

World War II on the Home Front: Rationing Information Sheet

Ask anyone who lived through the war on the U.S. "home front" about World War II and the conversation will quickly turn to rationing. America has always been -- and thought of itself as -- a land of abundance. Even in the depths of the Depression, there was enough to eat, if only you could afford to buy it. But as soon as the U.S. entered the war in the winter of 1941-42, shortages began. By 1943, it had become every citizen's duty to cut back on meat, sugar, coffee, canned foods, fuel, shoes, and consumer goods -- so "they'll have enough."

Most of the world's supply of natural rubber came from rubber tree plantations in Southeast Asia, which were quickly occupied by the Japanese in the first months of 1942. Factories converting to military production needed every scrap of rubber they could find, and citizens were asked to turn in old tires, raincoats, gloves, garden hoses, and rubber shoes for recycling. New tires became almost impossible to buy, and people tell stories of lining the insides of their tires with newspaper to make them last longer.

To save tires, the government asked Americans to cut back on their driving, to save gas by driving more slowly, and to share rides. (The term "carpooling" didn't exist yet.) These efforts continued throughout the war, as you can see in this 1943 poster. But Americans have never been eager to drive less or more slowly, and by the spring of 1942 it was clear that "voluntary rationing" was a failure.

Gasoline was rationed in 17 eastern states beginning in May 1942 and nationwide in December 1942 -- not so much to save fuel as to save tires and the rubber they were made of. A nationwide speed limit of 35 miles per hour was also enforced to save wear on tires. To ration gasoline, the government issued coupon stamps. These "A" stamps were worth three to five gallons of gasoline per week for essential activities such as shopping, attending church, and going to the doctor. The letter on the stamp would have matched a sticker on the car's windshield. People using their cars for work could buy more gasoline, and truckers could buy all they needed.

Although gasoline rationing had begun to conserve tires, by late 1942 other kinds of fuel were also in short supply. The military needed huge quantities of fuel for ships, tanks, and planes, and Americans at home had to make do with less. Fuel oil and kerosene were rationed beginning in 1942, and solid fuels followed in 1943. This poster warned citizens of the coming shortage and advised them to "winterize" their homes -- a term that most Americans were hearing for the first time.

To build tanks, ships, planes, and weapons required massive amounts of metal. A single tank needed 18 tons of metal, and one of the navy's biggest ships took 900 tons. Anything using metal -- from chicken wire to farm equipment -- was rationed. Americans were urged to turn in scrap metal for recycling, and schools and community groups across the country held scrap metal drives. Celebrities helped promote these efforts. In this publicity photo, actress Rita Hayworth announced that she was "harvesting a bumper crop for Uncle Sam." The caption added that "Besides setting an example by turning in unessential metal car parts, Miss Hayworth has been active in selling war bonds."

In Asheville, North Carolina, trolley tracks that had been buried beneath the streets were ripped up and used as scrap for military production. "It's no good under the ground," the caption read, "but it can be used to smash the Axis." Here, an inventor demonstrated his "railjerk" that pried the track loose.

Paper was needed for packing weapons and equipment before they were shipped overseas. The American Legion in Chillicothe, Missouri, set up this booth to collect scrap paper.

Sugar was the first food to be rationed, in the spring of 1942. The war with Japan cut off U.S. imports from the Philippines, and cargo ships from Hawaii were diverted to military purposes. The nation's supply of sugar was quickly reduced by more than a third. To prevent hoarding and skyrocketing prices, the Office of Price Administration issued 123 million copies of War Ration Book One, which contained stamps that could be used to purchase sugar. No sugar could legally be bought without stamps, and sugar rationing would continue until supplies returned to normal in 1947.

The military needed huge amounts of food, too, to feed soldiers, and by late 1942 food at home was running short. Grocery stores started rationing canned goods to customers to prevent hoarding. Meat was in especially short supply. The government limited the amounts shipped to grocers and restaurants and set a "voluntary ration" of two and a half pounds of red meat per adult per week. But stores often could not get even that much, and residents of some cities faced a meatless Christmas. Shoppers in San Diego crossed the border into Mexico in search of full shelves. Time magazine blamed the government's "blundering" for the shortages.

