

***Denville in World War II*****Peter Zablocki for the Denville Historical Society and Museum****The History Press, 2021****159 pages****ISBN: 9781467148955****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i2.343>**

Despite an ever-growing collection of broad scholarly work on World War II, state-by-state, and even city-by-city, analyses of wartime experiences remain sparse. *Denville in World War II* by Peter Zablocki is a necessary and important piece of New Jersey's World War II history. This work contributes to the overall scholarship of World War II by situating the story of Denville, a small town located 35 miles west of New York City, within a larger consideration of wartime in New Jersey. Chapters detail the distinctions of both the home front and abroad, and Zablocki paints a vivid picture of the experiences of Denville residents during World War II.

The author uses a rich collection of archival resources, along with oral history interviews, to create an extensive narrative that provides a window into the challenges Denville residents faced during World War II. Throughout this book, Zablocki emphasizes the importance of integrating personal narratives within the larger context of wartime society, writing, "It needed to be told through the eyes of those that lived it. History, and in this case war, is lived just like one's life: one person at a time" (10). This work blends the archival evidence with the personal, creating a focused analysis of wartime society through the experiences of the men, women, and children of Denville.

Presented in three parts, "Over Here," "Over There," and "Back Home," Zablocki details the varied experiences of Denville's residents as they navigated different facets of war. Part I focuses on the many aspects of the Denville home front such as bond drives, victory gardens, rationing, and civilian defense work. The social shift in Denville after the attack on Pearl Harbor is described in detail using local newspapers and personal testimonies to accentuate the feelings of uncertainty, apprehension, and fear that permeated the home front. The possibility of enemy

attacks on other strategically significant locations loomed over the citizens of the small town. Colonel William McKinely of Jersey City cautioned, “while Denville is of no military importance in itself, it is important as a section of the Port of New York defense area” (31). The danger of attack and the idea that citizens should be responsible for their communities spurred the creation of local defense councils. The activities of these groups provide a useful lens with which to view the Denville home front and to draw connections with other localities. Jablocki notes, “The main concern to be addressed by local Defense Councils was the constant threat of a potential attack from the air, at least in the first year of the war” (34). In the spirit of cooperation, many citizens volunteered to serve as air raid wardens, plane spotters, and emergency responders, expanding their individual worlds to include their neighbors and communities.

Other subtleties of wartime on the home front are well documented by Jablocki. The impact of rationing, material shortages, and other restrictions are considered as both individual and collective difficulties. Jablocki clearly describes how food rationing fundamentally changed the way people shopped and ate during the war. Importantly, he also explains the ways in which rationing and other restrictions presented unique challenges for women in the home front. One resident, Harold Buchanan, recalled, “My mom would buy margarine that was white and more like lard, and then you had to mix this yellow pill with it to make it look like butter” (52).

The industries that surrounded Denville shaped much of the activities, opportunities, and dangers of wartime on the home front. Because several munitions and explosives plants were within close proximity to Denville, many citizens engaged in war work that was both essential and dangerous. One instance, chronicled in chapter 1, involved an explosion at the Hercules Powder Plant in Kenil on September 12, 1940. The tragedy claimed the lives of 52 people and injured many more. Volunteers from the Denville Fire Department were among the first responders.

Ordnance work was just one of the dangerous yet necessary wartime occupations of Denville residents. The Picatinny Arsenal, in nearby Dover, was “the country’s principal source of research on artillery ammunition and one of the biggest producers of arms” (71). During WWII, local women answered the call to work, replacing men in many departments at the arsenal. The experiences of Denville women, described in chapter 5 titled “We Can Do It,” also include enlisting in the military and volunteering for the Red Cross and the USO.

Part II presents the experiences of Denville residents who served overseas. The first-person accounts included in this section present a necessary and poignant glimpse of the fears, struggles, and uncertainties felt by the young men who were either drafted or volunteered for military service. Henry Patterson, who enlisted in the Navy, recalled “We knew we were going to war; we just didn’t know where and when” (91). Especially impactful are the accounts of Denville residents involved in the D-Day invasion. Al Sipple remembered, “You cannot imagine what it was like...the bloodiest five hours of any battle that I had ever been in. It was hard to describe...it makes you want to cry” (104). Part III details the time after the declarations of victory in Europe and Japan. Along with a sense of relief and a desire to return to normalcy, the citizens of Denville were changed in ways both large and small.

Jablocki presents a clear and necessary local narrative that analyzes the experiences of Denville residents while making connections to the larger history of New Jersey in wartime and ultimately situates this work within a broad national context. More of these local studies are needed to expand our understanding of American involvement in World War II as a whole. Jablocki’s fluid storytelling, blending the personal and the archival, showcases the value of local studies and individual stories.

**Patricia Chappine**