

1945 January 22-28

Blackouts and Brownouts

WAR PRODUCTION BOARD Declares Nation-Wide "BROWNOUT"

Commercial Use of Electricity Curtailed

HERE'S A COPY OF THE OFFICIAL ORDER OF THE WAR PRODUCTION BOARD
• **Effective February 1st, 1945** •

Utilities Order U-9. (a) *Purpose of this order.* War requirements have created a shortage in the supply of coal and other fuels. The purpose of this order is to save fuels used in the generation of electricity by prohibiting certain unnecessary uses of electricity.

(b) *Definitions.* For the purpose of this order:

(1) "Person" means any individual, partnership, association, business trust, corporation, political subdivision, governmental agency or corporation or any organized group of persons whether incorporated or not.

(2) "Electric Supplier" means any person who generates, transmits, or distributes electricity.

(c) *Prohibited Uses.* No person shall use electricity for any of the following purposes:

(1) Outdoor advertising and outdoor promotional lighting.

(2) Outdoor display lighting except where necessary for the conduct of the business of outdoor establishments.

(3) Outdoor decorative and outdoor ornamental lighting.

(4) Show window lighting except where necessary for interior illumination.

(5) Marquee lighting in excess of 60 watts for each marquee.

(6) White way street lighting in excess of the amount determined by local public authority to be necessary for public safety.

(7) Outdoor sign lighting except for:

(i) Directional or identification signs required for fire and police protection, traffic control, transportation terminals or hospitals; or directional or identification signs for any similar essential public services the lighting of which is specifically certified to be necessary by local public authority. Certification shall be made in writing to the appropriate electric supplier and need not be in any particular form;

(ii) Directional or identification signs using not more than 60 watts per establishment, for doctors and for hotels, and other public lodging establishments.

(d) *Exemptions.* (1) Any electric supplier who considers that compliance with this order by the persons whom it supplies directly and indirectly, will not reduce the consumption of coal or other scarce fuels may apply for exemption for the area it serves to the Office of War

Utilities, War Production Board, Washington 25, D. C., Ref.: U-9.

(2) The War Production Board may from time to time issue directions exempting designated areas from this order if it finds that compliance within such areas will not reduce the consumption of coal or other scarce fuels in accordance with the purpose of this order.

(e) *Appeals.* Any person affected by this order who considers that compliance with this order will work an exceptional or unreasonable hardship on him or who considers that compliance will endanger public health or safety may appeal for relief to the District Office of the War Production Board for the area in which the consumer is located, Ref.: U-9.

(f) *Notices.* (1) Every electric supplier shall, as soon as practicable, notify by publication or otherwise all persons to whom it supplies electricity for uses prohibited by this order of the terms hereof.

(2) If any electric supplier has knowledge of a violation of this order by a person to whom it supplies electricity, it shall inform the person of the violation. If the violation is continued, the electric supplier shall notify the person in writing of the specific terms of the order which apply and of the penalties prescribed for violation and shall mail a copy of the notice to the District Office of the War Production Board for the area in which the consumer is located, Ref.: U-9.

(g) *Violations.* If the War Production Board determines that any person is using electricity in violation of this order, it may direct the electric supplier serving such person to disconnect service and prescribe the conditions under which service may be reconnected. In addition, any person who wilfully violates any provision of this order or who in connection with this order wilfully conceals a material fact or furnishes false information to any department or agency of the United States is guilty of a crime and upon conviction may be punished by fine or imprisonment.

(h) *Effective Date.* The effective date of paragraph (c) of this order shall be February 1, 1945.

Issued this 15th day of January, 1945.

WAR PRODUCTION BOARD

N O R T H E R N S T A T E S P O W E R C O M P A N Y

La Crosse Tribune, 1945 January 23, page 3

Cities in war zones were often under "blackout" rules that forbade lights after dark. The purpose was to make the city less visible to enemy aircraft, particularly bombers. There were also blackouts in cities on the eastern coast of the United States because lights could silhouette ships for prowling German U-Boats.

There were even blackouts in the rural interior of the United States. Norma (Huber) Anderson, who grew up in the Burns Valley, north of Bangor, recalls blackout rules during the war when she was a child.

Raymond Parmenter, a member of the La Crosse County Board of Supervisors, would drive around his district at night to make sure everyone had their lights out after dark.¹ Since there was no chance that the Axis was going to bomb Bangor, the blackout was probably enforced to conserve electricity.

