

The **M**aking of **M**ilwaukee Stories

Historical Time Period : 1929-1945

Hard Times in Milwaukee



World War II

VJ Day on Wisconsin Avenue

Depression Shacks for Homeless in Lincoln Park

Connecting to “The Making of Milwaukee”


Video Chapters: #14 - Hard Times and War Times

Curriculum Chapter: Gr. 5-12 - Hard Times and War Time

This story is historical fiction. The setting and events are real but the characters' names have been fictionalized. Pictures available in the Image Library @ www.themakingofmilwaukee.com

Hard Times in Milwaukee: The Great Depression and World War II

On June 20, 1922, Henry stepped off the train in downtown Milwaukee. Henry was 18 and had lived his whole life in a small Wisconsin town called Mayville. But now he had come to live and work in a big city. Milwaukee was a busy, exciting place and Henry began to explore his new home. Within a few months, he found a job at the Chain Belt Company and learned to be a welder, someone who joins two pieces of metal together by heating them. Making metal chains was a perfect job for Henry because he grew up on a farm and loved working with his hands.



*Milwaukee in the
Great Depression
1930's*

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making metal chains was a perfect job for Henry because he grew up on a farm and loved working with his hands. Henry worked many long hours at his job. At first Henry did not have enough money to buy a car, so on weekends he rode the streetcars and went downtown to see the movies. At the time, there were many exciting movie houses in Milwaukee like the Empire, Modjeska, Pearl, Princess, Butterfly, Strand, and Juneau. He was also able to buy a nice radio so he could listen to his favorite music and programs. Henry thought he was a terrible dancer but one weekend he went to the Eagles Club, a new club on Wisconsin Avenue, and gave dancing a try. There he met a young woman named Betty Hanson. Henry and Betty had so much fun dancing together that they began to meet every Saturday night. Like many other young people in the 1920's, they both loved dancing. Soon they could do all the newest dances like the Charleston, Jitterbug, Lindy Hop, Shimmy and Tango. One year later, on August 28, 1926, Henry and Betty got married.

At first, Henry and Betty lived in an apartment but they saved money and soon built a new home in Milwaukee's Sherman Park neighborhood. It was a very popular style of home called a bungalow. Life for the Schneider's was great. They were able to buy a new car, a Ford. Their first child was born in 1929 and they felt they were living the American Dream in a prosperous city.

Then, the unthinkable happened. In 1929, an economic disaster called the Great Depression hit the country. Many people in the United States lost their jobs. Henry kept working until 1931 when he joined the millions of people without jobs. Suddenly, times were very hard for people. They could not afford to buy food, pay for their houses, or go to movies and dance halls. Henry and Betty, like other families, could not make their house payments. So they had to sell the bungalow they loved and move into a very small upstairs apartment. Some of their friends even had to move into a single room with their parents or other family members. Henry knew of others who became homeless during the Great Depression. Many homeless people built small shanties or shacks in Milwaukee's Estabrook Park. They used any scraps of lumber, bricks, cardboard, canvas, tin or tarpaper they could find to build their shanties. These communities of homeless people were built all across America. They were called "Hooverilles" because people blamed the Great Depression on the President of the United States, Herbert Hoover.

Henry and Betty managed to stay in their small apartment and paid \$25 a month for their rent. Henry was unemployed for four long years. There were no jobs to be found and the money they had saved dwindled quickly. He didn't know what he was going to do to support his family. Henry finally had to ask the landlord to lower their rent to \$18 a month until he found work. His landlord lowered the rent because he understood that Henry was an honest, hard worker who simply could not find work. Henry was very grateful because he knew that his landlord was also out of work and needed money to support his own family.

Finally the United States government and the new president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt created a program that put some people back on track. It was called the New Deal and was designed to help people like Henry find jobs and get our country back to work. Henry began to work for an organization called the WPA (Works Progress Administration). The WPA was one part of the New Deal. People employed by the WPA in Milwaukee worked at many different kinds of jobs. Some were tour guides for the Washington Park Zoo,

others took care of the flowers in gardens across the city, and some even fixed up old bicycles and toys for children to “check-out” at the public libraries.

Along with 8,000 other Milwaukee people, Henry worked on building parks. He spent his time building waterfalls and a large garden in Whitnall Park. Even though the work was hard and he earned just seventy cents an hour, Henry was very happy to be employed. Some people in Milwaukee and across the United States were disgusted that the government was spending so much money on WPA projects. However, for people like Henry, the WPA and other organizations created by President Roosevelt helped them feed their families.

