

# **American Women in World War Two: The Impact of Rationing and Shortages on Eating and Food Procurement**

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The American household of the 1930's and 1940's was much more centered around meals than the households of today. The cultural expectation was that the table would be set with dishes, cutlery, napkins, centerpieces, and a table cloth at every meal. Working men and schoolchildren would typically come home for lunch. It was the expectation that wives would provide three meals a day, each consisting of multiple courses and at least dinner would include a dessert. The wife was expected to make these meals pleasing for her husband, filling for all, and nutritionally balanced. The woman of the house also did the budgeting, meal planning, and shopping. With the United States' entry into World War Two following the attack on Pearl Harbor, there was a stark increase in the obstacles to achieving this standard, though the expectations remained the same. Faced with limited time, a constantly changing rationing system, and wide-ranging shortages and scarcities, American shopping, cooking, and eating adapted to fit wartime needs.

World War Two began for American industry and American culture long before it began for the American military machine. As groups around the United States began to raise money and gather supplies for those impacted by conflict, groups began to conflict over ideology. The renewal of Lend-Lease in March 1941 and the increase in foreign aid placed a strain on American industry and agriculture (Breitman and Lichtman 181-182). War was felt by Americans long before it was fought by US citizens.

None of these trends were new to the public, they had experienced similar things during the previous World War only twenty-five years before. They remembered, too, the shortages and scarcity of that war, and the homemakers and administrators of the nation began to prepare and to watch. As early as 1940, President Roosevelt called upon the

National Defense Advisory Commission to begin gathering data on American purchasing habits and keeping an eye on various national stockpiles so as to initiate price and production controls as needed (Ward 81).

Simultaneously, many American homemakers began to stock up preemptively on staples and canned goods, such as shortening. As American entry into World War Two began to seem inevitable, officials began to fear a rush on grocers, and shoppers were limited to six cans per visit to a grocery store (Ward 84). While theoretically a good idea, limiting the number of cans a shopper could buy may have incited more fear than already existed. Grocers began to notice that consistent customers were, in fact, buying more canned goods than usual. One woman in New Hampshire, it was discovered, was going around her town and buying a five-pound can of shortening every day at each of several grocers (Ward 85).

## **Rationing in the United States**

On January 24, 1942, the Office of Price Administration, created by presidential executive order nine months before, was authorized to ration consumer goods across the United States (Ward 81). The first commodity to be rationed was white sugar, due to the US's inability to import it from the Philippines, which were then under Japanese control (Halper 286). Over the course of the war almost-innumerable other things were rationed, most notably rubber products, gasoline, meat, canned goods, butter, and other fats. The ration system itself was incredibly complex and evolved over the course of the war. Although the system of rationing in the United States was based on that of Britain, adaptations were needed to fit it to the US, as evidenced by the several stages and frequent changes to the program (Ward 88).

In January 1942, Certificate Rationing became the first aspect of rationing in the US. People who were deemed to need them received certificates that allowed the purchasing of specific items such as tires, rubber boots, and washing machines (Ward 82). The second type, called Differential Coupon Rationing, designated different types of people to receive different amounts of commodities such as gasoline on the basis of need (Ward 82). For example, those with an average need were entitled to three gallons of gas per week, while

groups including doctors and congressmen were entitled to more. This aspect of the rationing program was the hardest to administer and relied on locally influential people to identify members of their communities who ought to be entitled to more than others (Sitkoff 41). The third and fourth arms of the rationing system related to food. Uniform Coupon Rationing, which began in May 1942, used books containing sets of stamps that were officially validated for different periods of time. This system allowed everyone to purchase the same amounts of the relevant products while the limited and distributed validation periods kept hoarding at bay. This type of rationing was applied to foods like sugar and coffee, where no one was entitled to a different amount than anyone else (Ward 82-83). In February 1943 the final type of rationing was introduced: Point Rationing. Every individual received a book of point coupons to spend, distributed via local public schools (Ward 84). Various commodities required different numbers of points, and different colored coupons applied to different types of products. Red coupons were used to purchase meat, butter, fats, margarine, oils, cheese, canned fish and canned milk, while blue coupons allowed shoppers to purchase most other canned and bottled foods (Ward 83). This system allowed consumers to decide which goods they wanted to preference in their shopping.

