

Eat More Potatoes:

Milk Strikes, Food Boycotts, and the Effects of the High Cost of Living in New York During the Great War, 1916–1919

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In 1914 the world went mad. While Europeans were pulled inexorably into what would become the First World War, for American wheat farmers, things were looking up. In the United States, economic panics in 1907 and again in 1910 had led to stagflation—persistent high inflation combined with high unemployment and low economic demand. The global nature of the First World War brought rapid changes to the American food landscape which affected rural and urban communities in equal measure. Both period and modern literature have a tendency to examine rural agricultural economics and urban purchasing economics separately, but they are firmly interconnected. Progressive reformers attempted to intervene, but their efforts were often in conflict. Sharp increases in grain prices would pitch farmers and consumers against one another, despite their interdependence, as urban and rural communities alike struggled to deal with a changing global economy.¹

High grain prices and coincidental stagflation were at the root of many of the food problems that would face the residents of New York State in the months and years ahead. Grain prices and European demand for foodstuffs would go on to affect the price of milk, potatoes, and onions, while stagflation would lower the purchasing power of ordinary New Yorkers. Milk strikes by upstate dairy farmers and food boycotts enforced by women on the Lower East Side would have lasting repercussions for consumers and farmers alike, while anxiety about food supply during wartime would bring increased scrutiny to food operations of all sizes, farmer

1. Tom G. Hall, "Wilson and the Food Crisis: Agricultural Price Control During World War I," *Agricultural History* 47, no. 1 (January, 1973): 25–26; David I. Macleod, "Food Prices, Politics, and Policy in the Progressive Era," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8, no. 3 (July 2009): 365–406.

practices, and retail food prices. New Yorkers were worried about food, and it showed.²

By the fall of 1916, rising prices had made New Yorkers especially anxious. From farmers and rural folk upstate to immigrants in tenements on the Lower East Side to wealthy industrialists on their Long Island estates, the “high cost of living” or “HCL,” which had been a concern since the turn of the century, was rapidly turning into a global calamity. In the United States and Argentina, both grain exporting nations, the 1915 and 1916 wheat harvests had been poor. For Europeans, the Ukrainian breadbasket was off limits—cut off by German invasion—and their own agricultural lands became battlefields or went untilled as farmers were conscripted into massive armies. It was a classic case of demand far outstripping supply.³

Hampered by lack of capital, poor technological and horticultural innovation, and slow adoption of new technologies, farmers had few incentives to produce more grain. Past experience had taught them that overproduction led to a drop in market prices. But with the sudden spike in demand from Europe for grain and other stable, easy-to-ship food products, many farmers were for the first time seeing the possibilities beyond subsistence farming. The promise of stable high prices was a dream come true for most wheat farmers. Finally, they would be able to readily afford the commercial goods and technologies long advertised by magazines and promoted by Progressive reformers. However, for everyone else, including farmers who relied on grain for livestock feed, high grain prices seemed like a nightmare.

Dairy farmers in Orange County, New York were especially worried. Since the 1850s, urban reformers crusaded against swill milk, a catch-all term for the filthy and disease-ridden adulterated milk urban dairies often sold, and which resulted in the deaths of thousands of children and a number of tuberculosis and cholera outbreaks. In 1858 the *New York Times* reported that as many as 8,000 children had died from contaminated milk.

2. Hall, “Wilson and the Food Crisis,” 25–46; Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests,” *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985): 255–285; William Frieberger, “War Prosperity and Hunger: The New York Food Riots of 1917,” *Labor History* 25, no. 2 (1984), 217–239.

3. Almon R. Wright, “Food Purchases of the Allies, 1917–1918,” *Agricultural History* 16, no. 2 (April 1942): 97–98.

After these swill milk scares and the subsequent passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, Orange County became the primary source of fresh milk for dealers in New York City. But since 1914, when war broke out in Europe, grain prices had been steadily rising. During the summer months their cattle fed on grass and many farmers harvested enough hay to last the winter, but grain was a food necessary to keep milk production and butter-fat levels high in winter. Despite the increased costs of feed, the prices they were getting from the big city milk dealers had not risen at all in the last six or seven years. But what could they do?⁴

THE DAIRYMEN'S LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

Formed in 1907 by a group of farmers associated with the Pomona Grange in Orange County, the Dairymen's League was designed to organize farmers into cooperation and to negotiate prices with the New York Milk Exchange, which at that time was the primary raw milk purchaser in New York City. At the same time, from about 1910 onward, demand for fluid milk was increasing beyond production. The popularity of condensed milk, pioneered by Gail Borden, drove up demand even as the production of butter and cheese declined. Despite demand outstripping production, milk dealers were still able to purchase milk for less than the cost of production—a great boon to middlemen, but not farmers. Increasing transportation costs were taken out of farmer profits rather than passed along to the consumer. In New York City, the retail price of milk remained steady at nine cents per quart, even as the market price for farmers dropped.⁵

Despite the need for cooperation, by 1914 the Dairymen's League of New York was finished. They simply could not galvanize enough dairy farmers into cooperation. Perhaps it was because participation in populism had waned following the losses of presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan in the 1890s. Perhaps it was because participation required a fee in the form of purchased financial stock. Whatever the cause, by the end of 1914 the cost of paying solicitors to recruit members across Pennsylvania,

4. "Swill Milk and Infant Mortality," *New York Times*, May 22, 1858; For more on swill milk, see: Kendra Smith-Howard, *Pure and Modern Milk: An Environmental History since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18–21.

