

## RATIONING AND AGRICULTURE IN ROCKBRIDGE DURING WORLD WAR II

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**A**LTHOUGH WORLD WAR II rationing hit America's homefront hard, the Great Depression had accustomed the nation to limitation. Now the nation was faced with a call to ration goods so that the fighting men could have what they needed.<sup>1</sup> Rationing also made it possible to share scarce goods equitably among the domestic population.

The United States faced rationing of sugar, gasoline, the rubber used in vehicle tires, meat, butter, fats, tin cans, clothes hangers, coffee, cocoa, tea, shoes and liquor.<sup>2</sup> Even cameras and film were unavailable because the War Production Board (WPB) diverted film stock from civilian use to enable photographers and filmmakers to record the war's front-line action.<sup>3</sup>

Because rationing was based mostly on voluntary compliance, Americans who observed it were true patriots. Most members of local organizations such as Ration Boards or Offices of Civilian Defense were white-collar professionals, able to make their own schedules that bal-

anced their careers and the additional tasks their communities asked them to undertake.<sup>4</sup>

In Rockbridge, the volunteer members of the Lexington Ration Board included O'Neal Moses, manager of the Robert E. Lee Hotel; Dave Grossman, who ran a women's clothing store; Sam Rayder, a banker; and Bob Hutchinson, who operated a local lumber yard. The local Ration Board also had four paid members, all of them secretaries: Edith Peck, Lucille Mabry, Babe Craft (Goodbar) and Kathleen Painter.<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary reports in the *Lexington Gazette* show that residents were constantly being informed of what was expected of them and were given plenty of time to plan.<sup>6</sup>

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Two front-page articles from the Lexington Gazette, March 3, 1942

Rationing in the county went into effect in March 1942. The Office of Price Administration (OPA) issued rationing rules and regulations.<sup>7</sup> President Franklin Delano Roosevelt explained the need for rationing and an organization to monitor it: “If two people with plenty of cash start bidding for a scarce good, the price of that good goes up.”<sup>8</sup> Under the Second War Powers Act, a person who willfully violated priority orders, mainly involving rules involving rationing of scarce goods, faced a minimum \$10 fine and up to a year in jail.<sup>9</sup> There is no evidence that any resident of Lexington and Rockbridge County was ever charged or even accused of violating priority orders of the WPB or the OPA.

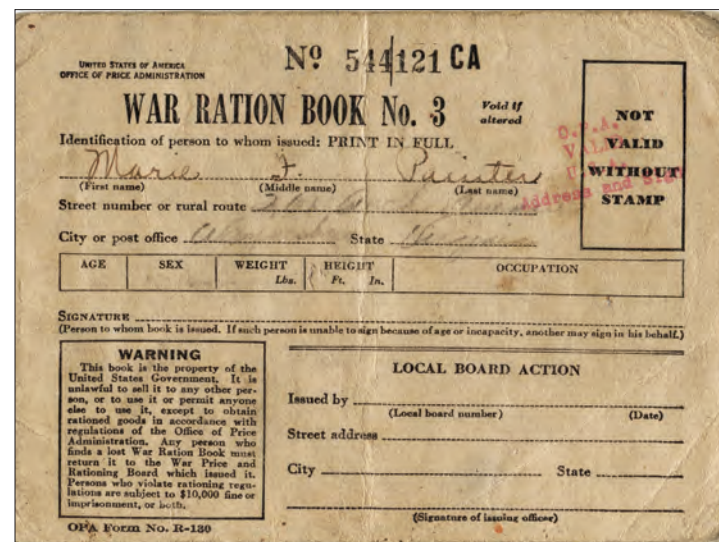
Sugar rationing was the first to hit the area. Beginning in March 1942, residents of the county and of Lexington and Buena Vista were responsible for registering for sugar rationing cards at local high schools. In interviews with many Rockbridge County natives who lived during the period, a common recollection emerged: Sugar was in limited supply and, seemingly, was missed most of all commodities. Kathleen Painter, the Ration Board clerk, had to deal with unruly clients, mainly mothers who were denied extra sugar they wanted so they could bake goods for their sons off at war.<sup>10</sup>