Housewives could also pool the points of the entire family and budget them out accordingly to purchase the foods that would allow them to make as nutritious and appetizing meals as possible with the limited resources of the day.

Historians, particularly Barbara McClean Ward, have found that American public, specifically housewives, actually reacted quite well to the rationing scheme after a short period of confusion. Initially, there was some struggle in convincing the public, not that rationing was necessary, but that such a program was actually beneficial to the war effort (Ward 8889). Understanding why using less meat would help defeat Nazi Germany is a challenging task from thousands of miles away. Fortunately for the Office of Price Administration and the War Production Board, their propaganda campaign quickly overcame this ignorance and helped the American people to understand that the shortages and resultant need for rationing were

caused by twin facts. Active soldiers and sailors eat far more than civilians and large amounts of food aid was being shipped to the embattled nations of Europe. Once this concept was broadly accepted, the rationing program became remarkably popular. Not only did it allow stateside Americans to feel that they were truly helping the national cause, but shoppers also understood that it ensured their access to available goods and ensured that early bird shoppers were not purchasing the entirety of a limited supply (Ward 90).

In 1943, when analysts erroneously predicted a close end to the war, a selection of items was taken off the rationed list. This move was very unpopular as people feared a rise in stockpiling would lead to the terrible scarcities seen during World War I. This worry lasted only a short time, however, as the war did not end and the items were rationed again a few months later (Ward 90-91). The ration system continued for the full duration of the war and was fully phased out by 1946 (Ward 100).

### **Procuring Ingredients**

World War Two and the associated rationing had a large impact on the procurement of ingredients. Commonly used products were either totally unavailable or only available in extremely limited amounts. Less of the meat Americans were used to eating was available in stores because so much food was being sent to the military. The most acutely felt was the lack of canned goods, which disappeared from shelves as the steel was turned into war materiel. Less produce was available commercially due to the combined hurdle of rubber and gasoline rationing and the inability to transport goods from tropical regions. In order to cope with these challenges, women pursued a number of creative strategies (Hayes 4).

The lack of meat was felt most acutely, as Americans' diet at that time was very high in red meats like beef and lamb ("Staples in Diet" 12); it was the era of ham and roast beef on Sundays. As preferred cuts of meat ceased to be available to civilians, many housewives opted for less preferred cuts and grades of meat ("Dinner by the Dollar" 89). As these, too, became scarce in American grocery stores, alternate protein sources were advised and recipes for using them began to appear

in magazines like *Good Housekeeping*. Organ meats like liver and heart were consumed with greater frequency, as were alternate meats such as pork, fish, and chicken (Giesler 86-87). In some places game meats from deer to muskrat were also added to the common diet (Halper 291-292). The OPA also advocated strongly for the inclusion of Meatless Days into the weekly meal plans of housewives as an opportunity to do their patriotic duty. As the war continued, women were advised to simply use meat less often and to substitute alternate sources of proteins like eggs, milk, cheese, and legumes – especially soybeans and their flour (“Main Dishes for These Times” 89).

The appearance of standard foodstuffs changed noticeably throughout the war. As industrial centers ramped up their production of ships, bombs, and airplanes, the production of canned goods was strongly curtailed on account of the steel. Some foods, like shortening, that had previously been canned were repackaged in glass or paperboard (Ward 92-93). What had a much greater impact was the massive rise in gardening and home canning. American households were encouraged to cultivate a Victory Garden measuring at least 30 feet by 50 feet if it was at all possible, even if that meant purchasing a plot of land on the edge of town and borrowing the implements needed to grow food (Kendall and Chapman 82). This produce could then be used for fresh eating throughout the growing season and for home canning in the late summer and early fall. Home canning was key to the sustenance of Americans in wartime winters because home canning used glass jars rather than metal cans. These home-grown vegetables could be served all winter long, thus eliminating the need for the precious metal in cans and ensuring the nutrition of the population.

