



MOUNT ALBERT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

Issue 68 • October 2024

WWW.MTALBERTHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG.NZ • PH: 09 846 4509 • INFO@MTALBERTHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG.NZ

Rationing in New Zealand September 1939–June 1950

Rationing had an enormous impact on private households between 1939 and 1950. Almost everything was in short supply, and petrol, fabric and some food were formally rationed via coupons in ration books. This article draws on memories from Mt Albert and nearby suburbs to tell the story.

Eleven lean years followed the outbreak of World War II on 3 September 1939. Memories of the Great Depression were still fresh as the economy contracted again. New Zealand prioritised supplying food and materials to its own armed forces, to Great Britain, and to the US forces in the Pacific, and to do this, domestic consumption had to be managed. Rationing ensured the fair distribution of scarce goods and materials to all, across both domestic and industrial sectors. People were urged to "make do and mend," reduce consumption and avoid waste.

September 1939: Petrol

Petrol rationing for private individuals began two weeks after war was declared. New Zealand had the second highest level of car ownership in the world, with one car for every six people, so this was a significant and symbolic move. Coupons allowed car owners to buy 6–12 gallons of petrol monthly, depending on the size of car, enough for between 180–280 miles. During the Pacific War (December 1941–July 1945), allocations dropped to 2–3 gallons, leading to many cars being taken off the road or fitted with coke gas converters. New tyres were unavailable, but people joked that the tiny petrol ration meant that their current tyres would last for decades. For a time after the war (June 1946–February 1948) petrol rationing was lifted, then controlled by restricting supply, but coupon rationing had to

be reintroduced (6–12 gallons a month) to conserve foreign funds. It finally ended on 1 June 1950.

September 1939: Supply Rationing

The Government's main method of rationing to the domestic population was to limit the supply of products available to retailers, who had to ensure fair distribution to their customers. This covered both staples and luxury items, such as apples, oranges and bananas, bacon, wines and spirits, sweets and chocolate. Where possible, extra supplies were released for Christmases. Even when times were very tough, parents would somehow obtain an orange, a shiny apple and a few sweets to put into the toes of their children's Christmas stockings. Tobacco was never rationed by coupon. Queues were common when new stock arrived, and those who didn't get there quickly risked missing out. Supply rationing continued until June 1950.

April 1942: Coupon Rationing

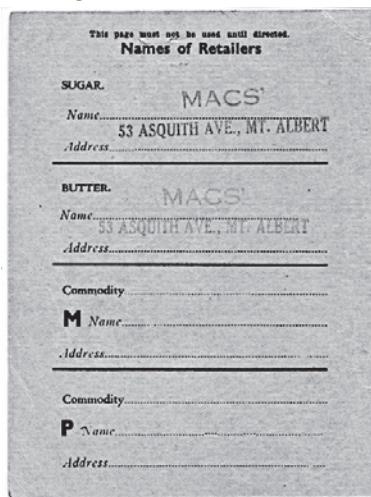
Japan's entry into the war on 7 December 1941 made supply even tighter. A coupon-based rationing system was introduced on 27 April 1942 for some food and fabric items. Ration books were issued by the Post Office. Everyone had to register with a local grocer, who would cut out the appropriate coupons from their ration book as part of each transaction. If someone needed to purchase a rationed food item from a different grocer, their ration book had a limited

number of "emergency counterfoils" which could be filled in, cut out and attached to a regular coupon. Knowing who was shopping where allowed the Ministry of Supply to accurately distribute goods, similar to how today's supermarket loyalty cards work. If you had the money and coupons, and if the shop had enough stock of the rationed item, then you could buy your allocation. The ration value of each coupon was regularly reviewed and often changed.

In addition to the standard allocations, there were various types of supplementary coupons, where different groups could get more rations. Pre-school and school-aged children, expectant and nursing mothers, people over 70, invalids with a range of conditions, and adults working in certain heavy industries were all covered by these variations.

