

"WHEREWITH SHALL WE BE FED"

By Herbert Quick

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A journal devoted to the grocery trade says of the American farmer, "The food director of America today." When Moses was ready to be blessed the Children of Israel by him; and his first benediction was in these words: "Let Reuben live, and not die; and let not his seed be few." And this shall be my lot this morning, in a pre-arrangement on the farmer as related to the mobility of our food supply in war. It is a greater revolution in thought than has ever been seen than that indicated by our present attitude toward food. The food question is uppermost in the minds of millions of us who have never given it much consideration before. The traditional attitude of the American has always been one of lordly indifference toward the food supply—its sources, or its wants and abuses.

And now, as the spring of 1917 unfolds, broadening gloriously into summer, our minds dwell anxiously on provisions and provender.

The wheat is casting its green mantle over millions of broad acres. The vegetables are either sprouting or ready to be planted. An unbroken fighting line of blades and sheaves and bursting shells sweeps across the Canadian frontier at the rate of twenty-five miles a day, while the videttes are winter wheat, and the sappers and miners the great rows of lettuce beds, onion patches and potato fields; with masses of celery, beans, asparagus, cabbages, turnips and beets interspersed among brigades and divisions of corn, barley, spring wheat and supports of meadow and pasture, while the rear will be brought up by the late potatoes, turkeys and buckwheat and all the things which autumn pours from out her lavish horn. And we are all thinking about these things in terms of grub.

An observer in China once noted the significance and rather appalling consequences of the conversation of the Chinese people or peasant may be roughly divided into two parts; one, the main theme, comprising eighty per cent. of the talk, relates to food; the rest twenty per cent. to domestic relations, the soul and other minor matters. As we read what the American press is now carrying about food, and listen to the discussions of it in public and private, one wonders if we are not approaching the Chinese standard of conversation. In the language of a latter crimson comes upon the world's breast; in the spring the

wanton lawping gets himself another crest; in the spring the index number—Bradstreet's—darkens every mood; in the spring our martial fancy gravely turns to thought of food. This spring anyhow.

Well may it so turn! We have been irresistibly, inevitably, reluctantly swept into the world war. Nothing will again be as it was in any case; but if we and our allies are defeated, things will always be disastrously worse for us than they ever were before. Into what new state we shall emerge when the struggle is over no one may say; but this is clear: We shall be in deadly and continuing peril if we lose.

Whether we shall be as well off if we win as we should have been if the great war, now three years old, had not been, is most dubious; but we shall certainly be fatefully the worse off if we lose.

We must not lose. Our side must not lose. Our enemy must be defeated. Every ship, and if necessary in the final stage every man, must be ventured rather than face the future terrors of a France subjugated, a Russia Germanized, a British Empire crumbled into ineffective and German-claimed provinces, and ourselves brought face to face with the grimmest foe the world has produced, flushed with victory and with whetted appetites for the spoils of the nations. And the winning of the war is at bottom a matter of food.

Armies walk on their stomachs as of old; but now the whole population of a nation at war is an army. Our allies are gastropods; and we must fill the stomachs on which they walk. Two months ago we might have talked of saving ourselves through embargoes or other measures which would have kept us well fed, even though our brethren across the sea might have been starved and vanquished; but that day is past and I believe, well past. If France, Italy and Great Britain are not fed, they will be defeated in ninety days and we shall be defeated with them. We must send them the food they need, even if we have to go on short rations ourselves.

No longer, if it ever was, is this a matter of generosity or profit or policy; it is stark, bald necessity. Not to do it last year might have been good or bad policy or good or bad business; but not to do it this year, and next year, and the year after, and for ten years if necessary, will be perjury. It will also be insanity and idiocy. We must feed our soldiers; and the men in the trenches, from the Swiss frontier to the North Sea, in the Trentino, at Saloniki, on the Suez front, in Mesopotamia, along that long, undulating, snaky

line from Bessarabia to Riga, and the workers in fields and factories all over our side of the divided and battling world—all these are our soldiers just as much as if they were our uniforms and fought under our flag. We must feed them as fully as we can. We must also feed ourselves.

This grim situation is dawning upon us with the broadening of the spring. Can we do it? How much of it can we do? Will it make us short of food? What can the farms and fields and vacant lands of America be made to do to carry this new load? What can be done by the cities and towns to aid in developing new agricultural possibilities and to make the most of the old ones? What can be done by our governments—national, state, county and municipal—to help accomplish all these objects? And how well are we now supplied with food? Let us first consider this last query.

