



From: Cobblestone, 1985-12

Issue Theme: World War II: The Home Front

Subject: North America, War, Enterprise and Commerce, World War II

Time Period: US 1929-1945: Depression and WWII

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A Fair Share

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It has been said that for Americans on the home front, World War II was fought in the marketplace. Almost everything consumers wanted and needed was in short supply, or so it seemed. Automobiles, gasoline, tires, food, paper products, clothing—all were scarce. Even chewing gum was hard to get!

One reason for the shortage of consumer goods was that war production had made jobs plentiful. Americans had “done without” many things during the Depression, but now that they had money to spare, they wanted to spend it.

Another reason for shortages was that many raw materials, such as metals and rubber, were being used in great quantities for the production of military equipment. Some products, such as automobiles and many appliances, eventually stopped being manufactured altogether because entire factories were converted to the production of war material.

Other commodities, such as coffee, sugar, and rubber, were scarce because they had to be imported from foreign countries. Shipping through war zones was difficult, if not impossible. In addition, a serious lack of workers in industry and agriculture hurt production.

Finally, some Americans hoarded goods, which means they bought huge quantities at one time so that they would have enough for themselves later on. Hoarding caused even more serious shortages for others.

It quickly became apparent to our government that something would have to be done so that all civilians could get a fair share of the available goods. Therefore, a program of rationing was set up in January 1942. This program was administered by the Office of Price Administration (known as the OPA) in Washington, D.C. The OPA established thousands of local ration boards across the nation, housed mainly in public schools and manned by volunteers.

Tires were the first item to be rationed in 1942, quickly followed by rubber footwear, coffee, sugar, gasoline, and fuel oil. In 1943, three more commodities were added to the list: leather shoes, many processed foods, and meats and fats.

While there were several different types of rationing, the two most common were “specific” and “point.”

“Specific” rationing was used for products such as sugar, coffee, and gasoline. Coupons for these items were issued to each household, and when the item was available, a person would have to submit the correct coupon as well as cash. This type of rationing was not necessarily done on an equal basis; gasoline, for instance, was distributed on a *priority*, or *need, basis*. This meant that physicians, war-plant workers, ministers, and others whose driving was considered essential were able to get more than the basic gasoline ration. (The basic ration was four gallons of gas a week early in the war; this was later reduced to three gallons.)

“Point” rationing was used for goods such as food and clothing. This was an *equal basis* type of rationing. Each member of a family was allotted a certain number of points at regular intervals, issued on books of stamps. When a person went shopping for food, he or she was armed not only with cash, but with the family's ration books. Red points were used for meat, cheese, butter, and oils; blue points were used mainly for processed foods. The point value of various rationed foods varied from month to month.

The rationing program was not easy for the OPA to administer. At its outset, five hundred thousand dealers and one hundred fifty million consumers had to be registered, creating mountains of paperwork. The government also had to find ways to prevent dishonesty and to deal with the cheating that did exist. (Illegal buying and selling of rationed goods was known as "the black market.")

While rationing did not eliminate the shortages of consumer goods during the war, it did help civilians get a fair share of what *was* available. Although they may have grumbled, most Americans pitched in to help in whatever way they could. They organized drives and collections to recycle materials such as paper, fats, rubber, and metal. They planted victory gardens and formed car pools. They learned to limit their travel, have "meatless Tuesdays," and put up with some pretty awful substitutes, such as imitation chocolate that tasted like wax and soap that did not lather.

Rationing was discontinued soon after the war ended, but while it lasted, Americans on the home front eventually learned to grin and bear it.

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