

Canned Nostalgia: The Myth of “Of Course I Can!” and the Rise of the Commercial Food Industry in the United States

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On June 10, 2011, the National Archives exhibit, “What’s Cooking Uncle Sam?” opened for a six-month run in Washington D.C., and subsequently, it has toured the United States.¹ The exhibit, which contains numerous artifacts, government documents, and images, explores the attempts the American government has made to impact what people eat. From the turn of the twentieth century forward, the U.S. government “... has ... attempted, with varying success, to change the eating habits of Americans.”² Its many efforts have included governmental calls to increase the home production of food during wartime. Images such the iconic “Of Course I Can!” poster from the World War Two era evoke a nostalgia that remains powerful in the modern United States. In fact, reproductions of these images are readily available for sale.³

¹ National Archives, “What’s Cooking, Uncle Sam?” <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/whats-cooking/index.html>, March 18, 2013.

² Ibid.

³ Zazzle, “Vintage Victory Garden: ‘Of Course I Can!’ Poster,” http://www.zazzle.com/vintage_victory_garden_of_course_i_can_poster-228754620204758817, March 18, 2013.

Figure 1 "Of Course I Can!"⁴



Modern efforts to change the way Americans eat harness the power of this nostalgia by suggesting Americans adopt such things as "Meatless Mondays," to fight the "War on Obesity."⁵ Even the First Lady, Michelle Obama, has called for families to embrace the home production of fresh foods and vegetables.⁶ But gardening and

⁴ Corey Bernat, "War Era Food Posters from the Collection of the National Agriculture Library," Accessed http://www.good-potato.com/beans_are_bullets/index.html, November 4, 2012.

⁵ Morgan Korn, "Has the 'War on Obesity' Gone Too Far?," <http://www.cnbc.com/id/49810996>, March 18, 2013.

⁶ Michelle Obama, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America* (Boston: Crown Publishing, 2012), 3. The phrase "home production of food" is used throughout this discussion. It should be read broadly unless otherwise indicated. Home production of food can include home gardens, cooking at home with fresh produce and other non-processed or minimally-processed ingredients, and home preservation such as canning, freezing, and drying.

cooking are both hard work, and over the last 150 years, commercial enterprises have largely taken over these duties:

Gardening – whether as a community or an individual – is difficult, backbreaking work. (Michelle Obama has many helping hands at her disposal.) Once you successfully harvest a crop, you then have to figure out what to do with it, and it’s worth recalling that techniques such as canning, which are being enthusiastically resurrected in the 21st century, are incredibly time consuming, and kept women tied, literally and figuratively, to the kitchen. Packaged and frozen foods may seem like a modern blight, but in reality they freed women and helped them move into the workforce.⁷

In fact, even during the world wars, American government efforts to encourage gardening, canning, and other home food production techniques met with only limited success. In many ways, the nostalgia for Victory Gardens and other efforts in wartime home food production is misplaced; because “[b]y the late nineteenth century, even the most self-sufficient of lives had come to require goods obtained on the market. Most urban people purchased significant amounts of their food.”⁸

⁷ Erika Christakis, “Michelle Obama’s Garden and the Problem With Growing Your Own Food,” <http://ideas.time.com/2012/05/30/the-problem-with-growing-your-own-food/>, November 3, 2012.

⁸ Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 19.

There was certainly a time in American history where the home production of food, from the farm to the pantry, was common, but that home food production was driven by need: there were very limited commercial options in the United States. When the first English colonists arrived in North America, they faced a number of challenges. Not only did they need to decide where to establish settlements, but they also had to work to clear fields and prepare to produce enough food to survive. These were new skills for the settlers, and not all of them approached them with zeal.⁹ But home food production was the norm in the Colonies and remained so through the middle decades of the nineteenth century when technological advances made commercial food production and preservation possible and then profitable. As these food products became more affordable and better accepted in the marketplace, they began to replace their home-produced analogs, and as the twentieth century dawned, a revolution in the kitchen was well underway.

Today, Americans use commercially prepared foods as a matter of course, both in their home production and as a substitute for it. A 2010 Harris poll found that 20% of Americans do not enjoy cooking and/or never do it, while only 40% of Americans, most of whom tend to be older, cook a meal in the home five or more times a week. Of those who do prepare meals in the home, 75% use commercially prepared food items, such as frozen foods, in their cooking.¹⁰ The First Lady may be trying hard to encourage Americans

⁹ The degree to which settlers embraced the need to farm, preserve, and cook varies tremendously by region, time of settlement, reason for settlement, and so on. For a comprehensive look at the food production habits of North American European settlers, see James McWilliams, *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Harris Interactive, "Three in Ten Americans Love to Cook While One in Five Do Not Enjoy it or Don't Cook",

to produce more of their own food, but the impact of her efforts is unclear at best.

