

10

Good Times, Hard Times, and Better Times

Activity 10.1: We're All Doing Our Part: A Wisconsin Family During World War II

Teacher Materials

Preparation/Organization This activity provides students with a glimpse of what life was like on the home front during World War II. At the same time it gives students a chance to participate and enjoy readers' theater. You will need copies of the script for the whole class. (The ten actors will need their own scripts; students who are part of the audience can share copies.) You will also need several props for the performance. The whole class will participate in the activity, although the ten actors will need time on their own to rehearse.

Procedure

1. Gather the following props and place them in a part of the room set aside for the performance.
 - An old wooden radio (or a cardboard box painted to look like one).
 - A newspaper.
 - Two chairs.
 - Envelopes, paper, pens.
2. Ask for volunteers and select students to be actors. You will need ten actors for the speaking parts. Tell the rest of the class that they will have the enjoyable task of being the audience.
3. Fill out Student Page 1 with the names of the characters and the students who will portray them. Then hand out scripts to the actors, making sure you highlight each student's role.
4. Allow students time to rehearse their parts, both alone and as an ensemble.
5. Have the class read and discuss pages 196–197 of *Wisconsin: Our State, Our Story*. Then introduce the play, explaining that it takes place during World War II.
6. Distribute Student Pages 2–3 and have all students read the vocabulary words and the introduction. Discuss the introduction fully before the readers' theater begins.
7. Pass out copies of scripts to those members of the class who are in the audience. (**Note:** You can have two or three students share a copy.)
8. Have actors assume their places and perform the play.
9. Afterwards, have students explain how Wisconsin citizens of all ages were involved in helping the United States during World War II.

Name _____ Date _____

Activity 10.1 We're All Doing Our Part: A Wisconsin Family During World War II

Character	Student
Narrator	
Radio announcer	
Newspaper carrier	
Katherine Short (grandmother)	
Martha Short (mother)	
Mary Short (daughter, age 22)	
Robert Short (son, age 20)	
Sally Short (daughter, age 14)	
Steven Short (son, age 14)	
Michael Short (son, age 10)	

Name _____ Date _____

We're All Doing Our Part: A Wisconsin Family During World War II

Vocabulary

civilians: People who are not in the military.

home front: Civilian activities to support the war effort, far from the battles' locations.

rationed: Limited the amount of food or supplies.

conserving: Saving something from being wasted, lost, or decayed.

USO: The United States Organization, which planned recreational activities, such as dances, for those in the military service.

VJ Day: August 14, 1945, when Americans and others received news of "Victory over Japan," officially ending World War II. (VE Day—Victory in Europe—was celebrated three months earlier, on May 8, 1945.)

Introduction

War, even in a far-off place, can affect how people live at home. People who join the military experience major change. So do the **civilians** (si vil yuhns), the people who stay in their communities.

During the early 1940s, the United States participated in World War II. About 15 million American men and women served in the military. They fought throughout the world. They required vast amounts of food, clothing, and housing. They also needed large amounts of important resources, such as gasoline, airplanes, and ships. On the **home front**, Americans of all ages worked to provide these supplies.

Name _____ Date _____

Factories quickly adapted to help with the war effort. A manufacturing company that built farm tractors, for instance, began building tanks. The demands of war often resulted in shortages on the home front. The government **rationed** some foods and materials such as shoes, tires, and gasoline. For more than three year, Americans could not purchase new automobiles or appliances such as kitchen stoves and washing machines.

Many people planted “victory gardens.” Growing and canning vegetables allowed families to participate in the war effort by **conserving** food so that soldiers and sailors would have as much as they needed. Even young people got involved. Boys and girls often collected scrap metal and rubber. Many teenagers also did chores on Wisconsin farms, especially during harvest time.

Businesses needed to hire new employees, since so many young men joined the military. Many of those moving into these jobs were women who had worked as homemakers. Some women worked at physically demanding jobs in factories. Many were hired to build aircraft, ships, and tanks. During the war, one out of every three women in Wisconsin worked outside the home.

Just like adults, many young people bought war bonds. By purchasing a war bond, a person loaned money to the U.S. government. The government used these loans to help pay for the war. People could buy a war bond for about \$18. Ten years later, the owner received \$25 when they handed back the bond. Every effort helped the United States and its allies win the war.

We're All Doing Our Part is about life on the Wisconsin home front in the early 1940s. The characters in this play are fictional. But the events and topics are based on information contained in letters and oral history interviews preserved at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Name _____ Date _____

**We're All Doing Our Part:
A Wisconsin Family During World War II**

SCENE 1

Narrator: Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The year is 1941. It's a Sunday afternoon in early December. Like many Wisconsin families, the Shorts—grandmother, father, mother, and five children—have just finished Sunday dinner. They have gathered in the living room. Robert, age 20, turns on the radio and begins looking for his favorite music show. The radio static clears and Robert sits down to relax. A news announcer interrupts the music.

