



# RATIONING

(Image: The National WWII Museum)

World War II put a heavy burden on US supplies of basic materials like food, shoes, metal, paper, and rubber. The Army and Navy were growing, as was the nation's effort to aid its allies overseas. Civilians still needed these materials for consumer goods as well. To meet this surging demand, the federal government took steps to conserve crucial supplies, including establishing a **rationing** system that impacted virtually every family in the United States.

**Rationing** involved setting limits on purchasing certain high-demand items. The government issued a number of "points" to each person, even babies, which had to be turned in along with money to purchase goods made with restricted items. In 1943 for example, a pound of bacon cost about 30 cents, but a shopper would also have to turn in seven **ration** points to buy the meat. These points came in the form of stamps that were distributed to citizens in books throughout the war. The Office of Price Administration (OPA) was in charge of this program, but it relied heavily on volunteers to hand out the **ration** books and explain the system to consumers and merchants. By the end of the war, about 5,600 local **rationing** boards staffed by over 100,000 citizen volunteers were administering the program.

Tires were the first product to be **rationed**, starting in January 1942, just weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Everyday consumers could no longer buy new tires; they could only have their existing tires patched or have the treads replaced. Doctors, nurses, and fire and police personnel could purchase new tires, as could the owners of buses, certain delivery trucks, and some farm tractors, but they had to apply at their local **rationing** board for approval. Good, functional tires became so valuable that the boards often advised auto owners to keep track of the serial numbers on their tires in case they were stolen.



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*DIG FOR VICTORY NEWSREEL, 1943*

Personal automobiles met a similar fate in February 1942 as auto manufacturers converted their factories to produce jeeps and ambulances and tanks. Gasoline was **rationed** starting in May of that year, and by the summer even bicycle purchases were restricted.

The government began **rationing** certain foods in May 1942, starting with sugar. Coffee was added to the list that November, followed by meats, fats, canned fish, cheese, and canned milk the following March. Newspapers, home economics classes, and government organizations offered all sorts of tips to help families stretch their **ration** points and have as much variety in their meals as possible. **Propaganda** posters urged Americans to plant "victory gardens" and can their own vegetables to help free up more factory-processed foods for use by the military. Restaurants instituted meatless menus on certain days to help conserve the nation's meat supply, and advertisers offered up recipes for meatless dinners like walnut cheese patties and creamed eggs over pancakes. Macaroni and cheese

## ONLINE RESOURCES

[ww2classroom.org](http://ww2classroom.org)

-  America Responds Video
-  Robert Gurr Oral History



**Citizens line up outside their local War Rationing Board office on Gravier Street in New Orleans, 1943.**

*(Image: Library of Congress, LC-USW3-022900-E.)*

became a nationwide sensation because it was cheap, filling, and required very few **ration** points. Kraft sold some 50 million boxes of its macaroni and cheese product during the war.

The system wasn't perfect. Whenever the OPA announced that an item would soon be **rationed**, citizens bombarded stores to buy up as many of the restricted items as possible, causing shortages. **Black market** trading in everything from tires to meat to school buses plagued the nation, resulting in a steady stream of hearings and even arrests for merchants and consumers who skirted the law. Store clerks did what they could to prevent hoarding by limiting what they would sell to a person or by requiring them to bring in an empty container of a product before purchasing a full one. State legislatures passed laws calling for stiff punishments for **black market** operators, and the OPA encouraged citizens to sign pledges promising not to buy restricted goods without turning over **ration** points.

As World War II came to a close in 1945, so did the government's **rationing** program. By the end of that year, sugar was the only commodity still being **rationed**. That restriction finally ended in June 1947. Plenty of other goods remained in short supply for months after the war, thanks to years of pent-up demand. Before long, however, manufacturers had caught up, and Americans could buy all the butter, cars, and nylon hosiery they wanted.