As commercial food production increased its market share throughout the early twentieth century, American tastes and food production skills changed, and these changes impacted the U.S. government's ability to increase the home production of foods, even in wartime.¹¹ Popular war images of Victory Gardens and competent women "putting up" in the kitchen illustrate an ideal of food production self-sufficiency. But the experiences of both World War One and World War Two do more to illustrate the rise of the commercial food industry than to serve as support for the nostalgic idea that the mid-twentieth century was a Camelot in home food production.

Historiography of Food History

Within the discipline of history, the study of food history did not become popular until the mid 1980s, after the social history movement spawned wide-spread interest in broad cultural topics that deepened academic understanding about the way people in the past actually lived. But that does not mean that interest in the history of food has dawned only recently. Prior to the formalized, academic work of authors like Sidney Mintz and Harvey Levenstein, a group of independent scholars, some of whom were associated with public history venues like living history farms, had long been collecting,

<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/mid/1508/articleid/444/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/Default.aspx>, October 3, 2012.

¹¹ Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 131. Bentley points out that by the 1930s, cookbooks regularly "listed canned goods as ingredients, proving how important and common they were to women's cooking," (131).

analyzing, and cooking from historical recipes.¹² These two distinct areas of investigation, one recent and academic, and the other long-standing and independent, are increasingly becoming one field called alternately "culinary history" and "food history."¹³ Today, the stronger academic work in the area of food/culinary history works to contextualize food through an understanding of the food itself and the time it represents.¹⁴ The work that follows draws from both of these intellectual traditions, representing the cultural history of the more modern food historians as well as an understanding of the realities of cooking and canning from scratch, reflecting the interests of traditional culinary history.

A Brief Review of Food Preservation in American History

It is well known that early arrivals to the New World had struggles with having enough to eat. The earliest colonists came

¹² Sidney Mintz's work is interdisciplinary and that combines fieldwork and historical methods to examine the history of sugar as a food product. Harvey Levenstein's research is a work of cultural history. Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Penguin, 1986). Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹³ Culinary history is the older of the two terms, and was the one adopted by independent scholars who have long been interested in the recreation of historical meals and the preservation of traditional tools, ingredients, and techniques. Food history is a term that has developed since the 1980s. Food historians are academics who often show little interest in the actual preparation of historic foods. As this academic field develops, it is becoming increasingly clear within the food history sphere that ignorance of cooking techniques has led to some pretty shocking errors in the scholarship. Consequently, increased value is now being placed on food historians who can also cook. For an excellent short discussion of these two related areas of scholarly investigation, see Barbara Haber's short article "Culinary History vs. Food History" in the Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink: Barbara Haber, "Culinary vs. Food History," 179–80, *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, ed. Andrew. F. Smith.

from an environment where many foodstuffs could be purchased at local shops, and only the rich hunted. Learning how to acquire, prepare, preserve, and store food became the first priority for colonists. Early newspaper accounts indicate the home preservation of meat and vegetables, particularly peas, was a priority for colonists until at least the end of the eighteenth century. Salting was a popular form of food preservation both in the home and commercially.¹⁵ The early nineteenth century cookbook, *The Virginia Housewife or, Methodical Cook* by Mary Randolph contains directions for curing beef, bacon, and herring, as well as recipes twenty-two preserved fruit items and nineteen recipes for pickles.¹⁶

At about the same time that Randolph's book was published, advances in food preservation were underway in France. In 1795, Napoleon's government offered a prize to anyone who could substantially improve the preservation of food.¹⁷ In 1810, Nicholas Appert, a French chef and confectioner turned food technologist, published his methods for preserving food through a canning process that used glass jars, heat, and sealing.¹⁸ Almost immediately, English food producers seized upon Appert's techniques, improved them, and launched the commercial canning industry, which quickly spread to

¹⁵ For a fascinating look at a specific use of salt as a preservative, see Mark Kurlansky's *Cod*, in which he argues the, "...first draw of the Caribbean for New Englanders was the salt from the Tortugas" (p. 81). Salt was a necessary material in the cod trade. Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (New York, Penguin Books, 1998).

¹⁶ Fruit was typically preserved as a jam or jelly, but Randolph included recipes to dry fruit and also to preserve it in alcohol. Randolph's pickle recipes did not include recipes for fermented vegetables, and all of her pickle recipes call for vinegar.

¹⁷ Andrew F. Smith, "Canning and Bottling," in *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, ed. Andrew Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91–93.