5. R.D. Cooper, *Origin and Development of the Dairymen's League*, manuscript, Cornell University Library Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Ithaca, NY: 1–4.

New Jersey, Connecticut, and southern New York, as well as the salaries of the League Secretary and Treasurer, outweighed the fees collected. Funds were exhausted and all League activities ceased.⁶

In September 1916, despite having been inactive since 1914, officers of the League gathered together and decided to take action on the issue of milk prices. They sent a letter to all League members indicating that they had authorized the executive committee to negotiate contracts at elevated prices for all league members from October 1, 1916 through March 31, 1917. All members were to sell only to League-approved vendors who agreed to a fixed price schedule. For two weeks very few milk dealers chose to work with the League and according to the *New York Times*, by Sunday, October 1, “milk trains began to draw light loads.”⁷

The “milk strike,” as it was known at the time, created problems for urban residents. New York City newspapers covered the strike anxiously. The *Times* did not mince words on September 30th, 1916, writing that within a week, the dealers “might be able to bring enough milk into the community to meet the absolute necessity—in other words, to supply infants and invalids.” Infants and invalids were often mentioned in newspaper coverage of the strike because Progressive Era Americans saw milk as essential to the health of growing children and the weakened ill. It was a “perfect food” containing protein, fat, and carbohydrates all in the same, easily digestible liquid. In a city that had pioneered the crusade against swill milk and was instrumental in the adoption of the Food and Drug Act of 1906, fresh, pure milk was a daily necessity.⁸

The next day the *Times* published a big spread on the topic of the milk strike. One of the primary causes of the strike-induced milk shortage was that the farmers themselves did not have the means of pasteurization, which was required for the sale of milk in New York City. Some league members suggested that they be licensed to sell inspected raw milk directly in the city, but city officials rejected the idea. While farmers argued publicly that below-production prices would put them out of business, thereby enacting a permanent milk shortage, milk dealers stood firm, choosing instead to attempt imports from states farther afield, even as far away as

6. Cooper, *Origin and Development*, 3–4.

7. Cooper, *Origin and Development*, 6, 10–11.

8. “Dairy Row to Pinch City’s Milk Supply,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1916.

Canada. League members retaliated by implying that any milk that made its way into the city during the strike was old or tainted.⁹

In the days following the announcement of the strike, reports came in of league farmers stopping non-member farmers on the roads to shipping depots and dumping their milk—after paying for it, of course. In Brewster, league farmers stopped one non-member driver who was an inspector for Borden condensed milk and dumped a whole can of milk over him; a “milk bath” as the papers called it. Although it seemed wasteful, league farmers knew that without total cooperation, the strike would fail. Enforcement through the control of product was the only way forward.¹⁰

By October 5, a mere five days into the milk strike, urban women were already getting desperate. More than five hundred women and their children, mostly immigrants, “stormed two Health Department milk stations in Harlem.” Having searched the neighborhood for other sources of milk, these desperate women, fearing for the health of their children, rushed the building and caused a virtual riot. The incident shocked middle and upper class Progressives and would serve to foreshadow the plight of immigrant families and their access to food—or lack thereof—in the months to come.¹¹

On October 6 milk buyers, led primarily by the Bordens, offered to increase the price of milk by one cent per quart and pass the profit increase on to the farmers, but the contract was for only one month. At the advice of the New York State Commissioner of Food and Markets John J. Dillon, the farmers held out for the traditional six-month contract. On October 7 the *Times* reported that twelve independent dealers agreed to the Dairymen’s League terms. In that same article, the New York Health Commissioner offered advice to mothers on how to keep their children healthy without milk, offering up condensed milk, cooked cereals, albumen water (made of egg white in boiled and chilled water), cooked eggs, and broth as alternatives. The article also reported violence in the southern counties as sheriffs squared off with Dairymen’s League farmers over dumping the milk of non-member farmers in an effort to enforce the

9. “Farmers Cut Off City’s Milk Today,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1916.

10. “Farmer Pickets Pour Milk Into Highways,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1916.

11. “Mothers With Babies Storm Milk Stations,” *Auburn News*, October 5, 1916.

strike. On October 8, more independent dealers signed on, but the biggest dealers, such as Borden, remained firm. Borden even went so far as to discuss plans to house cows within New York City's Flushing neighborhood in Queens, cutting out the independent farmers entirely. By October 15, Borden abandoned those plans and signed the league contract. The Dairymen's League had their contract and fair prices (for now), but food price woes were only getting worse for New York City residents.¹²

LOWER EAST SIDE

On the Lower East Side of New York City, working class women were also starting to worry. Food prices were rising, winter was coming, and wages were not keeping up. Food prices had gone up before. Jewish women in particular remembered the meat boycotts and riots of 1902 and 1910.¹³ But that fall of 1916 something was different. Food prices went up, and kept going up, and not just on luxury items like meat or butter. Even the cheapest of vegetables—potatoes and cabbage—rose in price. In February of 1917, the food price crisis boiled over. Working class Jewish housewives in New York City captured the nation's attention when they boycotted culturally essential foods such as onions, potatoes, and chicken, the prices of which had skyrocketed in a matter of months.¹⁴

Many people living on the Lower East Side and other poorer areas of New York City relied heavily on pushcarts for their daily food needs. Purveying everything from flowers and fruit to bread and pickles, in 1905 pushcart operators were subjected to a census by Mayor George McClellan. Stereotyped by Progressive reformers as selling spoiled food in filthy conditions, bilking the poorest of the poor, and blocking streets, pushcarts were in fact found to be clean, carrying high-quality produce, sometimes of better quality than those sold in stores. Despite claims of the time that

12. "Farmers Reject Milk Settlement," *New York Times*, October 6, 1916; "Milk Deadlock Seems Broken," *New York Times*, October 7, 1916; "More Milk Firms Yield to Farmers," *New York Times*, October 8, 1916; "Borden Gives In, Ending Milk War," *New York Times*, October 15, 1916.