Governmental emphasis on gardening and canning, with the assistance of *Good Housekeeping*, proved to be incredibly successful and the output of these gardens was enormous. By the summer of 1935, there were close to 20 million Victory Gardens spread across the United States. In total, they produced about one third of all the vegetables used domestically that year (Hayes 53). This success was not without complications of its own; home canning is not a simple process. While tomatoes and most fruits can be canned using a

water bath, it was considered unsafe to use any method other than a pressure steam cooker for less acidic vegetables (Chapman 141). Because they were a newer technology, these machines were not as commonly owned and the transition of factories to war production made purchasing these metal machines very difficult. *Good Housekeeping* encouraged women to share with their neighbors wherever possible and many towns set up community canning centers that not only provided the canning equipment, but also taught women how to use it (Hayes 53).

The war also led housewives to change their shopping tactics. Before the war, it was common for women to go grocery shopping every day or nearly every day, in large part because home refrigeration was still in its infancy and home freezing existed only in small compartments in iceboxes or refrigerators, typically only for a couple of ice cube trays (Hayes 54-55). As the war progressed and housewives entered the workforce, they needed to budget time for shopping more carefully. Women began utilizing their refrigerators more and shopping less frequently, often only three or four times per week (“A New Dessert Salad” 102). Some women left their orders at the grocer in the evening and picked them up the following day (“Tips Busy Women Have Given Us” 87). Other women who could do so sometimes used their limited gasoline resources to make a single, more efficient trip to a supermarket while other shoppers chose to walk between smaller stores and carry their purchases home, as delivery services were no longer available (Halper 326).

Despite rationing, the availability of most things was inconsistent enough that shoppers had to have several alternate choices ready, further complicating the shopping process. Added to the shopping struggle was the issue of long lines, particularly for meat. While lines were not typically an issue in all parts of the U.S., their length became a problem in places that had experienced a large influx of war workers, such as Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where it was not uncommon to stand in line at the same store twice in one day in an attempt to get a single piece of meat (McFeely 115). Children also became involved with the acquiring of food because they could be sent to stand in lines or look for specific products while their mothers

were working or even shopping at another store (McFeely 115).

### **Inspiration and Encouragement in the Pages of Good Housekeeping**

For generations, large portions of American women have turned to magazines for inspiration and assistance in running their homes. One of the most popular has been Good Housekeeping, which has been published every month for over 100 years and has historically been targeted at white, middle-class housewives. It provided guidance on a diverse range of topics from fashion to childrearing, and is known for its extensive cooking advice. For this reason, the archives of the magazine are an invaluable resource for understanding how the woman who read it understood the war as it progressed and which concerns played into their day-to-day kitchen life.

In the pre-war era, the food-related sections of the magazine focused on adequate nutrition and what new products are available, as well as setting an attractive table and how to socialize using meals as a catalyst. Vitamins were the greatest concern, particularly A, B, and C, with many types of guidance on how women could best get them into the diets of their families. One column which appeared each month is “Dr. Eddy’s Question-Box,” where Dr. Walter H. Eddy answered questions from readers. In every issue published in 1939, the majority of questions are about vitamins, both how they work and how to get them into one’s diet. The column’s response to these questions is that they are water-soluble vitamins and that because of this, cooking destroys, or at least severely limits, the vitamin content of fruits and vegetables. Readers were advised to cook such foods only as much as necessary and to serve them raw and in juice form as well, although nearly all vegetables were still served boiled (“Dr. Eddy’s Question Box” 189-190).

Another staple article in 1939 was “Visits to the Grocer,” in which various newly available products were highlighted. Throughout the year, the article chronicles the introduction of canned products such as beans (October 184), tuna (August 120), bread (May 117), and new versions of known products, like decaffeinated coffee (March 142) and semisweet chocolate (December 110). The

emphasis of this column overall was to highlight the new and exciting products readily available at the common grocery store as the nation’s finances were beginning to improve at the end of the Great Depression. Following the American entry into the war, “Visits to the Grocer” disappeared from the magazine, as did mentions of new products generally.

Cooking articles from this year also highlighted the new ways that products are being prepared, such as one from January 1939 titled “Do you know your hams and how to cook them?” This article by Dorothy Marsh describes how the new method of smoking hams allows them to be cooked in less time and eliminates the simmering step. She encourages housewives to purchase only hams made by recognized national meat packers to ensure consistency and quality (“Do You Know Your Hams” 76).

