

Struggle, Strife and Sacrifice On the Home Front

R. J. Musto examines the sacrifices made by millions of Americans during World War II

DURING WORLD WAR II, when over 16 million Americans served in the military, the country faced a major strain financially and emotionally. Those at home worried about their relatives in the military and faced the constant need to conserve fuel and food in order to contribute sufficient supplies toward the war. The military had an enormous need for food supplies; more than half of the canned fruits and vegetables produced in the US went overseas.

The Federal Government formed the Office of Price Administration to control food and fuel supplies and prevent shortages. They also controlled rent and food prices to keep inflation under control. Across the country, over 5,500 Local War Price and Rationing Boards were created to administer the system. The workers came mainly from volunteers, who worked without pay, for their desire to help the war effort at home.

Up until 1943, sugar, coffee and tires were the main items rationed in the US. When it came to rationing fruits, vegetables and meats, the process became difficult because of the many different sizes and choices. The US adopted a rationing system similar to the one which England had successfully used. The government set a point value for each kind and size of canned, bottled and other processed types of fruits and vegetables along with fresh meats. Local grocers posted in their stores the "Official Table of Point Values" for each consumer to review. During this period, women did most of the food shopping, and it fell on their shoulders to budget their family's ration points and provide daily meals.

The points came in the form of ration stamps and actually worked

like currency. Food products carried two prices, the cost in dollars and also the number of ration points needed to purchase a product. Consumers needed a combination of cash and points to purchase food products. Retail stores, in turn, used the ration

book. It was important to take care of the ration book. If lost, the consumer faced a difficult time obtaining a replacement. The book consisted of pages of perforated stamps which the consumer tore off to purchase rationed food. When purchasing meat, for



With an official as their guide, a woman shopper and her daughter get their first experience in using a war ration book while purchasing processed foods.

stamps (points) collected to purchase more food products for the consumer. In order to accommodate change for the customer, one point red and blue non-metallic fiber tokens were created to serve as change.

Food rationing coupons came in two categories: red points for meats and fats and blue points for processed food. For a period, there were also brown and green stamps — brown for meats and fats, green for processed food.

Every adult and child in the United States received a ration

instance, the consumer had to decide which type of meat they wanted because ration points varied with different types. For example, lamb or hamburger cost less in points compared to sirloin steak or a rib roast.

Some examples of points for canned goods are 1lb 4oz of corn = 14 points

- 1lb 2oz of spinach = 11 points
- 1lb 14 oz of pears = 21 points
- 1lb 14oz of sliced pineapple = 24 points
- 2lb 14oz of tomato juice = 32 points.

The point values changed depending on the nation's supply of the products.

The ration books were non-transferable. If a person passed away, any unused portions of the book had to be turned in to the Local Ration Board. The stamps could only be detached in the presence of the retailer or the person making the delivery to the home. Besides rationing, the federal government requested that adults reduce their weekly consumption of meat to 2½ lbs. Americans across the country observed meatless Tuesdays as an additional way to conserve.

The population learned not to waste; even kitchen fat was saved and used for explosives, drugs and other war materials. The local butcher gave the consumer four cents and two red points for one pound of used kitchen fat. Across the United States, radio programs promoted conservation and posters prompted the population to conserve with slogans such as "Ration For Victory", "Save your Cans—Help Pass the Ammunition" and "Americans! Share the meat as a war time necessity".

The planting of a backyard garden became the best way to supplement many of the food products sent overseas. The federal government promoted these backyard gardens, which became known as "Victory Gardens". The gardens appeared just about everywhere; people planted the gardens in yards, in window boxes, on rooftops of high-rise apartments and schoolyards. The government even printed recipe books for homegrown vegetables. Over 20 million "Victory Gardens" sprung up across the country and by 1944, 40 percent of the vegetables grown in the United States came from "Victory Gardens".

Not only did gardens appear in backyards, but so did chickens, which provided eggs and a meat supply.