13. For more on the kosher meat riots of 1902 see Paula E. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History* 70, no. 1 (September, 1980): 91–105. For more on the short-lived high cost of living meat boycotts of 1910, see Macleod, "Food Prices, Politics, and Policy," 365–406.

14. Dana Frank, "Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985): 258.

vegetables were nutritionally worthless, cabbages, potatoes, and onions, in particular, played a huge role in the diets of immigrant communities. For families who could afford meat perhaps once per week, vegetables formed the backbone of their meals.¹⁵

When vegetable prices began to rise, many women blamed pushcart operators for high prices. On February 19, 1917, when onions and potatoes took another price jump, a woman in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn did not have enough cash to cover her purchases. In anger, she overturned the pushcart, grabbed her produce, and ran. The peddler protested and gave chase, only to find himself surrounded by hundreds of angry women. This incident sparked a massive riot in which dozens of pushcarts were overturned and burned. By noon, police had quelled the morning's riot, but that afternoon another broke out in nearby Williamsburg. Surprisingly, police made no arrests. One lead officer later explained, "I just didn't have the heart to do it. They were just crazy with hunger, and I don't see how I could blame them." In an era still dominated by ideas of feminine virtue and masculine chivalry, members of the public found blaming women for reacting violently to the starvation of their children morally impossible. The sentiment would be echoed by others as government authorities and Progressive reformers attempted to lay blame where it was due and solve the high price crisis, with little success.¹⁶

Pushcart peddlers, who bore the brunt of women's anger, argued that rising wholesale prices hampered them as well. On the evening of the Brownsville and Williamsburg riots, the shaken pushcart men gathered at New Plaza Hall to plead their case to the public. They argued that wholesale prices at the Bushwick Terminal of the Long Island Railroad were so high they had to "chip in" together to purchase produce for resale. One man even said he made less than seventy-five cents for the week. In previous years, some operators had made as much as twelve dollars per week. In the middle of the meeting, a woman with five children pushed her way to the front, holding up her children as proof that her husband's meager

15. Jane Ziegelman, *97 Orchard Street: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 144–146.

16. Frieburger, "War Prosperity," 220.

wages as a tailor were not enough to feed them. She became so hysterical a doctor was called to sedate her and take her home.¹⁷

Under siege by unfriendly police officers, middle- and upper-class residents who complained about noise and pollution, and zealous Progressive reformers, pushcart operators made easy scapegoats. Progressive reformers accused them of adulterating tainted foods, leaving trash and decomposing refuse in their wakes, and spreading disease. Customers abused them and officials connected with Tammany Hall demanded extortionate “protection” payments. Although pushcart operators pled their case to the crowds, it made little difference to the stomachs of hungry people. By the end of 1917, New York City officials banned pushcarts from the streets. In an ironic twist, by February of 1918, a mere year after the Brownsville riots, the ban would be challenged as the Progressive reformers who had fought for it now called for its relaxation, to allow the poor easier and more affordable access to food.¹⁸

Pushcarts remained in service for the time being, however, and Jewish women in particular had had enough of rising prices. Mere months ago their husbands’ wages had bought plenty of vegetables with room for a Sunday chicken and other occasional luxuries. According to a *New York Times* investigation, February of 1917 left many families barely subsisting on coffee, tea, bread, and rice. Most could not afford potatoes, much less meat. Laborers who used to eat onion sandwiches every day for lunch could now not even afford onions. Wages had to be used for rent, wood or coal for heat, and clothing in addition to food. For many households, food was the one budget item with some wiggle room. But now their budgets were squeezed beyond bearing. Those making ten dollars or more per week were scraping by. Those making less were forced to rely on family members or charity to survive.¹⁹

To working families, the fact that their circumstances had not changed, but they suddenly could not afford even the cheapest of foods was not only a hardship, it was an affront to the promise of capitalism. Some fami-

17. Frieburger, “War Prosperity,” 220; Daniel Burnstein, “The Vegetable Man Cometh: Political and Moral Choices in Pushcart Policy in Progressive Era New York City,” *New York History* 77, no. 1 (January 1996), 54.

18. Burnstein, “The Vegetable Man Cometh,” 64–82; “Demand Pushcarts as Aid to Poor,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1918.

19. “Food Problem Real to East Side’s Poor,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1917.

lies coped by taking on extra work; others coped by eating less or eating lower quality. Some grew desperate as “investigators for the city’s charity department found people eating ‘decayed’ potatoes and onions,” although perhaps investigators’ definitions of “decayed” differed somewhat than those of the poor. For many, protest was the best coping mechanism. By February 20, the Jewish women of the Lower East Side, assisted to some extent by Socialist political groups, organized neighborhood boycotts to try to drive prices down. The violence with which these women enforced the boycotts—assaulting those who broke the boycott, destroying vegetable carts, and attacking storefronts—shocked Progressives and the general public alike.²⁰

By noon, the boycott had swelled its ranks with poor and working class women and their children who clamored at the gates of Mayor John Mitchel of New York City, holding up their babies and demanding bread. Mitchel refused to meet with them, suggesting that representatives meet with him the following day. The authorities, unable to solve the food price issue and at a loss when it came to dealing with violent and rioting women, did little except arrest and jail the rioters. Most of the women arrested in New York City were later broken out of jail by their free counterparts.²¹

