

## HISTORY FROM OHA

# Onondaga Pottery

## Syracuse Manufacturers Mobilize for Victory in World War II: the Story of Onondaga Pottery

■ BY THOMAS HUNTER

**Before the outbreak of World War II, factories located in Syracuse and Onondaga County made shoes, typewriters, air conditioners, washing machines, and many other civilian products. Military preparedness was low on the nation's list. However, shortly after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941, and the U.S. declared war on Japan, and Germany a few days later, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt set very challenging goals for many American manufacturers, including producing 125,000 airplanes, 120,000 tanks, and 55,000 anti-aircraft guns by 1943. Several local manufacturers answered the president's call for making war material between 1941 and 1945.**

On July 28, 1944, the "War Workers Cavalcade" paraded along Salina Street in downtown Syracuse. Comprised of many local businesses that had shifted from manufacturing civilian products to war material, the cavalcade displayed these companies' patriotism via elaborate floats in a procession that took 2 ½ hours to pass 70,000 spectators.

This article is the second in a series (the first one appeared in the March 14 issue of *The Business Journal*) that will focus on six local manufacturers that participated in the War Workers Cavalcade 70 years ago, and which played vital roles in supplying the Allied military forces with much-needed war items during World War II.

### The Art of Ceramic Destruction: Onondaga Pottery goes to war

Prior to World War II, Onondaga Pottery Company (O.P. Co.) had been manufacturing a variety of ceramic products at its Fayette Street and Court Street plants in Syracuse. The company was world-renowned for its fine residential china and commercial hotel and restaurant ware. In 1893, Onondaga Pottery Company won the High Award Medal for its ornate vitreous china known as Imperial Geddo at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and in 1904, the company won the Grand Prize of Clays and Table Ware at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. In 1896, the company installed the ceramic industry's first in-house lithographic shop for printing decals that decorated the ware. In 1921, the company opened the Court Street plant to make its hotel ware, the first linear, one-story plant in the American china industry. By the late 1930s, O.P. Co. was decorating its ware with Shadowntone, an airbrush design that sprayed colors onto the ware through stencils. Although still in the midst of the Great Depression, the 1930s proved to be one of O.P. Co.'s most successful decades for design, reputation, and even sales.

By the fall of 1939, a new world conflict had begun in Europe, and two years later, the U.S. joined its allies in Europe and the Pacific

to fight the Axis powers. At the time, O.P. Co. employed 1,150 people. Once the U.S. declared war on Germany and Japan, local men, and some women, joined the armed forces, and O.P. Co.'s workforce became predominantly women. Wartime production dramatically increased as these women assisted with filling large military orders for bowls, mugs, and plates for the Army Quartermaster and Medical Corps, Navy bases, and the Marine Corps. O.P. Co. also supplied large quantities of ware to the burgeoning wartime government agencies and bureaus, as well as the cafeterias at aeronautical factories and munitions plants throughout the U.S. During the four war years, the women employees contributed to making almost 60 million pieces of china for these military and civilian entities.

However, conceivably the most significant and secretive wartime operation at Onondaga Pottery Company was the development and production of the M-5 anti-tank landmine and the M-7 pocket mine. Working in conjunction with the Army's ordnance department, Richard Pass, company president, selected specialists from O.P. Co. and Pass & Seymour to develop a non-metallic landmine that the enemy could not detect with electronic mine sweepers. Army specifications stated that the landmine had to work in any type of soil, as well as under water, and it had to remain intact under the feet of infantry soldiers but explode under the slightest weight of moving vehicles. It also had to be effective between 40 and 170 degrees Fahrenheit. The landmine required a specially designed chemical fuse. After seven months of research, the O.P. Co. and Pass & Seymour design team created a non-metallic landmine that would detonate in any weather conditions. Tests were conducted inside Highland Forest Park, south of Syracuse. Electrical workers at Pass & Seymour made the fuses and O.P. Co. employees made and assembled the landmines. The company also produced the M-7 pocket mine, an explosive device carried by soldiers in their pockets and used for demolition purposes, as a booby trap, and as



a hand grenade.

Production began in July 1943 and lasted 15 months until Oct. 1, 1944, when the military met its quotas for landmines and fuses. The project was kept secret until the Rochester Ordnance District released information to the public on July 28, 1944. A special section had been carved out of the Court Street plant and converted to landmine production. Several female employees were re-allocated to the Court Street ordnance division, where they often worked seven days a week and produced 1.3 million landmines. On Sept. 30, 1944, about 90 former ordnance employees attended a banquet in their honor at the Eastwood Sports Center.

The Army Ordnance Department recognized Onondaga Pottery Company as being a pioneer in the field of non-metallic ammunition and was commended by military officials for their work. On Oct. 18, 1944, Court Street employees were presented with the Army-Navy "E" Award for excellence in production of war equipment. The company also had the honor of flying the Army-Navy "E" Award pennant outside the Court Street plant. It was quite a tribute; only about 3 percent of all American production firms were qualified to receive the "E" award. President Pass, in his congratulatory speech to the employees stated, "The successful production of the mines here has been made possible only by the faithful, loyal work and support of every member of the Pottery organization. This support has accomplished more in aid of our country's war effort than you may know." The non-metallic landmines produced by Onondaga Pottery Company became known as the "Syracuse Secret Weapon of World War II."

Onondaga Pottery Company had "turned a source of beauty into a force of destruction. One of the finer products, so much a part of the American Way of Life, became a force in the defense and preservation of that American Way."

Once landmine and fuse production ceased, company officials turned the production space back to making civilian ceramic items. Many of the women who made the landmines and fuses decided to stay on at O.P. Co. From that point in time, more than half of the employee workforce consisted of women. After World War II ended in 1945, returning male veterans joined these women in producing some of the finest American china the world has ever known. Later employees followed their parents and grandparents to work at Onondaga Pottery Company, even after the company officially changed its name to Syracuse China Corporation in 1966. Syracuse China continued to produce wares until it closed in 2009. At Syracuse China's closing, the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA) acquired the remnants of the 138-year-old establishment — business records and documents, decals and other designs, tools, and tens of thousands of pieces of ware. Although the company has closed and Syracuse China is no longer made in Syracuse, its legacy continues at OHA. Visitors may still see 138 years of company history and revel in the fact that Syracuse was once home to a company that made the world's best china, as well as one of World War II's "secret weapons."

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