

Growing Up in Wenham in WWII Recollections of a Bygone Era

By Bob Hicks

Rationing

Unlike all the other World War II-related rules and regulations that affected some of our lives, rationing's impact was universal, everyone was subjected to its burdensome constraints. Rather than attempt to chronicle the details of its impact on our lives myself, I here step aside to quote in its entirety, Mrs. Adeline P. Cole's chapter on the topic from her book, *Wenham in World War II*:

"The expanding Army and Navy created increased demands for food and every sort of equipment. The United States had no backlog of supplies and it soon became evident that it would be necessary to ration the civilian population.

The immediate occasion of the setting up of a Ration Board was by order of Hon. Joseph Ely, Massachusetts tire administrator, requesting the selectmen of Wenham to appoint a Tire Ration Board.

Cutting off the natural supply of rubber from the East Indies created a rubber famine. It would take a long time to find substitutes or build plants for the production of synthetic rubber, so the remaining supply of rubber must be carefully husbanded. Each city or town was allocated a certain number of tires determined by the number of cars in each community. Wenham's allotment was oftentimes only one tire for the month.

The Selectmen, conforming to the request from the tire administrator, appointed as Tire Ration Board, Fred T. Vickers, Louis Dodge and Horace Pauling. This Board commenced to function January 5, 1942 by requesting all citizens to register with the Board the number of tires they owned with their serial numbers. Only one spare tire was allowed each car, the government buying any in excess of this allowance. It then became the duty of the Board to decide where the available allotment was to go, whose need was greatest and whose use of the tires would be most helpful in the war effort.

In May of '42 it became necessary to ration gasoline on account of lack of transportation. This act fell heaviest on the seacoast towns, the submarine menace stopping distribution by boat. The rationing of gasoline made a real change in the lives of our people as well as in the appearance of the town highways. Gone was the procession of sleek limousines on the way to Boston. Bicycles ridden by young and old wobbled down the village

street. The nights were punctuated by the two shifts returning from and going to the industrial plants. "Share your car" was the slogan of the workers as they journeyed to the defense plants. Speed limit was reduced to 30 miles an hour and by December the Governor requested that Sunday driving be abandoned. Farm trucks with a more generous allowance of gasoline seemed to replace many passenger cars, busses became crowded, the sidewalks populated by housewives carrying big brown paper bags of groceries. The closing of one grocery store made shopping for food doubly difficult.

During the summer of '42 in anticipation of fuel oil rationing, a survey was made of all homes using fuel oil for heating. Whenever possible, coal burning was substituted, every effort was made to conserve heat; storm windows were added, fireboards closed up open fireplaces, wood and coal burning stoves were set up. Fuel rationing was a fact by October '42 and Wenham people unable to reconvert from oil started the winter with a minimum allowance of oil.

The Tire Ration Board had now become the War Price and Rationing Board and this volunteer Board handled entirely the complicated mechanism of this act of the government, the only paid employee being the clerk, Guy Cole, assisted during the most active period by Mrs. Robert Jones. On January 8, 1945 Horace Pauling resigned. Ray Fowle was appointed to fill the vacancy.

This whole system of rationing involved three separate divisions. First there was the survey and the accounting of what each household had. Then there was the registration of each citizen and lastly the making out of the orders, or ration books by the Board.

Throughout the nation an army of public school teachers was recruited for the registration. In Wenham, for the first book it took the afternoons of a week to register the population. Registration was simplified by calling families in alphabetical order, those whose names commenced with A-F coming on Monday, etc. The work of the teachers was supplemented by other volunteers.

In rapid succession followed the rationing of sugar, fats, meat, canned goods, shoes and other commodities,

while many articles of everyday need became scarce. Queues sometimes a quarter of a mile long stood patiently in line for the possible half pound of butter that might be available. It seemed a full time job for a housewife to shop and collect sufficient food for the family.

People with land and the ability to do so purchased steers, which they fattened for home consumption. Baby pigs were in great demand as it seemed possible for many country people to raise a pig.

In carrying out the provisions of rationing, the work of this unpaid Ration Board was a very real patriotic service. It was task difficult to administer and lacked the stimulus of war work carried on by large groups. There were hours of hearings and discussions to make the allotments most fairly. However fair the decisions, the unpopularity of rationing sometimes precluded the gratitude this Board merited.

The real accomplishments of the Board and their assistants can never be summed up in columns of statistics but the gratitude of their fellow townsmen will increase in the years to come when we can see the war in retrospect.

The Board's activities ceased in September, 1945 when the work was transferred to Beverly as rationing became less necessary. Mr. Vickers and the members of his Board received from the President and from the Governor of Massachusetts, personal acknowledgment of the value of their services."

The details of so all-encompassing government control of public consumption of necessary goods and services for almost four years are far too numerous to list here, but a short representative listing of goods either unavailable at all or only in limited rationed amounts includes automobiles, radios, metal furniture, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, sewing and washing machines, typewriters, footwear, bicycles, fuel oil, cheese, silk, stoves, nylon, butter, margarine, milk, lard, processed foods (bottled, canned and frozen), canned milk, dried fruits, coal and firewood, fruit butter, jellies and jams. Certain medicines became scarce, penicillin, for instance, was rationed to conserve available supplies for the military.

How small an item could become rationed? Try this, an empty toothpaste tube had to be turned in to buy a new one.