Food boycotts and rioting quickly spread across the country. On February 21, riots broke out in Philadelphia; on February 22, in Boston. On February 23, newspapers reported that people in Alabama and Mississippi were near starvation as “for weeks only 6 per cent of the usual allotment of railroad cars” had been able to move food into the region. In New York City on February 22 and 23, there were poultry price demonstrations. In one week the price of poultry had risen from 20 or 22 cents per pound to as high as 32 cents per pound—a 45 percent increase. On February 25, 5,000 people “leaving a protest rally at Madison Square, marched upon the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, demanding food.” Demonstrators also attacked wealthy motorists. One driver, “fearing injury at the hands of the mob, put in high speed and went pell mell through the crowded street,” injuring at least one hundred women and some children. In Philadelphia, food riots resulted in one man being shot by the

20. Frieburger, “War Prosperity,” 226; Frank, “Housewives, Socialists,” 258–259.

21. Frank, “Housewives, Socialists,” 255–285.

police and an old woman being trampled by a mob, while furious mothers declared a school strike. In Cincinnati, community leaders called for a boycott of butcher shops. In Chicago, settlement workers reported acute suffering among the city's poor. High food prices and fuel shortages gave rise to "[r]umors of foreign influence," which prompted a Justice Department investigation. The investigation later found "no plot" in the food boycotts, only hungry people.²²

The rioting and protests in New York continued on March 1, which the socialist daily paper *New York Call* called the "worst rioting" yet. Nearly one hundred people were arrested as grocery stores across the Lower East Side were attacked. On March 3, butchers stabbed a baby and an old woman in two separate protest incidents. In an effort to quell the boycotts and alleviate hunger, authorities tried a variety of ways to bring food into the city. Some Progressives tried to shift the diets of poor and working class Americans to nutritionally equivalent but cheaper and more readily available substitutes, but to the boycotting women this was offensive. "We don't want their oleomargarine. I could buy butter once on my husband's wages—I don't see why I shouldn't have the same to-day," said Mrs. Ida Markowitz at a protest. Other women felt the same—"Even two months ago it wasn't so hard as it is today." Others tried to get their wealthy friends to "subscribe" to their efforts to replace middlemen with themselves—to personally buy up produce and have it shipped into the city to sell at below market costs, with the assurance that subscribers would get their money back, of course.²³

The biggest blunder by wealthy Progressives was perhaps that of George Perkins, head of the Food Committee, who "sent 14,000 pounds of smelt into the city on motor trucks, [but] angry East Side shoppers 'who suspected Wall Street and did not want smelts, anyhow, mauled the sellers and returned some of the fish to their native element through open manholes.'" Dr. Haven Emerson, head of the New York City Health Department, nearly provoked another riot on March 3 when he told 2,000 East Side residents "to use milk instead of eggs and rice rather than pota-

22. Frieburger, "War Prosperity," 223–229; Elaine F. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory: The Woman's Land Army of America in the Great War* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2008), 23; "No Plot in Food Riots," *New York Times*, February 24, 1917.

23. Frieburger, "War Prosperity," 228–238; As quoted in Frank, "Housewives, Socialists," 262–263.

toes and not to intrude their European habits into the United States.” An editorial in the *New York Call*, pointed out that high use of cheaper substitutes was far more likely to simply drive up the price of said substitutes as demand increased. Many suspected that suggested substitutes were not only a deflection of the larger high cost of living problem, but also covert (and not so covert) attempts by Yankee Progressives to Americanize and assimilate the food habits of immigrant communities.²⁴

In New York, the boycotts and riots eventually worked. Or so it seemed. In the weeks between February 20 and March 11, pushcarts disappeared from the streets, vendors “slashed prices to save their stocks from spoilage . . . [and] Onion shipments accumulated unsold at wholesalers’ wharves.” By March 11, potato prices had fallen from eleven cents to six cents per pound. But by March 25, New York State Agriculture Commissioner Charles Wilson reported that meat, bread, and vegetables like potatoes were likely to remain scarce, owing to a poor potato and vegetable crop in 1916 and encroachment on cattle range lands in the west. Although prices were dropping from their mid-winter highs, the high cost of living and food price problems remained fundamentally unresolved.²⁵

The U.S. entry into the European war in April of 1917 changed everything, and nothing. Since the fall of 1916, when poor wheat harvests were predicted, President Woodrow Wilson had been trying to solve the “wheat problem.” When poor harvests were predicted for 1917 if something was not done to increase production that spring, he stopped dithering and finally took action. In May Wilson appointed Herbert Hoover “food dictator” of the United States Food Administration. Created by executive order and staffed by volunteers, the Food Administration had little real power until a deadlocked Congress finally approved the formation of the United States Food Administration in August of 1917. That did not stop self-made mining engineer and international relief organizer Herbert Hoover, who believed that voluntarism would rebut the coercive measures Allied powers had taken to secure food in their nations. He enlisted American housewives in voluntary conservation in an effort to free up American

24. Frieburger, “War Prosperity,” 234–235.

25. Frank, “Housewives, Socialists,” 259; “Sees No Hope of Drop in Prices of Food,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1917.