April 1942: Sugar and Stockings

Sugar was the first food rationed by coupons, with 12oz a week allowed for each person, saving 10,000 tons a year. There was an additional annual allowance of sugar for jam making, between 6 and 12 lb a year. Rationing ended on 27 August 1948. Immediately this announcement was made, the President of the New



Butter	Butter	Sugar	Sugar
32	30		
31	29		
28	26		
27	25		
24	22		
23	21		
20	18	20	18
19	17	19	17
16	14	16	14
15	13	15	13

Zealand Dental Association sounded the alarm about future tooth decay.

The second coupon introduced on 27 April 1942 allowed women over 16 one pair of stockings every three months. There had been shortages from the start of the war, and stockings laddered easily. When no alternative was available, girls painted their legs and drew a line up the back of their calves to mimic seams before going out dancing. The first American forces arrived a few weeks after this rationing started, and were very popular, bringing stockings, candy, tobacco, pop music and fun to wartime Auckland.

May 1942: Clothing and Fabric

On 29 May 1942 each person was issued with 52 coupons for clothing, fabric, footwear and household linen for the year. Clothes coupons were the same for ready-made clothes or fabric. 2 were needed for a woman's or girl's blouse; 3 for a skirt or cardigan, 4 for a dress, 5 for slacks. A man's or boy's pyjamas needed 4 coupons; trousers 5; overcoat or raincoat 12; a three piece suit 16. Shoes were 3; and sandals or sandshoes 2. Bloomers or underpants required 2 coupons. Initially wool and household linens had to be purchased using clothing coupons, but later these became separate categories of coupon. Expectant and new mothers had a special allowance related to the needs of a new baby, although infants' napkins were not rationed. Clothing coupons could be redeemed at any shop.

Access to clothing was tight, though, and people had to balance cost, availability, number of coupons and patriotic attitudes that waste should be minimised. From January 1943, embroidery, lace, pockets, applique and other unnecessary elements were banned on women's pyjamas.

Some brides married in day-frocks, but for others a special wedding dress was an escape from the dreary daily fashion. Mt Albert resident Doreen Downing remembered the whole family contributing clothing coupons

for her cousin's bridal party. Her mother extended the hems and cuffs of Doreen's winter coat with fur to accommodate a growth spurt, and knitted her a new cardigan knitted from wool unpicked from old garments. Pat Pound from Westmere remembered swapping clothing coupons for tea coupons with neighbours, being given second hand clothes by neighbours with older daughters, and how going barefoot was common.

"I don't remember wearing shoes to school until I went to Pasadena Intermediate, so I imagine all our leather went into Boots for the Boys".

Clothing rationing ceased on New Year's Eve 1947, with a plea from Minister of Supply Arnold Nordmeyer that consumers not go mad buying new clothes, because supply was still tenuous. He was wasting his breath: by the middle of 1948, Christian Dior's 'New Look' was sweeping the world, inspiring a new generation of fashion designers and home sewers who reacted against wartime austerity and embraced the new style. Sherley Gibson, an Avondale bride who married in Mt Albert Methodist Church in April 1948, filled her glory box with newly sewn clothes, which a few months later were all out of fashion. Mt Albert resident Shirley Henderson remembered the impact of this:

"All of a sudden, after the lean, sparse war years, an irresistible array of colourful fabrics appeared in the shops and "The New Look" was born. Swirly full-skirted frocks, some with stiffened net underlays, were the order of the day. Swing coats with lots of gores, or cut-on-the-cross at the back fell into soft folds, were cape-like but gave an "A-line" effect as well. Nifty two-piece suits, some with nipped-in waists and peplum-styled jackets were considered very smart. Halter-necks, fischtails and off-the-shoulder styles were popular for evening wear, and sunfrocks, the latter being bright and colourful."

