The home front and the battlefront were intimately connected during the Civil War. North and South, families sent loved ones off to fight. While sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers were gone, family members waited anxiously for word of their whereabouts and safety. To stay connected, family members wrote frequently to their relatives in the field, and they cherished the letters they received in return.

Families’ worry and concern only increased as the war progressed and the casualties mounted. Most Americans expected the Civil War to be short and relatively painless. By the end of 1862, the astounding bloodshed at the battles of Shiloh, Antietam, and Stones River had cruelly shattered this illusion. People had to come to terms with a scale of warfare and a level of suffering that they had never imagined could happen in America.

Given the scale of the war and its disruption to transportation networks in the South where most of the fighting took place, families in both regions struggled to get accurate, timely information about what was taking place on the battlefield and to learn the fate of their loved ones. Throughout the countryside and within towns and cities, people shared what they knew or had heard. Rumors and hearsay flew. Newspapers and magazines published reports from officers and accounts by soldiers in the field but included a lot of rumors and speculation as well. Soldiers’ furloughs, which decreased in frequency as the war continued, especially for Confederate soldiers, or visits to the front gave families the best firsthand information. Families usually received news about the death of a loved one through a letter sent by an officer, comrade, or relative.

When families learned the terrible news that a loved one had died on the battlefield or from disease, they mourned. Those who could afford to followed elaborate rituals common to nineteenth-century society: they draped their doors and windows with black cloth, mothers and widows dressed in black, and many women wore mourning rings and other jewelry made from locks of hair that they had collected before the war began. Adding to their emotional pain, in this era before dog tags many families were unable to identify and recover the remains of their loved ones.

As the war dragged on, families with loved ones at the battlefront missed not only their companionship but also their labor. In many families on both sides, women and children had to take on new roles
during the war. In cities and towns, women signed on to do jobs once filled by men, such as working as clerks or assembling munitions. On small farms North and South, women and children raised the crops and tended the livestock. On large plantations in the South, women had to extend their management duties beyond the household into the fields, relaying orders to overseers and slaves. Although women gained the satisfaction of keeping their families together and contributing to the war effort, they also found it extremely challenging to add new duties to their already busy lives. Many families struggled to make ends meet. Families that lived near the fighting suffered considerably because both sides stripped the countryside of food, forage for horses, and wood for fires.

Even as families grappled with new routines and daunting physical needs, they also faced changes in everyday social institutions. Within the Confederacy, schools and churches closed down due to the disruption of the war and the enlistment of so many men; some churches were closed down by Union occupation authorities if perceived as disloyal. In many cases, local governments ceased to meet regularly, and law and order suffered accordingly. Gathering with relatives and friends to sing patriotic songs together provided families with one of the few respites from hard work and worry.

The home front was never a static place during the war, particularly in the South. In many parts of the Confederacy, including Tennessee, the home front and the battlefront became one and the same. Tennessee was a key battleground because of its strategic location between the eastern seaboard and the Mississippi River. The state’s rich resources, particularly its rivers and railroads, drew the attention of both Confederate and Union leaders. By war’s end, about 3,245 incidents of combat had taken place in Tennessee, second only to Virginia.

Living in a war zone was not for the faint of heart. In fact, many families in the upper South and in coastal areas of the Confederacy simply relocated early in the war in anticipation of invasion from Union forces. They went to live with friends or relatives in interior regions of the Confederacy for safety. Some slave-owning families in Tennessee sought to protect their investment in their slaves by removing them from the temptation to escape to Union lines. Other refugees from Tennessee included Unionists who disagreed with the secession of their state and did not want to be drafted to fight for the Confederacy. Refugees had to recreate their home lives in new locales.
People who witnessed battles and skirmishes in their communities were devastated by the loss of life and the destruction around them. From the roar of cannons to the cries of the wounded, the sounds of the Civil War shook people to the core, and the sights that confronted those who ventured onto the battlefield after the fighting were even worse. In Tennessee, large-scale battles such as Shiloh, Stones River, and Franklin left more wounded than local residents could care for. Almost every available nearby building became a temporary hospital in the aftermath of these battles. Women in particular tended the wounded. Residents also helped bury the dead.