The February issue from 1942, which would have come out some time in mid- to late- January of 1942 and was the first truly war-era issue, showed a stark change in the tone and motive of the magazine. This issue opened with a poignant letter from the editors explaining the stance they, and the magazine as a whole, would take for the duration of the war. While some publications, like Gourmet, did not change their writing at all in wartime (Hayes 4), Good Housekeeping placed its abilities at the service of the U.S. government and viewed it as its obligation to remain anti-hysterical (The Editors 19). The editors took the stance that “...life in American homes must go on and will go on; and that for the sake of the generations to come we must not lose sight of that – never, not for a single day, because it is that home life, and all it implies, that we are now defending,” (The Editors 19). This policy would serve to motivate the magazine’s articles for the remainder of the war. It encouraged women to cook with ingredients they previously would not have considered, to grow huge amounts of produce, to create meatless meals that would please the whole family, and do it all while working, in many cases, a full-time job.

From the pre-war writing to the issues of the early war years there is a harsh and unmistakable shift in the content of Good Housekeeping. Rather than being concerned with the newest variety of



boxed baking mix (“Visits to the Grocer,” September 1939, 133), writers emphasize how to plan a day’s worth of meals so as to hit all of the major food requirements set out by the government in association with Good Housekeeping, since a healthy populace was put forward as the best way to win the war (“There’s Plenty of Beans and Cheese” 146).

As the fighting continued and the rationing system expanded throughout 1942 and 1943, each issue reacted accordingly. Women were first encouraged to plan meals ahead of time with an eye on nutrition, and then to more carefully make their shopping lists, then finally to prepare to make any number of changes once they were at the grocers (“Dinners in 30 Minutes” 91).

As the war continued, the Good Housekeeping authors also grew increasingly favorable to stretching various products so that they would last longer. At first, the idea of using any method of coffee stretching is totally disavowed and consumers are simply advised to drink less coffee (“Good Meals Even With Rationing” 104). However, just one month later, the use of a coffee stretcher such as chicory is strongly advocated, so long as women mix it into their coffee at home rather than purchasing a pre-mixed product (Punnett 91). A similar trend is seen in the realm of protein. Initially authors advocate for the use of different cuts or types of meat, such as organ meats or a greater utilization of fish and poultry (“Good Meals in 30 Minutes” 102). By October 1943 these same authors advocated for meals that used increased amounts of cereals like oatmeal and soy flour to stretch the meat as far as possible while still retaining the flavor of a dish (“Cereals – Good for Any Meal” 90). To cope with the very limited amount of sugar available, recipes were published that used alternate sweeteners like maple syrup, molasses, and particularly corn syrup (Hoover 98). The war made butter, too, harder to keep on hand, and authors advised whipping it with margarine or even unflavored gelatin and a bit of milk, a process that was labor intensive, but effective in making the butter literally cover more bread (“What We Have Found” 86).

In general, wartime issues of the magazine placed a value on efficiency not seen in pre-war

writings. Women were repeatedly instructed to purchase carefully and not to buy more than exactly what was needed (Scripture 100, Kenyon 68). Leftovers were viewed with scorn and were to be avoided if possible. At the same time, the water used for boiling vegetables was to be both minimal and reserved for making sauces and soups so that nutrients would be preserved as much as possible (Kenyon 68). Good Housekeeping also encouraged women to use specific items to prevent their spoilage and waste, such as in the fall of 1943, when authors pushed women to use additional sweet potatoes rather than white potatoes to compensate for a particularly bumper sweet potato crop that year across America’s farms (“This is the Month for Sweet Potatoes” 90).

One thing that never changed was the expectation that the woman of the house and the reader of the magazine will ceaselessly provide a never-ending series of diverse, nutritionally balanced, appealing, and responsibly purchased meals. The wife, without fail, was to remain the steadfast support for the home and in doing so perform her patriotic duty to keep the entirety of the civilian population healthy and productive so that the war could be won as quickly and decisively as possible.