Like everything else, sugar rationing evolved and became more efficient. The local Ration Board believed that 24,000 people, or 5,000 families, would eventually register for sugar, requiring more organization and better planning than it could accomplish on short notice,<sup>11</sup> so county registration was delayed. The registration system for sugar divided into two departments: merchants or business owners and individual consumers. The local

newspaper announced that registration would initially take place in the local high schools — Lexington, Parry McCluer, Effinger, Natural Bridge, Fairfield, Brownsburg, Goshen, and Highland Belle<sup>12</sup> — and that after the school year it would move to private homes, usually those associated with voting districts that citizens were familiar with.<sup>13</sup> The newspapers did not mention it, but registration also took place at Lylburn Downing School for the black community.<sup>14</sup> Mae Woodson, a local school teacher, remembered working one summer at the satellite ration registration facility and finding herself unable to register one of her neighbors completely because she would not tell anyone her age.<sup>15</sup>

The original sugar quota set by the OPA was 50 percent of their 1941 consumption for most merchants and half a pound a week per person for households. Exceptions were made for bakers, bottlers, confectioners and producers of ice cream and dairy producers; these were allowed 70 percent.<sup>16</sup> Quotas varied during the war years; in mid-1943, for example, the sugar quota was increased to 25 pounds a month, mainly to allow canning.<sup>17</sup>

People received ration books with specific stamps and coupons for specific goods. As early as May 21, 1942, fifteen items were said to fall under rationing, or would in the near future. The county was already dealing with six controlled items — sugar, gasoline, bicycles, cars, typewriters and tires — with the other potential nine



World War II ration booklet cover



to buy cars: The county Ration Board was authorized to supervise the sale of twenty new cars and trucks.<sup>19</sup> This did not mean, however, that you were guaranteed the car you wanted, or any vehicle at all. As with most rationed goods, a person had to fill out an application with the local Ration Board, and the decision whether to allow a resident to buy extra gasoline or a car or a new tire was based on need.<sup>20</sup> The sale of the twenty motor vehicles did not actually happen until March, April and May, giving the local Ration Board time to evaluate applications and identify the neediest applicants. Additionally, Buena Vista was allowed five automobiles to be allocated however its Ration Board felt best.<sup>21</sup> (As early as May 1942, vehicles for sale privately began to show up in the local newspaper classified ads.)

**G**ASOLINE RATIONING, much like sugar rationing, came with approximately a month to prepare; in May 1942 gas rationing ranged from 2½ to five gallons weekly.<sup>22</sup>

Members of the community had to apply to the OPA through the local Rationing Board for gasoline ration cards.<sup>23</sup> Initially, 3,000 people registered in Rockbridge for gasoline.<sup>24</sup> Rationing fell into three main classifications: ‘A,’ ‘B’ and ‘X,’ with further classifications within each letter system. ‘X’ card holders were allowed unlimited gas; these included mail carriers, doctors, clergy and taxi or jitney drivers. In fact, if taxis and jitneys were clearly marked, drivers did not even have to register for

gasoline cards. ‘B’ card holders were those who needed extra fuel to operate their businesses or for frequent trips for medical treatments; ‘B’ card holders were further divided into three groups, based on how far a person had to travel regularly to meet his or her needs.<sup>25</sup>



Mary Frances Cummings

Until early 1943, tire rationing operated under quotas that did not really decrease consumption by much. In fact the tire quota for March 1942 was set so high that the *Gazette* speculated that it would cover 340,000 automobiles.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, gasoline allowances hit an all-time low in October 1943, when the quota for an ‘A’ card holder once dropped to two gallons a week and people were asked to make their ration coupons last three months. In effect, people were asked not to drive whenever it could be avoided.<sup>27</sup>

People coped imaginatively. Food alternatives such as margarine for butter and corn syrup for sugar began to appear.<sup>28</sup> Hitchhiking became popular; Mary Frances Cummings recalls that her husband hitchhiked from Norfolk, where he was stationed with the Navy, back to Lexington to see his family.<sup>29</sup> There is some anecdotal evidence that ration coupons were traded among friends and relatives, which may not have been entirely legal, but it may have helped mitigate some of the discomfort.