A little girl in a frontier school-house was once asked to define Providence.

"Providence," said she, "is something up above that hears when man scrapes the bottom of the flour barrel."

The flour barrel is the symbol of bread with us, for we belong to a race which makes its bread of wheat. This bread habit is not absolutely necessary; for Indian corn, of which we grow three times as much annually as of wheat, is a good ration. "Man doth not live by bread only," said Moses; and if he meant wheat bread, it is a wonderful scientist Moses was. For if man tried for a single generation to live on a chemically balanced ration of wheat products the race would be extinct or soiled toward extinction; while on a sole diet properly balanced by corn and corn products we should be yet on earth. Still it is the scraping of the flour barrel and not the empty flapping of the meal bag that we expect Providence to hear.

What the Figures Show

How near are we now to the bottom of the national flour barrel? Too close for comfort. Closer than we have been for years. Closer than we have ever been, in fact. While we grew two billion six hundred million bushels of corn last year, we turned out only six hundred and forty million bushels of wheat. This was a short crop. The average for five years before was twenty per cent. more, and the crop for 1915 was above a billion bushels. The crop of 1916, therefore, plus the carry-over from the big crop of 1915, gave us eight hundred and four million bushels with which to supply our

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elves, seed the fields for 1917 and send food abroad.

From an average crop of say, seven hundred and thirty million bushels we have annually been shipping out of the country in normal times about one hundred million bushels; and we have to save another hundred bushels for seed. We shall need more seed wheat than ever this year. If the spring wheat states follow, and extend acreage. Last year we shipped abroad two hundred and forty million bushels. If we have to do as much this year we shall have for possible home consumption only five hundred and sixty four million bushels. Take out of this a hundred million bushels for seed, and we have left but four hundred and sixty-four million bushels. The first class in arithmetic will by this time have on their slates the following sum all nicely worked out:

Wheat crop of 1915 (bushels)	640,000,000
Carry-over from 1915 bushels	164,000,000
In the flour barrel for the season (bushels)	804,000,000
Less shipments abroad (bushels)	240,000,000
Less seed, at least (bushels)	100,000,000
340,000,000	

Answer: Or hand March 1st, 1917, 464,000,000

Now we need five hundred million bushels of wheat per year for our bread. Getting five hundred out of four sixty four is a problem too stiff for the first class in arithmetic. The amount of wheat in the hands of farmers on March 1st was the lowest for many years, being one hundred millions as against two hundred and forty millions a year ago. Country elevators and mills as well as the big terminal operators are down to an unprecedentedly low supply. If we send abroad only what we should have sent if we had not become engaged in the war, visible and invisible stocks will have been reduced to a dangerously low minimum. The question as to whether or not we have enough on hand for our bread until the harvest is in is in an open one; but we probably have.

Secretary Houston says of next year's situation: "Should our exports to our Allies rise to the not improbable figure of four hundred million bushels, and should our crop this year equal that of last year (plus the carry-over), which may be put roughly at eight hundred million bushels, it is clear that we should have only four hundred million bushels left, or a hundred million bushels less for all purposes than we now have for four alone." Take out the seed wheat, and we should have only three leaves of bread to supply our usual demand for five. Give us no better crop than we had in 1916, and we should be reduced to a little over two hundred million bushels for bread. "Let Reuben Live, and not die!" and let not his men be few!" Especially let not his men be few, for in our labor supply depends the harvest. And watch the sky and the weather, remembering that Reuben cannot control them, but must take the cloud with the sunshine. We are not going to have famine in this country but whether or not we have a scarcity of our greatest food staple depends on the season which divides our crop with our Allies, no matter what it is. If the German submarines continue their work we shall be obliged to ship enough to make up for the sunken cargoes.

Secretary Houston, of the Department of Agriculture, in the statement last quoted, said, after summing up the situation: "In view of this it is well within the possibilities that instead of having a barrel of flour apiece for consumption this year the United States, which prides itself on being the richest agricultural nation in the world, may have to go short bread rations—on a war-bread basis." This utterance is all the more significant because it followed on the heels of another, made March third, which began by saying: "There is nothing in the food situation of the country which justifies hysterical thinking or action." Surely not; but Secretary Houston would be the last to deny that, because his Department is doing its share of both.

Food Sources and High Prices

Bread is not the whole thing, and wheat is not the only thing. Let us not get ourselves into a panic on account of what seems to me the certain and inevitable shortage in wheat. Let us eat something else; but by all means

let us economize. We waste seven hundred million dollars worth of food every year—and that is more than the value of the entire wheat crop of 1914. It will be worth something to know, if we are forced to learn, how to save some of this. Our farmers waste a hundred million dollars' worth of roughage and forage crops a year. That, if saved, would help out the supply of meats and dairy products.