wheat through conservation until more could be planted the following year.²⁶

After the August passage of the Lever Act, which allowed the Food Administration limited intervention powers, Hoover moved quickly to mitigate skyrocketing grain prices not by setting price controls as so many advocated, but by acting as the sole broker for all grain purchases by the Allies. All grain export deals were to go through the newly created Grain Corporation, which reported to Hoover. By doing so, he avoided the “socialism” of outright government control and maintained this intervention as a temporary war measure. Grain prices began to stabilize thanks to the purchasing monopoly of the U.S. Grain Corporation, and farmers promised to increase production. Despite this promise, the harvest of 1917 would turn out to be a disappointing one.²⁷

That spring of 1917 a small group of women from Orange County got together and formed the Orange County Food Preservation Battalion (OCFPB), a voluntary, women-led organization with an educative mission. Inspired by a similar organization founded by the wealthy elites of Long Island, including former president Theodore Roosevelt, and the exhortations of the newly appointed Herbert Hoover, Gillian Webster Barr Bailey and her well-to-do friends began advocating for food conservation to free up supplies for soldiers and starving Europeans alike. Part of their efforts included a “conservation train” on the Erie Railroad in which upper-middle-class and middle-class women throughout Orange County traveled from town to town in early July, preaching the gospel of canning, dehydrating, and thrift. They met with a primarily rural audience, and although many of the OCFPB ladies had grown up in New York or other large cities, they appeared to listen to the people they were trying to educate.²⁸

Running for a full week from Monday, July 2 through Friday, July 9, the conservation train’s early emphasis on canning gave way to information

26. Hall, “Wilson and the Food Crisis,” 26–28.

27. Hall, “Wilson and the Food Crisis,” 43–44; George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Master of Emergencies, 1917–1918* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996), 81–103.

28. For more information on the Orange County Food Preservation Battalion, see: Sarah Wassberg, “Preserve or Perish: The Orange County Food Preservation Battalion and Food Conservation Efforts in New York State during the Great War, 1917–1919” (MA thesis, University at Albany, State University of New York, 2015).

on the dehydration plants and homemade drying racks that communities, businesses, and individuals could use to preserve foods indefinitely and quite cheaply. With speculation that food dehydration was how Germany was feeding its armies, interest in Orange County ran high. As the *New York Herald* reported on July 8, Germany had used dehydration to stockpile a supply “sufficient to last its civilian population six month,” whereas Americans were only just coming to realize the value of dehydration.²⁹

A few days earlier, the *Middletown Times-Press* reported that a good portion of the train route ran through the “onion belt” of Orange County—an area of bogs that had been drained by Polish and Volga German immigrants into some of the richest agricultural land in the country. In this rural farming area, large numbers of men showed up to ask the experts about vegetable dehydration, including how to manufacture flour from potatoes, which Gillian Bailey happily explained. The farmers were interested in preserving an exceptionally large harvest that year, “declaring . . . that there has never been a larger onion crop.”³⁰

Members of the OCFPB must have been overjoyed at the sincere interest by men and farmers in this particular area of food preservation, especially considering that food preservation was long considered women’s domain. Onions, particularly those varieties not specifically bred for long storage, are susceptible to mold and rot if held for too long. Clearly the idea of dehydration was attractive to farmers and businessmen facing a bumper onion crop with potentially no way to preserve it before it spoiled. With the memory of the February onion boycotts and their crops rotting at rail terminals fresh in their minds, the onion farmers of the black dirt region of Orange County were almost certainly looking to preserve what onions were held over from the prior winter, as well as planning for the possibility of more food-related unrest in the winter of 1917–18.

One of the most popular topics of the OCFPB’s 1917 “Conservation Special” was the premise of grinding potato flour in the home and on the farm. Community dehydration plants and homemade kitchen driers were enthusiastically received, especially in the Pine Island, “black dirt” area where onion and potato farmers were hardest hit by boycotts and transpor-

29. “Preached Gospel of Dehydration to 7,000 Persons,” *Herald* (New York) July 8, 1917.

30. “Erie Food Special Draws Large Crowd In This City,” *Middletown Times-Press*, July 5, 1917; Bailey, “Waste Not, Want Not” *Erie Railroad Magazine*, 391.

tation issues. Potato flour was being touted as a substitute for or additive to stretch wheat flour, which Herbert Hoover had asked housewives across the country to conserve through his “Wheatless Wednesdays” campaign. In her *Erie Railroad Magazine* article reporting on the “Conservation Special,” Gillian Bailey wrote, “That we brought encouragement and help to the large market growers is evident by the fact that we are expecting at least three commercial dryers to be run . . . and when these three huge machines are being run to their full capacity I shall feel that Orange county will be doing her bit.”³¹

Indeed, there was a great deal of interest in installing community dehydrators all over Orange County. The mayor of Middletown, N.Y. was “so interested in the possibility of a local plant” that he coordinated with the Middletown Chamber of Commerce to discuss. Staff from a local farm belonging to the Department of Correction of New York City spoke with Mrs. Andrea about preserving produce like corn, beans, and tomatoes “until markets for them could be found.” Mrs. Andrea was the OCFPB’s at-large home economics expert who had published a book on food preservation through canning and later went on to publish another on dehydration and drying.³²

Individuals were also interested in dehydration. The OCFPB’s Mrs. M. C. Migel said that “a community dryer is to be installed on her estate at Monroe, N.Y., as an incentive to others. Mrs. H. D. Pulsifer, who owns the 700-acre Houghton farm, at Mountainville, N.Y., is another person who showed interest in the community dryer.” Port Jervis, too, showed a great deal of enthusiasm in the potential of a community dehydrating plant. In a letter to Mrs. Bailey about her impending magazine article, a representative from the Erie Railroad wrote congratulating her about the press coverage of the train, including this tidbit, “Port Jervis, you will note by reading the Union report, is deeply interested and its business men have taken up the question of a community dryer.”³³

31. Bailey, “Waste Not, Want Not” *Erie Railroad Magazine*, 391; “Farmers Interested In Vegetable Drying,” *Evening Telegram* (New York), July 5, 1917, p. 4. Gillian Webster Barr Bailey, “Waste Not, Want Not,” *Erie Railroad Magazine* 13, no. 7: 430.