To help explain the importance of gas consumption for the war effort, the federal government promoted gas conservation with advertisements on how much gas the military used. "It takes 12,500

gallons of gas to train a single pilot" or "A modern destroyer burns 3,000 gallons of oil per hour". An ad for the Office of Price Administration on gas consumption went as follows:

"As we sit near our radios, lis-

lons we all saved — is playing an important part in winning the war. It's flying our planes — driving our jeeps and tanks — propelling our landing barges. Yes, that gasoline you didn't use — has gone to war on all three fronts — land, sea



Above: Poster distributed to gasoline stations and garages to educate motorists on the need for fuel rationing. Below: Motorists fill up before entering a gas-rationed area.



tening to the thrilling invasion reports, how many of us can declare with patriotic satisfaction— I've got a hand in the fight! The gasoline I didn't use is playing its part in the invasion! Yes, the gasoline you didn't use — to drive to the country — or to go to the movies — or to the beach — together with the millions of gal-

and air."

When it came to gas rationing, a system of different colored letter stickers placed on the windshield designated how much gas the consumer could purchase. The holder of the windshield sticker also received a coupon booklet with ration stamps.

• "A" Sticker: The white letter A

Library of Congress

Library of Congress

printed on a black background designated nonessential driving, which allowed the purchase of three to four gallons of gas a week.

•“B” Sticker: The white letter B printed on a green background designated workers that needed gas for work purposes, which allowed the purchase of up to eight gallons of gas a week. For example, traveling salesman and industrial war workers would receive this.

•“C” Sticker: The white letter C printed on a red background allowed the driver to purchase as much gas as needed. For example, clergy, civil defense, Red Cross workers and railroad workers got this kind of sticker.

•“E” Sticker: Was for emergency vehicles, police and firemen. The sticker holder received an unlimited supply of gas.

•“M” Sticker: The white letter M printed on a dark blue background, designated motorcycles that were used for a business. For example, Western Union and other types of delivery people.

•“T” Sticker: The white letter T printed on a blue background designated trucks, which received an unlimited amount of fuel when supplying the country with supplies.

•“X” Sticker: The white letter X printed on a black background designated members of Congress and other VIPs.

In order for a driver to obtain a gas windshield ration sticker and ration stamps, the driver had to prove their level of need for gas. A person could lose mileage rations if they did not drive or if they owned more than five tires. Excess tires had to be sold to the federal government. A tire inspection was performed on cars, and each tire had to be registered by its serial number and the tire

inspection record kept with the car. To save on gas, the driving speed, known as the “Victory Speed”, was 35 MPH.

Rationing caused the rise of the black market. This caused some to illegally purchase rationed items without stamps,

Bonds to help reduce the debt. The sale of bonds had a dual purpose; it became another way for the population on the home front to support the war effort and helped to hold down inflation by taking money out of circulation.

Advertisements and slogans for bonds appeared on billboards and magazines, such as *Sears & Roebuck Catalog* and *Time Magazine*. Even Hollywood stars helped: actress Lana Turner raised \$5.2 million by offering kisses to bond buyers. The Savings Bonds became known as Defense Bonds before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. After the attack, the name changed to War Bonds. During World War II, over 85 million Americans purchased Savings Bonds, which paid for almost half of the estimated \$340 billion spent to support the war effort.

The Series E Bonds came in \$25, \$50, \$100, \$500 and \$1,000 denominations, and could be purchased for \$18.75, \$37.50, \$75, \$375 and \$750.

Defense Stamp Albums became an incentive for the US population to buy War Savings Bonds. The population purchased stamps which went into an album. The album was then exchanged for a War Savings Bond. For example, 187 \$0.10 stamps totaled an \$18.75 bond album, which purchased a \$25 bond. The other denominations came in \$0.25, \$0.50, \$1 and \$5. Many children saved their change to purchase savings bond stamps.

