

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Home Front: North and South

By **Roberta Baxter**

The Civil War changed the lives of the soldiers involved. However, civilians on both sides were also caught up in and forever changed by the war. Women had to feed and care for families while taking over the duties that their husbands had before the war. People on the home front had to deal with inflation, lack of supplies, sicknesses and long times with no news of their loved ones. Many lived in areas where the armies fought or marched through.

The North

The North started the Civil War with big advantages over the South, especially in terms of manufacturing power, food supplies, and number of people. Rail networks of more than 22,000 miles carried shipments of food and equipment from farms to cities. Twenty million people, more than a fifth of them recent immigrants, provided a large pool of soldiers and of workers for farms and factories. In 1860, the North had nine of the ten largest cities. (In the South, only New Orleans, Louisiana, made the list.) New York City had reached a population of one million. Industry in the northern cities consisted of manufacturing, cloth milling, shipping, and businesses, such as stores, financial firms, and professions such as doctor and lawyer.

Some families became wealthy during the war. They usually were in businesses that manufactured war supplies. Accusations flew of poorly made supplies being sent to the army at exorbitant prices, but these people continued to build their wealth. Companies making munitions, uniforms, harness equipment, and boots could charge the government whatever price they wanted because the demand was so great.

A middle class family would have a father employed in one of the city's businesses. The family would own its home, probably a row house, and likely have one or two servants. The mother would care for the children and elderly in the family, shop for food and necessities, and oversee the servants. Once the war began, the mother might have to run the family business on top of her other duties or manage the household on savings and the father's army pay.

In 1863, more than half of New York's population lived in tenements. Most were recent immigrants, who squeezed whole families of 8 to 10 people into one or two rooms.

They worked at whatever low paying jobs they could find. The men from the tenements enlisted in the army for substantially better pay of \$13 a month, leaving the women behind to care for the family. Some women and many children worked in the factories and cloth mills, often 12-hour days at dangerous jobs. Women worked in munitions factories, making the cartridges needed for the armies. Women sewing at home might make less than \$2 a week, working 14 hour days. The pay for factory workers would barely cover food and rent for a family, even if children were working and adding their wages to the family funds.

Women who did not have to run businesses or work banded together in sewing circles and groups to make bandages and clothing for the troops. A group in Boston turned out 1,000 shirts in one day. Some women worked in such groups while others sewed or knitted as they found time from their home chores. They sent boxes of clothing to troops on the front lines.

Single women joined the likes of Dorothea Dix and Clara Barton and became nurses for the wounded. Louisa May Alcott worked as a nurse in a military hospital. These women proved to the skeptical army doctors that they had the courage and ability to be nurses under terrible conditions.

Although the Union had large cities, more than half of the population lived on farms. The farms varied in size from small vegetable farms in the northeast to large ranches in the west. Before the war, men worked in the fields, growing grain, potatoes, feed and hay for animals, apples, and vegetables. A hired hand might also work in the fields and take meals and board with the family.

Mechanical equipment, such as Cyrus McCormick's reaper, became available and were introduced as labor saving devices. As a result of such innovations, for example in 1862, Union areas (including newly settled western farms) produced more wheat than the whole country had in 1859.

Farm women cared for the children and elderly, and performed housekeeping chores, such as sewing, weaving, spinning, preparing and preserving food. They often were in charge of the garden and chickens. The more prosperous family might have a hired girl, usually from a neighboring farm, working on household chores for about \$1.25 a day, plus room and board.

When the men marched off to war, the women began managing farms in addition to their household duties. One woman wrote her husband that she had managed to plant corn and vegetables, but that rain had washed away much of the seed. She sold a pig and a cow to buy more seed and to hire help in planting while she cared for a sick child. Still she was able to plant much less land than he had managed before the war.

In 1862, the Homestead Act was passed, allowing for people to receive 160 acres of land in the western part of the country, in return for working the land for five years and making improvements, such as building a barn and house. The rush to the western

territories began. Over the years of the war, more than 2.5 million acres were homesteaded.

The families who took up homesteading would travel west in wagon trains for the trip of about 500 miles. They chose land and filed on it. The first priority was breaking ground and planting crops. A small house would be built, usually of sod or possibly logs. Fuel was scarce, so many families burned buffalo chips.

Men worked long hours, plowing the sod and planting. The first years of sod corn were small crops, but eventually the grain produced was enough to feed the North and to ship the excess to Europe. Some of these men did eventually go to war, but many stayed, proving up on their homesteads and providing food for the North.

The start of the war meant that items that had come from the South were cut off. For people in the North, tobacco, sugar, and cotton became very expensive and then impossible to buy. They stopped using these things, making substitutions as they could. For example, they raised more sheep for wool to replace the cotton not available from southern plantations. Honey replaced sugar.