A different kind of warfare bedeviled the days and nights of many residents on the home front in the Upper South, including Tennessee. Particularly in rural and mountainous areas outside of military control, guerilla attacks harassed civilians. Confederate bands targeted Unionists and vice versa. These partisan companies, which often included former soldiers, were not usually formally attached to either army but sometimes worked with regular army units. Families with loved ones at the front were among the victims of guerilla violence. Petty disagreements often fueled the violence, and antagonisms created during the war continued long afterward. Perhaps most notorious in Tennessee was the feud between Confederate Samuel “Champ” Ferguson and Unionist David “Tinker Dave” Beatty on the Cumberland Plateau, where the population was very divided over the war. Ferguson in 1865 became one of only two Confederates executed by the U.S. army.

Most residents of the home front contributed to their respective causes without resorting to extralegal violence. Individually and as members of soldiers’ aid societies, women made bandages, socks and other clothing, and regimental flags. When troops passed through towns, local residents handed out water, cakes, pies, fruit, and other foods. Perhaps most glamorously, at least in retrospect, residents on the home front provided information to military authorities. Particularly early in the war, women succeeded in obtaining and passing along secret missives because men in positions of authority assumed that women were apolitical and thus were less guarded around them. Ex-slaves who came into Union lines gave authorities valuable accounts of Confederate troop movements and detailed descriptions of local topography and roads. Harriet Tubman undoubtedly became the most famous African American informant for Union forces and served as a scout in South Carolina and Florida.

Civilians and soldiers also came into conflict on the home front. Tennessee presents an interesting example of this. For much of the war, East Tennessee, which was strongly Unionist, was under the control of Confederate forces. Middle and West Tennessee, on the other hand, were heavily Confederate.
but came under Union control in the spring of 1862. While there are many accounts of strained relations between residents and occupiers, civilians exhibited a range of responses to occupation. Some resisted and did everything in their power to show their support for their cause: they hurled insults at occupying troops, flew flags in defiance of authorities, refused to engage in any travel or business that would require them to take an oath of allegiance to the government, and spurned any overtures to socialize with the enemy. Other civilians were more conciliatory even as they remained loyal to their own beliefs; some even took the opportunity to debate the merits of their cause with the officers and soldiers who were fighting for the other side.

Union occupation of Confederate states like Tennessee precipitated one of the most significant changes on the home front during the war: emancipation. Enslaved African Americans took advantage of the Union presence to break down the bonds of slavery. The Union army certainly did not set out to free the slaves, and many slaves who first fled to Union army camps were turned away. By 1863, however, U.S. policy had begun to catch up with events on the ground, and President Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure to try to deprive the Confederacy of slave labor. Although the proclamation did not apply to Union-held Tennessee, the state’s slaves did not pay any heed to that exemption. Some fled to Union army camps or relocated to fortified towns and cities, while others bided their time to see how events would turn out. Many of those who remained with their owners refused to do certain tasks and carved out more time for themselves. By the last year of the war, slavery had ceased to exist as a viable institution in Tennessee. (For a detailed discussion of emancipation during the Civil War, click here.)

By war’s end, there was significant suffering among the general population within the Confederacy. Shortages of food and manufactured goods left many families struggling to survive on the home front. (While cities and towns garrisoned by Union troops, such as Nashville and Memphis, did enjoy a flow of imports that places deep within the Confederacy did not, prices were quite high.) As mentioned earlier, in Tennessee and other battleground states, residents had to contend with hungry soldiers taking what they wanted from fields and farms. Families adapted as best they could. They shared resources and made do with less. Women had to be creative in coming up with substitutes for goods in short supply: instead of sugar, they used honey and sorghum molasses; as a replacement for coffee, they used ground-up okra seeds and dried sassafras.
When the war ended in April 1865, families and communities welcomed home war-weary soldiers. In many parts of Tennessee, scenes of destruction and ruin greeted the men. Throughout the nation, both veterans and civilians had to come to terms with the Civil War’s devastating death toll of close to 620,000 men. It would take decades for many communities to recover, both physically and emotionally.

Resources

- Bokum, Hermann. *The Testimony of a Refugee from East Tennessee.* [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/uncall:@field(DOCID+@lit(AWI-5658%20%20%20))](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/uncall:@field(DOCID+@lit(AWI-5658%20%20%20)))
- Carney, Kate S., Diary. [http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/carney/carney.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/carney/carney.html)
- Civil War Music Primary Source Set. [http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/civil-war-music/](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/civil-war-music/)
- Primary Source Set: Impact of the Civil War on the Tennessee Home Front. [http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/sets/Primary_Source_Set--Civil_War_Homefront.pdf](http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/sets/Primary_Source_Set--Civil_War_Homefront.pdf)