send-off parties for departing servicemen but we also laughed at "Boots and Her Buddies" on the comic page and started our gardens and sent the children off to school as always.

Just a few days before Pearl Harbor, a group of Hinsdale women, my sister-in-law among them, became the first county women to get instruction as a unit of the newly formed Women's Defense Motor Corps. This was just one link in a large Civil Defense network being put together all over the country. When the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor, suddenly all kinds of plans solidified. Rescue teams, repair groups, ham radio operator groups and Red Cross classes were organized. Seven thousand county air raid wardens had ID photos taken. The Navy Recruiting Office announced that it would stay open 24 hours a day.

In the attack on Pearl Harbor, two Pittsfield men were killed of the 75 or more Berkshire County men stationed there. The day after Pearl Harbor, *The Berkshire Evening Eagle* polled pedestrians on North Street to get local reaction to the attack. The response was overwhelmingly in favor of an all-out war against the Japanese. For many, That Day marked the start of World War II.

We all knew about Britain's food rationing. Now, our own rationing loomed as a certainty. Shoes and meat were becoming scarce. But it was April of 1942 before the government was ready to institute rationing. The procedure for registration was outlined several times in *The Eagle*. All around the county, schools were designated as the place of registration, with teachers pressed into service as registrars. On April 23rd one member of a family, with signed statement of supplies on hand,

registered for all and got a book for each. Coffee stamps were removed from books of members under 15. Books of departing servicemen had to be returned and O.P.A. ceiling prices went into effect.

The pinch was on. We learned to be aware of the expiration dates of stamps and not to let eager grocery clerks be helpful and remove them for us. The rationing board became calloused over stories of stamps removed by mistake, or lost, or stolen.

I don't recall instances of long lines at filling stations for gasoline. Rationing made drivers take restrictions seriously. "Necessary travel" did not include eating out at restaurants, whether you drove or called a cab. Unless your job required extra driving, you held an "A" gasoline ration book. Holders of more generous "B" and "C" books dared not be caught at sporting events lest they lose their ration books 'for the duration.' Berkshire rush hour found the streets clogged with buses. Staggered shift times prolonged rush hour at both ends of the day. People relied on the frequent trains. Gasoline coupons were saved for the big events like my brother's graduation from Union College in Schenectady in May of 1942. It had been many months since I had been that distance in a car.

At the time of Pearl Harbor, 800 men from Pittsfield were in the armed forces. The drain of men from the local work force was becoming apparent, with over 3,500 gone by the end of 1942. Pittsfield school children took home 2,000 questionnaires, and about as many Pittsfield women indicated they would be interested in war work.

The War Manpower Commission sent out 40,000 cards to Berkshire County women in February, with 4,000 replies, mine among them. *The Eagle* carried stories and pictures of classes for welders and machine operators, the members largely female, the graduates destined mostly for GE. I didn't sign up but I did move us to Pittsfield.

In February of 1943, the second wave of food rationing began. Holders of Book #1 got Book #2. This time, 49,500 books were issued in Pittsfield, down considerably from the 53,000 issued for Book #1, explainable by the departure of service men and women.

Now, in addition to our other stamps and coupons we had red stamps for meat, green, brown and blue stamps for canned fruits and vegetables, juices, baby food and dried fruits, included in the meat "point" allowance were cheese, butter, margarine and cooking fats. Two "red points" per pound could be earned by turning in used meat drippings and other fats. Quite often, however, we soon found, the only "meats" to be had were hot dogs and cold cuts, the ceiling prices on beef and pork having discouraged farmers from producing supplies large enough to feed both the armed forces and civilians. Meat drippings were scarce, too.

Every two weeks *The Eagle* recapped the rationing situation, with point allowances, stamp values, expiration dates and ceiling prices. The big markets like Kelsey's and The Auditorium ran ads

which included information like: “Sugar stamp # 11 good for 3 lbs. until 3/15.” I patronized a neighborhood grocer who delivered or sent along my telephoned order. Mr. Storie would volunteer to “let me have” some sugars or other scarce item when we had it, if I had the necessary stamps. This was helpful to me as I began to work six days a week at GE.

