

RED, LIGHT & BLUE

A BRIEF LOOK AT OPA TOKENS AND THEIR USAGE

By Todd Sciore

For collectors with an interest in World War II era exonumia, OPA tokens are an inexpensive item with a rich history. Not to be confused with Monty Python's *Ministry Of Silly Walks* or *The Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes* from the Harry Potter series, the *Office of Price Administration* or O.P.A. for short was a government agency established in the United States during "the big war" whose primary function was to stabilize (control) both prices and rent during the war. The price controls were necessitated by rationing and were established to protect against inflation, price gouging by retailers and hoarding by those who more could afford to do so. In addition to food they also applied to other items such as tires, automobiles, nylon, sugar, gasoline, coffee, meats, processed foods and other items.

Rationing in the U.S. began in 1942 when consumers were issued "coupon books" with small tear out "stamps" to be used as directed for specific items. Gasoline purchases were reportedly limited based on a particular sticker on the vehicle. As can be expected, the number of coupons a family received was determined based on need and generally, commercial drivers obtained additional fuel allotments but all members of the public were expected to partake in the program lest they not be considered patriotic. In order to remind the public that compliance was important to America's success in the war effort, a number of posters like those featured here were created and prominently displayed.



The poster is entitled *Ration For Victory. Rationing Safeguards Your Share*. It is “based on an equitable rationing plan for war-time emergency. Printed in three colors -- red, black and blue -- it was designed and produced by the Office of War Information (OWI) and distributed to retail stores...”



Above are examples of the actual ration stamps

Below are two examples of the reverse side of the actual books that were distributed to citizens. I bought these booklets in a pouch containing remnants of books 1 through 4 at an auction years ago.



**NEVER BUY RATIONED GOODS
WITHOUT RATION STAMPS
NEVER PAY MORE THAN THE LEGAL PRICE**

United States Office of Price Administration

IMPORTANT: When you have used your ration, salvage the **TIN CANS** and **WASTE FATS**. They are needed to make munitions for our fighting men. Cooperate with your local Salvage Committee.

☆ U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1943 16-35570-1

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 This book is valuable. Do not lose it.
- 2 Each stamp authorizes you to purchase rationed goods in the quantities and at the times designated by the Office of Price Administration. Without the stamps you will be unable to purchase those goods.
- 3 Detailed instructions concerning the use of the book and the stamps will be issued from time to time. Watch for those instructions so that you will know how to use your book and stamps.
- 4 Do not tear out stamps except at the time of purchase and in the presence of the storekeeper, his employee, or a person authorized by him to make delivery.
- 5 Do not throw this book away when all of the stamps have been used, or when the time for their use has expired. You may be required to present this book when you apply for subsequent books.

Rationing is a vital part of your country's war effort. This book is your Government's guarantee of your fair share of goods made scarce by war, to which the stamps contained herein will be assigned as the need arises.

Any attempt to violate the rules is an effort to deny someone his share and will create hardship and discontent.

Such action, like treason, helps the enemy.

Give your whole support to rationing and thereby conserve our vital goods. Be guided by the rule:

"If you don't need it, DON'T BUY IT."

☆ U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1942 16-30853-1

And as noted on the books themselves, trying to cheat the system was treasonous behavior and you wouldn't want your neighbors to think you were aiding & abetting the enemy !



The rationing stamps like those pictured earlier were then redeemed for specific goods and in order to make change, the use of OPA tokens came into play. Below is a vintage poster showing the usage and redemption process OPA tokens utilizing a waterfall analogy.



While in business terminology, this would generally be considered flowing back “upstream” through the supply chain, the poster was designed to be understood by the masses in which case, water flowing down a mountain is an easier concept to grasp.

The OPA tokens came in two colors, (red and blue), were 16 mm in diameter and made of a light weight vulcanized celluloid fiber. Each had a value of “one point” and the colors served a specific purpose (Blue was supposedly for processed foods and Red for meats). In addition, the tokens each carried a pair of letters- there are 24 different letter combinations known for the blue tokens and 30 for the red.



The assorted known letter combinations are listed below:

Red letter combinations: HC, HT, MV, MM, TH, TY, UC, UH, UT, UV, UX, UY, VC, VH, VT, VU, VX, VY, XC, XH, XT, XU, XV, XY, YC, YH, YT, YU, YV, YX.

Blue letter combinations: CC, CH, CT, CV, CX, HH, HU, HV, HX, HY, TC, TT, TU, TV, TX, UU, VV, WC, WH, WT, WU, WW, XX, YY

While one unproven theory suggests that the letter combinations represent issuance in different parts of the U.S., a wider belief is that they have no specific purpose beyond being an anti-counterfeiting measure. Collectors have picked up on the fact that certain combinations are harder to find with the **Red MV** being the rarest. Other key and semi-key combinations include the **Red MM, YC** and **XC** as well as the **Blue WW, WC, WH, WU** and **HX**. The remaining letter combinations are considered common and can be found under \$1.00 each but as a class, Red is more common than Blue. In addition, errors such as “double struck” or “off center” pieces from either series carry a slight premium. Their issuance stopped in 1945 after the war ended, and the various functions of the OPA were either eliminated or, assigned to other agencies.

Both OPA tokens and ration books can still be found very affordable prices and they make for an interesting addition to any World War II coin or token collection. I acquired the examples featured here at various times and at a cost well below their historical value. I also picked up this OPA employee “meritorious service” award pin at an auction to compliment the tokens and stamps:



Each country has produced their own WWII era collectable coins, scrip, tokens, etc..., and OPA tokens are but one item to round out either a U.S. focused, Allies themed or an even more challenging world collection of numismatic items and exonomia from the last World War.

Sources

<http://www.usmilitariaforum.com/forums/index.php?/topic/104233-opa-rationing-token-information/>

<http://www.scvhistory.com/scvhistory/signal/coins/soltaylor080908.html>

OPA tokens By Dr. Sol Taylor "Making Cents" Saturday, August 9, 2008

Poster Images: The U.S. Library of Congress

Coupon, Booklet, Pin & Token Images: The author's personal collection.