Announcer: WTMJ News interrupts this program for an important announcement. We have just received word that the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor has been attacked by Japanese aircraft. The early news is sketchy, but reports indicate that the U.S. military suffered heavy losses. President Roosevelt will address the nation this evening. Stay tuned to WTMJ News for more updates on this breaking news. Now, back to our regularly scheduled program.

(Robert calmly turns off the radio)

Michael: What's Pearl Harbor? And where is it?

Steven: Our army and navy have large military bases located there. It's in Hawaii, a U.S. Territory. You'd better start studying your geography—

(Older brother begins pestering younger brother.)

Name _____ Date _____

Mrs. Short: Steven, please don't pick on your brother.

Sally: What does it mean, Dad? We've really been attacked? Why?

Mr. Short: Well, the United States demanded that the Japanese withdraw its army from China. When Japan refused, President Roosevelt announced an embargo of American exports like metal and oil from going to Japan.

Sally: What's an embargo?

Mr. Short: It's a government order stopping the sale of goods to another country. Now, the President will have more information tonight. Let's try not to worry . . .

SCENE 2

Narrator: About two weeks later. Christmas Eve, 1941. The Short family has just finished exchanging gifts.

Robert: I have an announcement to make. This morning I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. I report to Camp McCoy in Monroe County for basic training in two weeks. After that I'll be off to flight school.

Michael: You're going to be an aviator! Do you think you can get me an aviator's helmet?

Name _____ Date _____

Robert: Sure thing, little brother.

Mrs. Short: What about finishing college? Why not graduate, then join up?

Michael: I'll go back and graduate, as soon as we win the war.

Mary: Well, everyone, I also have some news.

Grandmother: Mary, not you too? This is too much for me to take all at once.

Mary: I joined the Red Cross. You know they need good nurses. I've resigned from the hospital and report next week.

Grandmother: Next week!

Mrs. Short: We've got to do everything we can to make this time together count.

Mr. Short: I'm proud of you both. I'm afraid this is going to be a long war. This may be the last Christmas that we're all together for a few years. Sally, why don't you and mother lead us in some Christmas music?

(Begin humming well-known Christmas carol)

Name _____ Date _____



SCENE 3

Steven: (Reading a letter that he's just written to Robert. Begin with the date.)

November 22, 1942

Dear Robert,

We all enjoyed your most recent letter. Congratulations on earning your wings. Have you been assigned to Europe or the Pacific?

Name _____ Date _____

Dad's been teaching Sally and me how to drive the old Ford on weekends. She's a pretty good driver—when she's not looking at herself in the rearview mirror. Dad will need the car to get to work this winter, which will require most of our gas ration stamps. I'll have a driver's license, but I doubt I'll be doing much driving.

I recently bought a world map for my bedroom. I use it to keep track of all the big battles: Midway and Guadalcanal in the Pacific and the American invasion of North Africa. Do you think Russia will fall to the Germans?

I've got some homework tonight. I'd better get started.

Your brother,

Steve

Grandmother: *(Sitting down in a chair, she opens an envelope and begins reading a letter she just received from her granddaughter, Mary.)*

December 24, 1942. Somewhere in the Pacific.

Dear Nanna, Mom, and Dad:

New week will be my first anniversary as a nurse in the American Red Cross. I remember how upset and worried you all were when I announced my plans to join. I guess I've traveled halfway around the world—training in Washington, D.C., San Francisco, then Honolulu, and now the South Pacific. (The military won't allow us to mention our exact location. The information could help the enemy.)

Name _____ Date _____

I've met many soldiers from Wisconsin, even a few from Milwaukee. Many Wisconsin soldiers fought bravely at the Battle of Buna, in New Guinea. No, I haven't been introduced to General Douglas MacArthur, the most famous Milwaukee native in the Pacific.

Your letter mentioned the snow and ice in Milwaukee. I'm jealous. Christmas in the tropics seems strange. Some of the nurses and soldiers decorated a palm tree, which looked pretty silly. I'd love to go shopping with Nanna and Mom on Wisconsin Avenue. Please wish everyone a Merry Christmas. Maybe next year we'll all be together again.

Love,

Mary



Name _____ Date _____

Michael: *(Reading a letter that he's just written to his brother, Robert)*

June 25, 1943

Dear Robert:

Our Boy Scout troop has been collecting scrap metal for the war effort. Last weekend we turned in more than ten tons of old junk, more than any other troop in Milwaukee County. Who knows? Maybe one of your airplanes will be made from some of it! Next month we're going to collect old tires.

Everyone at school has been buying war stamps to support the cause. Each week I purchase a couple of 25¢ defense stamps. When you fill up the stamp book you receive a \$25 war bond. There's a pledge in the stamp book:

"To every soldier, sailor, and marine who is fighting for my country. For you there can be no rest, for there should be no vacation from the part I can play to help you win the war. I therefore solemnly promise to continue to buy United States Savings Stamps and Bonds to the limit of my ability throughout summer vacation until our victory is won."