32. “Preached Gospel of Dehydration to 7,000 Persons,” *Herald* (New York City), July 8, 1917.

33. *Ibid.*; Erie Railroad Company to Mrs. Bailey, July 9, 1917, Orange County Food Preservation Battalion Scrapbook 1917–1919, Archive, Museum Village, Monroe, NY.

Unfortunately for Gillian's optimism, community dehydration plants did not take off in Orange County as planned. The *Port Jervis Union* recounted the decision, indicating that a large commercial dryer was too expensive. "After a long discussion, it was decided that Port Jervis and the adjacent farming territory was not large enough to support such a plant." Indeed, although homemade dryers seemed popular and commercially made ones could be had for as "little" as five dollars, the big commercial dehydration plants proved out of reach for most communities. The narrow profits to be made on dehydrated vegetables just could not warrant the up-front expense. As the war wore on and agricultural production improved, the demand for dehydrated foodstuffs seemed to decline. Perhaps the length of time to dehydrate and the difficulty in reviving dehydrated vegetables, in particular, made the process less palatable to farm wives and individuals. Canning took less time, and the results were much easier to use—just heat and serve for most vegetables, and canned fruits could be eaten straight from the jar. The commercial market for dehydrated vegetables also did not seem particularly robust, and thus could not support the expense of large-scale dehydration.³⁴

Despite setbacks in community dehydration, the agricultural surpluses continued. The winter of 1917–1918 was one of the coldest on record for the Northeast and much of the northern parts of the country saw record snowfall. This weather anomaly only served to further exacerbate backups and bottlenecks on the already overburdened rail lines across the country. For the Northeast in particular, including New York City and Boston, the frigid temperatures and heavy snowfalls meant that rail lines carrying essential goods such as coal and food were delayed or stopped altogether. Blizzard after blizzard and near-record snowfall in Pennsylvania and parts east had led to serious railroad delays. As the mercury dropped in January, coal was in high demand in New York City, but by February the city was facing shortages and serious hardship. Workers struggled to free frozen and buried railcars and authorities flexed their control over the railroads

34. "Chamber of Commerce Discussed Drying Plant—City and Community Not Large Enough To Support the Proposition," *Port Jervis Union*, undated, Orange County Food Preservation Battalion Scrapbook 1917–1919, Archive, Museum Village, Monroe, NY.

by restricting cargoes to those in highest demand—food, coal, and war goods.³⁵

On January 24, 1918, according to the *Times*, U.S. Railroad Administrator William McAdoo placed an “embargo” on a number of eastern rail lines, preventing the transportation of all freight but coal, food, and war goods. Coal was particularly important as it was used to fuel ships in New York Harbor and other major ports bound for the Allies, as well as the homes of most New Yorkers. The *Times* cited the weather, particularly bad through the Allegheny Mountains, as the primary cause of this temporary embargo, writing that, “The railroads affected by the embargo order carry the greater part of the coal supply for the New York City Area, and it is expected that the embargo will make itself felt at once in the increase in supplies of coal and food.” In an interesting reversal of New York City policy, as a “war measure,” pushcarts, once the victims of angry housewives and banned in 1917 for their role in street congestion and garbage production, were reintroduced into the city in an effort to reduce congestion at central markets and better facilitate the transportation of food to the poorer sections of the city, including the Lower East Side. By March the snow and cold weather had eased, making life for residents of New York City warmer, if not easier.³⁶

The railroad shipping backups, combined with large potato harvests, meant that an unusually large crop of storage potatoes would be available in the spring. Government officials worried that oversupply and the low prices caused by a glut on the market would prevent farmers from planting as many potatoes that spring which could cause a shortage the following fall and winter. As Figure 1 indicates, this led to an increased emphasis on getting households to use potatoes as a cheap substitute for bread and other starches. Even the Orange County Food Preservation Battalion got in on the propagandizing, with one of the few pieces of evidence that they continued their work in 1918. Lillian Meeker, the new food conservation agent for the OCFPB, did her part to attempt an increase in demand by

35. “Section VII.—Weather and Data for the Month,” *Monthly Weather Review* (January 1918): 42–43; “Roads limited to food, fuel, and war goods,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1918.

36. “Roads limited to food, fuel, and war goods,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1918; “Rushing Cars West for Food Supplies,” *New York Times*, February 1, 1918; “Demand Pushcarts as Aid For Poor,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1918.

