

O A S I S

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On The Homefront:

SSA, like everyone else, contributed to the war effort in World War II

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Forty years ago this month, our Nation was thrust into World War II when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The all-out war effort caused profound changes in American life. It also affected the operations of all Government agencies, including Social Security.

The economic problems of the Great Depression gave way to the problems of the war. Instead of an acute scarcity of jobs and markets, a scarcity of workers and materials for the war effort soon began to develop. One of President Franklin Roosevelt's first actions was to federalize State and local employment agencies. And for a brief period, the old Social Security Board was responsible for operating a national employment service to refer people to jobs without regard to State boundaries.

The Government also established the War Manpower Commission, which took over the employment service, and the War Production Board to help allocate human and material resources to essential services and industries. Arthur Altmeyer, Chairman of the Social Security Board, was named Executive Director of the War Manpower Commission in May 1942. He filled both posts until November 1942, when he resigned as director of the commission but remained a member representing Social Security.

Defense planners soon found that they needed a great deal of information about the Nation's economic

resources available to fight an all-out-war. Defense industries were gearing up, and critical shortages of workers and supplies began to arise. The Government started planning economic surveys to provide a base for integrating all industries into the war effort.

This is where the Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance, forerunner of SSA, came in. BOASI, the biggest part of the Social Security Board, was the only Government agency with the widespread and experienced field staff needed to conduct these economic surveys. Information was needed on workers and what their jobs were, materials used, supplies, etc. In June 1942, we had 478 field offices, 10 branch offices, and 1,802 "stations with itinerant service." Staffing these facilities were 3,900 field employees.

Dean Haley, formerly district manager in Eugene, Ore., and now retired, remembers what things were like in the Portland Field Office. "In those days, field representatives were called field assistants," Dean explained. "We visited employers frequently to resolve complex earnings discrepancies, claims involving employer-employee relationships, and the like.

"Besides being well versed technically, field assistants were accustomed to dealing with businesses. When the Government began those economic surveys, they were ideally suited to conduct the interviews."

In the smaller field offices, managers often surveyed local business leaders, according to retired SSAer Mel Wunsch, who was district manager in Lafayette, Ind., in 1942. "We had just one field assistant, and he had several contact stations to cover," Mel recalled. "I visited employers to find out what materials they used and how much they needed in their operation, how many employees they had, and so forth.

TOP: Candler Building, home of Social Security's wage record operations from 1936 to 1960. FROM LEFT: Staff meeting in the Bureau of Old Age and Survivors Insurance in the early 1940s. A winter day in the register checking unit finds all the women wearing coats because of cold air drafts in the Candler Building. At a military parade in Lafayette, Ind., in 1942, the gun barrel is wooden--no real guns could be spared from the war effort.





“For example, I asked a furniture manufacturer how many bedsprings he produced and how much steel he bought and used. We were supposed to find out if businesses had more critical materials than they needed. The same thing was true about workers. We collected the figures and sent them to the War Production Board. The surveys went on through the spring, summer and fall of 1942.”

BOASI also handled a program starting in 1942 that is now almost forgotten. The “civilian war benefits” program paid benefits to families of civilian war casualties. When World War II began, hundreds of American construction workers were in the Pacific—mainly on Wake and Guam Islands, but also including the Philippines. When the Japanese captured these islands, Americans were interned for the duration of the war.

This left their families, nearly all living in the western States, without support. An emergency program began to provide for these families, and BOASI was called upon to administer it. The burden of work fell mainly upon field offices on the west coast as well as the office in Boise, Idaho, the home office of the major contractor.

Benefits went to wives (and a few widows), children, and parents of the construction workers. The

minimum wife’s benefit was \$30 and the maximum was \$45 a month. Children received less. Benefits were related to the worker’s former wages.

