

Sacrificing on the Home Front¹

In 1941, the United States was the richest country on earth, but the costs of fighting a global war would soon impact upon the lives of every person in the nation. As Hitler's legions held Europe and war clouds gathered over the Pacific, the Roosevelt Administration established the Office of Price Administration (OPA) in April of 1941, to fight inflation in the economy and plan food rationing should war occur. The OPA held little power at first, but in the frenzied days after Pearl Harbor, it established Ration Boards in every country in the nation, and won congressional approval of the General Maximum Price Regulation Act, giving it authority over 60 percent of all products and 1.7 million retailers.

Rubber was the first commodity to be regulated, for without controls, the entire national stock would be depleted in less than a year. Rubber drives were authorized, and tires for cars and bikes became impossible to obtain. Americans had to restrict their driving, for both tires and gas virtually vanished in the eastern sections of the nation by the end of 1942.

In May of 1942, Americans received their first ration books, and in time, the national system would cover sugar, coffee, meat, fats, butter, cooking oils, cheese, canned goods, and even shoes (three pairs in 1942, two pairs in 1943). Housewives had to master the complicated double bookkeeping of coupon points and cash to do their shopping. In 1942, there were still plenty of consumer goods available, including clothing, appliances, automobiles, and trucks. Soon, however, these goods began to vanish as wartime requirements became primary. It was the gifted repairman who was always assured of a job.

Gas rationing began only after the election of 1942, and from January to September 1943, all pleasure driving was forbidden. The owners of cars parked outside clubs and restaurants risked having their ration books confiscated.

The availability of meat steadily declined due to the food needs of expanding armed forces, and in 1943, it was included in the ration system. After March 1943, horsemeat was offered in the Midwest, giving rise, once again, to the crime of cattle rustling along the Western range. Millions of urban women suddenly discovered that the neighborhood butcher was the most important man in their lives. Unfamiliar cuts of meat led to culinary adventure, but if meat wasn't available, eggs served as a common protein substitute. Many preferred to deal with "Mr. Black," a term used for illegal black markets that were designed to bypass the legitimate system. Black markets existed in every state. Meat, shoes, liquor, and rayon stockings were the preferred targets of hijackers everywhere.

No one starved because of rationing. The Secretary of Agriculture encouraged people throughout the country to plant "victory gardens" wherever possible, ensuring the constant availability of fresh produce. Over 15 million victory gardens supplied between 30 and 40 percent of the vegetables grown during the war years. By 1944, the ration system was working so smoothly that the hardest items to find were Kleenex tissues and Camel cigarettes, but cheaper imitations were almost always available. And despite fears of an energy shortage, it was only during the last winter of the war that the country experienced a serious fuel shortage.

Rationing worked successfully—the country's basic needs were met, inflation was kept under control, and most people believed the system was fair. It made everyone a contributor to the war effort. And because Americans were forced to hold onto their money, the postwar period would experience the greatest economic boom in the country's history.

¹Clariday, Robynn and Matt Clairday. *Postcards from World War II*. Garden City Park, NY: Square One, 2002. Print.