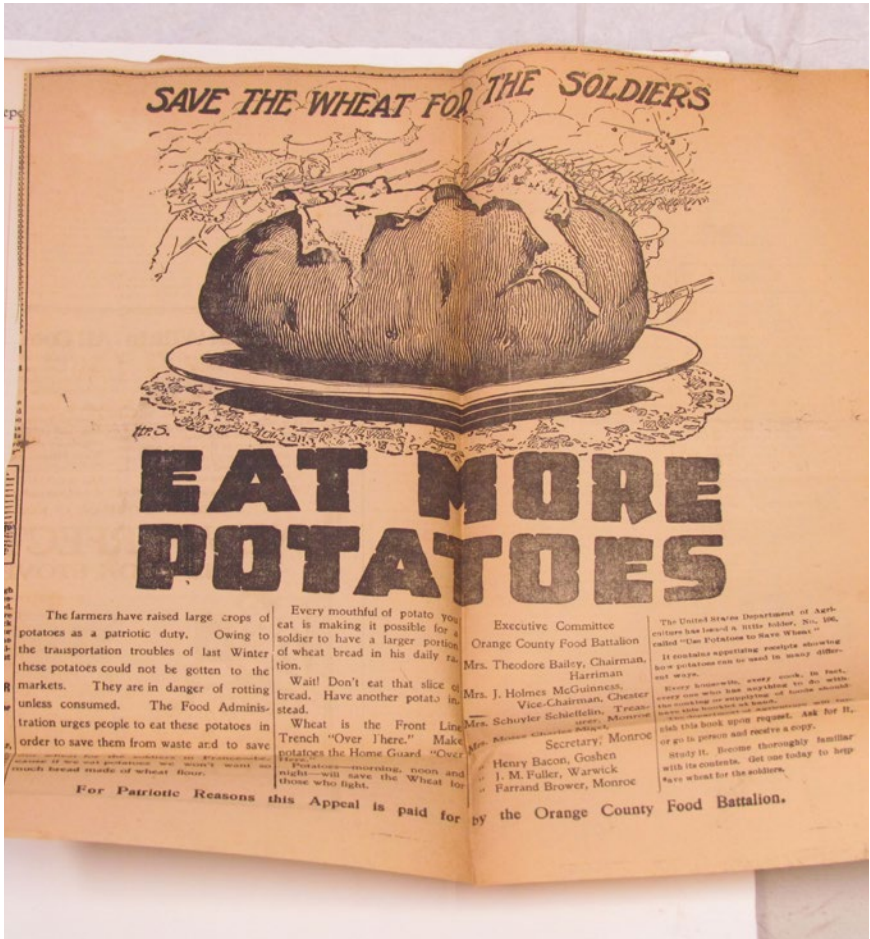


Figure 1. At some point, presumably in early 1918, the OCFPB published this advertisement in an local newspaper. Catchy slogans were an important part of convincing people to replace bread with potatoes. The first paragraph reads “The farmers have raised large crops of potatoes as a patriotic duty. Owing to the transportation troubles of last Winter these potatoes could not be gotten to the markets. They are in danger of rotting unless consumed. [...] Every mouthful of potato you eat is making it possible for a soldier to have a larger portion of wheat bread in his daily ration.” Source: “Eat More Potatoes,” undated image (but circa 1918), Orange County Food Preservation Battalion Scrapbook 1917-1919, Archive, Museum Village, Monroe, NY.

emphasizing potato recipes, including potato biscuits and potato doughnuts. To the working-class Jewish women of New York, it must have been a relief to have such a price reversal, albeit almost a year later.³⁷

MILK PRICING V. CONSUMPTION

While the Orange County Food Preservation Battalion was exhorting residents to eat more potatoes, consumers in New York were having a harder time drinking more milk. In 1918 the City of New York published the *Report of the Mayor's Committee on Milk*, which outlined price increases between October 1916 and October 1917. Prices had increased from the original nine cents per quart in September 1916 to 14 cents per quart by October 1917. Prices were increasing approximately every four months, with some shorter periods between increases. Of particular concern to urban Progressives, including Dr. Haven Emerson (of “let them eat rice” fame) who led the committee, was that increasing milk prices were driving down consumption among poorer families in the city, particularly among children. According to the committee’s research, out of 2,200 families with young children surveyed, 1,480 indicated that they were purchasing and consuming less milk than during the same time last year. Although the *Report* outlines all the prices and profits received by both farmers and dealers, it does not lay the blame for higher prices squarely at their door. Rather, in typical Dr. Haven Emerson form, the *Report* uses the nutritional science of the day to equate milk with other foods such as beef and eggs, claiming that milk provides calories and protein at a much more affordable rate than meat. This attempt to convince working families to spend money on milk instead of meat largely failed.³⁸

The *Report* does include extensive tables and speculation on the actual costs of milk production in New York, New Jersey, and New Hampshire, with the average cost of production being around five or six cents per

37. *Report of the New York State Food Commission*, 58. New York (State). *Report of the New York State Food Commission for Period October 18, 1917, to July 1, 1918: With Supplementary Report for Four Months Ending November 1, 1918*. Albany: J. B. Lyon Co., printers, 1919. “Orange County Food Battalion,” *Monroe Gazette*, undated, Orange County Food Preservation Battalion Scrapbook 1917–1919, Archive, Museum Village, Monroe, NY.

38. New York (city), *Report of the Mayor's Committee on Milk*, City of New York, (New York, 1917): 17, 24.

quart. Yet in 1915, producers in New York were getting a mere three and a half cents per quart, and by October, 1917, thanks to New York Dairymen's League efforts, were getting just seven cents per quart when the retail price had risen to fourteen cents. Because of this price discrepancy, milk dealers and their costs were also heavily investigated by the committee and the results of that investigation show that in 1917 several dealers, including Borden, actually posted a profit loss. According to the *Report*, "even the recent advances in the retail price of milk have not been sufficient to pay the cost of delivery without serious losses to the majority of retailers."³⁹

By the end of 1917 the push toward both increased production and increased prices had created a sharp reversal of the conditions of the fall of 1916. No longer was demand outstripping supply. Instead, a surplus threatened a dairy depression. Milk prices were too high for the traditional oversupply cushions of condensed milk and butter to make much of an impact—condenseries could not sell their product for less than the cost of production. According to the *Report*, "it appears that the losses on surplus milk, when made into butter and the skim milk sold at 75c. per hundred, would be more than \$414,000.00 per year." But dairy farmers were still paying off their high feed grain costs and could not lower prices.⁴⁰