June 1942: Tea

The third set of ration coupons, in use from 1 June 1942, was for tea. 8oz a month was allowed per person aged 10 and over. From 1 August 1946, people over 70 received an additional ration equivalent to 4lb per year. Tea rationing ended on 31 May 1948.

Winter 1943: Eggs

Many households kept a few hens, mostly fed on kitchen scraps, but overall there was a national egg shortage. From mid 1943, children under 5, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and some invalids could register as "preferential customers" and their guaranteed extra portions went "under the counter" at the grocers. Although no coupons were issued, egg supply to grocers was restricted until 7 June 1950, making eggs the last item rationed in New Zealand.

October 1943: Dairy Products

Britain needed more food, so from 28 October 1943 New Zealanders reduced their annual dairy consumption by a quarter. Butter coupons allowed 8oz per person weekly: in Britain, the weekly ration was only 2oz butter and 2oz of another fat. Supply rationing of cheese and cream was also introduced: even farmers and people who owned a milk cow were prohibited from using cream for anything domestic, although many families churned their own butter.

Sandwiches and home baking were core features of the New Zealand diet, and the rationing of butter, coming alongside limits on sugar and eggs, made for some grim eating. Recipes were developed for no-egg and one-egg cakes; lard was used in some baking instead of butter; and golden syrup became a pantry staple, as a sugar substitute that needed no coupons. The butter ration was cut to 6oz on 11 June 1945, a month after VE Day, and was not raised back to 8oz until 24 October 1949. The supply rationing of cheese and cream was lifted on 23 February 1950, and coupons were no longer needed for butter from 4 June 1950.

March 1944: Meat

From May 1943, all fresh pork was diverted to the war effort, and was not available again until 17 December 1945, shortly after the war ended. Housewives had got used to making do with whatever meat was available, but further sacrifices were required. From 6 March 1944, meat coupons were issued for beef, veal, mutton and lamb; each adult and school aged child was entitled to 2.5lb a week and under 5s received a half ration. Unlike groceries, you did not need to register with a particular butcher. Coupons were numbered, and each number had to be used within a specified 2 week period. If you ate in a restaurant, you surrendered meat coupons with your payment. Domestic consumption dropped by a third, allowing an additional 10,000 tons for export each year. It was not too bad though: mutton skirts, bacon, ham, sausages, offal, poultry, rabbits, fish, etc. were not rationed.

Pat Pound remembered the meat her family ate:

"MEAT — LUVELY MEAT. There wasn't any good meat, it all went overseas for "Our Boys". All that could be bought, only with coupons, was mostly mince (fatty as!) and stewing chops (neck) and shin meat. We always ate meat every

meal, but only because we ate offal: brains, kidneys, liver, sweetbreads, etc. I never learnt to think of them as yukky, and still love them to this day, not liver, but ox tongue is still one of my favourites. You didn't need coupons for offal. Or RABBITS, Yum! The Rabbity Man came round and sold them for 1/- ... And my Dad went fishing, always successfully, and we would go out to Pt. Chevalier Reef at low tide for mussels, crayfish and always dug up cockles on the way back to shore. I have no memory of ever being hungry."

Ruth Williamson, nee Marshall, grew up in Woodward Road. She remembered how her family got through quite comfortably, despite the rationing.

"Uncle Frank's entire meat ration for the week went to feed our 3 cats their gravy beef. We ran out of coupons part way through the week, but sausages and lambs 'fry weren't rationed, and there seemed to be no shortage of fish. Mother used to buy a bottle of oysters from the fish shop for half a crown, and serve them in parsley sauce. She cooked for seven, and no-one went hungry."

Meat rationing ended on 27 September 1948.

Reflection

It may surprise younger readers that rationing continued, and in some cases was tightened, for an additional five years after the end of the War. Attitudes, practices and recipes from this period continued to feature in family life through future decades.

