

Food Supplies in Times of Emergency by Alan F. Rumrill



WWI Food Administration Poster

A few short months ago it would have been inconceivable to most of us that our regular food supply could be interrupted by a widespread medical emergency. However, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted the supply of food to an extent that few in this region have experienced in their lifetime.

We have recently seen depleted shelves in grocery stores and entire sections of meat departments empty and covered. There have been several reasons for this. The first was panic-buying; people wanted to be prepared for potentially long periods of staying at home. Secondly, some people were uncomfortable being in grocery stores during an epidemic, so they purchased more than they normally would to avoid returning to this public setting soon. Finally, meat processing plants were closed due to outbreaks of the virus among workers. All of this has resulted in shortages of various products. This is not the

first time our region has seen food shortages, however.

During the early years of European settlement and habitation here food shortages were generally not caused by epidemics, because most of the residents were farmers who grew their own food. They did not buy their food at a store. Rather, food scarcity was caused by wars and natural disasters. As far back as the Revolutionary War some shortages were caused by a combination of large amounts of food being needed to feed the army and, at the same time, some of the citizen soldiers not being at home growing crops because they were serving in the military.

Natural disasters caused some shortages following that war. The most well-known of those was “the year without a summer.” That year – 1816 – was also dubbed “Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death” by some of those who experienced its severe weather abnormalities. The Monadnock Region experienced an unusually cold spring season that year, with the ground frozen solid on May 15. Some warm days arrived in early June, but then the ground froze in Keene every night for a week beginning on June 5 and snow fell on three days during the month. July and August brought little relief to the area as frost was reported on eight days during those months. In addition to the cold, the region experienced a drought from June through September.

Vegetable gardens were destroyed time-after-time by the cold. The corn and hay crops also failed. What little corn there was in the fields was cut up to feed the livestock. The entire corn crop failed in Swanzey, where the town subsisted on emergency supplies from neighboring towns. Trees were cut down so that animals might browse on branches and leaves, but many

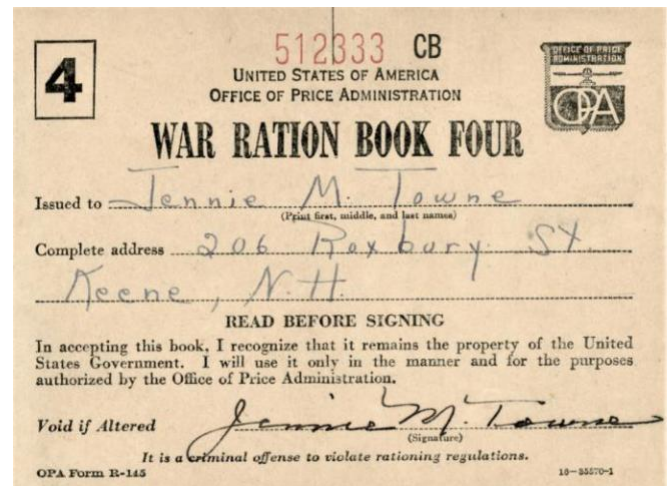
cattle died before the winter passed. Food prices increased dramatically and passenger pigeons supplemented the sparse diets. The year without a summer was caused by a volcanic winter resulting from a massive eruption of Mount Tambora in the Dutch East Indies. The ensuing decrease in global temperatures caused major food shortages throughout the Northern Hemisphere.

The American Civil War also caused a scarcity of food that resulted in increased prices as massive amounts of foodstuffs were needed to supply the Union and Confederate armies of 2.75 million men. Shortages were more severe in the South where farm fields became battlefields. It was the world wars, however, that had a greater impact on southwest New Hampshire.

By the time the United States entered World War I America's allies in Europe were facing starvation. Our government leaders realized we would have to send food to our own troops and to our allies in Europe; the U.S. Food Administration was established to lead that effort. Residents were encouraged to reduce their consumption of certain foods that could be shipped to the troops and were asked to grow and eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, which were more difficult to transport. Keene was heavily involved in these efforts.

As soon as war was declared, Keene Normal School President Wallace E. Mason went to work to mobilize an army of young gardeners at the Normal School's practice schools in the region. More than 500 home and school gardens were started by pupils and the Normal School itself provided more than 12,000 cabbage, tomato and beet plants for the effort. The group was named a unit of the United States School Garden Army. Furthermore, the local canning and conservation commission made use of campus facilities to teach community classes on home canning and drying of fruits and vegetables. The group proclaimed: "LET NO FOOD GO TO WASTE." Although the region did experience a shortage of flour, the war gardens provided vegetables for the local population.

The Monadnock Region undertook similar efforts a generation later during World War II. This conflict brought more serious food shortages as more than 16 million military servicemen and women served overseas during the War. As a result, rationing was begun here early in 1942. Meat, coffee, sugar, butter, cheese, and some canned goods were among the items that were rationed. Some grocery stores exhausted their supply of meat and ration book holders were allowed to purchase one can of coffee every five weeks. More than 35,000 people from the region were served by the Keene ration board office during the war.



WWII Food Ration Book for Jennie Towne



Keene Teachers College students picking potatoes during WWII

Once again the normal school, recently renamed Keene Teachers College, took an active role in the local food effort. Many of the students assisted with the harvest by picking potatoes for local farms during the war. During one harvest season 85 students put in a week's work at the Dodd farm in Westmoreland. Hundreds of local residents planted Victory Gardens to assist with food production. Despite the shortages of food and other products, most residents were willing

to sacrifice to support the cause and the millions of servicemen who were on the front lines.

Most food shortages in Cheshire County history have resulted from war and natural disasters. The current limited supplies have been the result of the ongoing pandemic. It is interesting to note, however, that the region's residents have once again turned to local sources to supplement their needs. A recent front-page article in *The Keene Sentinel* carried the headline: "Local farms see record sales in pandemic." The farmers suggested that the demand was due to the appeal of shorter, more reliable supply chains. CSA shares have been selling quickly and the Cheshire County Conservation District (CCCD) has been contacted by local farmers for help, especially with the implementation of new forms of payment. Our region is fortunate to have so many farms offering a wide variety of produce. Local farms are essential businesses, especially during a time of pandemic.