

# 1945 September 10-16

## The Price Fixers

### **OPA District Office In City Will Close Friday Afternoon**

*(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 September 12, page 1)*

This week brought the news that the La Crosse district office of the Office of Price Administration would close by the end of the week. The Office of Price Administration was one of the most important government agencies during World War II because it impacted the lives of every American.

The need for economic controls on a wartime economy had been demonstrated during the First World War. From July 1914 to May 1920, the cost of living for American families increased by 108.4 percent.<sup>1</sup> The government took steps to ensure that would not happen during World War II.

The Office of Price Administration was created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's executive order on April 11, 1941, before the United States even entered World War II. Its objectives and functions were:

- maintaining price stability to prevent inflation due to wartime scarcities
- protect consumers from price gouging
- setting maximum prices for commodities
- setting maximum rent prices in areas close to military bases and war production plants
- administer the rationing program for food, clothing, gasoline, and other consumer products
- oversight of local rationing boards
- issuing billions of ration stamps<sup>2</sup>

With war already raging in Europe and the Pacific, another purpose of the OPA was to discourage hoarding.<sup>3</sup> When a crisis looms, the natural tendency of people is to stock up on supplies just in case things get so bad that they cannot get what they need. A prime example was earlier this year when toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and some cleaning supplies disappeared from store shelves because of COVID-19.

In early 1942, with the United States now in the war, rapid price increases were elevating the cost of living. To prevent runaway inflation, the OPA froze retail prices and rents using March 1942 as the benchmark.<sup>4</sup> The OPA froze prices on about 60 percent of food items. There was some scarcity because of the needs of the military and American allies, so this action prevented inflationary food prices.<sup>5</sup>



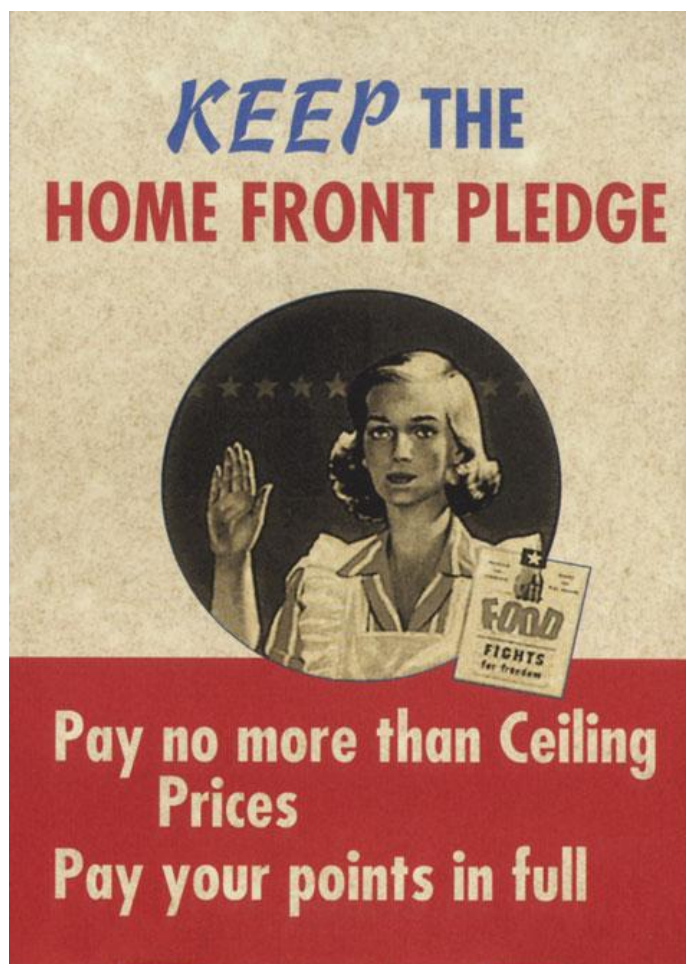
(Historical Museum of Fort Missoula)

Rationing was another tool employed by the OPA. Tires, sugar, coffee, gasoline, meat, butter, and canned goods were rationed. Ration books went out to every American to help allocate scarce commodities. The OPA later used a point system to give consumers more choice in when they purchased certain items.<sup>6</sup>

The OPA directed about 5,500 local rationing boards made up of volunteers, but it also became a large bureaucracy that was not always viewed kindly by the populace who lived under its rules. Rationing and price controls were so vast and complex that the OPA had more than 60,000 full-time employees to take care of it all.<sup>7</sup>

