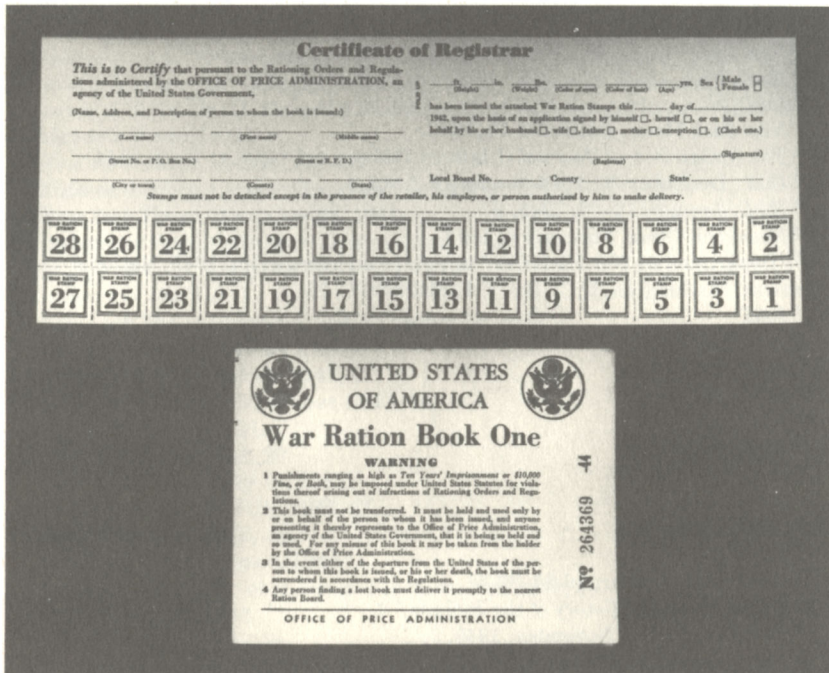


# Supplying the Civilians:



## A Photo Essay of World War II Ration Stamps

*By Oliver E. Rooker*

One of the hardest lessons learned on the home front during World War I was the need for adequate price and rationing controls. Failure to control prices substantially increased the cost of the war and reduced the standard of living of millions of people. Recognition of this unsatisfactory organizational experience led to various Industrial Mobilization Plans for any future war. By the time the United States began to feel the impact of the Second World War, the government had in place certain policy

guidelines regarding priorities, allocations, prices, and distribution of raw materials and goods.

The primary responsibility for the allocation and distribution of civilian supplies initially fell to the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply, which was established in April, 1941, but which had little authority in pre-war days. Congress reorganized the agency, changed its name to the Office of Price Administration (OPA) in August, 1941, and increased its powers with the Emergency Price Control Act of January, 1942, which authorized it to establish maximum prices on most commodities and on residential rents. Its power to ration came with the Second War Powers Act.

Control of commodities was undertaken in much the same way, regardless of the commodity: procurement and control of world supplies, reaching agreements with foreign claimants for those commodities, and distribution of the United States' allocation to the Armed Forces, Lend-Lease, and civilian populations.

The OPA's task was to distribute the civilian allocations equitably. It devised and administered the mechanics of the various rationing programs. The OPA eventually employed about 60,000 paid persons, but relied primarily on volunteers—200,000 at the peak. It was administered from the national office in Washington, through nine to twelve regional offices and as many as 104 district offices, down to 5,500 to 7,000 local War Price and Rationing Board offices. The OPA was a complex organization, hastily organized and rapidly expanded. Inter-departmental and interagency cooperation were sometimes absent. Lines of authority often were unclear.

On January 5, 1942, within a month after the United States entered the war, the OPA began the rationing program with tires. In May it began to ration gasoline on the East Coast and in December extended it to the entire nation. Rationing was imposed on crude oil in the East in the fall of 1942 and nationwide in the late winter of 1942.

