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Sarah Jo Peterson, *Planning the Home Front: Building Bombers and Communities at Willow Run*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 358. ISBN 978-0-226-02542-1.

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In *Planning the Home Front*, independent scholar Sarah Jo Peterson (PhD Yale) presents a comprehensive, detailed case study of one of the major American industrial developments of World War II—the plant that the Ford Motor Company (hereafter “Ford”) built to manufacture B-24 Liberator bombers at Willow Run outside Detroit—and the resulting impact on surrounding communities. While these are not new topics for historical analysis,¹ Peterson, with her background in urban planning, focuses particularly on the planning of the Willow Run facility and the often contentious issues attending the rapid growth of communities around the plant to house and serve its workforce.

Peterson begins by arguing that the Willow Run story is emblematic of “how the federal government mobilized the home front.... Because major decisions about the plant and its workers coincided with crucial transitions in the country’s mobilization policy, federal interactions with Willow Run helped define the limits of federal action” (3) both before and then throughout US participation in the war. Decisions about Willow Run and its neighboring communities were complicated by disagreements within and between federal agencies, local governments, business groups, labor unions, and civil rights organizations, to name just a few of the principal stakeholders. This reflected the massive changes that the Second World War brought to the United States: huge expansion in industry, migrations of people to work in wartime industries, and the resulting development of suburban communities. Ford’s Willow Run plant epitomized such home-front experiences throughout the country.

Planning the Home Front begins as the United States was just starting a dramatic expansion of its military to prepare for possible involvement in the war. As the government sought to increase production of military aircraft, especially long-range bombers, it contracted with corporations like Ford as well as traditional aircraft manufacturing firms. Construction of the Willow Run facility began in spring 1941, but only in fall 1942 did the first airplanes roll off its production lines. The concurrent need for readily available labor spurred the suburbanization of adjacent small towns and rural areas: “The plant attracted newcomers, often of a different class, ethnicity, or race, displacing the rural populations and livelihoods. Local governments ... designed for rural populations quickly became overwhelmed” (44).

The influx of thousands of new workers and the concomitant demand for housing sparked intense debates: should the new homes be in existing or new communities? should the housing be temporary or permanent? should workers only or also their families be accommodated? should the residences be single- or multi-family? The answers to these questions reflected ideological divisions in American society: some believed the private housing market could and should meet the defense workers’ needs; others, especially in the labor movement and parts of the federal government, shared an idealistic vision of transformative public housing communities that would outlast the war. Existing local communities feared that large temporary projects would have bad effects on the postwar housing market. And, too, the racial and class animosities of some were stirred by the prospect of adding many people of color and poorer migrants to their communities.

1. See, among others, Roger W. Lotchin, ed., *The Way We Really Were: The Golden State in the Second Great War* (Urbana: U Illinois Pr, 2000), Marilyn Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 1994), John Findlay and Bruce Hevly, *Atomic Frontier Days: Hanford and the American West* (Seattle: U Washington Pr, 2011), Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1983), and Peter Bacon Hales, *Atomic Spaces: Living on the Manhattan Project* (Urbana: U Illinois Pr, 1997).

Housing was not the only problem facing the Willow Run work force. Peterson explains that commuting to work by automobile was another major headache: the road system surrounding the plant, despite some improvements, could not bear the burgeoning traffic flow. And this at a time when lack of sufficient housing near the plant forced many workers to drive sometimes long distances to and from work. Even when government agencies and various interest groups agreed on the type of housing to be built, shortages of building materials often delayed or halted construction.

The housing issue was not just a matter of bureaucratic infighting among various agencies and interested parties. Lack of adequate accommodations near Willow Run left many workers and their families living in substandard conditions in trailers or overcrowded houses and apartments and even in tents. Such hardships, along with the drafting of male workers into the military, caused high labor turnover rates throughout 1942 and into 1943. This situation, together with plant management problems and difficulties in obtaining manufacturing materials all impeded the production of bombers.

To secure needed labor and expand production without exacerbating housing shortages by bringing in workers from outside the area, Ford tapped the “underutilized Detroit-area labor pools: white women and black men and women” (190). By summer 1943, Peterson writes, women comprised 35 percent of the Willow Run plant’s workforce. The hiring of African Americans, particularly black women, was less rapid and posed a difficult problem in regard to public housing. Some local agencies and federal officials favored the segregation of blacks in new housing projects. At the same time, civil rights groups, supported by other federal officials, along with some organized labor leaders and Ford’s management, demanded integration of residents in the housing developments. After serious race riots in Detroit and some of its suburbs in June 1943, support for racial segregation grew stronger and, with some exceptions, it became a central feature of housing policy in the area.

Eventually, as in other defense-boom communities, many of the social strains of rapid population growth were resolved at Willow Run: the various agencies and interest groups sought common ground in an effort to resolve the immediate crisis and provide housing to ensure that Ford’s workforce remained on the job building bombers. It is a testament to this cooperation that, by 1944, Willow Run achieved Ford’s goal of rolling out a bomber an hour.

Peterson has mustered an impressive body of research to support her analysis. She has mined archival sources from several federal agencies, the United Auto Workers, and Ford, as well as records from local groups in the Willow Run area. Regional and national newspapers have been culled to document the development of the bomber plant and its impacts on neighboring communities.

Peterson reminds us that World War II had complex, far-reaching effects on American society. Hers is a “warts and all” analysis of the swift growth of wartime industries and the creation of communities for defense workers and their families. She explains precisely how, in the face of interest groups engaged in messy, often rancorous struggles to achieve their own agendas, the federal government stressed cooperation over coercion and thereby preserved the participatory nature of planning. In the end, negotiated settlements among people espousing quite disparate visions for Willow Run enabled the plant to produce unprecedented numbers of aircraft in support of the war effort.

Given the complexity and detail of its analysis and the lack of a clear human story in terms of the war’s effects of individuals, *Planning the Home Front* is unlikely to appeal to casual students of its subject. It is, however, a valuable addition to current scholarly literature on wartime defense industry towns and the relations between different levels of government, business and labor interests, and various community groups. It will particularly reward historians and serious students of the American home front, urban planning and development, and the interactions of government and private agencies and organizations.