The OPA was effective in controlling inflation. From 1942 to 1945, consumer prices rose nine percent.<sup>8</sup>

The reach of the OPA even extended into fashion. Women's skirts had to be above the knee, and swimsuits became two-piece to conserve cloth. Men's suits had narrow lapels, short jackets, no cuffs, no vests, and just one pair of pants for the same reason. Patched clothing became a patriotic fad.<sup>9</sup>



(ibiblio.org)

Phil H. Griffin was the owner and operator of a drug store in Ladysmith when he came to La Crosse in April 1943 to run the La Crosse district OPA office.<sup>10</sup> The OPA district office in La Crosse operated for almost two-and-one-half years. The 120 employees, with a total payroll of \$400,000 per year, administered rationing and price controls in 16 Wisconsin counties, five Minnesota counties, and two Iowa counties. An average of 275 people visited the OPA office every day to conduct business with the agency.<sup>11</sup> The La Crosse district office supervised rent control offices in Sparta, Eau Claire, and Rochester, as well as 163 clerks on 23 local rationing boards.<sup>12</sup>

Local rationing boards were supported by volunteer panels administering various commodities. In La Crosse County, there was a tire panel, an automobile panel, a gasoline panel, a fuel oil panel, a food panel, a shoes and boots panel, and a price panel.<sup>13</sup>

La Crosse County residents who wanted to apply for rationed commodities could pick up application blanks at several locations:

- Mindoro-Fishers Service Station
- Bangor-Municipal Utilities Office
- West Salem-Village clerk's office
- Onalaska-City clerk's office

- Holmen-Bank of Holmen
- La Crosse (north side)-Wittenberg's Cigar store
- La Crosse (south side)-Bodega Lunch Club<sup>14</sup>

Prices for many goods were strictly controlled. The price panel recruited volunteers to check prices in stores to make sure price ceilings were being followed.<sup>15</sup> Every retailer of apparel, dry goods, and house furnishings had to prepare a pricing chart showing the cost and selling price of all goods and submit it to the OPA district office in La Crosse.<sup>16</sup>

The La Crosse district had two counties that were under rent control: La Crosse County starting on December 1, 1943, and Monroe County (home of Camp McCoy) starting on November 1, 1942. Landlords had to register their properties with the area rent office in La Crosse and charge no more than they had been charging on March 1, 1942, for their rental units.<sup>17</sup> Tenants could recover "up to treble damages or \$50, whichever is greater" for overcharges in rent.<sup>18</sup> Rent control continued in both counties even after the La Crosse district OPA office closed.<sup>19</sup>

Out of the 93 OPA districts in the country, the La Crosse district office was the first one to have a woman as the chair of its labor advisory committee. Mary P. Samb, 2522 East Avenue South, was elected to that post in February 1945. Samb grew up at Hokah, Minnesota, on a farm and then attended the La Crosse Vocational and Adult School. She married Roy E. Samb, an employee of the Electric Auto-Lite Company, and they had three children. Mary Samb headed an advisory committee made up of representatives of the American Federation of Labor, Congress for Industrial Organization, and railroad unions.<sup>20</sup>



—Tribune Photo  
**First Woman Chairman** of an OPA labor advisory committee is Mrs. Mary P. Samb of La-Crosse. The La Crosse committee is one of the many established in the 93 OPA districts of the nation.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 18, page 7)

When people did not follow the rules and regulations, the OPA took action.

