

Victory Gardens

Sowing the Seeds of Victory

Written by Wallace Hayden in 2010 and published in the News Herald and in the book, *Images and Ancestors* by Wallace Hayden

The home front war effort during World War II included industries ramping up the production of planes, tanks and guns; war bond, paper and scrap metal drives; and shortages of just about everything. There was another facet--the Victory Gardens.

“War gardens” existed during World War I. In 1917, the Michigan State government called for the civilian population to support the troops with a home gardening campaign. In Wyandotte, two large industries, the J. H. Bishop Fur Co. and the Michigan Alkali Co., made their land available for the planting of potatoes.

But, the Victory Garden brought the concept to a whole new level during World War II. The idea was to have the citizenry plant, raise and consume their own fruits and vegetables in order to take the strain off food supplies needed for the troops. In addition, the transportation system would be free to deliver war material. For the population, it was a way to take an active part in the defense of the nation.

While “Rosie the Riveter” rolled up her sleeves to hammer sheet metal onto B-24 Liberators at the nearby Willow Run bomber plant, thousand of Downriver homemakers rolled up their sleeves to plow and plant.

Idle yards of green grass were marshaled into regimented ranks of rhubarb, carrots and cauliflower. Nurtured with water and patriotism, vegetables seemed to sprout with determination and purpose.



Not only potatoes, tomatoes, carrots and lettuce but also kale, salsify, sorrel and kohlrabi were planted. Nationwide, 20 million gardens produced huge quantities of fruits and vegetables.

In Wyandotte, Ira Kreger, the superintendent of parks and boulevards, headed the gardening effort and the Wyandotte Garden Club helped advise and manage the details.

Communal Victory Gardens sprang up in vacant lots and plots of land along alleys. City workers plotted out the lots and individuals planted vegetables. Neighborhoods coordinated their efforts for a balanced production. School grounds supported gardens tended by the children. Altogether, 230 acres were put to use within the city limits.

The first photograph accompanying this article shows Wyandotte resident Ray Heins and family inspecting a Victory Garden in the backyard of their home in the 2200 block of 18th Street in August 1945. Stalks of corn and other crops grew in abundance. The houses in the background are on 19th Street.

The second photograph is another Victory Garden in the 100 block of Davis.



The government encouraged the formation of Victory Gardens by making available seed packets decorated with patriotic designs and slogans such as “Sow the seeds of victory,” and “Every garden a munition plant,” and even “Our Food is Fighting.”

Manuals gave novice gardeners horticultural advice on gardens, root cellars, seed boxes

and hotbeds.

In 1944, the book “Victory Garden Manual,” by James H. Burdett was a popular item in the collection of Wyandotte’s public library. Throughout the publication, Burdett proselytized like a present-day health food advocate. He lamented the poor diet of the 1940s and touted the virtues of vitamin packed produce grown locally. The library still has this book in its archives.

When the war ended, most people abandoned their vegetable gardens and returned to the grocery store and farmers markets for their produce. The switch was so abrupt, that there were shortages of vegetables in 1946.

Today's community gardens look much like the communal Victory Gardens of the 1940s. This grass-roots movement that urges city dwellers to "grow their own" is partly inspired by the wartime experience.

In Wyandotte, both a community garden and a farmers market are enjoying renewed popularity. Garden Clubs are working to beautify communities, and teaching residents the pleasure of growing herbs, vegetables and colorful flowers.

It might be an exaggeration to say that the seeds of victory were sown in the soil of small town America as much as on the beaches of Normandy and the shores of Iwo Jima, but if the old adage "An army travels on its stomach" is true, then the Victory Gardens made available the "fuel" to move divisions.

Total war demanded total commitment of resources. Victory was achieved with guns and guts--and gardens.