

Consumer Impact On Food, Agriculture

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PART I

American agriculture produces for many markets. The largest single outlet for harvested crop tonnage is feed for livestock. Thus one part of agriculture becomes the market for another. Non-food industries utilize fibers, tobacco, vegetable oils, starch, and the like, equal to about ten percent of total farm output. Overseas markets absorb another 15 percent of farm production, including a wide range of crop items and livestock by products. In other words, domestic needs for these materials have been satisfied and overseas outlets are the best available alternative. By far the largest, the most remunerative market for American farmers—taking three-quarters of aggregate farm production—is the food needs of 200 million American consumers, most of whom have the habit of three square meals a day.

True there are two hundred millions of us who eat. But for the purposes of this discussion I prefer to recognize—and to analyze, if possible—the 49 million homemakers who keep the family hearth who decide upon family food purchases in terms of what each one thinks will keep her family most happy (within her means), and who are, indeed the purchasing agents for the homes of America. (To these must be added 12 million households maintained by "unrelated" individuals.)

The only generalization that can be made about American homemakers is that one cannot generalize about them. One married homemaker in six is less than 30 years old, one in seven is 65 or older. A third of all families are only two persons, 15 percent are six persons or more. Fifty-nine percent of all husband-and-wife families have children under 18 years old in the household. 31 percent have children under age six. More than a third of all married homemakers (35 percent in 1966) have gainful employment outside the home—so they have two jobs, one as wage earner and one as homemaker.

Median family income in 1966 was \$7,436 up from \$4,971 ten years earlier. But this is merely a statistical "average." Fourteen percent of families in 1966 were below the \$3,000 "poverty" level (versus 25 percent in 1957), while 30 percent were above \$10,000 and nine percent were at \$15,000 or more.

Some homemakers—just over six percent of the total—live on farms, but even these do not utilize home canned vegetables, home-prepared meats, homemade butter and homemade bread as farm wives have done up to this generation. At least three times as many live in the open country but not on farms. The largest number live in small urban communities or in suburbs. Many are apartment dwellers in central cities. But wherever they live and however their livelihood is derived, all are busy—in ways that the nation's homemakers never before have been busy. If not employed, they are at home with small children. If neither of these absorbs their time, they are engaged in community-service or other such activities as never before. They have neither the time nor inclination to spend long hours in the kitchen, dealing with an ingredient food supply as our mothers did.

Impact of Technological Change

Nor do they have to. It is not only American agriculture that has changed. The food industries beyond the farm are at least equally a different model than only a few decades ago. This country has gone five full decades, 50 years, on a static base of agricultural crop land, and with total breeding herds of livestock no greater than they were at the end of World War I. Yet the population of the country over these 50 years has doubled. We feed twice as large a population even better than we did 50 years ago—and have a larger part of our total farm output now available for export.

This is what the advances in agricultural technology have meant. An acre of land is not a static unit. Its productivity is a function of the technology applied to its fixed area. Fertilizer and better seed and pest control have more than doubled its productive potential since World War I—and the same is true for the productivity of our food-producing farm livestock.

The food processing industries have done as much. Few items come from the farm in the form in which they are wanted by the homemaker. No one wants a live pig. It would be interesting to see how it would get to the table.

if indeed it did get there, if delivered alive to the typical family. I wonder, in fact, how many homemakers today could serve dinner tonight if they had to begin with a live chicken?

More and more the raw products of the farm have been grown in the location and at the season of the year where they could be most economically produced; then processed in large quantity and in a manner that reduces their perishability and converts them into a form that is most readily stored and distributed throughout the nation and throughout the year. The savings derived from most efficient areas of production; from processing in volume; from reduction of perishability; and from simplicity in distributing the processed products—these factors taken together are an offset to practically the total cost of processing. Startling as this may sound, food processing services cost the American consumer almost nothing net. If she took raw food from the farm, together with a short list of basic ingredients, and prepared the finished products in her kitchen, the costs would be much the same as they are now for the processed food that she does, in fact, obtain at the supermarket.

And this supermarket is one

of the wonders of the world. It is the display case for the abundance of the American farms and for the ingenuity of the food processors. It is very much the same wherever you find it, in whatever corner of the nation, and at whatever season of the year.

This array of highly processed, highly varied, highly serviced food makes it possible for women now to be 37 percent of the gainfully employed labor force of the nation. They buy "maid

service" in food, and thus they either can hold down a job or engage in endless other activities outside the home.

A moment ago I said we cannot generalize about the American homemaker. Now I shall ignore my own statement and try to do so. As many of you have done, or surely would have done if you were in the food business, I have talked with a great many homemakers about food, and have watched many more as they did their shopping.

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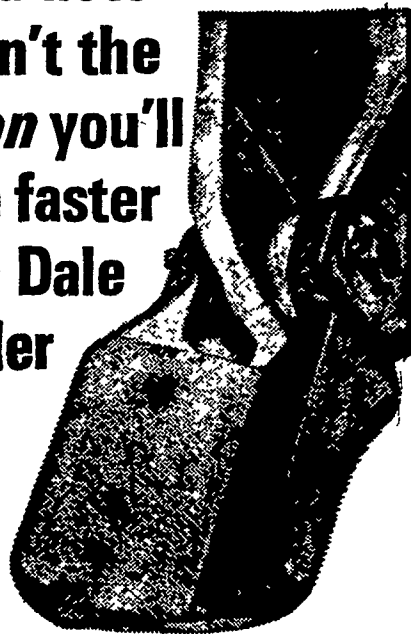
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