MAHS is grateful to Phyllis Mealing, who donated her ration book and written memories of Mt Albert during the war. She lived at 25 Wairere Ave, and in October 1944 was registered with McCully and McHardy, grocers, just around the corner at 53 Asquith Ave, which until recently was a dairy. We also treasure the memories that were recorded in Mt Albert Community Library's *Memories of Mt Albert* books from 1999 and 2002, which is where we draw the quotations from Doreen Downing, Shirley Henderson, Pat Pound and Ruth Williamson.

If this article has sparked memories for you, please write them down and share them with us. We want to tell the story of Mt Albert's history, as it really was. It is the small details, like Flossie Marshall's meal of oysters in parsley sauce, that make history come alive.

Lynley Stone

A fuller version of this article, with references, is available on the MAHS website.

MAHS PAST EVENT REPORTS



Sunday 3 November: Visit to Belmont House

Dianne and Alan McArdle generously opened their home and garden to a large group of MAHS Members and friends, including former owners and residents of the property. Alan delighted us with a presentation on the history of the house, and Lynley Stone gave a brief overview of the Winstone family and names of their homes. This house was named Belmont in the 1970s by then-owner John Collinge, after William Winstone's subdivision, the Belmont Estate.



A delicious afternoon tea was served, using fine china generously loaned from the Alberton House collection. It was a beautiful sunny day, and a real treat to be able to enjoy one of Mt Albert's great old houses.

Sunday 15 December: Casual Gathering in Alice Wylie Reserve

Instead of a formal Christmas Meeting, this year we issued a general invitation to Members to come and spend some time together in Alice Wylie Reserve. 19 people came, bearing camp chairs and picnic mats, and enjoyed conversation and company in a very relaxed event. MAHS provided a chilly bin full of Magnum ice creams, which were greatly enjoyed.



MAHS FUTURE EVENTS will be notified to you in the next issue of the Newsletter, coming soon.

My Memories of the Smith and Caughey's Department Store

In the early 1930s I was at Miss Jenkins' Kindergarten with Jeanette and Josephine Caughey, who were cousins whose families both lived in Mt Albert, in McLean Street and Allendale Road. Shopping in the city was so easy with the big department stores. Smith and Caughey's, John Courts and Milne and Choice were all in Queen Street, and Farmers in Hobson Street, reached by free bus up Wyndham Street; and in K. Rd, there were George Courts and Rendells - and not a red cone in sight!

Smith and Caughey's was a very special place in war time in the late 1930s. During the Second World War, many goods were rationed and some needed ration coupons for goods, if they were even available.

Smith and Caughey's was the place to go to on the 1st of August when the store released its new spring materials. My mother and I would catch a tram from Mt. Albert to be early before the choice of material ran out.

In those days, at least in my family, I had one good dress and one everyday dress for the year. As I was a slow grower my clothes lasted for a long time. Thinking back I don't remember my mother buying any new material for herself, so she must have made her clothes last a long time too. My mother sewed all the clothes for her family until I took over my own.

I remember buying lovely kid gloves from Smith and Caughey's as we always wore them when we were dressed up. I would put my elbow on a little cushion on the counter and the sales girl gently pulled the glove on. I still have some of those gloves — will anyone ever wear them again?

Rae Edgar



**Smith & Caughey's Spring
Glove Wardrobe . . .**

Images
Auckland Star 22 September
1945, p. 8 (left)
Auckland Star, 31 July 1939, page
15 (right), via Papers Past.

Spring Season 1939
Great Exhibition
Newest Dress Fabrics
in
Smith & Caughey's
FABRIC HALL

Personally Selected by one of
their Directors Abroad !!



Last year the Vogue was for "Stripes"
This SPRING Ushers in --

FASHION'S HIGHLIGHT
PAINT! PAINT! PAINT!
DESIGNS

Beautiful Printing in New Colour Combinations
... also Exclusive "LIBERTY" productions, and an
Unprecedented Collection of Novelty Bright
Cottons for House, Holiday and Beach Wear

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Dress Specialists