¹⁸ Sue Shephard, *Pickled, Potted, and Canned: How the Art and Science of Food Preserving Changed the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 226–244.

the United States with English immigrants. By 1821, William Underwood, a pickle maker who immigrated to Boston from England, was providing the market with canned luxury foods as well as ships' provisions.¹⁹ By the mid nineteenth century, the American commercial canning industry was up and running. The Civil War (1861–1865) provided a large and hungry market for these commercially canned goods, and the industry reacted to the demand by building inland packing plants for both fruits and vegetables. Soldiers and sailors who ate canned goods brought home the taste for, and acceptance of, these foods when they returned from the war. As a consequence, commercial canning was able to establish itself as an American industry, with the statistics to prove it: in 1860 five million commercially canned items were produced; by 1870, the canning industry was producing in excess of thirty million cans a year,²⁰ and by "1910, production of canned goods accounted for roughly 20 percent of U.S. manufacturing output and more than 3 billion cans of food."²¹

Nevertheless, canning was not solely a commercial enterprise. Home cooks also benefitted from the advances in food preservation science. In 1858, Philadelphian John Mason patented the Mason "fruit jar," and it, along with improved cookstoves, specialty kettles made for canning, and other canning materials made home canning much easier. As it became easier, it also became less expensive with an unrelated drop in the cost of sugar. Early on, home canned items were preferable to commercially canned foods, which were expensive

¹⁹ Smith, "Canning and Bottling," 91.

²⁰ Richard Hooker, *Food and Drink in America: A History* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1981), p. 207, 214.

²¹ Deutsch, *Housewife's Paradise*, 19.

and typically designed for a specialty/luxury market.²² Canning allowed the home cook to preserve the harvest for year-round consumption, and the quality of the food was superior to fruits and vegetables that had been preserved through the earlier preservation techniques of drying and salting. The year-round availability of something close to fresh fruits and vegetables had a direct impact on what Americans ate.²³ Typical meals included an additional vegetable dish year-round, and desserts were more likely to include berries, syrups, and fruits such as peaches. Home cooking began to rely on home canning, and women would enter their canned items in fairs and other contests where they would be judged on overall appearance and sometimes also on flavor. Cookbook publishers began including instructions on how to safely and effectively can foods in the home, and in 1887, the first dedicated canning cookbook, Sarah Tyson Rorer's *Canning and Preserving*, was published in the United States.²⁴

But the increased availability of commercially canned items put downward pressure on home canning, and Rorer notes this change in the preface to the 1912 edition of *Canning and Preserving* where she bemoans how much the relationship between the home cook and her preserved food had changed by the early twentieth century. In the preface, Rorer paints a picture of the choices available to the early twentieth century home cook:

This book, a missionary to the country folk, will, if used carefully and wisely, save many a dollar, and enable them to have always on hand the best of

²² Ibid. Hooker also argues that commercially canned foods offended home cooks who, he says, saw cooking as a form of self expression (p. 214).

²³ Deutsch, *Housewife's Paradise*, 19.

²⁴ Alice Ross, "Home Canning," in *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, ed. Andrew Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91.

canned goods, jellies, preserves and fruit juices. It will also be useful to the town dweller where fresh vegetables can be purchased, at moderate prices, during the summer months. It is unfortunate that so many people use food put up at factories. Many of these are clean and use fruit of good quality, to be sure; but if the work is done at home, one knows that all materials are first-class, and then there is comfort in having a closet filled with materials easy of access.²⁵

Rorer's observations presaged the continued acceptance of commercially canned items. Writing in *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity*, Amy Bentley points out that home canning, while possibly providing an "aesthetic indulgence" was also very, very hard work: "Canning was both time-consuming and labor intensive, and this work fell almost exclusively to women."²⁶ By the 1920s, even rural families were relying on commercially canned foods for at least some of their food supply, and cookbooks were incorporating them into their recipes. By the 1930s, commercially canned food items were commonly called for as basic ingredients in most cookbooks.²⁷ This increased demand expanded the market, dropping costs and improving overall quality. By the mid-twentieth century, Americans had come to prefer the taste of canned food from the store over things canned in their own kitchen. Only the crises of

²⁵ Mrs. S. T. Rorer, *Canning and Preserving (Revised and Enlarged Edition)*, (Philadelphia: Arnold and Company, 1912).

²⁶ Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1998), pp. 129-130.

²⁷ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 131.

the World Wars and the Depression kept the practice of home canning alive in the United States.²⁸

Limiting Food During the First World War

When the United States entered the First World War, it was already facing food shortages due in part to providing food for some European countries already and to the failure of the Kansas winter wheat crop in 1917.²⁹ Just two weeks after the U.S. entry into the war, President Woodrow Wilson called on Americans to aid the war effort by producing and conserving food: "We must supply abundant food for ourselves and our armies ... but also for large part of the nations with whom we have now made common cause..."³⁰

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁹ Katherine Eighmey, "Food Will Win the War": Minnesota Conservation Efforts, 1917-18," *Minnesota History* 59, no. 7 (2005): 273.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

Figure 2 Food Conservation Was a Theme in WWI Propaganda.³¹



In fact, it was not just starving Belgians and a bad Kansas wheat harvest; when the U.S. entered the war, wheat prices rose immediately due to speculation on the Chicago Board of Trade.³² The United States was facing possible food restrictions as it geared up to send food to American troops in Europe, but the immediate push for food conservation and production was probably as much about fostering feelings of patriotism through a shared “spirit of self-sacrifice” on the home front as it was about the actual production of food.³³

³¹ Taken from the National Archives, “Teaching with Documents: Sow the Seeds of Victory! Posters from the Food Administration During World War I,” <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/sow-seeds/>, October 4, 2012.