### **An Evaluation of the Sources**

The available sources for this research are fascinating and diverse, but in many ways this diversity presents a challenge to the researcher. The most useful sources are magazines and cook books. These are invaluable for their first-hand accounts, real-world advice, and up-front, unabashed honesty about the state of the American kitchen and how to “Use it Up, Wear it Out, Make it Do, or Do Without,” as one wartime slogan advised (Sitkoff 39).

Good Housekeeping in particular is very useful because of the frequency with which it is published. Whereas true cookbooks are a one-time publication, a monthly magazine like Good Housekeeping allows the historian to track how professional food writers were thinking about the impact of the war on food and daily life over time. Where the pre-war era writings focused on what new canned goods were available and how new technology was making cooking easier, wartime

food writing had more to do with conservation, efficient cooking, and how certain foods could be stretched or substituted out of necessity and patriotism.

The style of this research also allows for the use of some very interesting sources which were written as those who grew up during the war regained an interest in it. These works are often found as essays and articles, such as those in *Produce & Conserve*, *Share & Play Square*, in which authors combined historic research with anecdotes from their own childhood. Emmanuel Harper's writing on the growth of the supermarket during World War Two follows a similar line, interspersing details about the changes in shopping with stories about how these changes impacted his childhood trips to the store with his mother.

Although this trend can be tremendously helpful in understanding how people were thinking about the war, it can also produce somewhat muddled results because there is a tendency to assume that one's own experience is representative of the whole country. This causes some conflicts the historian can only attempt to unravel. One example of this is the way different authors believe women went about the action of purchasing food during the ration years. While Halper argues that women shifted towards supermarkets in order to maximize the efficiency of their time and gasoline use (325), McFeely posits that women did more of their shopping on foot around the various stores in town so not to use gas at all for their shopping (112). Conflicts such as these are most likely based in regional differences and as such the historian can understand that the way housewives shopped was tied to where they lived, a phenomenon still seen today.

A further challenge to studying this topic is the comparatively limited amount of accessible, academic, historical research. While there is writing about the impact of women in the workforce and the role of Victory Gardens and various advertising campaigns, much less has been written on how the many obstacles presented to wartime housewives impacted the way they and their families ate. Despite its usefulness as a changing source over time, Hays is the only author to utilize a magazine such as *Good Housekeeping* in any depth, and her

training lies in nutrition and public health rather than history ("Grandma's Wartime Kitchen"), making this study even more valuable.

### **Concluding Remarks**

World War Two and the international assistance programs that the United States pursued in relation to it placed a great strain on the country's food industry and the women who purchased and prepared food for the millions of Americans who remained on the home front. Despite the rising incomes during the war, that money could not be spent on increased kinds or amounts of food, as there simply wasn't any to be had and rationing prevented it if there was. Rather than generating ire, which was cleverly turned by the OPA, WPA, and magazines like *Good Housekeeping* into an opportunity for the housewives of America to contribute further to the war effort. A healthy populace fed efficiently was the way to keep the nation strong so that soldiers could fight and those working in the home front war industries could work at the maximum level.

Despite increasingly demanding work schedules, women managed to keep up with the ever-changing ration system and can immense amounts of produce each fall. Their efforts were crucial to keeping up both health and morale on the home front, as the authors of *Good Housekeeping* ensured homemakers knew.

From the perspective of the present, the amount of work and forethought that went into the shopping and cooking routines of these women is astonishing. When compared to the eating trends of modern America, there are obvious differences and clear continuations of trends established in the 1940's. The pace of society has sped up and home-cooked meals are much less common than they were during World War Two, particularly with regard to breakfast. Almost no one goes home for lunch and the idea of a nightly sit-down dinner once the whole family has arrived is almost laughable. Home canning is something now pursued by a very few people. However, there are some trends in modern food that almost certainly have their roots in World War Two. The greatest of these are the introduction and the rise to popularity of corn syrup, which is now the sweetener in most processed foods, although there is a growing campaign against

it. An ingredient used then because of sugar's unavailability is used now on account of its low cost. The trend of eating less meat is seen today as well, though for much different reasons. While meat was avoided out of necessity in the war era, today increasing numbers of people are seeking to eat less of it for environmental and health reasons. The substitutes are the same, but the rationale different. As global events proceed, it will be interesting to see how other consumption trends compare the patterns observed in World War Two.

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