

## Changing Traditional Foodways in Wartime: American Strategies

Cathy Rickey

Volume 12, numéro 1, 1990

L'alimentation  
Foodways

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081663ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081663ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Rickey, C. (1990). Changing Traditional Foodways in Wartime: American Strategies. *Ethnologies*, 12(1), 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081663ar>

---

# CHANGING TRADITIONAL FOODWAYS IN WARTIME: AMERICAN STRATEGIES

---

*Cathy RICKEY*

War disrupts not only the lives of a nation's people but also those traditional attitudes, beliefs, and values which normally contribute to security and stability. Traditional foodways, those culture-based aspects related to food which have implications beyond the biological necessity of nutrition, are among those traditions disrupted. Foods normally used can become scarce or unavailable, and governmental intervention in the form of rationing often leads to disillusion and greater confusion in the prevailing situation. Because traditional ways of procuring, preparing, and serving foods are interrupted by the often rapidly changing milieu of war, food-related events and customs often flounder. However, in World War II, even under difficult conditions, individuals strove to maintain traditional foodways.

At the beginning of the war in the early 1940s, Americans saw the spectre of food shortages and rationing looming. England had already had rationing in various forms since 1939. U.S. governmental agencies now faced massive organizational and operational problems associated with the control of the nation's food supplies for both the military and civilian population.

Quasi-governmental agencies like the National Research Council's Committee on Food Habits (1941-1943), which included such notable social scientists as Margaret Mead, W. Lloyd Warner and Kurt Lewin, were established to study the importance of relating nutritional reforms to existing belief systems. Previously, agencies had studied the importance of civilian cooperation relating to food programmes, but did not take into account so closely the socio-cultural impact of such programmes upon existing foodways. Scientific studies had focused on the immediate food and nutritional problems and short term resolutions rather than on long term adaptation and adoption. The committee looked at the nation's existing food patterns, considering not only scientifically based nutritional needs, but also, as stated by Carl Guthe, chairman of the Committee, patterns existing "in the cul-

ture as folk foodways."<sup>1</sup> As a result of the Committee's recommendations, wartime food planners and governmental propagandists in charge of food-related strategies acknowledged the need to consider the cultural milieu in which traditional foodways occurred when targeting the potential acceptability of any rationing or food control programmes.<sup>2</sup>

### Military Personnel

The government's first food priority became military personnel, for whom a balanced nutritional diet was imperative in order to keep fighting men fit for action. Additionally, to battle-fatigued soldiers, the comfort provided by familiar foods and/or traditional celebrations was extremely important for morale. Seasonal holidays, long established as special food-related events, were times when military efforts to maintain traditional foodways took on heroic proportions. For example, the military was so determined to carry out the task of providing the traditional Thanksgiving turkey meal, even under adverse conditions, that in Italy in 1942

Army cooks sealed turkey, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and vegetables in special heat-retaining pouches and sent them into the mountains as far as jeeps and trucks could travel. When the roads became impassable, dinners were loaded on pack mules. Where rain storms had washed out bridges, Thanksgiving dinner was hurled across the freshets to soldiers waiting on the opposite bank, and where U.S. units had penetrated close to the enemy, Thanksgiving dinner was carried to the front lines under cover of night. Some units proudly heated their meals in captured German field kitchens.<sup>3</sup>

Another "American Tradition," Coca-Cola, also became an important symbol of what the American soldier was fighting for. Robert W. Woodruff, president of Coca-Cola, issued the following directive: "We will see that every man

- 
1. Carl E. Guthe, memorandum, "Food and Folkways," November 21, 1943, pp 3-4, National Research Council Committee on Food Habits files, Washington, D.C. in Charles Camp, *American Foodways: What, When, Why and How We Eat in America*. The American Folklore Series, W.K. McNeil, ed., Little Rock, August House, 1989, p. 25.
  2. For details on the Committee's findings, see the *National Research Council Bulletin Number 107*, Washington, D.C., National Research Council, 1943.
  3. Diana Karter Appelbaum, *Thanksgiving an American Holiday, an American History*, New York, Facts on File Publications, 1984, p. 250.

in uniform gets a bottle of Coca-Cola for five cents wherever he is and whatever it costs."<sup>4</sup>