- Service stations that violated gasoline regulations were suspended from dealing in rationed gasoline for periods ranging from 30 to 60 days. Among them were the Burns Store near Bangor, Boehlke Service Station at 1537 Caledonia Street in La Crosse, and Stone's Service Station at Onalaska.<sup>21</sup>
- John and Mike Asfoor of A. Asfoor and Sons, La Crosse, paid damages of \$7.50 and court costs of \$22.20 for "over-ceiling sales of waste paper." They were also issued an injunction restraining them from further violations of the regulations and requiring them to keep proper records.<sup>22</sup>
- Taverns that overcharged for liquor, beer, or meals could be sued for treble damages. Among those charged in La Crosse in 1945 were: Walt's Place at Third and Mississippi streets, Schaefer's Tavern at 520 N. 4th Street, and Steve's Place at 124 N. 3rd Street.<sup>23</sup>
- In May 1945, 71 people in La Crosse, Eau Claire, Rice Lake, Chippewa Falls, Prairie du Chien, Fennimore, Viroqua, Cornell, Cadott, Bloomer, and Barron were charged "with wilful (sic) and unlawful acquisition and possession of more than 8,000 pounds of meat for which it is alleged they did not surrender ration points . . ." according to the La Crosse district OPA office.<sup>24</sup> Raymond Johnson of La Crosse paid a \$5.00 fine for 68 pounds of illegal meat, and Anthony F. Bruha of La Crosse paid a \$15 fine for 100 pounds of illegal meat.<sup>25</sup>
- H. L. Partridge of 1433 Charles Street in La Crosse had to pay the United States Treasury \$28.50 because he had overcharged a tenant at 124 S. 9th Street \$1.00 over the rent ceiling for nine months.<sup>26</sup>
- The Phillips 66 Station at West Avenue and Green Bay streets in La Crosse overcharged a customer \$8.90 for tires; it refunded \$8.90 to the customer and paid the federal government \$16.10. Casey's Car Sales at 3rd and Jay streets in La Crosse had to refund \$25 to a customer and pay the federal government an additional \$25 for overcharging on an automobile.<sup>27</sup>

Griffin declared the OPA operation a success for the nation's taxpayers. The La Crosse office was rated as one of the top district offices in seven Midwestern states. One achievement he cited was a reduction in food prices during the last year.<sup>28</sup>

When the war ended, reorganization of the homefront bureaucracy, including the Office of Price Administration, was inevitable. About half of the paid clerical help was given a 30-day notice of their termination before the end of August 1945.<sup>29</sup> Now in early September, the whole office was being closed, with its records and furniture being dispersed to other offices. At least forty of the 120 La Crosse employees accepted transfers to OPA offices in Green Bay, St. Paul, Milwaukee, and Chicago.<sup>30</sup>

Although the La Crosse district OPA office closed, its functions continued. The county war price and rationing board was in Room 303 in the Hoeschler Building. The rent control office for the area was in Room 518 of the Exchange building. The Milwaukee district office of OPA assumed overall oversight for western Wisconsin.<sup>31</sup>

The Office of Price Administration continued to operate until it was abolished on May 29, 1947.<sup>32</sup>

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## Sources & Notes:

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- <sup>2</sup> David M. Kennedy, ed. *The Library of Congress World War II Companion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 213.
- <sup>3</sup> Kennedy, 874.
- <sup>4</sup> *Summary of the Second World War and Its Consequences: An Alphabetical Reference Book* (Chicago: F.E. Compton & Company, 1946), 56.
- <sup>5</sup> Kennedy, 874.
- <sup>6</sup> Kennedy, 874.
- <sup>7</sup> Ronald H. Bailey, *The Home Front: U.S.A.* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1977), 110. Before he entered the Navy, future president of the United States, Richard M. Nixon, worked for the Office of Price Administration.
- <sup>8</sup> Bailey, 111.
- <sup>9</sup> Bailey, 114
- <sup>10</sup> "40 Members Of District OPA Office Here Given Transfers," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 September 14, page 2.
- <sup>11</sup> "OPA District Office In City Will Close Friday Afternoon," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 September 12, page 1.
- <sup>12</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 January 1.
- <sup>13</sup> "Group Of Residents Works Thousands Of Hours Annually On Numerous Panels of Ration Board," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 January 3, page 10.
- <sup>14</sup> "Ration Board Establishes County Distribution Centers," *The Nonpareil Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 January 25, page 5.
- <sup>15</sup> "Seek Panel Volunteers," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 7, page 9.
- <sup>16</sup> "Pricing Charts Simplify Order," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 28, page 5.
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- <sup>18</sup> "May Recover Excess Rentals," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 19, page 12.
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- <sup>22</sup> "Settle Court Cases," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 5, page 4.
- <sup>23</sup> "Taverns In OPA Suits," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 28, page 7.
- <sup>24</sup> "OPA Files 71 Court Actions," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 May 2, page 2.
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- <sup>26</sup> "Name Three Landlords In Injunction Actions," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 1, page 2.
- <sup>27</sup> "OPA Announces Six Settlements Of Cases," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 June 5, page 10.
- <sup>28</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 14.
- <sup>29</sup> "OPA Staff At La Crosse To Be Cut 50 Per Cent," *La Crosse County Record*, Onalaska, Wisconsin, 1945 August 30, page 1.
- <sup>30</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 14.
- <sup>31</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 September 12.
- <sup>32</sup> Kennedy, 213.