Wheat bread is going to be scarce and, if the matter is not in some way controlled, very high. This will amount to little to the rich and well-to-do; but to the wage-earners, even though they may be getting what to many seems high wages, it means a good deal; and to the really poor it means hunger, unless something cheaper than wheat can be found to take its place. This something would ordinarily be potatoes; but last year's potato crop was short. In the seven greatest potato-producing nations of the world last year only thirty-four bushels were grown for every sixty bushels of an average year. The result is that potatoes for seed are now quoted at from \$2.50 to \$4 a bushel, and potatoes for food are so dear as to be almost a luxury. The visible supply of corn is only about two-thirds of what it was a year ago, judging from the amount on farms. On the same basis there is a shortage of twenty per cent. in oats and of almost fifty per cent. in barley. Corn, oats, rye and barley selling respectively at \$1.50, 65c, \$1.70 and \$1.25, it is not to be wondered at that hogs sold yesterday in Chicago—thirty-three thousand of them—for fifteen cents a pound on the hoof, and beef cattle at from nine to thirteen cents.

Secretary Houston said on March third: "The prices of foodstuffs are high. A full and satisfactory explanation of prevailing prices is not possible on the basis of existing knowledge." Very true; but when meat animals and grains on the farms bring such prices, foodstuffs must be high in price, no matter how well organized our marketing and transportation affairs. Not so high as they are, but high. For such prices mean that the rich United States has come to a food scarcity!

We have produced enough, but we have shipped it away. We have really been, economically, in the war all the time. The warring nations have been drawing from us until we are drawn low in almost everything and drawn almost dry in some things. What can we do about it? "Already our poor are feeling the pinch. I know a grocer who operates a string of stores where provisions are sold for cash and nothing is either charged or de-rated. His business is growing rapidly by the influx to his shops of people who are willing to carry their food home in order that a little may be saved in price. Go to one of his places—or to any one of thousands of other stores—and you will find it no uncommon thing for a man and his wife to look all over the stock, taking notes of the prices; and then, after a whispered consultation in the middle of the floor, during which they have crossed off one after another of the things desired as too high in price, they will buy some rice, some beans—now almost out of reach!—a few other necessities, and no meat except the cheapest boiling piece they can get, and only a little of that.

No longer is the complaint made that Americans will not buy the cheap cut of meat. Hogs' kidneys and livers, soup bones, every bit that is a little lower than others in price—and all are high—all these are greedily snapped up. We have been in the war, and the war, save for the loss of life, is affecting us just as it is affecting the nations who send out soldiers to the trenches. The difference is in degree and not in kind, and soon, perhaps, the only difference in degree will grow out of our exceptional agricultural situation. Agricultural mobilization must be considered and acted upon. Will the farmers rise to the occasion? This brings us to a consideration of what the farmers can do and what they will do.

In the first place, the fact may as well be recognized first as last that the farmer is in no very advantageous position. For a couple of generations we have been building up cities and deserting the country. We have been letting the tribe of Reuben die. Individual farmers may have made mistakes by going to the city; but the whole classes do not make economic mistakes decade after decade; and the people who have migrated from farm to city have gone because they were happier there, happier and more comfortable. The city has been so attractive that it has stripped the farms of their labor.

The Scarcity of Labor

Observe the result on our present food problem: Farmers in the Connecticut Valley are paying seventy-five dollars a month, some of them, for hands. Everywhere farm labor has become scarce and wages high. We have been in the war at labor or just as Germany, France, England and Italy have been, and our labor as well as our food conditions are war conditions. Our soldiers are making munitions and other things for war uses. Railways are running laborers' trains as far as forty miles from some manufacturing centres, bringing workers in from the country mornings and taking them back nights, at the expense of the employers, who not only transport them but pay them three dollars and a half upward a day. These country laborers will grow no food for you this season. They will complete with you for the food others produce.

This is the sack of the manufacturing maelstrom right on the verge of the funnel; but to the remotest edge of the nation this great, laborer



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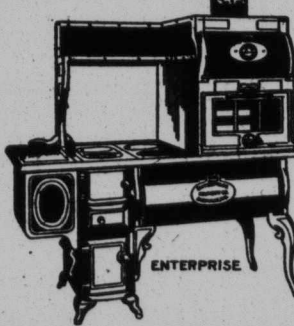
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