



Editors, Food, and the Public

LAST WEEK THE NEWSPAPER food editors held a conference in Chicago. They got a great deal of attention. The governor of Louisiana told them about the wonders of Louisiana sweet potatoes. A sauce manufacturer flew a batch of crawfish bisque from Avery Island. A number of producers presented new developments, and some research specialists spoke.

Attention to food editors is not surprising. Everybody eats and most of us pay for it. If we were grocery manufacturers we, too, would do what we could to see that the president of our association explained to editors a few facts of the cost of food and the other items which make up the cost of living. We sit down to meals three times a day—more frequently than salaries or taxes are paid—so it's natural to curse the cost of food more frequently. Economics predominated in the editors' meeting, but it was comforting to find also that food technology and nutritional science got some attention!

A recent article in *Fortune* had a great deal to say about the remarkable market for food in this country. It noted that the consumption pattern has even ignored Engel's economic law that the higher a family's income the smaller the percentage of income spent for food. A \$60 billion market is not bad—especially when the earlier pattern and experience didn't indicate nearly so much. Such a development justifies lively attention.

But to us, the most encouraging part of the editors' meeting program was the presence of nutrition experts and research people—Byron T. Shaw of the Agricultural Research Administration, for example. It was gratifying to note that technological advances came in for a share of attention. This was a demonstration that the food industry is research-minded and is putting research into practice. Competition is benefiting the consumer. Recognition of consumption patterns is bringing more and more prepared food to the consumer and the trend will continue. This means increasing technology which will require more food scientists and a continued increase of large-scale manufacturing facilities. Food manufacturers with their names on products will be increasingly critical of the raw materials used and increasingly aware that the production of food depends on chemistry all the way from seed to plate.

Everyone is interested in food and everyone is interested in health. But it is not quite like the weather; some people are trying to do something about it. One problem is to give the consumer a chance. Except under physician's orders, his planned eating habits follow mostly along ideas picked up casually—a fair percentage comes from the newspapers and magazines. The food

WALTER J. MURPHY, Editor

editors have an opportunity for public service. So do honest advertisers.

Science has gained high prestige in the past quarter century, and it has high advertising value. As a result "science" comes in for a lot of abuse as well as use. How is the citizen to know? Where is the food editor to get the right kind of information to back an argument for more sensible eating? The food industry today spends a great deal on research and modern processing methods and also depends on results from university studies. But getting the consumer to think about these things is not easy. H. E. Robinson (page 922) points out the need for more public education to improve nutrition. He has suggested the establishment of a nutrition education foundation. Supported by industry, it would be devoted to giving the public sound and useful information about nutrition.

The cereals, fats, and sugar industries today are keenly and painfully aware of the effect of public opinion on markets—and the public opinion affecting those industries is based on very limited knowledge. It appears that in some places, cereals, fats, and sugars are losing favor where they need not. Those industries knew, long before the public did, of the research findings from which present "low-calorie crazes" have taken flight. For example, the basing of milk quality standards on fat content has been continued long after nutrition researchers began talking widely of the harmful effects of our high-fat diet—now it is a problem.

Through an organization devoted to education, the realization of some of our dietary faults might have been brought to the public more gradually; the shift in attitude toward fats and carbohydrates might have been less sudden and accompanied by corresponding shifts in product characteristics.

The establishment of a foundation to educate the public in matters of nutrition certainly should be a public service, but also it could aid the food industry in avoiding landslides of opinion which come when the accumulation of scientific evidence becomes so great that the public is almost suddenly shocked into action. Under such conditions, reactions often are extreme and radical. The matter deserves thoughtful consideration by industry—surely not all the horses are yet out of the barn.