

War Time Rationing During WWII

by Jordan Wells



Did you ever wonder why grandma's pantry and freezer are always full, sometimes overflowing with stockpiled food? Why she buys 8 or 10 pounds of coffee, 10 or 15 pounds of sugar when they are on special? Why she tops off the gas tank of her car every few days?

Chances are she remembers World War II, when many luxuries as well as necessities became scarce, and the federal government instituted a complex system of rationing, based on the number of people in a household.

President Roosevelt created the Office of Price Administration (OPA) in August 1941 in order to control prices, and regulate the consumption of goods necessary to the war effort. In April 1942, prices and rents were frozen across the board.

Rubber was one of the first commodities rationed, followed by gasoline and foodstuffs, such as sugar, coffee, meats, butter, canned goods and shoes and clothing. Many items, such as alcohol, were not rationed, but were in short supply.

The OPA distributed and maintained records of ration stamps, sometimes numbering up to three billion monthly. Stamps were issued in books which were identified by name, physical description and occupation of family member. Stamps were color coded and worth various "points." For instance, red

and blue stamps might be worth 10 points each, green and brown stamps, less. Red and blue tokens were used to make change for red and blue stamps and were worth one point each.

Shoppers used red stamps for meat, butter and fats; and blue stamps were for canned foods, such as beans and peas. White stamps helped buy flour, bread and sugar. Other items under the rationing system included milk, coffee and shoes. Families developed systems of trading products, when one household had an abundance of one kind of stamp and desired another kind.

All of a sudden, housewives had to budget not only money, but, also, points and stamps in order to feed and clothe their families. To prevent hoarding of stamps, the OPA placed date codes on the stamps, which made them redeemable only for a specific period, usually one month.

A pound of steak might cost 12 points, while the same amount of hamburger or ham cost only 7; one pound of butter cost 16 points, while a pound of margarine cost only 4. Canned sardines cost 12 points, canned milk 1 point, a pound of cheddar cheese went for 8

points. Each jar of baby food cost 1 point and a 14-ounce bottle of catsup was worth a whopping 15 points. The number of points and stamps required per item fluctuated, depending on the supply of the item.

Mexican border towns struggled through this period of scarcity. Residents shopped in Mexico for necessities, where they were not limited to certain amounts. Coffee was scarce for Americans because ships that carried coffee beans from South America had been pressed into military service, and much of the rest had been reserved for the military. However, coffee was available in Mexico, as was sugar and other commodities. Some retailers accepted American ration stamps and managed to redeem them.

Another source of food helped Americans cope with scarce quantities of food. Secretary of Agriculture, Claude R. Wickard, originated the idea of individuals planting and growing their own food and named these small plots "victory gardens." Detailed booklets taught city dwellers how to grow tomatoes in pots on their window sills and made gardeners out of people who, heretofore, had depended on farms to produce the fresh vegetables they consumed.

In 1943, Americans planted 20.5 million victory gardens in backyards and some unlikely places like the zoo in Portland, Oregon, Arlington racetrack near Chicago and even parking lots. The 1943 harvest from victory gardens accounted for at least one-third of all vegetables consumed in the United States that year and made permanent gardeners out of many Americans.

The planting of vegetable gardens helped boost morale during the war and produced practical results. Housewives became more nutrition-conscious and canning and vegetables became more and more popular. By such activities, the home front helped to contribute to one of the government's many wartime goals: a healthy citizenry.

Americans could not produce another rationed commodity they had become accustomed to, however. Gasoline rationing seemed to be more difficult than food rationing for many. Motorists received windshield stickers with a letter of priority: A through E. An A sticker went to motorists who drove for pleasure only and limited them to three to five gallons of gas per week.

Commuters received B stickers worth varying amounts of fuel, depending on the distance they traveled to and from work. The highest priority: E sticker went to policemen, clergymen and sometimes, to politicians and it bought as many gallons of gasoline as they needed.

Gasoline rationing angered many Americans. In addition to gas rationing, motorists were asked to obey speed limits, which were reduced to 35 mph from 45 mph. Nevertheless, car pools got people to work and children to school.

Americans, who grew up during World War II, learned what sacrifice meant. Although rationing was a daily irritant, it was, also, a reminder that the country was at war. Gas rationing and blackouts, meatless Tuesdays and all the other daily deprivations represented an essential contribution of the average American to the war effort.

Personal Experience

Starting to grade school in 1940, I can remember the highlights of WWII rationing as it affected my parents. Being farmers, rationing impacted us less than our city cousins.

We didn't need a "victory" garden — our garden was larger than many city lots. Every farm wife canned and stored food as a matter of good housekeeping — nothing new here!

Every farmer raised his own meat and had chickens and eggs. Our milk cow provided milk, cream and butter. The cow ate grass and some feed we made by grinding corn and oats or wheat. The creek nearby provided fish. No food problems, thus far.

From our land, we picked wild blackberrys, gooseberrys, rhubarb, asparagus and morell mushrooms (during a short season). We had lots of black walnut trees and a few persimmon trees. If you knew where to look, you had a supply of sassafras tea.

We heated our house with wood and mother cooked on a wood cook stove. Wood was on our farm for the price of sawing it into firewood. Our water was supplied by both deep and cistern wells. Our bathroom facility was the old 2-holer beside the chicken house! Baths were in a washtub with hot water from a kettle on the cook stove.

We had no electricity, so light was provided by kerosene lamps. Milk, etc. was kept cold with an "ice box" (fore runner of the modern refridgerator). The "ice man" delivered 100 lb blocks of ice to replenish and allow an occasional freezer of homemade ice cream!

The WWII life style for a typical farmer was almost self-sufficient; with a few exceptions that required interfacing with the WPA for ration stamps and permits to buy any outside product like shoes, rubber boots, gasolene, and what few canned goods we needed to buy. To process and store meat, we needed salt, black and red pepper and a few other spices. Sugar was needed along with white flour.

Looking back at the need for flour, puzzles me. Every farmer grew wheat as

a cash crop, yet few, if any, ground any whole wheat flour.

We grew sorghum cane and every neighborhood had someone with a cane mill (squeezed the juice from the cane) and the facilities for cooking off the molasses. Naturally, we usually had several gallons of molasses on hand

I'm telling this "Mother Earth News" story to illustrate how "war rationing" affected some people who's life style paralleled what we would today call "survival."

Yes, we sacraficed for the war effort the same as anyone else — it just happened to be the life-style we were living anyhow.

It was only natural that a "black market" developed for many rationed products. Rural law-enforcement was practically non-existant and the FBI was stretched pretty thin, already.

It was possible for a farmer to sell some of his "butchered" meat to a black-et market supplier in a nearby city — for a good price. There always seemed to be someone you could contact for black pepper, coffee, etc. No one in the rural areas went hungry.

In today's urbanized society, few would have the resources available in those days. Who has a milk cow? Who knows how to milk? Who has the space or climate for a garden?

Could rationing happen again? Possibly so, but with a few changes! Our Fascist government has, as a prime goal, the disarmament of the citizens. A likely scenario would be military trucks, loaded with food such as MRE (meals ready to eat) to locate where food riots are taking place.

A system would be set-up to give out food, only to those turning in guns!

A good place for those old, rusty, non-shooters to be sacrificed for food. Never sacrafice good arms to this diabolical scheme