

Rationing Revisited

By Frances Armington

"Recently, Julia's oldest grandson, Sam, a junior in high school, went to her one day with a question.

"Gran'mom, do you remember World War Two?"

"Yes," she answered with a wistful smile as she realized the nineteen-forties must seem like ages ago to him.

"Then you remember rationing during that war?"

"M-m-m-m," she agreed.

"Mr. Krown told us to ask our grandparents about it."

Julia realized that although Mr. Krown was approaching retirement age, he was still young enough to have missed the Great Depression as well as the war years...

She thought for a moment.

"I remember it was sort of a nuisance. Everyone had to apply for a ration book. Children, as well as adults, needed to have one. My mother had to take the little book of stamps with her every time she went grocery shopping. The clerk took out the right number of stamps when she paid for the food."

"But why? I don't understand. Why did everyone have to have one?"

Julia thought again. How could she explain scarcity, especially a scarcity of food, to Sam? He was accustomed to a well-stocked pantry and a refrigerator stuffed with goodies.

"There had to be rationing so everyone would have a fair share of food. At first, some kinds of food were scarce because the United States was shipping a lot of it to England. Later, after we entered the war, there had to be food for our soldiers and sailors and marines"

Sam had another question, "Was all food rationed?"

Julia explained, "At first, it was only sugar and coffee and then later meat, cheese, and butter. Eventually some canned goods were rationed also."

"So you didn't get much meat. Didn't you miss that?"

"Not really. At that time the country was still coming out of the Great Depression and we hadn't been able to afford much meat anyway."

"Mr. Krown said that Massachusetts was one of the hardest hit areas during the Depression."

"That's true. Many people had lost their jobs. Some of the men in our neighborhood were on the WPA and some of the teens were in the CCC."

"What did those letters stand for?"

"The Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps. They were run by the federal government to give work to those who were unemployed... But, they're another story. Maybe we'll get back to them later. Some people claimed that if it had not been for the war, the Depression would have lasted longer. It was when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 and the war began, that the United States started providing food for some European countries and that helped our economy."

She continued, "At first food was being sent to help the European countries. Then after the United States entered the war and our men were drafted they needed food also. With so many men in the Army or Navy, there were fewer farmers in the States to produce food. The government urged people living in towns and cities to plant Victory Gardens in their back yards in order to help ease the shortages."

"How could they do that in the cities?"

"In cities like Boston space was made in the city parks so those who lived in apartment buildings could raise vegetables."

"Didn't that hurt the farmers who were making their living growing food?"

"No, no, no! It was different." Julia was a little exasperated. She thought, "This generation doesn't understand what a 'shortage' is."

Then she said, "They had to be sure there was a supply of food. There were fewer men to work on the farms. The Army was taking both food and men."

"Your two cousins in Maine joined the Army," Sam remembered.

"Yes, and then my uncle didn't raise as much food because there was no one to help him."

"OK! I get it." Sam said.

Julia sighed, "Good! You see, all the Armed Forces of all the Allies had to be fed and you have to allow more food for service men than civilians because they have to be prepared for emergencies, for the loss of food in a retreat, for all sorts of reasons."

"Mr. Krown says that a lot of people starved in Europe during the war."

"Yes. That's true. They couldn't farm *and* fight. And that's another very sad story. But no one starved here. Because of the rationing there was enough food for everyone although not as much of some kinds as we might have liked. The government controlled the prices and the number of ration stamps that were needed for meat, eggs, and all the other scarce items."

"What about clothing?"

"That wasn't rationed although some restrictions were placed on clothing made in factories, especially on woolen clothing and women couldn't get nylons."

"So in my report I can say rationing was not a hardship."

"That's my spin on it, but it was inconvenient. Of course, I lived in the city. If you lived in the country, you were probably used to growing some of your food. Your Gran'dad's family raised chickens, so they had plenty of eggs and plenty of chicken. What hit them hard was the gas rationing."

"Gas was rationed?"

Julia sighed. "They may say an army marches on its stomach but there's more to it than that. Ships had to cross the ocean. Tanks and trucks and jeeps, they all needed gasoline. And the big farms in the Midwest needed gas to plow and to harvest their crops. There was no gas for Saturday 'joy rides' or Sunday afternoon outings. Only as much as you really needed."

"That **would** be tough."

That triggered another thought and Julia mused, "Some people ate horsemeat during the war. Another thing you might want to mention is Spam. Don't ask! I'll get some and we'll have it for supper tomorrow. You might be able to get extra credit for 'research'."

Sam had more questions but he sensed his grandmother had had enough.

"Ok, Gran'mom. I get the drift. Thanks for your help."

© 2008 Frances Armington