Sally and Grandma have been babysitting some little kids in the neighborhood. Their moms got jobs in factories, replacing men now in the army or navy.

Steve got a job working at a dairy farm near Waukesha this summer. The farmer has three sons in the Army. Most of the farmers need help taking care of their cows, harvesting crops, and helping with other chores. Steve lives at the farm and comes home to visit on weekends.

Name _____ Date _____

I've got a lawn job down the street.

Your brother,

Mike

Mrs. Short: *(Reading a letter she's prepared to send to Mary)*

Labor Day, 1944

Dear Mary:

We took the electric train out to Waukesha County this afternoon and had a family picnic near one of the lakes. Grandma stayed at home, working on her vegetable garden. Actually, it's our very own "Victory Garden." Every vegetable that she harvests for our table means the military will have an easier time feeding our soldiers. Even Grandma's doing her part to help win the war.

Your dad has been bicycling to work all summer, conserving his ration stamps and the old tires—which are very hard to replace due to shortages.

The meat and sugar rations are the most difficult to live with. I've been using a cookbook with meatless recipes. But these shortages are nothing compared to the efforts that you and others in the service are making.

Name _____ Date _____

We just received a letter from Robert. He reports that he's in good health, but he's lost many good friends in the Air Corps. We worry and miss both of you.

Love,

Mother



Sally: (Reading a letter that she's about to send to her sister Mary. She's dressed in work clothes.)

January 1, 1945

Dear Big Sister:

Last night I went downtown to the **USO** Center for the New Year's Eve Party. I danced with several nice young soldiers. Many are homesick, especially during the holiday season. The USO volunteers try and cheer them up, at least for a few hours. Who knows where some of the soldiers will be in a couple of months?

Name _____ Date _____

Can you imagine your kid sister operating a forklift? It's true. When the regular operator at the factory got drafted, the foreman decided he'd train me for the job. Remember Helen Polenski from high school, the girl always fixing her hair and polishing her fingernails? She's a pipe-fitter at a steel plant! Many women in the neighborhood are working at factory jobs. And you know what? Most of us are really good at it!

I'm working the late shift tonight. I'd better go.

Your sister,

Sally

(Standing on an imaginary street corner, the newspaper carrier holds up a newspaper and announces:)

Newspaper Carrier: Extra! Extra! Get your special edition of the Milwaukee Sentinel! Extra! Extra! Victory in Europe! The Germans have surrendered!

Mr. Short: *(Reading a letter he's written to Robert. He's sitting in a chair with a pad of paper on his lap.)*

May 8, 1945

Dear Robert:

Finally, after nearly six years, peace in Europe. People here are excited about the news from Europe, but they all know this war is only half over. Do you think the Army will send you home now, or will you get transferred to the Pacific?

Name _____ Date _____

How did the American troops respond to the death of President Roosevelt? Can't say we know much about our new president, Harry Truman. He has a big job facing him.

The entire family was saddened to hear about the loss of your old schoolmate, Bill Peterson. He was a good man, and a brave soldier.

I'm glad you're thinking about life after the war. Mother and I hope you'll return to Milwaukee.

Love,
Dad

Newspaper Carrier: Extra! Extra! Victory in the Pacific! **VJ Day.**
Read all about it!

Steven: (Reading a letter he's just written to his sister)

August 15, 1945

Dear Mary:

I thought you'd enjoy hearing about how we celebrated the wonderful news from the Pacific. The special announcement came on over the radio just before supper.

Mom insisted that we have dinner. Then Sally, Michael, and I rode a city bus downtown. It seemed like the entire city of Milwaukee showed up. Everyone was hugging and kissing each other. A jazz band starting playing, then people started doing the Jitterbug—right in the middle of Wisconsin Avenue. I've never seen such hoopla!

Name _____ Date _____

Do you think you'll be coming home soon? We all miss you and look forward to being all together again.

Your brother,

Steven



SCENE 4

Narrator: We return to the Short's living room. It's the holiday season. Four years have passed since the entire family has been together. Mary has recently arrived home. Other members of the family are listening to a funny story that she is telling.

Mary: . . . We finally stopped laughing about the practical joke they'd pulled on the corporal . . .

(The doorbell rings. Mary pauses, and Mrs. Short gets up to answer the door. She opens the imaginary front door, and there stands her son, Robert. They immediately hug each other. Mr. Short gets up, and shakes his son's hand. They then embrace.)

Name _____ Date _____

Michael: Robert! Robert's home!

Grandmother: Well. I'll be! At last!

Narrator: More than 330,000 Wisconsin residents served overseas during the Second World War. They came from all over the Badger State—from farms and villages, towns and cities. Eight thousand people from Wisconsin died as a result of the war, many more were wounded. On the home front the war interrupted the lives of many families. But the contributions of the people who stayed in Wisconsin should not be forgotten. They played an important role in the longest and costliest war in modern history.