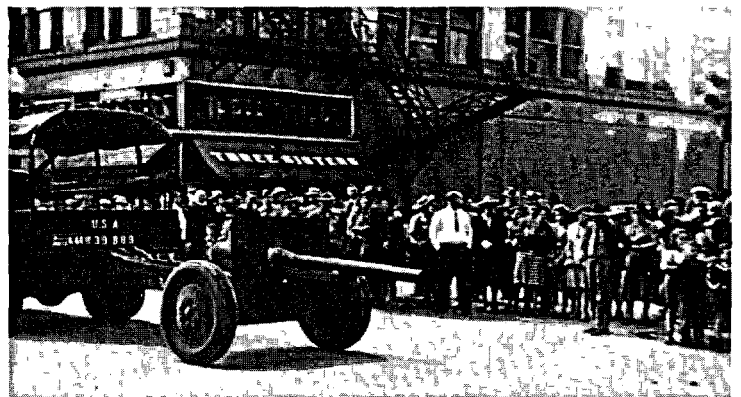
In March 1942, the first civilian war benefits went out to 972 dependents. By December 1942, BOASI was paying \$38,800 a month to 1,467 people. The payments came from general revenues and not from the OASI Trust Fund.

Although the Social Security disability insurance program did not start until the mid-1950s, BOASI paid a small number of disability benefits during World War II. In November 1942, these benefits first went to civilians injured while engaged in civil defense work or during enemy actions such as the Pearl Harbor attack. In March 1943, payments began for disabled defense workers. These little-known payments were part of the civilian war benefits program.

The year 1942 was important in the history of Social Security for other reasons as well. The BOASI central office and claims divisions were in several buildings in Washington, D.C. A permanent new Social Security building near Capitol Hill was ready to house all the Washington area employees. But because of the war, this was not to be.

Washington rapidly began to fill up with Government workers—both military and civilian. Office space, housing and transportation all grew tremendously scarce. Social Security’s new headquarters building—now known as HHS North—was preempted by war-related agencies. BOASI had to go elsewhere.

Fortunately, “elsewhere” turned out to be not-too-distant Baltimore. The Equitable Building on Calvert Street became BOASI’s headquarters on June 1, 1942. Our wage record operations already were housed in



the Candler Building in Baltimore and had been since 1936.

The claims and control divisions also moved out of Washington and were decentralized. Five cities were chosen to set up area offices, forerunners of the program service centers, to process claims, certify benefit payments, and keep claims records up-to-date.

According to Cliff Gross, then a central office budget analyst and now retired, "Decentralizing helped us keep our experienced staff. Other Federal agencies in Washington were trying to recruit our claims people. When they were given a choice of moving with Social Security to one of five other cities, most decided to do so."

Because of severe shortages of manpower, the standard workweek in the Federal Government went up from 39 hours to 44 hours in January 1942. Most employees did not receive additional pay until months later. The workweek increased again in December 1942 to 48 hours. Many Social Security employees worked long hours of overtime--almost always unpaid--on top of that.

During the war, Social Security conducted what were called "Why?" surveys. "We looked at everything we did with a critical eye," Cliff Gross recalled "Why do we need to do this? Why can't we do that another way? This process led to a real streamlining of the organization.

"Wartime was an ideal time to do this. If someone made a suggestion that resulted in eliminating jobs, no one would mind. There weren't enough people to do all that had to be done, and it was easy to change jobs within the organization. Everyone's goal was to save time and conserve materials."

The most striking aspect of life in those days was the



total commitment to winning the war. Almost everyone was involved--directly or indirectly--in the war effort. Over 12 million men went into military service.

The exodus of large numbers of Social Security employees going off to war resulted in serious staff shortages in some of our offices. In large cities, the problem grew worse because many men and women left for defense plants and other war-related work.

As a result, managers often faced a tremendous challenge to hire and train enough people to keep operations moving. Headquarters recruiters went out from Baltimore to nearby States and as far west as Ohio to hire employees. Those hired were nearly all women. The personnel office found accommodations for them before they arrived.