A “brownout” involved restrictions on the use of electricity to save fuel. One of the most common fuels at this time was coal.

In 1945, power utilities in the United States consumed almost 75 million tons of coal to produce electricity.² Coal accounted for about two-thirds of the electric power generated in the United States.³

In the middle of January 1945, James F. Byrnes, director of War Mobilization and Reconversion, called for curtailment of “all nonessential lighting and transportation.” Interior temperatures were to be maintained at a maximum of 68 degrees. Non-essential trains were also eliminated. These measures were designed to save 2,000,000 tons of coal during the year. Some officials in private industry claimed the savings would be far less than that.⁴

J. A. Krug, chairman of the War Production Board, responded by ordering elimination of outdoor advertising or promotional lighting, outdoor display lighting, outdoor decorative and ornamental lighting, show window lighting, marquee lighting greater than sixty watts, outside sign lighting, and excess street lighting. There were some exceptions, including lights required for public safety and identification of “doctors, hotels and public lodgings.” This was to take effect on February 1. Failure to comply could mean denial of electrical service.⁵

Government buildings, even the White House, were kept at 68 degrees or less. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt said her bedroom was “like an outdoor icehouse.” She said she was not complaining, but she wished she had more time to become adjusted to the change.⁶ The government realized that the 68-degree rule for private homes was not enforceable, so compliance would have to be voluntary. Unusually cold weather also worked against efforts to save fuel.⁷

In La Crosse, Heileman Brewing got a head start by shutting off their signs in late January.



—Tribune Photos

La Crosse's Largest Electric Sign, the one on top of the G. Heileman Brewing company, has been turned off for the duration, in compliance with a plea of the Wisconsin State Brewers' association. The state organization has urged brewers to discontinue at once illumination of all signs under their control in advance of the Feb. 1 effective order of the war production board. Letters of the Heileman sign range from eight to 14 feet in depth. N. J. Graden, 719 West avenue south, is shown disconnecting some of the tubing of the sign, while in the other picture Charles Mateju, 813 Winnebago, is pulling out the master switch to break the electric circuit as Edward G. Helke, advertising manager, looks on. The Heileman plant also has turned off four spotlights on the brewery, one spotlight on the office and two other signs.

La Crosse Tribune, 1945 January 25, page 5

Not everyone did their patriotic duty to save electricity. After the first night of the brownout, the electrical inspector of Elizabeth, New Jersey called the rate of compliance "disgraceful."⁸

It was even worse in Pittsburgh where a "wave of vandalism" began soon after midnight on the night the brownout went into effect. Vandals broke windows in eight stores downtown, and three stores were burglarized.⁹

Businesses that violated the brownout restrictions could be fined. In the middle of February, the owner of a furniture store in the Bronx, New York, was fined \$2.00 for having six lighted lamps in his store window.¹⁰

These were isolated incidents. Director of the Office of War Utilities, Edward Falck, said "the 5,000,000 consumers affected by the brownout cooperated virtually 100 per cent." The brownout was lifted on May 8, 1945 with the defeat of Germany, even though the war with Japan was continuing. Falck claimed the brownout saved 500,000 tons of coal when the country was experiencing its "most critical fuel shortage of the war."¹¹

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Sources & Notes:

¹ Norma (Huber) Anderson, West Salem, Wisconsin, telephone conversation with the author, January 26, 2020.

² United States Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1947*, "Consumption of Fuels by Electric Utilities for Production of Electric Energy: 1920 to 1946," Table No. 524 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947) 479.

³ "Darkened Shop Windows, Plan," *Twin Falls Times News*, Twin Falls, Idaho, January 10, 1945, page 1.

⁴ Walter H. Waggoner, "Krug Orders Cut In Outdoor Lights to Conserve Coal," *New York Times*, January 16, 1945, page 1.

⁵ Waggoner, *New York Times*, January 16, 1945.

⁶ Waggoner, *New York Times*, January 16, 1945.

⁷ Jay Walz. "Cold Impedes Struggle Against Fuel Shortage," *New York Times*, January 21, 1945, page 72.

⁸ "Finds Brownout Ignored: Police Chief in Jersey Says Many Violated WPB Order," *New York Times*, February 3, 1945, page 13.

⁹ "Vandals in Pittsburgh Brownout," *New York Times*, February 2, 1945, page 32.

¹⁰ "First Brownout Violator Fined," *New York Times*, February 14, 1945, page 9.

¹¹ "Brownout Ends By WPB Order," *The Evening News*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, May 8, 1945, page 1.