³² Kara Newman, “Historical Overview: World War I,” in *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 289.

³³ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 20.

Regardless whether there was an “actual need” for the conservation of food or whether the government’s efforts in this area were more propaganda than anything else, it is clear that food conservation and the home production of food became an immediate government priority. In May, 1917, Wilson appointed Herbert Hoover to lead the newly-forming U.S. Food Administration, and although it did not receive Congressional approval and funding for four more months, Hoover began working immediately, taking advantage of the wave of early patriotism that swept the United States.³⁴

The government’s food program, soon under the auspices of the U.S. Food Administration, stressed voluntary conservation, home production of food, and home preservation of food. Newspapers immediately took up these points, and an opinion piece in the *Wilkes Barre Times Leader* is representative of the tone of the newspaper reporting:

‘The world food crop is deficient and the situation is becoming alarming,’ is the word which has been sent from Rome where the International Institute of Agriculture is now in session. This Institute is the highest authority there is on world food conditions. ... When the International Institute of Agriculture speaks it is not guessing; it knows. ... The question that every individual should ask himself, in view of this alarming warning is: What can I do to increase and conserve the food supply? The answer is obvious. Cultivate every

³⁴ Eighmey, “Food Will Win the War,” 274. Also “Hoover Will Proceed with Organization,” *The Idaho Daily Statesman*, 47, (6-17-1917), 1, America’s Historical Newspapers. “Food Law in America Now in Progress,” *The Wyoming Tribune*, 23, (8-11-1917), 1, America’s Historical Newspapers.

square foot of soil that you possibly can and do not waste food. The secretary of agriculture [sic] recently stated that the experts in his department estimated the food waste in this country as reaching the enormous total in value of \$700,000,000. Think of it! Nearly three quarters of a billion dollars worth of food wasted in a year!³⁵

The figure of \$700,000,000 of food waste appears to have been particularly startling to people, although as the *Wilkes Barre Times Leader* pointed out, that came out to be only \$35 a family a year.³⁶

In addition to getting the message out through newspaper coverage, the federal government published war recipe booklets that focused on conservation and the use of those food resources that remained abundant. In a typical recipe pamphlet from May 23, 1918, the U.S. Food Administration explained the need to conserve wheat: "Wheat is one of the very few foods we can ship successfully. From now until harvest we must SAVE, SAVE, SAVE, in order to keep up our shipments to the other side. Every day we must put aside more wheat for our boys over there. Do not be satisfied with a little saving. Do all you can."³⁷ The booklet goes on to provide 32 bread recipes, all of which were wheatless or nearly so.

Although the propaganda of conservation and home food production was widespread, the nation remained divided in actual

³⁵ "Stop Wasting Food if You Want to Help Win the War," *Wilkes Barre Times Leader*, (4-13-1917), 12, America's Historical Newspapers.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ United States Food Administration, "Without Wheat," Form no. 100, (5/23/1918). Accessed from the United States Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/northeast/nyc/education/food-wwi.html>, September 25, 2012.

practice. Newspaper opinion columns tended to blame the wealthy for wasteful food practices,³⁸ although there was blame enough to go around, “Why not yoke the food speculator, the gourmand, the slacker and extravagant housewife together for a double team to earn their living and to curb their waste of food? This would conserve sustenances equal to doubling the present production.”³⁹ A point of heated contention centered on the use of grain in the making of spirits and beer, and also the use of grapes in the making of wine. Of course, the historical context of these disagreements has to be taken into account as they occurred during the rise of prohibition sentiment in the United States, but it is telling that opposition to the use of raw foodstuffs for alcoholic beverages was so controversial.⁴⁰

In fact, the American public was asked to do very little when the government’s actions are considered in historical context. There were calls for conservation, but the government did not institute mandatory rationing, and the limited rationing that was considered was purely voluntary.⁴¹ For the most part, the government encouraged conservation and home food production and preservation through supportive policies, like allowing vacant lots to be turned into gardening space and providing free classes in bread baking and

³⁸ See for example “Annual Food Waste in U.S. \$700,000,000,” *The Wyoming Tribune*, 23, (4-11-1917), 2, America’s Historical Newspapers.

³⁹ “If Dietician Had Full Control,” *Oregonian*, (8-28-1917), 8, America’s Historical Newspapers.

⁴⁰ “Senate Forbids Use of Cereals or Grain to Make Intoxicants,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 176, (5-13-1917), 1, America’s Historical Newspapers. “Food Bill Debate Centers on Liquor: Whisky Believed Eliminated as Issue, Beer and Wine are Factors,” *Oregonian*, (6-29-1917), 1, America’s Historical Newspapers.