When I was hired, I was a typical housewife-turned-warworker. I had no work experience. I had no idea what “Load Ratio” (the department name) meant or what I would be expected to do. I’d been fingerprinted, presumably checked for subversive tendencies, issued an ID badge and hired, along with dozens of other green housewives of all ages and backgrounds. My group was trained to make “cables.” This involved placing gray, cloth-covered wires on a large varnished pine table, hooking the wires’ terminal circlets to pegs in a precise pattern, then “lacing” the whole together with stout waxed cord. Wearing gloves, we stood in one spot all day, making cables for the Manhattan Project, a rigidly inspected government undertaking of top priority, and, we learned after the war, ultimately responsible for the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I still feel that I earned my \$36.00 a week.

Any single working mother today can empathize with my circumstances. Convenience foods scarcely existed. Certainly frozen foods were in their infancy before the war, with very few households taking advantage of freezer lockers, highly advertised as they were. A typical month’s supply of canned goods for four, with point values:

Soup / two cans	20 points
Baked beans / one can	10
Peas / one can	16
Corn / one can	14
Green beans / one can	14
Tomato juice / two cans	28
Peaches / one can	14
Pears / one can	14
Cherries / one can	14
Prunes / 2 lbs.	40
Catsup / 14 oz.	8

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Devising meals that children were likely to eat was a challenge. We ate lots of soups and puddings and garden produce.

Another complication to life was the air raid drills. Chief Air Raid Warden Charles Hodecker spelled out the rules: One long blast meant that cars could proceed on low beams and pedestrians could continue to move; blackout of buildings was to be started immediately. (Wardens pounded on doors and windows yelling “blackout!”) Short, quick blasts meant that the street lights would go off. Cars must stop, lights off; pedestrians must take cover. All clear would be indicated by turning on street lights.

These drills usually caught me in the middle of putting the children down for the night. Exhausted from a day’s work, many chores yet to be done, I was in no mood to sit in the dark, the children half ready for their bedtime story. I had no blackout curtains and no time to make any.

Clothes were another problem. Three pairs of shoes a year is not an unreasonable allowance for adults but children, a case of the impossible, had it not been for hand-me-downs. In summer, and until it got too cold, women painted their legs with “liquid stockings” because the shiny awful-looking rayon hose wore poorly and were too expensive. Hesitantly, some of us began to wear slacks – to work, that is – and then only if we weren’t expecting to make any stops. Slacks for women were just not accepted in Pittsfield – women who wore them were considered more than a little tough. But some of the women who waited a long time for a bus in the sub-zero weather found themselves with bleeding legs needing treatment at the GE infirmary. Grudgingly, slacks were in.

Berkshire Street Railway cut its bus schedule for non-rush hours because of the problems of aging buses, worn tires, and manpower shortages. Chicken became plentiful, and it required no red meat points. Most December activities, like *The Eagle’s* Santa Toy Fund, went on as usual, somehow. The Orpheus Choir pleaded for male voices, but with no intention of dropping its annual Christmas production. The Elks managed to put on their minstrel show and the London String Quartet arrived and performed a Beethoven concert just before Christmas. The tinsel may have been dull war stuff and the baubles not quite shiny, but the holiday celebrations were held, perhaps more prayerfully than in past years.

The Berkshires, on Eastern War Time, rang in the New Year of 1944 an hour earlier than states that stayed on Standard Time. Points came off bacon, canned juices and canned vegetables. In the spring, some of us working on the Manhattan Project were sent home for lack of materials or orders. I needed the work but secretly welcomed the chance to go at some badly needed house cleaning. There were rumors that the Germans were being softened up and grumbings about the possibility that the war’s end might put an end to overtime.

Then, on June 6th we were overwhelmed by the scope of D-Day and proud that a Pittsfield paratrooper, Private Francis A. Rocca, was the second man to land on French soil. In Pittsfield, prayer services were held continuously in the downtown churches from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. Quietly, with no air of jubilation, workers dropped in during their lunch hours. It was a time to hold your breath – this could be the beginning of the end of the European war or a terrible disaster. Chief Hodecker had recently warned that no further air raid practice drills would be held. The next alert would signal a real air raid. Seventy men were scheduled to leave for the service that day. Over the next week or two, the extent of the damage to the Germans became apparent, along with sad news of more Berkshire casualties.

