Stories To Learn From: WWII Survival On The Home Front

Life in Detroit back in the early 40s was idyllic for most—far different than it is today.

America was clawing its way out of the Great Depression and President Franklin D. Roosevelt calmed fears with his homey fireside chats on the radio. Americans were hardy and most exhibited strong work ethic. They had little money, but families stuck together—helped each other, and helped their neighbors as well.

From Promise to War

Kids didn't have cell phones, IPads, computers, notebooks, X-boxes, video games, cable TV—they didn't even have TV back then—radio was their communication medium. They played outside with their friends. And they made up most of their games.

Marbles and "hide-and-seek" were popular. They walked or rode

bikes to see their friends. And no-one locked their house doors. All the kids could play outside until the street lights came on. Then they had to return home.

Parents sat on porches, visited with passing neighbors, and watched children play in the neighborhood. Everyone felt safe and secure. If a child disobeyed, any parent in the

neighborhood could discipline the child—including spanking. Then when the child got home, they were given another spanking by their own parents.

They didn't sue each other at the drop of a hat. They learned discipline and respect for adults and the law. And they learned how to survive as a group.

The year 1940 was a good year for America—full of promise. The country was getting back to work, and the Great Depression was fading into history. The window to the world was the radio and families crowded around the big box in the front room every night to listen to their favorite programs—*Jack Benny, The Lone Ranger, Fibber McGee and Mollie*, and *The Shadow*.

Every Sunday afternoon, a radio announcer would read the comic section of the local paper—people called them "the funnies."—imitating the voices of the characters as the children laid on the floor and read along. And most families were poor but content.

Then came Pearl Harbor and suddenly our country was thrust into a long, bitter, and violent war. My older brother remembers when the president announced to the world that America had been attacked and uttered his famous statement: *"December 7th, 1941, a day that shall live in infamy …"* My brother doesn't remember what was said, but at one year old, he felt the anger and fear that filled our home.

Soon over a million young Americans were putting on uniforms and going off to fight the Germans in Europe and the Japanese in the South Pacific. Eventually almost 14 million would serve. Our dad joined the fight and spent almost two years in action in the Pacific—particularly Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

We were no longer Catholic or Protestant, Jew or atheist. We were no longer Republican, or Democrat, and our skin color or where we grew up didn't matter. We were all Americans. We were

all in this together, and we intended to win. We were at war.

As American involvement increased, the government soon realized we were rapidly expending vital resources sending men, machines, supplies, and food overseas. Washington knew our resources were limited—although manufacturing immediately ramped up, and 3.5 million women went to work—so an Office of Price Administration was established with directions to ration vital resources. Production of new cars was halted during the War so plants could manufacture planes, guns, tanks, and ships.

When President Roosevelt announced to the country that America would begin rationing, my mother knew instinctively what to do. As a Canadian who grew up on a Mennonite farm where the family grew its own food and scrimped and saved, it wasn't difficult to repeat this lifestyle. Her family in Detroit joined other Americans—mostly immigrants like her—and cut back on the use of meat, fuel, sugar, coffee, shoes, rubber, and other consumer goods so the troops "would have enough."

The federal government established War Price and Rationing boards in every community to verify and certify households and issue ration books to buy certain commodities. All heads of households were required to register for ration books containing ration stamps. Each stamp had a simple drawing of a plane, ship, gun, tank, wheat stalk, fruit, or alphanumeric lettering, and a serial number.

The stamps were printed in color—red for meat and butter, blue for processed foods, and gray for general commodities. People could purchase rationed products by using ration stamps or compressed wood fiber token representations of ration points and cash. Tokens were used as change for ration stamps because metal was in such short supply.

Sugar was rationed first—one half pound per person per week—half what people normally consumed. One #30 stamp from book 4 plus cash would get you 5 pounds of sugar. Then chocolate was rationed. Chocolate was being used to make chocolate candy bars for the military. Even coffee was rationed—one pound every 5 weeks.

The national speed limit was reduced to 35 mph to minimize tire wear. The Japanese had taken over all the rubber plantations in Indonesia so rubber was very difficult to obtain. Nylon was needed for parachutes and gun powder bags so sale to civilians was quickly banned. Even after the war in 1945, women's nylons were not available until late 1947.

Gasoline was carefully rationed based on five levels of need.

- A letter sticker on the windshield identified the level

of need. “A” stickers had the lowest priority. The car owner could purchase up to 4 gallons a week. Gas cost 12¢ a gallon back then.

- “B” stickers were for people working in the defense industry. They could buy up to 8 gallons a week.
- “C” was reserved for doctors, who were deemed essential to the war effort.
- “T” stickers were on trucks. They could buy all the gas they needed.
- An “X” sticker gave the holder unlimited access to gas. This sticker was for defense workers, fire fighters, police officers, and ministers. A scandal erupted when about 200 members of Congress were found to be illegally using X ration stamps. Some felt they were above the law.