Sugar and coffee were the first foodstuffs to be affected by shortages. During normal pre-war years Americans consumed close to eight million tons of sugar, two-thirds of which was imported from the Philippines, Hawaii, and Cuba. Early in the war the Philippines was cut off; imports from Hawaii were seriously reduced. Lack of shipping and submarine activities curtailed imports from Cuba. At the same time the demand was enlarged by Lend-Lease shipments and the increased use of sugar in manufac-

## THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

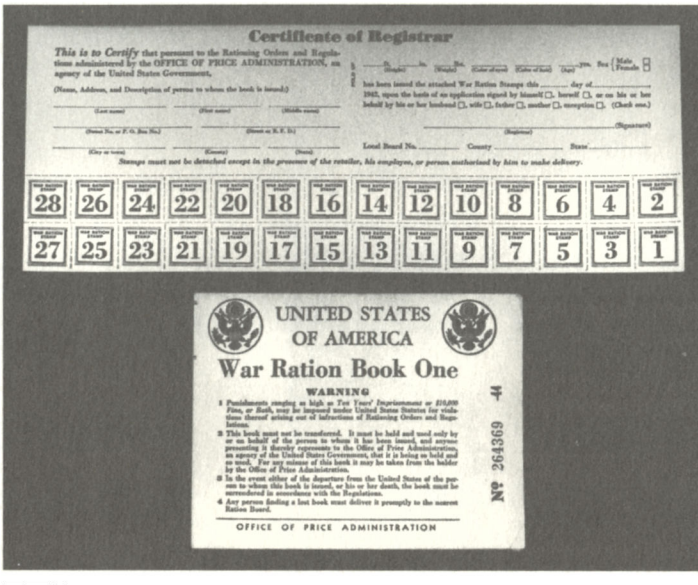
turing alcohol, synthetic rubber, and explosives. Rationing of sugar began in May, 1942, and continued until 1947.

Coffee, most of which was imported from Brazil, became temporarily scarce because of large shipments to the Allies and interference with shipping. Coffee rationing began in November, 1942, but was discontinued eight months later.

By the end of 1942 the armed forces and Lend-Lease were absorbing 25 percent of the foodstuffs produced in this country. Rationing of processed foods (canned, bottled, frozen, and dried vegetables and fruits, juices, and soups) began on March 1, 1943, under a "point system." Four weeks later the point system was extended to meats, fats, and oil. Under this system the OPA determined the point value of goods and issued coupons valued for a certain number of points. By mid-1942 rationing covered 95 percent of the food supply. In addition to gasoline and food, rationed commodities eventually included automobiles, bicycles, stoves, typewriters, rubber footwear, and shoes.

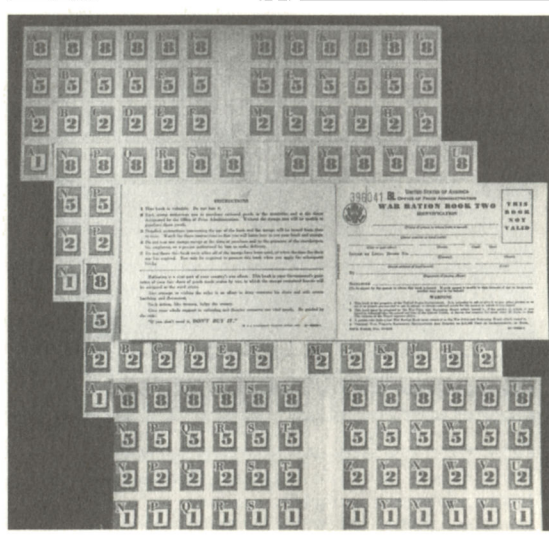
Probably no government agency ever affected more intimately than the OPA the lives of so many people and it received more than its share of criticism. The fundamental necessity of the OPA's work was understood, however, and, despite a somewhat lucrative black market for some items, the great mass of patriotic Americans loyally supported it. The OPA not only saved taxpayers billions of dollars in the cost of the war, but it prevented the widespread chaos and suffering which surely would have followed, had not price controls and rationing been in place. In the end the war on the home front was won and citizens of the United States emerged from World War II more prosperous than after World War I.

\* Oliver E. Rooker is a resident of Canton, Oklahoma, who lived in California during World War II. Near the end of the rationing program, both Mr. Rooker, a stamp collector, and his mother asked the Office of Price Administration for a complete set of ration stamps. Although most of the sets were distributed to libraries and historical societies, the Rookers received two sets. Mr. Rooker used one set to assemble a thirty-five piece exhibit that he displays at schools and civic and social organizations.