⁴¹ Newman, “Historical Overview,” 289.

canning, rather than through anything that comes close to being mandatory.⁴²

Whether handled through government programs directly or through public/private partnerships, educational initiatives appear to have been particularly popular. For example, in Oregon a "preparedness train" travelled the state providing canning demonstrations.⁴³ Canning demonstrations received wide-spread coverage in the newspapers during 1917, and in the South, these demonstrations were available for segregated audiences: "The first canning demonstration for negro women in the county food conservation campaign was given at the Central High School Monday at 2:30 p.m. by Miss Eloise Berry. Another demonstration for their benefit will be given at the same place Tuesday..."⁴⁴ General "war cooking" schools were also popular, and these appear to have been focused on cooking bread without wheat and preparing nutritious, "wholesome" meals with little waste from scratch rather than through the use of commercially-prepared ingredients.⁴⁵ In fact, an investigation of three World War One recipe pamphlets printed by the U.S. government yields eighty-seven separate recipes, none of which use commercially-prepared ingredients other than those difficult or impossible to produce in the home (e.g.: chocolate, cheese, and

⁴² Ibid. Also, "Patriotic League to Provide Food: Conservation Committee Reports Having Use of 20,000 City Lots for Gardens," *Oregonian*, (4-14-1917), 14, America's Historical Newspapers.

⁴³ "Crowd Greets Train: Canning Demonstration at Wasco Best Attended So Far," *Oregonian*, (4-14-1917), 2, America's Historical Newspapers.

⁴⁴ "Negroes Instructed in the Canning of Food," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 37, (6-11-1917), 3, America's Historical Newspapers.

⁴⁵ "War Cooking School Will Begin its Sessions Today," *The Charlotte Observer*, (10-22-1917), 8, America's Historical Newspapers.

baking powder) and only one recipe, for “corn flake macaroons” that used an ingredient that was a proprietary, commercial product.⁴⁶

With all of this government emphasis on home food production, it would seem likely that commercial food producers would have suffered during the War, but the reverse is true. Even though the home cook may have had occasional limitations in her ability to buy commercially produced items, particularly canned items due to a tin shortage in 1917,⁴⁷ war contracts more than made up for the lack of retail sales for commercial food producers.⁴⁸ Although there was some hostility from commercial food producers toward the government policy of conservation, some companies even embraced government recommendations, as can be illustrated in this Kellogg’s Corn Flake advertisement:

⁴⁶ United States Food Administration, “Without Wheat.” Also, United States Food Administration, “Potato Possibilities,” (n.d.), from the United States Archives on 9/25/2012: [Http://www.archives.gov/northeast/nyc/education/food-wwi.html](http://www.archives.gov/northeast/nyc/education/food-wwi.html), September 25, 2012. United States Food Administration, “Sweets Without Sugar,” form 108, 3, (9-1-1918), from the United States Archives, [Http://www.archives.gov/northeast/nyc/education/food-wwi.html](http://www.archives.gov/northeast/nyc/education/food-wwi.html), September 25, 2012.

⁴⁷ “Economize in Tin, is Federal Appeal: Chief Manufacturers Asked to Save That Full Canning Supply be Assured,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 176, (4-8-1917), 2, America’s Historical Newspapers.

⁴⁸ Newman, “Historical Overview,” 290.

Figure 3 Eat More Corn 49

PUT SALES FIRST

**Government Food Experts Say
EAT MORE CORN**

From Washington the call has gone forth to "Eat more corn," and women throughout the Nation are responding.

- Kellogg's—the original Toasted Corn Flakes—is the quality Corn Flakes of America, and has been for over ten years. To millions of homes it has introduced corn in its most delicious form.

These thin, crisp flakes with their fresh-drum-stone-over taste are totally unlike any other corn flakes. They are made from the hearts of the finest selected corn—the quality in every way strict from retained.

**A Serving of Kellogg's
for Less than a Penny**

The economy of corn, its high food value, and the tempting flavor of Kellogg's Toasted Corn Flakes are doing for the sake of this national cereal in these days of food conservation.

Kellogg's, for breakfast, is delicious with cream or milk, and for tea, luncheon, or as a dinner dessert, it is a special treat with peaches or bananas.

**Kellogg's
TOASTED
CORN
FLAKES**

If there had been an actual need for food conservation in the United States during World War One, it is good that the country was not involved in the war for very long. As pervasive as the government measures were, they were not particularly effective.⁵⁰ In contrast to contemporary newspaper claims, it was not the "wealthy" who eschewed the government call to conserve, it was the lower classes, whose incomes went up through war work. The extra income allowed them to increase consumption of foods the government was trying to

⁴⁹ "Government Food Experts Say: 'Eat More Corn,'" *Kansas City Star*, 346, (8-29-1917), 4, Accessed from America's Historical Newspapers.

