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The Home Fronts of Iowa, 1939–1945

Terrence J. Lindell

Wartburg College

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The Home Fronts of Iowa, 1939–1945, by Lisa L. Ossian. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009. xv, 242 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

Reviewer Terrence J. Lindell is professor of history at Wartburg College. He has investigated home-front activity during World War II in northeast Iowa.

Lisa Ossian, codirector of the Iowa Studies Center and history professor at Des Moines Area Community College, makes a major contribution to Iowa history with this study of the state's World War II home-front experience. Although a number of writers have sought in recent years to explore aspects of Iowa's home front, this work — a revision of Ossian's 1999 dissertation at Iowa State University — is the first to look at the experience as a whole.

In her introduction, Ossian explores what Iowans thought of the growing likelihood that the United States would be drawn into World War II, the beginnings of defense preparedness, and the reaction to Pearl Harbor. In subsequent chapters she examines four different "home fronts" in Iowa: agricultural production, war industries, "the community front," and "the kitchen front." Throughout, she ponders the question: "How did Iowans so quickly transform their relatively isolationist perspective regarding involvement in this threatening world conflict into an overwhelmingly enthusiastic attitude, which they sustained throughout the war effort?" (x). An ancillary question has to do with why Americans recall this conflict as "the good war."

Themes in the "farm front" chapter include the increasing mechanization of Iowa agriculture as farmers managed, despite shortages of traditional labor and hesitance about importing workers, to boost production, though at the cost of moving toward industrial-scale farming and practices that would deplete the soil. For the "production front" chapter, Ossian examines Iowa's contributions to war production, including the state's two ordnance plants, the manufacturers that received Army-Navy "E" pennants for excellence in production, the roles of women and African Americans in defense employment, and Iowa State University's role in developing the atomic bomb.

In her treatment of the "community front," Ossian describes how Iowans responded to bond drives and calls for scrap materials. This chapter also looks at Iowa's contribution to the nation's armed forces, with particular treatment of the ill-fated Sullivan brothers of Waterloo and Red Oak's losses when its National Guard company saw action in North Africa. The chapter on the "kitchen front" examines women's roles in the household during wartime, which included feeding their families nutritious and pleasing meals under the restrictions of rationing, preserving the bountiful produce of Victory Gardens, and salvaging

materials such as waste fat needed for the war effort — all with little help from males who saw household chores as women's work. Women in their role as homemakers, presiding over an abundance of home-cooked food, including — perhaps especially — pie, were a powerful and comforting image for American troops far from home.

Iowans embraced the challenges set before them because they saw themselves as soldiers on a home front with duties as necessary and vital as those in uniform on the war front, and so “this war became the people's war. Because of their participation, the war seemed good. It had to, because everyone had battled in it and sacrificed for it” (160).

Ossian's extensive notes and bibliography reflect wide and deep reading in the relevant literature. Her analysis is well grounded in the work of other historians of the home front. Her use of diverse and often-overlooked sources — as wide ranging as high school yearbooks, *Iowa Veterinarian*, MacKinlay Kantor's fiction, and *Kitchen Klatter* — enriches her narrative. The impressive bibliography, divided into works published during the war and those published after the conflict, does not show all of her work in archives, public library files, and newspapers. (Her work in newspapers is stronger for central and southwestern Iowa than for the rest of the state.)

The treatment of women's roles in the wartime home is particularly insightful, though Ossian makes a number of minor and uncharacteristic errors regarding rationing. The first ration book issued by the Office of Price Administration was named War Ration Book One, not “Sugar War Ration Book,” though initially sugar was the only food item it regulated (132). Stamps in Book Two were not glue-backed, though the grocers who had to account for them may well have wished they were. Butter was rationed (and in the spring of 1943 cost as many ration points per pound as porterhouse steak).

Important topics of the Iowa home front still need further attention, including communities' scramble to attract war spending, educational institutions' efforts to attract training programs, the impact on Iowa's industries that processed agricultural products, the influence of a military facility such as the Sioux City Army Air Base on the surrounding communities, and the geographic mobility that carried Iowans to other parts of the nation. However, *The Home Fronts of Iowa* provides a superb starting point for future scholars.