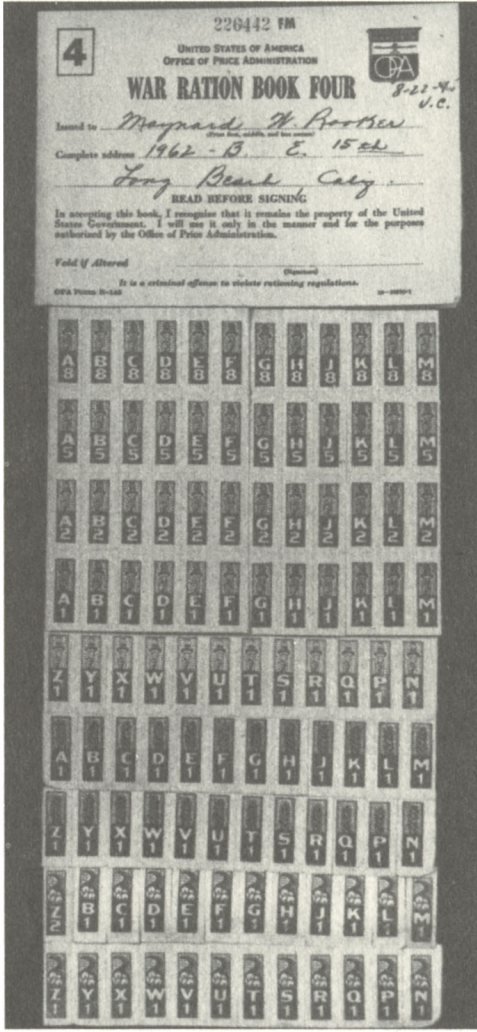


*War Ration Book One (above) was in circulation from May 4, 1943, until April 30, 1944. Its holder was permitted to purchase one-half pound of sugar a week, about half the normal consumption. Book One was eventually used for coffee and shoes.*

*War Ration Book Two (right) was issued in March, 1943, and was used for processed foods (blue stamps), and meats, fats, and oils (red stamps) (Photos by Ed Blochowiak).*



# THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



The production of War Ration Book Four was the "biggest printing job in history." The job required:

—18 printing plants scattered throughout the nation

—96 carloads of special safety paper to balk counterfeiters

—7,500 gallons of paste to fasten the pages in books. Using paste saved 75 tons of stapling wire, enough steel to make 15,000 Garand rifles.

—87,000 pounds of ink

—750,000 boxes; 200 books to the box

—4 freight trains of 30 cars each to take the books to the 5,500 War Price and Rationing Boards across the United States.

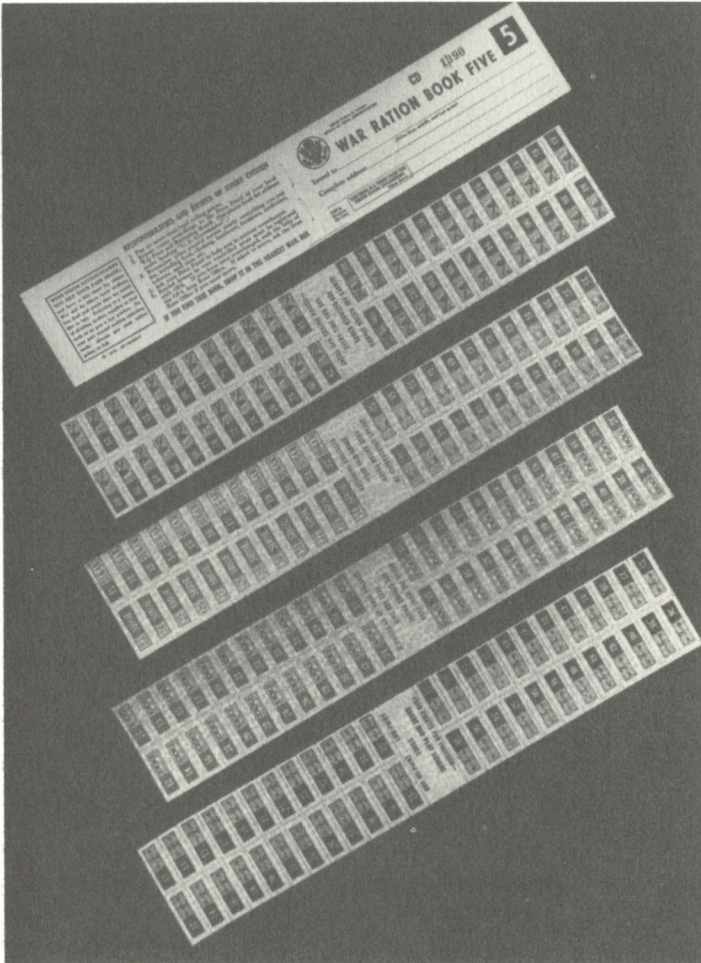
During the war a family of six was issued 24 food ration books with a total of 5,064 coupons.