Again, the government turned to rationing. The idea wasn't entirely popular, and the Office of Price Administration -- which limited food prices as well as how much people could buy -- used posters like this to convince people that rationing was the best way for everyone to get his or her "fair share."

Not everyone accepted rationing with patriotic equanimity. Paul S. Willis, head of the Grocery Manufacturers of America, said: "The food predicament in this country is worse than terrifying. The Army is taking care of military food needs. The Agriculture Department is taking care of Lend-Lease. But no one is taking care of the 125 million home folks." Asking civilians to conserve food didn't do enough, though, and a year into the war, the government began rationing. In early 1943, the Office of Price Administration introduced a system for rationing canned goods -- which were needed for troops overseas and also used scarce metals. Each person had 48 points' worth of ration stamps per month for canned, dried, and frozen foods.

New ration books covered all the foods now rationed, which included sugar, coffee, red meat, dairy products, and fats. Ration books were issued to individuals and could not be used by others. To make sure it was not borrowed or sold, each book included the name, age, sex, weight, and height of the person to whom it was issued. And to prevent hoarding, ration stamps had expiration dates.

Instructions on the back of each ration book reminded people not to lose it and asked them to "give your whole support to rationing and thereby conserve our vital goods... If you don't need it, don't buy it!"

During World War I, food shortages had pushed prices up and created hardships for people in the U.S. In World War II, the government combined rationing with price controls -- limits on what people could charge for various goods -- in hopes of keeping the cost of living reasonable. This poster urged people not to undermine price controls by paying premiums for black-market goods outside the rationing system.

Homemakers were asked to pledge their support for rationing: "I pay no more than top legal prices. I accept no rationed goods without giving up ration stamps." Buying only one's "fair share" became a patriotic duty.

People could avoid the limits imposed by rationing -- and save food for soldiers -- by planting "victory gardens." Some 20 million Americans planted gardens in their backyards, in empty lots, and on the rooftops of city buildings.

Home-canned goods were exempted from the limits imposed by rationing, and victory gardeners were urged to grow enough fruits and vegetables to put aside for winter. Government pamphlets and agents of state agricultural extension services taught them how to can produce at home. This photograph was part of an instructional booklet published by the U.S. Office of War Information in 1943.

But canning required sugar, and sugar, too, was rationed. Women who canned could receive additional sugar, but they had to complete a special application. Canners certified that they expected to can a given quantity of fruit in the coming year and would can four quarts of fruit per pound of sugar allotted.

Women were urged to save waste fat and greases and return them to butchers. The poster on the counter in this photograph announced that the butcher would pay for the fat and sell it to rendering plants so that it could be processed into explosives. Since meats, oils, and butter were all rationed, women had to re-use fat for frying as often as possible before collecting it in a can and turning it in.

Soldiers needed shoes, too, and with rubber for soles in short supply, shoes were rationed beginning in early 1943. This page from the 1943 Sears Roebuck catalog explained how people could buy rationed shoes via mail order.

Major purchases such as automobiles, bicycles, and kitchen appliances required special certificates and proof of need. Because the military needed so many typewriters for communication, even they were rationed.

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Bomb 'em with JUNK

Who SHOULD Collect? EVERYONE

WHAT TO COLLECT - all kinds of scrap metal (iron, steel, copper, brass, aluminum, zinc, lead).

**IRON and STEEL - COPPER and BRASS - ALUMINUM
ZINC - LEAD**

TIN CANS (After can is empty, clean thoroughly, remove label, cut off bottom as well as top, flatten by stepping on it, tuck in top and bottom ends.)

PRICES - Scrap Metal - 45c per hundred lbs.
Tin Cans - 25c per hundred lbs.

PLACE OF COLLECTION - salvage station at High and Poplar, opposite Town Hall.

TIMES OF COLLECTION - August 8, 15, 22.

THERE ARE BOMBS IN YOUR BARN — THERE ARE GUNS IN YOUR ATTIC!

Any proceeds from the sale of Scrap which is donated to the drive will be used for defense work in Oxford.