Nevertheless, it was a real morale booster when the news came on August 25th that Paris had been liberated. It did seem that the war in Europe was winding down. Smith Paper Company in Lee announced its intention to give everyone the day off with all whistles blowing when the end came for the Germans. Yet the war effort went on. *Eagle* newsboys won prizes for selling the most ten-cent war stamps in the state. Drivers, especially those from out of state, were stopped and made to show their gas ration books. In September, Berkshire County schoolchildren gathered 4,700 bushels of milkweed pods. After drying, they were sent to a life preserver manufacturer in Amherst. Populous Pittsfield gathered the most, but little Sheffield came in second.

In this climate of a war's waning months, even though we were still salvaging paper, tin, cans, and toothpaste tubes, some consumer goods like refrigerators were coming back on the market. Yet peas, asparagus and tomatoes went back on points – we never really knew why. Our county ham radio operators had been trying to form a solid network that would keep us in communication with the East Coast, if invaded. Hampered as they had been by the mountains around, there was cause for celebration when, in March of 1945, their all-out effort succeeded in contacting Boston. If this seems like a puny effort in this age of satellites, it was still a monument to dedication and persistence which marked most of the efforts on the home front.

I recall vividly the sinking feeling I had at the news of Roosevelt's death. He'd been the only president many of us knew as adults. (And who in the world was Harry S. Truman, anyway?) Some people I knew professed a deep distrust and hatred for F.D.R. – he'd "given away" the country to the poor, the allies – but most of us had an abiding respect for his abilities and efforts in pulling us out of a crushing depression and starving off our entry into the war until we could prepare. Now we had the feeling that a bulwark was gone, that our new president would flounder at his formidable assignment.

Soon afterward, one bright May day as I walked up South Street. The air was filled with the sound of church bells and sirens. Factory whistles began to blow helped along by the horns of motorists. People poured out of stores and other buildings while the air raid siren blew continuously, starting at 9:50. Finally Mayor James Fallon begged that it be silenced at 10:30. Some stores, England Brothers among the first, and some offices closed for the day. Others waited for the official proclamation from President Truman. The bells of the First Congregational Church on Park Square kept ringing as workers finally filed back into City Hall next door. Chimes at the First Baptist Church on South Street played "America," scarcely recognizable in the general cacophony. Schools officially remained in session but held assemblies to mark to occasion. (There were a remarkable number of very young people milling around North Street, however.) When The Berkshire Evening Eagle came out we learned that the next day would be officially declared *VE Day*.

When the excitement cooled, we knew that nothing had really changed here at home. We still had what was now referred to as "the second half" of the war to get through. We had no way of knowing how soon we would learn of the twin horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There seemed not to be many of us then who were horrified. Those of us who were shocked and ashamed of this massacre of civilians soon learned not to express those feelings indiscriminately. There was a savage

wave of feeling against “Jap-lovers” it was unwise to provoke. The avowed intention of the Japanese to surrender “proved” that our course had been right, after all.

Except for the fact that gasoline rationing ended, there was little to mark the end of the war at home, beyond the whistle-blowing and bell-ringing. The men didn’t come home right away. Some food rationing stayed in effect along with price ceilings. There was little to buy and that of indifferent quality. Slowed by unpredictable and inevitable spot shortages of raw materials, production of civilian goods was fitful. The pressure built by the demand for goods in the face of price ceilings was too much. By the start of 1946, there were 616,000 Americans on strike, with thousands more to follow.

Here, the Berkshire Street Railway workers went on strike for twelve days in January. At GE, the workers waited to see how the steelworkers’ wage talks went before striking on January 15th. The strike lasted two months, but many workers waited longer than that to be recalled. But gradually strikes and shortages waned. Ice cream and nylons came back. We could get cinnamon and nutmeg again, although the old car had to go a while longer. By the time sugar rationing ended in June of 1947, the war had already receded into the shadows.

Bertha E. Prew, who resides in Pittsfield, is a member of the Berkshire County Historical Society.

[note: Bertha E. Llewellyn Prew was born in Pittsfield in 1917, and died on February 21, 2000. Mrs. Prew worked in computer services at Berkshire Life until retiring in 1979. She never remarried.]