While Henry worked for the WPA, he and Betty had another child. Betty also wanted to earn money for the family but during that time most women stayed home to raise children. Fortunately, Betty was talented at sewing and making clothes. So she was able to save money for the family by making all of their clothes. Years later they remembered that the family wore those clothes until they were totally worn out and the holes could no longer be patched. Betty also found other ways to save money. She mended and made clothes for the butcher’s family and traded the sewing work for meat. Henry’s job with the WPA was a big help during the depression but it was only temporary. After the WPA ended, Henry was still only able to get small jobs like cleaning offices and doing odd jobs. Finally, 12 years after Henry lost his job, he was rehired by the Chain Belt Company in 1941. The company needed workers because the United States entered WWII and declared war on Germany and Japan. Another time of great sacrifice began to impact the lives of all U. S. families.

*Part II:
Milwaukee in
World War II*

In January of 1941, the Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. America’s navy and many people declared war on Japan. It also declared war on Germany, which had already started a war with its European neighbors. The war was fought around the world and was called World War Two, or WWII. Suddenly the United States had to manufacture everything from clothing to airplanes to fight in the war.

country of Japan attacked Pearl Japanese airplanes bombed ships of were killed. The United States then

Henry was now 37 years old and was too old to fight in the war. But he and many other men were called back to work for the Chain Belt Company so that the company could make military products. Other Milwaukee companies such as Falk, Allis-Chalmers, Pfister & Vogel, Trostel, Pabst and A. O. Smith also hired workers to manufacture products for the war. Some companies changed their regular production of goods to make supplies for the troops such as torpedos, guns, parachute silk, and ships. Milwaukee factories operated day and night, seven days a week during the war. Henry sometimes worked ten hours a day every day of the week just to keep up with the war demands. Finally, Henry and his family had money again. But now they had to make sacrifices of a different kind because so many resources were needed for the war effort.

So many young American men joined the Army, Navy, Marines or Air Force that there were not enough men left to work in the factories. In 1941 most women worked in their homes. However, that all changed very quickly. Women went to work in droves to help factories work around the clock. By 1942, women made up about one-third of the work force in our country. Some worked as mechanics on factory lines producing munitions and machinery. They became known as “Rosie the Riveter”, a symbolic name representing the power women had in helping the U.S. war effort. There was even a popular song recorded about “Rosie” during this time.

*“Whether rain or shine
She’s part of the assembly line.
She’s making history,
Working for victory
Rosie the Riveter.”*

Betty did not work in a factory but she continued to sew clothing for her family and other neighbors. Henry was finally making a living wage, but his family and all Americans were called on to make sacrifices for the war. Many supplies such as sugar, meat, rubber, gasoline and fuel oil were limited because of the war. These limited items were “rationed” or shared by Americans. Like Henry and Betty, Americans had to sign up for ration booklets which had tickets inside that allowed them to purchase very limited amounts of the rationed items.

Even though Henry could afford to buy a car again, there were very few cars to buy. The metal and gasoline used to make and operate cars was needed for the war. So Henry took the trolley to work. Millions of Americans, along with Betty and Henry, planted vegetable gardens to grow their own food. That allowed some of the crops farmers raised to be sent to the troops fighting overseas. These family gardens were called “Victory Gardens” because Americans believed their efforts to be self-sufficient and feed themselves helped the soldiers win the War.

A much bigger sacrifice, though, was sending family members off to fight the War. Some families did not see their loved ones for months or even years. They had to carry on their lives and survive through hard times without them. And many families suffered the greatest sacrifice of all; some member of their family was killed during World War II. In the United States, over 418,000 troops died in the War. Throughout the world, over 60 million people, soldiers and civilians, died. The word “sacrifice” does not begin to describe the losses that occurred throughout the world.

When the War ended on August 14, 1945, thousands of people celebrated V-E Day, or Victory in Europe Day, in downtown Milwaukee. Betty, Henry and their children were there, too. Betty reminded her family that between the Great Depression and World War Two they had lived through very hard times. Some days they didn’t know if they were going to have a meal or a place to live. But they stuck together, sacrificed and shared with friends and family, and pulled through. Now they looked forward to peace and new opportunities. They did not know what would happen next but they did know that with faith, hard work, strength, and courage, they could make it through anything.