The war effort was not limited to the military. Many Social Security offices--especially in cities on or near the east and west coasts--conducted air raid drills. During these, volunteer floor wardens directed fellow employees to shelters. Other employees served as airplane spotters on roofs of large offices such as the Equitable Building in Baltimore. During evening blackouts, many checked all office windows to be sure that no light escaped.

Buying defense bonds and stamps was a patriotic duty. The amounts of money pledged would surprise SSAers today. Suggested bond allotments were \$5 a pay period for those with salaries of \$1,080 a year. Those making the then high salary of \$5,600 a year

TOP: Employees of the Social Security Board exhibit prize-winning posters about the protection the program offers. FROM LEFT: Accounting operations in the Candler Building before callups for military service reduced the number of male employees. Receptionist in the Muncie, Ind., District Office in 1943. Employees jam the corridors at quitting time in the Candler Building. Card punch operators entering wage information onto earnings records.



A Patriot

The following stanzas were part of a poem written by a Bureau of Old-Age and Survivors Insurance employee and printed in the *OASIS News* during World War II.

When you're eating full and well,
And you're feeling mighty swell,
And you nonchalantly yawn and take your ease,
I do not want to bore you,
But there's someone fighting for you,
Fighting, bleeding, dying for you overseas.

Perhaps you're not to blame,
But remember just the same
To think a little less of selfish ease.
In BONDS put every cent
For a gallant fighting gent
Attending to YOUR BUSINESS - OVERSEAS.

Heloise Jones

(only the top officials were paid more than that) were asked to buy a \$50 bond--for \$37.50 every payday! Our employees had an average of 10 percent of their pay deducted for bonds.

Stringent rationing of gasoline and tires cut auto travel sharply. In cities, many people put their cars up on blocks until the war was over. People commuted by bus, trolley, or train. Most employees still using cars operated car pools.

Those on Social Security business used public transportation whenever possible. Ralph Brasher, then manager in New Albany, Ind., visited the office's contact stations regularly. "I had a 'C' ration card, good for whatever gas I really needed," Ralph remembered. "But I used public transportation when I could.

"A typical trip was: Greyhound to Scottsburg; a later bus to Seymour; next day, a local bus to North Vernon, evening bus to Madison; next night, a local to Rising Sun; next morning on to Vevey (all in Indiana); in the afternoon a ferry across the Ohio to Ghent, Ky., to catch the Greyhound to Louisville, and back home. The whole trip took 4 days."

Because of staff shortages and reduced auto use, personal contacts with the public declined sharply. About 600 of our 1,800 itinerant stations were closed during 1943. This meant increased reliance on the mail when dealing with the public. Of course, fewer people retired during the war so old-age claims declined.

Travel budgets then, as now, were tight. Overall travel expenses declined from \$1.5 million in 1942 to \$700,000 by 1945.

Even public transportation was restricted. Employees needed special permission to take annual leave from

December 10 through January 10 if they were using tram or bus. Permission was granted only if there was serious illness or death in the family. This kept enough seats on trains and buses available for servicemen and women traveling home for the holidays.

Lots of employees donated blood every 56 days for "our boys at the front." After a rousing speech with the theme, "Give your blood to save a life!" at the San Francisco Area Office (now PSC), over 50 percent of all employees volunteered as donors. Participation today stands at about 2 percent in most large SSA facilities.

Shortages of office supplies were the rule. Paper clips and rubber bands were used over and over until they gave way from exhaustion, and then the steel and rubber were recycled. Used typewriter ribbons were returned to supply rooms for "re-inking."

Office workers observed five rules to "conserve paper for victory."

1. Do not use at all if you can avoid it.
2. Use as little as possible.
3. Use as well as possible.
4. Use again.
5. Salvage the remainder.

Many helped with Red Cross drives. Social Security offices raised funds to buy such equipment as ambulances and X-ray field generators to be sent to the fighting lines. Offices conducted letter-writing drives to be sure that the many Social Security employees in the military weren't neglected at mail call.

While Social Security was not on the front lines during World War II, the agency--and its employees--contributed to the war effort in many ways.