The *Report* culminates with offering a few reasons for high production costs: first, the argument that many cows in the dairy herd were low producers and should have been fattened and sold for beef; second, that most dairy herds were too small and that production costs could have been lowered by economies of scale; and third, that purchasing feed from retailers was unnecessarily expensive and that through cooperation farmers could have purchased whole cars of feed directly from the wholesaler. Feed costs were by far the highest input into dairy farming, and although the *Report* points this out, it does not blame European grain exports as the primary driver behind price increases.⁴¹

By January of 1918, conflict over milk prices, which had threatened in October 1917 to turn into another milk strike, led the New York Food Commission to reluctantly agree to higher prices. Herbert Hoover and the

39. *Ibid.*, 1–5; *Ibid.*, 62–63.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

U.S. Food Administration, despite repeated requests from state agencies, milk dealers, and dairy farmers alike to do something to standardize milk prices across the country, failed to do so. Unable to “stabilize” prices (as Hoover was so fond of saying, refusing to admit to price fixing) for dairy as it did for so many other agricultural products, especially wheat, the Food Administration simply helped facilitate deals between the largest of the dairy cooperatives—such as the New York Dairymen’s League—and the big city milk dealers. But, by July of 1918 the Dairymen’s League had backed out of the prices fixed by the Commission, as had the biggest milk dealers. Another deal came in October, this time struck only with influence from Hoover, with a price of seven cents per quart to the producer and fifteen and a half cents to the consumer. This represented a serious increase in the cost of milk from two years earlier, when a quart of milk cost just nine cents retail. Even so, the agreement did not last and by December 1918 milk supplies were once again in jeopardy as the league ordered another strike. In January 1919 the State of New York appointed a new milk commission and prices were once again fixed to the market demand, rather than the price of production.⁴²

With the end of the war in November 1918, producer and dealer conflicts over price continued, albeit to a lesser extent. Shockingly, after the war the New York Dairymen’s League and other dairy cooperatives across the country were accused of price fixing and in several states, including New York, cooperative leaders were actually arrested and prosecuted under anti-trust laws. Agricultural cooperatives were later determined to be exempt from anti-trust laws, but at the time dairy farmers saw the punitive action as yet another attack—and rightfully so.⁴³

As rationing eased and Europe got back on its feet agriculturally, consumer prices for food fell to more manageable levels. But for dairy farmers the fight was not over—milk strikes occurred again in the 1920s and ’30s and it was not until World War II that prices were stabilized primarily through increased mechanization and cooperation, with the number of

42. James L. Guth, “Herbert Hoover, the U.S. Food Administration, and the Dairy Industry, 1917–1918,” *The Business History Review* 55, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 180–187.

43. “High Cost of Living Hearings Before the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives, Sixty-Sixth Congress, First Session on Amendments Proposed to the Food Control Act, August 15, 20, 1919,” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1919); Guth, “Herbert Hoover,” 176–177.

farmer-owned creameries continuing to increase through the 1920s until the 1950s. Poor and working-class people in New York and across the nation continued to struggle as the Great Depression set in. Food prices were no longer quite as high as they had been during the First World War, but it would take President Franklin D. Roosevelt quietly removing the American economy from the gold standard and a Second World War to help working people make enough money to afford abundant food again. And it would take more direct government intervention into agricultural policy to make food production and prices more stable for both farmers and consumers.

CONCLUSION

Although they are not often considered together, the actions of farmers and consumers had distinct and direct impact upon one another during the First World War. Grain production—or lack thereof—had an outsized influence on food prices nationwide and although grain farmers benefitted from the higher prices brought on by European demand, others such as dairy and vegetable farmers suffered, despite often being lumped together with their grain-producing brethren both in the period and by modern historians. Rural producers struggled to attain the consumerist lifestyle of their urban counterparts while urbanites strove for fair wages and affordable prices. The Great War highlighted, but never solved the rural-urban struggle. When the United States went off the gold standard in the 1930s, inflation slowed, and other nations soon followed suit.

Following the end of World War II the United States experienced an agricultural boom thanks to newly minted pesticides and herbicides and increased manufacture of heavy agricultural machinery. In the 1970s US Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz's removal of WWII-era price protections for farmers and his "get big or get out" policies combined with the "green revolution" led to a boom in agricultural production, even as the number of farmers declined. Government regulation of food sanitation, begun at the turn of the century and just starting to gain real traction in 1917, has made our modern food supply among the safest in the world. But today, as in 1917, food remains the one piece of the budget which working families can adjust during hard times. And today, as in 1917, some families are

forced to eat what they can afford, not what they choose. Unlike 1917, our modern abundance of food and lack of close neighborhood and family ties has meant that protesting for cheaper vegetables—not the luxury foods that beef and butter were during the Great War—is no longer even considered.

This is perhaps to our detriment. The Jewish women of the Lower East Side wanted to maintain their standards of living and protested to get it. The dairy farmers of New York wanted to increase their standards of living, and cooperated to get it. Today, cooperative purchasing clubs and cooperative stores are on the rise, cooperative creameries and dairies still exist, and community-supported agriculture in rural and urban areas is making fresh produce more readily available to people of all backgrounds. Whether or not the United States will ever have another milk strike or food boycott remains to be seen, but we can learn from the cooperative efforts of farmers and working class housewives alike.