Once in place, rationing stayed in place for the duration of the war, though quotas sometimes changed in line with supplies. Of all the goods that were eventually rationed, the most frequent quota changes happened with sugar and gasoline. In May 1942, the sugar quota was increased to one pound per week from half a pound, ostensibly to help with canning and preserving. From November 1 to December 15, 1942, some sugar consumers were allowed to purchase three pounds a week to prepare for the holiday season.<sup>30</sup>

Gasoline quotas were also increased, starting July 1, 1942, to four gallons per week for ‘A’ card holders.<sup>31</sup> In November 1942, ‘A’ gasoline card holders were dropped from four to three gallons a week in sixteen of the seven-



Jacqueline Pleasants

teen eastern states, including Virginia. For local school teacher Mae Woodson, that deficit of one gallon a week mattered; she was working at a school in Craigsville in Augusta County and was allowed just enough gasoline to travel back to Rockbridge County once a week. On one trip home she expected that she could fill up in Goshen, but the station was dry. Woodson ran out of gas in Goshen Pass; luckily, a passing motorist pushed her car from the eastern end of the pass to Rockbridge Baths, where she was able to refuel.<sup>32</sup> By May of 1943, there was a pleasure-driving ban in effect for the Eastern Seaboard, with the loss of the guilty driver's gasoline ration card the penalty for violation.<sup>33</sup>

Gas rationing also affected local physicians. Jacqueline Pleasants, wife of Dr. Alfred Pleasants Jr., the black physician in Lexington, recalled that house calls were frequent before the war and after the war — but were frowned upon during the war years.<sup>34</sup> She also recalls that her husband would accept ration coupons as payment;<sup>35</sup> this form of stamp trading was not uncommon during the war years.

Next to be rationed was coffee. Leon Henderson, administrator of the federal Office of Price Administration, announced that coffee rationing would begin on November 28, 1942. Purchases were limited to one pound every five weeks for every person aged fifteen or older, which was approximately one cup a day.<sup>36</sup>

By the end of 1942, Rockbridge residents were not only feeling the effects of limited sugar, gas and coffee, but were facing even harsher conditions with winter weather. All of Virginia was dealing with the consequences of limited snow-removal equipment, mainly because of the tire and gas rationing.<sup>37</sup>

Food rationing officially took effect in the Rockbridge area on March 1, 1943, with public registration starting the week of February 22.<sup>38</sup> More than 200 types of canned foods began to be rationed: everything from fruits to soups. It was considered highly unpatriotic to hoard food, and in Lexington and the surrounding area, people worked hard to cooperate with OPA instructions.<sup>39</sup> C. S. Glasgow, a local attorney who was food rationing advisory officer for the local War Price and Rationing Board, was determined to run a “tighter ship,” even though Lexington and the area were already “tight.”<sup>40</sup>

Then, in early 1943, convivial residents were required to register at the Alcohol Beverage Control store, where they could obtain special ration coupons for spirits. When rationing started, one quart could be purchased every two weeks.<sup>41</sup> Charles Agnor, the local ABC manager, denied a ration book to Kathleen Painter, perhaps because Agnor knew that Painter was a non-drinker at the time and would not use the liquor coupons herself.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to most other rationed goods, liquor rationing was a little more relaxed. With their so-called whiskey ration books, people could buy any type of liquor. Beginning in early January 1944, book holders could purchase twice as much rum as they previously had been able, in an effort to alleviate a rum surplus.<sup>43</sup> After February of that year, in fact, the liquor quota did not change in the area through the end of the war.<sup>44</sup> And beginning in April, the liquor-rationing rules were changed to allow husbands and wives to use each other's liquor stamps.<sup>45</sup>