To prevent hoarding of foodstuffs, ration stamps were redeemable only for a specified period—usually a month—and could be cancelled at any time.

Victory gardens were an important home front activity for many Americans during World War II. Officials estimated that up to one-third of the vegetables eaten in 1943 were grown in victory gardens.

The OPA frequently issued charts and instructional booklets to show housewives and other consumers how to get the most out of ration points by judicious shopping.

## RATION STAMPS



*Each month every man, woman, and child in the country, and some military personnel, received two ration books. Approximately three billion stamps less than one inch square changed hands every month. Newspapers kept the public informed of the stamps' validity dates.*

*War Ration Book Three was used from 1943 to March, 1944, when Book Four was issued and circulated until the end of the program. War Ration Book Five (above) had already been printed when Japan surrendered and was never distributed to the public.*

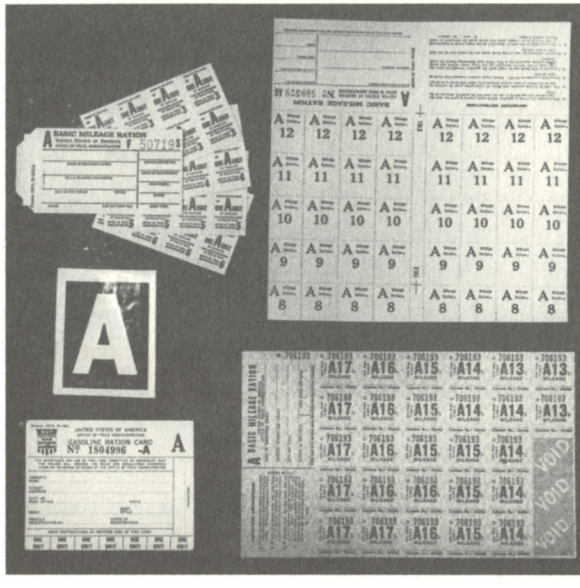
*The OPA occasionally issued additional stamps for sugar for home food processing. The customer applied for the stamps through his local rationing board. Bakeries, cafes, and industrial users obtained their quota with certificates.*



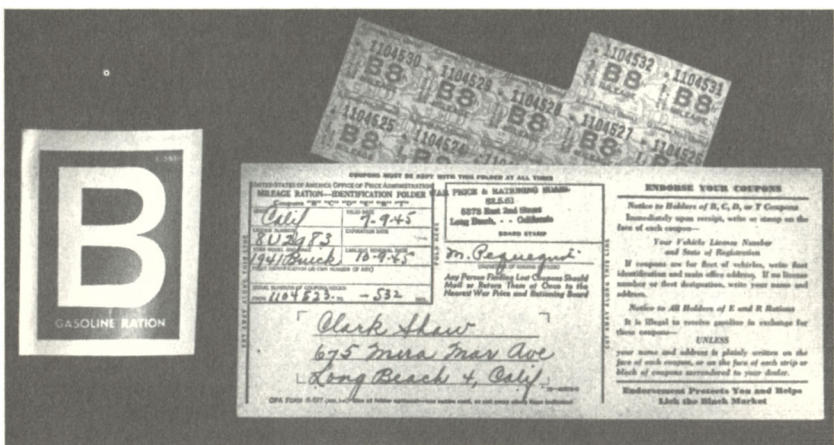
## RATION STAMPS

Gasoline rationing lasted from May, 1942, through September, 1944. The public never really understood that the purpose of gasoline rationing was to conserve rubber. Each motorist was assigned a sticker with a letter of priority—A to E. The sticker was displayed on the windshield to indicate the type of coupon being used.

A Coupons (right) were issued to owners of automobiles for pleasure driving. One stamp was worth three to five gallons per week. After January, 1943, when the OPA banned pleasure driving, the A Coupon was used only for essential business such as shopping, church, funerals, and medical attention.