Taxes were raised to provide money for the war and the government also printed money. This caused inflation, an overall increase in the North of about 80% over the course of the war. Necessary items, such as food, clothing, and coal, rose twice as fast as wages, causing strikes and strife between workers and employers. Eggs went from 15 to 25 cents a dozen, potatoes from \$1.50 a bushel to \$2.25. People ate cheaper items to control their costs and many, even in the cities, started home gardens to increase their food supply.

In the Eastern theatre, most of the battles took place in the South. However, two large battles were fought in the North. In the late summer of 1862 Confederate forces invaded the Union and on September 17, 1862 a battle erupted near Sharpsburg, Maryland. The Battle of Antietam, as it was called in the North, was the bloodiest single day in American history. The combined sides lost more than 22,000 men. Just ten months later, the Confederates advanced into Union territory again. This time, the opposing forces met at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. A fierce three day battle brought the highest casualties of the war—about 50,000 men from both sides. The fighting roared over and through the town, while the residents hunkered down wherever they could. Long after the armies had left, the townspeople nursed soldiers in blue and gray back to health.

The South

The citizens of the South faced many of the same hardships as those of the North. When men left to go to war, women took up their duties on top of their own. Supplies were short, inflation was much more rampant than in the North, and long weeks passed without word from soldiers on the front line.

Only about 10% of the population of the South lived in cities and the cities were smaller than those in the North. Many of the jobs were similar to those in the North—merchants, doctors, lawyers. Ports were busy shipping cotton around the world and there were a few factories.

When the men went to war, the women took over businesses as much as they could. They also formed sewing and knitting groups and took on nursing duties, as did the women of the North. For the southern women, supplies became even scarcer than in the North and many struggled to feed their families.

As the war continued, many cities and towns in the South saw fighting first hand. Atlanta, Savannah, Vicksburg, Petersburg, Richmond and others all came under the guns of the Union.

Only a tiny fraction of the population lived as plantation owners. Their wealth in slaves, land, and crops gave them great power. Before the war, the men supervised the many activities of the plantation, much like that of a small town. A plantation owner might have a manager in direct oversight of the slaves, but he decided the work to be done, crops to be planted and harvested, items to be repaired, etc. The woman of the house supervised the house slaves, as they cooked, cleaned, cared for children and tended the garden. Women also entertained visitors who often came for weeks at a time.

Once the war began, women did their best to take over the plantation duties. But as more slaves ran away and cotton could not be shipped due to the Union blockade, most women did what they could to grow food for their families.

Many slaves ran away with advancing Union armies, but did not find much better treatment than they had as slaves. The slaves who stayed with their mistresses faced the same deprivations and hunger as the plantation owner families.

Even more so than in the North, the vast majority of the population in the South lived on small farms. They might have one or two servants, but few had slaves. The men worked in the fields, cared for animals, and grew food for the family.

The women performed household duties, caring for children, preparing food, tending the garden and chickens. Once the men left for war, women tried to keep the farms going. A Virginia woman wrote to her husband that she had been able to get the corn harvested, but that she had not been able to plant any rye. The additional burden of

armies tromping over the fields and carrying off any crops and animals led to extensive hunger for the civilian population.

The effects of inflation were more strongly felt in the South. When the Union blockade kept cotton from being sold, it also prevented goods and supplies from coming in. Prices of everything rose sharply. The Confederacy printed its own money, but merchants began to refuse it. They wanted to be paid in gold or silver coins. Over the course of the war, inflation in the South rose over 9,000%. A pound of bacon cost 12.5 cents in 1861; it was \$11 in 1865. A barrel of flour went up to \$1,000. Clothing and shoes were impossible to buy, so people did the best they could. Some made shoes out of animal skins and used fabric from old clothes to make new ones.

On April 2, 1863, women in Richmond rallied and marched to the capitol. In what became known as the “Bread Riot,” the women demanded the government lower food prices. Confederate President Jefferson Davis stood on a wagon to speak to the women. He threw out the money he had with him and told them that was all they would get. Eventually the mob broke up and went home.

Part of the Union strategy to defeat the South was a scorched earth policy. During an advance through the fertile Shenandoah Valley, Union troops burned 2,000 barns and more than 500,000 bushels of grain. Union General William Tecumseh Sherman captured Atlanta and then marched to the Atlantic Ocean. As his troops passed, they confiscated any food they could find from plantations and towns. What they couldn’t use, they burned. These tactics forced even more southerners into the cities, starving and with no resources to care for themselves.

The impact of the war on the home front affected both sides because this was a war fought on American soil. Once the war was over, the economy and population of the North began to recover. The South, however, faced deprivation and struggles for years to come.