To help fund the War, children purchased 10¢ victory stamps and pasted them in Victory Book albums that were exchanged for $25 War Savings Bonds when all the stamp spaces were filled. Schools and veteran groups conducted scrap paper drives to extend our supply of paper packing material, and others collected scrap metal for recycling.

Even bacon grease was saved and donated to butchers who collected it and provided it to rendering companies that processed it into glycerine, a substance used for explosives. Some families also used the fat in bacon grease to make soap. My mother did this and used this soap to clean the floors. Because meat, oil, and butter were rationed, she re-used the fat for frying as much as possible before pouring it into a can and turning it into our butcher.

The Lessons We Learned

We became accustomed to shortages and soon more vital commodities were rationed. Adults were allowed 2-1/2 pounds of red meat each week (if it was available). Hamburger cost about

43¢ a pound plus 8 points in ration stamps. Pork chops cost 37¢ a pound plus 7 points in stamps.

Americans found ways to cope. And we found creative ways to make meals. Very few people complained. We considered shortage an inconvenience but not devastating. We shared, we re-purposed old clothes, we handed clothes down to younger kids, we made clothing out of feedbags, we used rags to make warm quilts, and we put cardboard in our shoes to make them last longer. We made do with what we had or made what we needed. This included much of our food.

As the War dragged on, access to even more goods became restricted. In 1943 the government began rationing canned goods. Each person was allocated 48 points of ration stamps per month to buy canned, dried, and frozen food. And people were encouraged to plant gardens in every back yard. President Roosevelt urged all Americans to start "victory gardens" to grow enough fruits and vegetables to help sustain a family through the winter. Posters hung on walls and buildings saying "Plant a Victory Garden – A Garden Will Make Your Rations Go Further."

A Victory Garden Institute handbook was created with a patriotic red, white, and blue cover. It told people how to start and maintain a home garden. Over 20 million Americans planted gardens in backyards, empty lots, in flower beds, and on rooftops. My mother fell back on her Mennonite upbringing and began to improve soil, compost, and journal her gardening successes and failures.

Today my mother's journal is a treasure trove of good sage advice for optimum planting, harvesting, and bug control. People talked with their neighbors and like my own parents, millions of Americans grew gardens to produce as much food as they could. If they could produce over five percent of their own food, they felt good. If they could grow over 20% of their own food, they became ecstatic. They shared garden harvests

and they taught others how to replicate their success.

By 1944, about 40% of food for America came from Victory Gardens. This program was a huge success—many emigrants were doing this before the government acted and established policies.

Many of them were drying and canning foods from the time they arrived in this country. So when Roosevelt urged all Americans to preserve foods, many thought, “Yes, we already are.”

Then they expanded their food preservation operations.

Home canning became a major food processing industry, and canning was occurring almost every day. By the end of the War, my mother was canning about 200 jars of food each summer. The family constructed a pantry to hold food stuffs, and we never went hungry. By agreeing to produce four quarts of canned fruit per pound of sugar used, she and other like households could receive extra sugar allotments. We ate well.

Americans are highly adaptable, and we survived rationing and victory gardens quite well. Today the victory garden concept is growing popular once more as people realize that the healthiest foods available are those grown at home.

Just like our grandparents who found ways to survive the Great

Depression, adults living when WWII ended carried with them valuable lessons for the future. They hoped for the best, but prepared for the worst.

They identified with their local community, and they learned who had the skills they may need. One skilled person welded and repaired most of the vehicles, wagons, and toys in our neighborhood. My mother conducted canning classes where she taught other women how to safely preserve garden produce and fruits. Before being drafted and shipped out, my father taught how to repair vehicles to get the most miles out of each gallon of gas.

Kids entertained themselves building forts and reading comic books playing together in groups of friends. No one was barred from joining the fun. In the evening, neighbors gathered to play cards and board games. Everyone knew everyone else and all felt safe and secure in their close neighborhoods.

As Americans we respected faith, family, and community. We didn’t flaunt our religion. We respected all religions. And we accepted a duty to help others while living within our own means. We learned and taught new skills and we worked together to develop capabilities that would benefit all.

We never knowingly left any family without food, water, or shelter. But we expected each person to do everything they could for the benefit of all—to help carry their own load. And we corrected our own problems. There were those who abused the system, but because they lacked character and integrity, we moved beyond them and they were soon left behind. For us, we never felt alone. And we survived as a community.

CLICK HERE

To find more survival secrets that we lost to history

Watch video >>

References

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victory_garden

http://www.genealogytoday.com/guide/war-ration-books.html