⁵⁰ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 20.

see conserved: “Evidence suggests that voluntary rationing of food in World War I simply did not work. While many better-educated and more affluent Americans did observe wheatless and meatless days, immigrants and those in the working classes, whose war industry-related jobs produced higher incomes, increased their food intake; beef consumption, for instance, actually went up during the war.”⁵¹

Once the war ended, food production habits went fully back to normal in the United States. Commercial food producers, who had done so well during the war, were poised to expand their capabilities and their market share in the years after the war. Restaurants also grew in popularity in the 1920s, as incomes went up and women gained more societal rights and began the early rejection of some historically “feminine” roles such as preparing meals in the home.⁵² And in 1930, frozen convenience foods joined canned items in American grocery stores as the work of the American food scientist, Clarence Birdseye, finally proved its commercial viability.⁵³ At home, kitchens got markedly smaller and were designed for “assembly cooking” rather than “scratch cooking” or project cooking such as canning.⁵⁴ Although the Great Depression limited some families’ ability to purchase food, for those who had money, the years between the wars brought abundant, cheap food, and an increased rise in the

⁵¹ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 20–21.

⁵² Anne Mendelson, “Historical Overview: World War I to World War II,” in *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 290. See also Richard Hooker, *Food and Drink in America*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1981), 323–323.

⁵³ Betty Wason, *Cooks, Gluttons & Gourmets*, (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 315–317. See also Sue Shephard, *Pickled, Potted, and Canned*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 306–310. In her work, Wason says that frozen food made a “gourmet in every split level” although frozen foods were initially expensive and met with limited success in the early years due to the Great Depression.

⁵⁴ Mendelson, “Historical Overview,” 290.

importance of commercially prepared items like bakery breads.⁵⁵ In the absence of the government propaganda and the wave of patriotism it exploited, American home cooks sided with commercially prepared foods over their home-produced analogs on a daily basis.

Rationing, Gardening, and Canning During the Second World War

Upon the U.S. entry into the Second World War, the federal government immediately understood the need for food rationing and even price controls.⁵⁶ There had been lessons from the First World War: Americans could be encouraged, through an appeal to their patriotic duty, to accept the idea of changes in their diet to support the war effort, but accepting an “idea” is not the same thing as actually changing a behavior. The “spirit of self-self sacrifice” that was called upon the first time around was simply not enough, and if the U.S. was facing the possibility of a long war, the best course of action was to initiate changes in food availability right away in case food shortages became a reality in the future. In May 1942, the government instituted sugar rationing, and the rationing of meat and other food items such as coffee followed. The government issued

⁵⁵ Hooker, *Food and Drink*, 318–319. Commercially available bread provides a good case study in the way taste preference changes in response to food availability. The famous writer Henry Miller said the following about commercially prepared bread: “I say we make the foulest bread in all the world. We pass it off like fake diamonds. We advertise it and sterilize it and protect it from all the germs of life. We make a manure which we eat before we have had time to eliminate it,” (as cited in Hooker, 319).

⁵⁶ Amy Bentley, “Historical Overview: World War II,” in *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 290. See also Richard Hooker, *Food and Drink in America*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1981), 291–292.

rationing stamps to be used for sugar, and it instituted a complex points system for other restricted foods.⁵⁷

But the issue of food rationing and other conservation measures remained more one of fairness rather than one of actual need to control the food supply in the United States. In fact, in comparison to other Allied countries, "... rationing in America had less impact on the structure and content of meals than in any other country. American soldiers and civilians alike consumed significantly more food than their allies or their enemies."⁵⁸ But inequities by social class remained a potential problem with regard to food in the U.S., so the government harnessed the fresh wave of patriotic feeling in the country to institute a policy that ostensibly was about keeping food available for the "boys overseas"⁵⁹ but which was actually about, "... spread[ing] shortages fairly across the different socio-economic groups within the population."⁶⁰

Although getting enough food was not a real problem in the United States during the war, having access to commercially prepared foods was another issue. Commercially produced foods, with their durable packaging and stabilized contents ship well, and government "set asides" of fruits and vegetables canned in the factory meant that families who wanted to eat these items were going to have to produce them at home.⁶¹ As a consequence, the government calls to plant "Victory Gardens" and to use the harvest, either immediately or

⁵⁷ Ibid., 291.

⁵⁸ Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012, 415–416).

⁵⁹ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 114.

⁶⁰ Collingham, *The Taste of War*, 419.

⁶¹ Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 125.

through canning and other preservation techniques, do appear to have been somewhat effective.