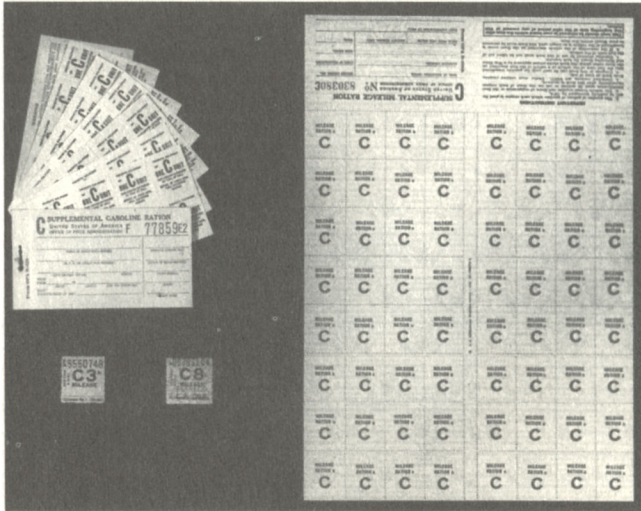


B Coupons (below) were issued to cover essential driving, such as commuting to work. The amount varied depending on the distance. War workers received a supplemental allowance.

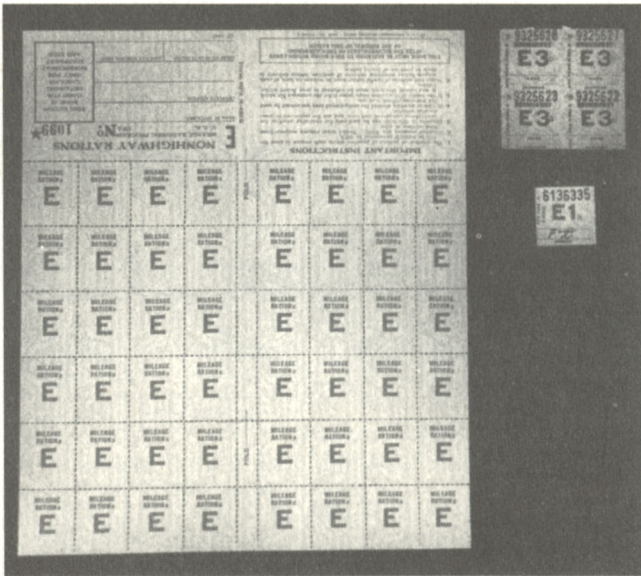


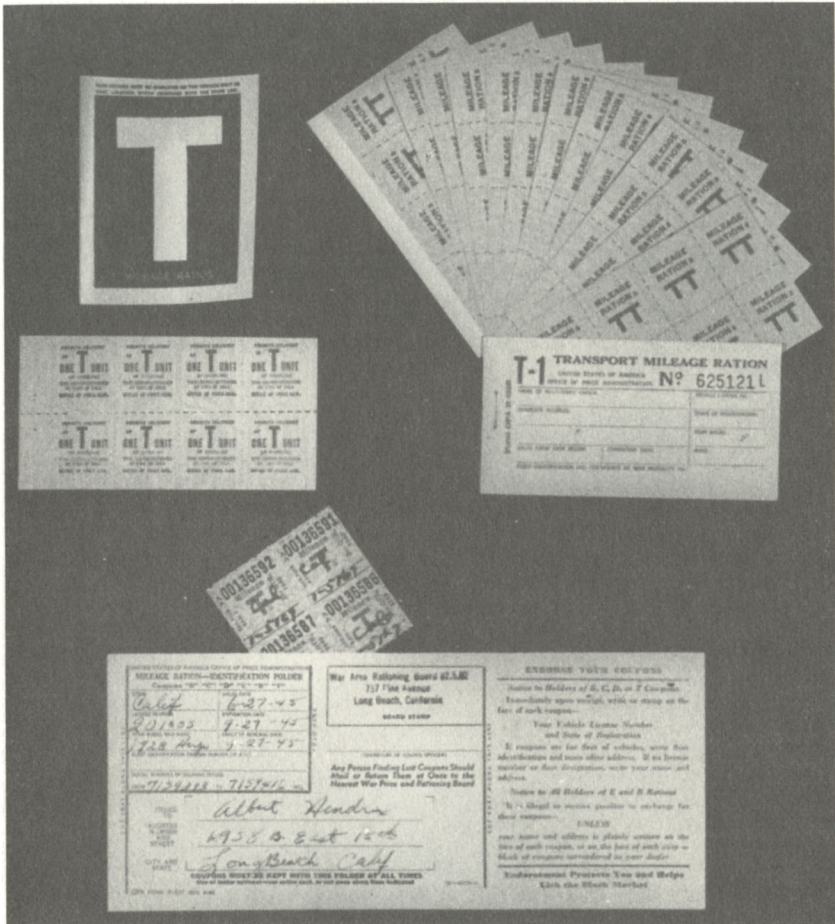


# THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



*C Coupons (above) were issued to essential industries and occupations such as physicians. E Coupons (below) were used by farmers for non-highway use gasoline for farm implements. They also were used for the highest priority category—emergency vehicles, police, clergy, and occasionally politicians. R Coupons provided allocations for boats and small engines.*