The rationing system was constantly being honed to find the most effective way of rationing. Soon a mechanism intended to make the system more efficient took

Ration stamps



effect, based on points. Not only would people have to have the correct money and ration coupon; they also needed points to pay for rationed goods. The point system was implemented locally with food rationing in early April 1943. As with everything else, however, there were exceptions to the point system; for example, dried fruits (raisins, prunes, and the like) could be bought without restriction, along with items like dog bones and not-so-sought-after cuts of meats, such as organs.<sup>46</sup> Fruit juices were low in point value for fear of the products going bad.<sup>47</sup>

In November 1943, the OPA ruled that stamps — both red, used for meats and goods like butter, and blue, for processed foods, such as ketchup — would remain

## AGRICULTURE IN ROCKBRIDGE DURING WORLD WAR II

In January 1943, Rockbridge County offered farmers the opportunity to enroll in a machinery class that would teach them to repair damaged farm equipment with used materials — the county's first effort to help local farmers adapt to the war. The class was taught by Guy Agnor of Lexington and was held in the agricultural room at Brownsburg High School.<sup>1</sup> This made perfect sense, according to Ruth Ann Herring, Agnor's daughter, because he operated a farm supply store.<sup>2</sup> Herring said the class never had a large attendance but did well enough that it continued to be offered. In fact, a second machinery course was offered at Brownsburg High, su-

pervised by Agnor but taught by John C. Layman, the shop teacher at the high school.<sup>3</sup> The classes at Brownsburg High aided the war effort greatly by repairing more than seventy pieces of farm machinery.<sup>4</sup>

It seemed that all of Brownsburg's residents were committed to agriculture during the war. A community cannery operated in the high school, and during its first two days of operation it processed 608 cans.<sup>5</sup> In all, the Brownsburg Community Cannery processed a total of 17,169 pints of fruits, vegetables and meats.<sup>6</sup>

Local farmers were assigned to increase food production, particularly potatoes, pork, eggs and milk. The

main concern in Rockbridge County and the surrounding areas was how to increase the production of eggs; county agent George W. Allison urged better feeding and management of flocks.<sup>7</sup>

In April 1943, the Rockbridge County Board of Agriculture decided that the new goal for the local farmers should be to plant more vegetables.<sup>8</sup> To complicate the farmers' lives more, the Office of Price Administration declared that by the end of the month, small and large producers of country butter would have to turn in their butter point coupons and report all retail sales. In 1943, the farmers of Rockbridge were asked to produce 14,500 acres of corn.<sup>9</sup>

During the war years almost everyone in the Rockbridge area was something of a farmer because of the abundance of Victory Gardens. Everyone had one. V-Gardens were on average ten-by-twelve-foot plots, sometimes twenty feet by forty when the space was available.<sup>10</sup> William W. Morton, an ordained minister and instructor at Washington and Lee University who was noted for the ornamental gardens at his home on Jefferson Street, was the local V-Garden committee chairman; he noted that the number of V-Gardens in 1943 was spectacular but declared that there was a need for still more gardens in 1944 to relieve the pressure on commercial production.<sup>11</sup>



One premier Lexington V-Garden was located in the front yard of The Pines at the corner of Lee Avenue and Preston Street.<sup>12</sup> The home belonged to the Gadsden sisters. Miss Eleanor and Miss Anzolette, who operated a boarding house, one possible explanation for the size of their V-Garden.<sup>13</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> *Rockbridge County News*, December 17, 1942, p. 3.
- <sup>2</sup> Ruth Ann Herring, interview by author, tape recording, Lexington, VA, July 19, 2007.