“Waste nothing” became a way of life in the US during the war. Men, women, boys and girls across the country searched for scrap tin, iron and steel to be used



Poster encouraging participation in civil defense efforts, including growing a victory garden. (Library of Congress)

but at higher prices. The black market in the US during World War II mainly sold sugar, meat and gasoline. The Office of Price Administration had less than 3,000 paid investigators for price control to monitor wholesalers, retailers, rental properties, restaurants and other business that fell under price control regulations. If one was caught violating ration regulations, they could face up to 10 years’ imprisonment, a \$10,000 fine or both.

World War II created a major debt for the nation, and in response, the federal government promoted the sale of Savings

in the war effort. Rationing even reached US coin production. In 1943, due to the need for copper in the war effort, the copper penny came off the market and was replaced by a steel penny coated with zinc for one year.

As so many men went off to war, the home front experienced a shortage of male workers. Mothers and daughters filled the jobs of fathers and sons, and during that time, the percentage of women in the work force increased more than 57 percent. Many of the women worked in areas that aided the war effort, such as munitions plants and shipyards. Women that had spent a large portion of their time in the home became crane operators, machine operators and lathe operators, just to name a few of the jobs. At the Watertown Arsenal in Massachusetts, more than 3,000 women filled in for male workers. Many of the women attended training in trade schools or training programs prior to work in the arsenal and other occupations.

Women with children encountered a new problem: how to work, but also care for their children. The Kaiser Shipyards in Portland, Oregon found the answer; Kaiser built daycare facilities next to the shipyards to care for the employee's children. In 1943, the Federal Government aided in the support of childcare for women working in the war effort and several wartime services for communities with the passage of the Lanham Act.

Brigadier General Clarence Howard Kells paid tribute to the women workers when he declared, "They are so immersed in their war service that they have no time left over for a social life. Telephone operators, clerks, machine operators, they all love their work. We can use more women in both kinds of jobs, office administrative workers and the skilled women who take over a man's job. We need them to release men." Dur-

ing the war, over 6,500,000 women worked in the defense industries.

Another area deeply hit by male workers going overseas was the farming industry. In order to save crops from wasting in the fields, it was not unheard of for towns to mobilize local business and close for the day, so the shop workers could aid in harvesting the crops. The major fix for the farmers came with the creation of the US Crop Corps, which developed several programs to help alleviate the employment short-

The US Crop Corps needed over 3,500,000 volunteers to work in paid jobs to supplement the farm workers that were off fighting to preserve peace. One division of the US Crop Corp was the Women's Land Army. This organization scheduled women to work at least 30 days in the summer, and sometimes as much as a year, in the agricultural field. They picked fruit, harvested vegetables and helped with canning. Another group was the Victory Farm Volunteers, which recruited 16 and 17 year old youths to work on a farm as their chance to help the war effort. As a last resort if the US Crop Corps programs did not supply sufficient workers, migrant farm laborers from Mexico, Jamaica and the Bahamas filled the void.

Even with war raging across the ocean, the homeland still had an active Civil Defense program to keep citizens prepared for civilian safety and a possible invasion. Air raid posters had slogans such as "keep cool, don't run and obey instructions". Citizens across the country were encouraged to join a local Civil Defense group to serve in control centers, casualty stations and as air raid wardens.

As we look back at our grandparents, we can see why many of them lived conservative lives and built financial nest eggs. They lived through the ration period and appreciated material items and saved more. I can remember my grandfather wasted nothing. He would straighten a bent nail so it could be reused or he would patch his work pants in several places. It was a different time, when people appreciated what they had.



Poster of woman working in an airplane factory, meant to encourage women to help with the war effort by seeking traditionally male jobs.

(Library of Congress)

age. One of the first ideas the US Crop Corp developed to help farmers was a list of "12 Labor Short Cuts For Wartime Farming". The shortcuts included planning jobs for greatest efficiency, using all labor-saving devices, eliminating unnecessary motions and steps in every chore.

Copyright of *History Magazine* is the property of *Moorshead Magazines Limited* and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.