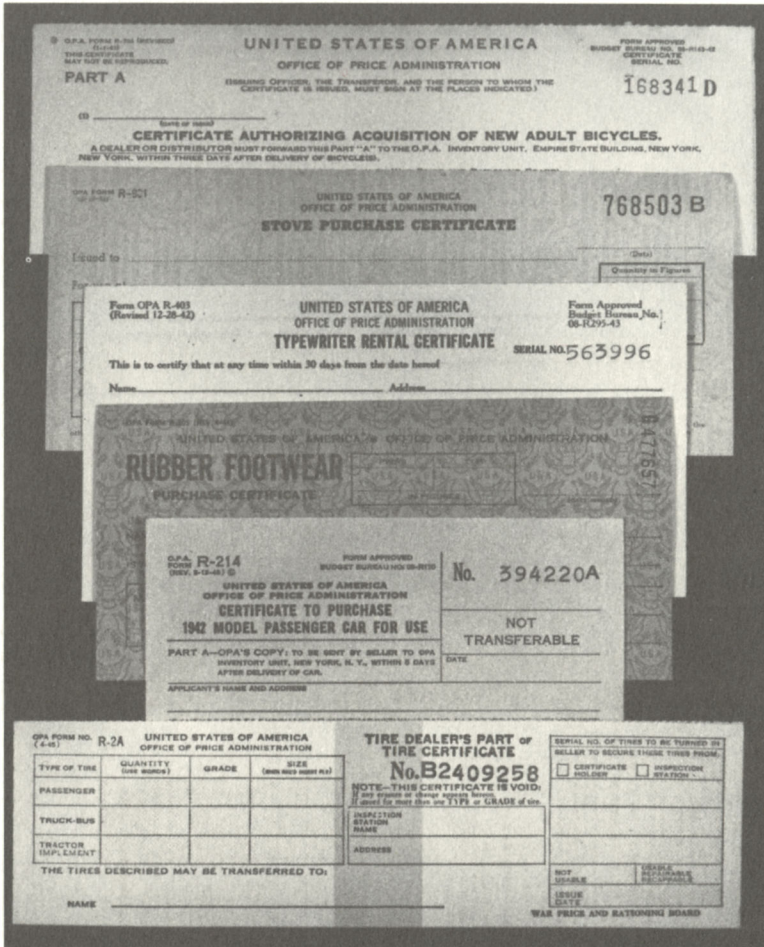


Owners of trucks, both farm and commercial, received T Coupons (above). Truckers and farmers generally received all the gasoline they needed, but it was a mixed blessing because of the increased paper work. Motorcyclists used D Coupons, but received no sticker. S Coupons were issued to servicemen for use when off duty. Essential industries and certain occupations acquired bulk gasoline coupons.

A thriving black market developed with fuel selling for two to three times the legal price ceiling. But as difficult as the gasoline program was to administer, there were important benefits. Traffic fatalities decreased; car pooling and walking became fashionable.

Another problem the OPA faced was counterfeiting of ration stamps and coupons. Verification centers were established in the OPA's regional offices where the ration currency was inspected for counterfeiting, stolen ration currency, and other problems. The government used special safety paper to deter counterfeiters.

# THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Consumers had to apply to the OPA for major purchases which included bicycles, kitchen appliances, typewriters, rubber footwear, new automobiles, and tires. Other goods unavailable for much of the war ranged from lawn mowers, brushes made of hair or bristle, boxed candy, and beer mugs to glass eyes, lobster forks, ice skates, alarm clocks, and occasionally cigarettes and book matches.

Consumers and the OPA found innovative ways to overcome the shortages in many cases. Clothiers sold mens' victory suits—one pair of cuffless pants, a short jacket with narrow lapels, no vest. The OPA decreed that women's skirts must end one inch above the knee and that swim suits had to be two piece. Women used leg makeup and eyebrow pencils to simulate nylon or silk stockings. Patched clothing became the latest fashion fad. In general consumers found ways to "use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without."

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