- <sup>3</sup> *Rockbridge County News*, February 11, 1943, p. 7.
- <sup>4</sup> *Rockbridge County News*, April 22, 1943, p. 1.
- <sup>5</sup> *Rockbridge County News*, August 12, 1943, p. 1.
- <sup>6</sup> *Rockbridge County News*, May 3, 1945, p. 6, and June 21, 1945, p. 7.
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valid for the rest of the war to help prevent hoarding of stamps and goods.<sup>48</sup>

In 1943, the rationing of meat products became a significant issue. Among meats, most of the rationed products were red meats. As the shortages of meat became more severe, prices started to increase toward the ceiling placed on them by the OPA.<sup>49</sup>

Around then, the rationing of clothing also began. The OPA in September of 1943 finally gave in to what people had feared for the past year and a half: It announced that people needed to make their shoes last longer.<sup>50</sup> The first shoe ration stamps appeared on the local scene in May of 1944.<sup>51</sup> There is no evidence, however, that shoe rationing in the county forced low-price shoe dealers out of business, as it did in Richmond.<sup>52</sup>

Along with shoes, jams and jellies were eventually added to the ration lists.<sup>53</sup> Meat shortages became pervasive. It was believed, in 1944, that there would be 200,000,000 pounds less meat for sale in retail stores nationwide in the month of February than in January.<sup>54</sup>

Prices and point requirements continued to increase, even as the price and points needed to buy vegetables decreased, largely due to Victory Gardens.

In 1944, things seemed to get slightly better — briefly. Food rationing became slightly less demanding from the middle of May 3 through December 26, 1944, when meat rationing, except for steaks and beef roasts, was actually suspended.<sup>55</sup> The tire quota for the month of June was increased from the quota in May to its highest point since the beginning of the war. Unfortunately, even though the overall theoretical quota for grade-one tires (normal passenger vehicle tires) increased in Rockbridge, there were practical problems with meeting that need.<sup>56</sup>

The availability of goods began to decline generally in 1944, with a decrease in the amount of meat from the ration order.<sup>57</sup> In addition to tightened food rationing, local gas-rationing quotas remained as low as two gallons per week.<sup>58</sup>

The sugar allowance seemed to be either rising or falling from month to month, at least until 1945, when it was clearly dropping steadily. By early 1945, residents of Rockbridge County and the surrounding areas were being given 29 percent less sugar for canning than they had been in 1944.<sup>59</sup> In addition to the reduction in the canning sugar allowance, residents also faced a decrease in their regular sugar allowances of 25 percent, largely because the sugar reserve had finally reached “rock bottom,” as the OPA declared.<sup>60</sup> Tire rationing was another mystery of 1945 because, in 1944, things seemed to be going smoothly for tires and rubber, with the exception



Red and blue points, issued by the Office of Price Administration

of grade one tires. In 1945, however, the local rationing board was notified by the War Price Board that the tire quotas for April and subsequent months would be 40 percent less than they had been previously.

The first months of 1945 brought growing meat shortages, but by the end of June 1945, Charles Bowles, the OPA director, agreed to deliver the same amount of meat to Rockbridge as had been delivered in 1944, thus effectively ending the local meat shortage.<sup>61</sup> By the middle of 1945 people could see the end of rationing, and by the end of 1945, they no longer worried about a meat shortage. Foods such as hamburger and sausages were removed from the point system and could be acquired simply by paying for them.<sup>62</sup> Rockbridge, Lexington and Buena Vista were thankful, just like the rest of the na-

tion, when gas rationing was immediately ended once Japan surrendered on August 14.<sup>63</sup>

Sugar rationing lasted into early 1946, and though people were asked to make their ration books last at least until January 1946, things became less restricted in the local area.<sup>64</sup> An example was the change in the local rationing boards' hours of operation. What used to be a nine-hour, five-and-a-half-day job became seven-and-a-half hours, Monday to Friday.<sup>65</sup>

It appears that through approximately four years of rationing few in Rockbridge suffered mightily from it, except perhaps for those who needed whiskey or cigarettes.<sup>66</sup> Faced with continually varying rationing requirements, area residents accepted them — creatively and patriotically.

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