The home production of food during the Second World War began with the Victory Garden, an idea that is indelibly linked to this war but which actually has very deep roots, dating back to at least the seventeenth century in England.⁶² In the United States, gardening as a way of producing food for the family was part of the American experience and narrative, but post industrialization, "... gardening functioned less as a source of vital foodstuffs and more as a form of recreation, exercise, and most important, therapy – a release from the strains of civilization."⁶³ In the U.S. only the very poor had to garden for food in the early twentieth century, but rather than being associated with poverty, the idea of gardening was bound up with the country's vision of itself as wholesome and even righteous nation. As a consequence, the government's Victory Garden program met with some success. In 1942, 2.0 million more Americans reported keeping a garden in comparison to the previous year. The overall increase was small from 14.5 million gardens in 1941 to 16.5 million in 1945, but still substantial. The Victory Garden program then hit its peak the following year with an estimated 75% of the adult population reporting they grew a garden, and their efforts produced over eight million tons of food: 40% of the fresh produce consumed in the U.S. that year.⁶⁴

But this impressive outcome did not come as a result of government encouragement alone. Instead, public/private partnerships helped to encourage Victory Gardens, educate

⁶² Ibid., 116.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 117.

individuals on basic gardening techniques, and provided space to garden. Not only did the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) print educational brochures, so did The Beech-Nut Packing Company, Firestone Tire Company, Standard Oil, and B&O Railroad, just to name a few.⁶⁵ Private companies knew an opportunity when they saw one: by linking their name to such a wholesome activity as Victory Gardening, they could keep their name in the public eye even during times of rationing.

Even in the face of the 1943 statistics, it is important to note that Victory Gardening was always more popular with those who had been gardening all along, namely the poor and especially African Americans.⁶⁶ Victory Gardening was also very popular in the South where the tradition of gardening for food, even post industrialization, was more vigorous even among the middle class.⁶⁷ Propaganda did do an impressive job in getting Americans to support and even attempt gardening; nevertheless, available evidence indicates that as many as half of all war gardens would be rated as only “poor” or “fair.” Perhaps this bad outcome was because in 1943 approximately one third of those growing a Victory Garden were gardening for the first time in their lives.⁶⁸

Gardening is, of course, only part of the story when it comes to home food production. Once items have been grown, they have to be processed for immediate and long-term use, and this required the reviving of skills that were still available in the population but were on the decline:

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 119–120.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

While home canning in the twentieth century decreased in importance, world crises kept the practice alive. World War I provided a stimulus for women to maintain their canning skills, and with the Great Depression, women who had once canned but quit took out their pressure canners and glass jars to make sure their families had an adequate food supply. World War II only increased this need for canning because significant portions of the nation's canned goods were sent overseas to the military and Allied countries. ... The majority of American women who canned during the war already possessed canning skills (only 8 percent had never before canned). Although experienced canners, some 40 percent of women polled had difficulties, including spoilage problems and faulty thermometers; locating equipment, especially pressure canners; and maintaining it in working order.⁶⁹

To support women in their canning and other food preservation efforts, both the government and private groups printed booklets and books with extensive food preservation instructions. Of these, *Home Canning For Victory, also Preserving, Pickling, and Dehydrating*, edited by Anne Pierce stands out in its comprehensive nature.⁷⁰ The information in *Home Canning* could teach or remind any competent home cook about the four methods of home canning then advocated by the U.S. government: canning low and high acid foods, preserving fruits in jams and jellies, pickling items with vinegar and through

⁶⁹ Ibid., 131–32.

⁷⁰ Anne Pierce, *Home Canning For Victory, also Preserving, Pickling, and Dehydrating* (New York: M. Barrows & Company, Inc, 1941).

fermentation, and dehydration of fruits and vegetables with or without “sulphuring”.⁷¹ The foreword to *Home Canning* indicates there was a contemporary realization that the call to home food production represented a change in the American way of eating by asking consumers to shift from commercially prepared foods back to the home prepared foods of an earlier age:

All over the country the preserving kettle, the wash-boiler with a rack and tight cover, the doughy pressure cooker, glass jars, and rubber rings or tight-sealing covers are marching out to volunteer in the save-the-food drive. The victory gardens and the surplus crops that the farmer has been urged to raise are waiting to be used. It will be of no use unless the women get behind them. Despite the wonderful mass production by the commercial canner ... commercial canned foods may not be available next winter and you must feed the family. ... Important as home food preservation has always been, for years to come it will be a necessity.

Note the difference in tone between the forewords of two otherwise very similar books, Pierce’s 1941 *Home Canning For Victory* and Rorer’s 1912 *Canning and Preserving*. Where the earlier book reflected derisiveness toward food that was made “in factories,” a very

⁷¹ “Sulphuring” (or “sulfuring” in the modern spelling) is a process by which sulphur (sulfur) is applied to a fruit prior to drying it. In the mid twentieth century, actual sulfur fumes were used to “sulfur” fruit, although today sulfur dioxide gas is more common. Sulfur fixes color and flavor in fruit before drying, and is associated with commercial drying preparations rather than home drying. Pierce makes the argument that sulfuring is not necessary or desirable in small-batch drying like that done in the home (63). Both “sulfured” and “unsulfured” fruits are commercially available today.

similar book written three decades later shows respect and appreciation for the “wonderful mass production” of commercially-canned items. Both books focus on skills and recipes, but the change in tone helps to illustrate a shift in attitude away from distrust of the commercial food producer to an acceptance and appreciation of the commercial role, even during a time of increased need for home production.

The societal encouragement to preserve the harvest through home canning and other preservation means appears to have been somewhat successful during the World War Two era. In 1942, at the start of the government efforts to strongly urge home preservation as an obligation of war, 64% of all women reported canning for their family’s use. This number rose to 75% in 1943, and these women canned an average of 165 jars of food, although by 1944, this output dropped.⁷² But it is instructive to look closely at who was doing the canning. Much like with gardening, canning was very popular with those who were doing it already: the very poor who relied on canning to feed their families and families in the South who still had home food preservation as part of their culture. In addition the years of 1942–1944 saw a rise in the canning efforts being made by upper-middle-class households: in contrast to middle-class and lower-middle-class women who were working too much to have the time and making too little to have the money to spend it on canning.⁷³ Statistics regarding canning “schools” and classes bear out this observation: although government agencies from the federal to the local levels were providing canning classes all over the country, they tended to be sparsely attended during this era, even though the

⁷² All statistics from Bentley, *Eating for Victory*, 131–32.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 136–37.

increase in canning had led to an increase in problems with spoilage.⁷⁴

As soon as it became clear in the U.S. that the war was winding down, interest in both gardening and home preservation dropped off precipitously, and commercial food producers were well-placed to take advantage of the home cook's desire to get out of the kitchen.⁷⁵ During the war, commercial food producers had kept their names alive in the marketplace through wartime advertisements and community outreach, and they had also provided the government with new "nutritional science" information that both underpinned the size and character of military food rations and helped to guide civilian food recommendations during the war.⁷⁶ As the war came to a close, the commercial food industry was successful popularizing a pseudo-scientific message about "nutrition" to the mass market, so that the message became clear: not only was commercially produced food easier and tastier than the home-produced varieties, it now was "healthier" too.⁷⁷ All the more reason for the home cook to put her pressure canner back in storage and spread grass seed over her garden plot.

The years after the Second World War saw the meteoric rise of the commercial food industry. What started as a small industry that provided somewhat dubious luxury canned items to a small market in the mid nineteenth century was now a multi-faceted international business that provided every kind of food that had once been prepared in the home and more. McDonalds's, Kentucky Fried

⁷⁴ Ibid., 136.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁶ Collingham, *The Politics of Food*, 420.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 421-22.

Chicken, and Pizza Hut all got their start in the years immediately following the war, and American families began to rely on inexpensive take-out meals. Swanson introduced a similar idea with the “TV dinner” in 1953.⁷⁸ An argument can be made that women would not have been able to enter the workforce in such great numbers during the 1960s and 1970s without these commercially prepared food items taking over the burden of feeding the family.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The modern United States is conflicted about its food. In 1986 an Italian journalist launched Slow Food, an anti-fast food, anti-industrial agriculture movement.⁸⁰ Although it faces criticism for being an “elitist” idea, the Slow Food movement has been very popular in the United States where the idea that food should be grown locally by organic farmers and should be cooked in the home. In fact, it appears that the ideas of the Slow Food movement, especially in times of economic distress such as the United States has faced since late 2007, might be changing American food production behaviors. Although there are no reliable statistics about how many people are canning and otherwise preserving food in the home, according *Wall Street Journal* reporting, the National Center for Home Food Preservation received an unprecedented number of requests for canning demonstrations in 2009, during the height of the “Great

⁷⁸ Sylvia Lovegren, “Historical Overview: World War II to the Early 1960s,” in *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 290. See also Richard Hooker, *Food and Drink in America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1981), 292–93.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁸⁰ Bryan Walsh, “Can Slow Food Feed the World?” *Time.com*, (9–4–2008), www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1838757.00.html, November 4, 2012.

Recession.”⁸¹ Nevertheless, the story of the decline in home food production from the mid eighteenth century through the Second World War should be instructive here: changing wholesale food behaviors is difficult and takes more than a desire. The home production of food is labor intensive, time intensive, and knowledge intensive, and the modern world has changed from the days when all three of those things were abundant in the United States.

Even in the face of the world wars of the mid twentieth century, and all the patriotic fervor that surrounded the U.S. entry into those wars, the actual behavior of American cooks was difficult to modify. The changes that did happen were short-lived and supported by the fact that even by World War Two, most home cooks still had basic knowledge about food preservation techniques such as canning. In a modern setting, making the case for home production of food is much more difficult, as the First Lady no doubt understands by now. The rise of the commercial food industry has shifted the burden of food production from the home cook and gardener to the factory and factory farm, and in part as a result, Americans’ expectations about who can work outside the home have changed too. Commercial food production has also standardized the flavors, colors, and textures of food and has changed what Americans expect when they sit down (or stand up!) to eat. In future food crises, the U.S. government will have more to deal with than it did during the world wars of the twentieth century if ever hopes to rely on the home production of food in the United States again.

⁸¹ Ana Campoy, “Putting Up Produce: Yes You Can,” *The Wall Street Journal*, *WSJ.com*, (10-15-2009), Accessed <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703787204574449160079437536.htm>, November 4, 2012.