During the course of the war more than 5,000,000,000 bottles of Coke went to American servicemen and women in addition to that served through dispensers and self-contained equipment in battle areas...Getting Coke to the battle areas was not only often difficult but also called for much ingenuity. In the Pacific ingenious combinations of ice-making machines and beverage dispensers called "Jungle Units," were developed for dispensing Coca-Cola. Specifically designed to fit on most military transportation facilities, they could even go into a Jeep or other small motorized vehicles and, by the end of 1944, these units were to be found all over the South Pacific.<sup>5</sup>

Company spokesman H. B. Nicholson recalled:

In 1943 a prisoner-of-war coming down a gangplank at an American port, spotted a bright red sign. He stopped in amazement. "Oh," he said to a guard, "You have Coca-Cola here too!" The incident was widely reported in the press and Americans, generally, were also surprised. It was news to them that something they consider "so typically American" was considered indigenous to other countries. It was like Main Street suddenly stretched around the world and a comforting thought to those with fighting men in the far-flung theaters of operation."<sup>6</sup>

## The Home Front

In order to understand the impact of food rationing on traditional patterns of American foodways, it is important to understand that certain characteristics of food consumption patterns were both apparent and of long standing in the period prior to World War I up to the beginning of World War II (1909-1941):

1. The average American consumed between three and one half to four pounds of food per person per day.
2. There was a marked decline in the consumption of potatoes and cereal products.

---

4. Coca-Cola Company, *Coca-Cola Company: An Illustrated Profile of a Worldwide Company*. Atlanta, Coca Cola, 1974, p. 77.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 79.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

3. Sugar consumption increased about 20 pounds per capita between 1920 and 1925, then continued at a higher level through 1941.
4. Consumption of meats, poultry, fish, and eggs remained steady, while consumption of beans, peas, and nuts increased.
5. Up to the war period, consumption of manufactured dairy products remained steady.
6. Fresh fruit consumption was stable.
7. After a major educational drive in 1925, consumption of leafy, green, and yellow vegetables steadily increased.
8. Individuals relied more and more on processed and ready to serve foods.<sup>7</sup>

With the wartime disruption of food supplies, any governmentally mandated programmes would have to find ways of altering these consumption patterns to take into account limited availability, changing certain patterns if such change was deemed nutritionally important, or informing and educating the public of alternative ways of procuring, preparing, and stretching supplies as necessity dictated.

In 1942 the U.S. government made efforts toward voluntary controls of food with programmes like a "share the meat" campaign, which apparently failed:

To have been successful, it would have necessitated marked voluntary changes in consumer habits. For one of our most marked consumption patterns is that meat consumption varies widely among families, depending upon their income.<sup>8</sup>

In the United States sugar was rationed on April 20, 1942 and coffee on November 21, 1942. This smaller effort allowed the government to establish the organizational techniques which would make later planning a less monumental task. Canned fruit and vegetables were rationed by point rationing. Even though the plan was announced by the Secretary of Agriculture on December 21, 1942, it did not go into effect until March 1, 1943, in order to allow an intensive educational programme explaining point rationing. Fats and oils, including butter, would later be added to the point rationing system.<sup>9</sup>

---

7. Roy Hendrickson, *Food Crisis*, London, Chatto & Windus/The Hogarth Press, 1943, pp. 50-51.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

9. Point rationing was first adopted by the Germans for rationing clothes and combines both quantity and value rationing.

Of all foods, however, meat seems to have caused the most complications for rationing and seems to have had the greatest attraction for the consumer. On March 30, 1943, rationing went into effect for meat and other protein foods. Almost immediately, a plethora of cookery booklets and articles appeared which both expressed the importance of conserving meat supplies and also the imperative nature of the public's cooperation with meat rationing. For example, one article begins with the following message on the importance of meat rationing to the war effort:

*Rationing of Meat Is Vital to Our Victory: Housewives Urged to Use Substitutes for Fresh Meats*

... Nationwide consumer meat rationing with the probable meat allowance of about two and one-half pounds of meat per person per week is an important part of the country's all-out, program for defense and victory.<sup>10</sup>

Some butchers were even known to become "moral guardians" by denying certain customers meat supplies if the individuals were rumored to be meat hoarders or squanderers.<sup>11</sup>

By 1943 food supplies became big news, and newspaper headlines used words like *shortage* and *famine*. Some sensation mongers even used expressions like "starvation is just around the corner."<sup>12</sup>

With the advent of food rationing for civilians, it fell to governmental propagandists to flood the population with information which would not only educate it about the details of the rationing scheme, but also provide information about maintaining a healthful nutritional balance during periods of shortages, and suggest ways of stretching food supplies and eliminating waste, while encouraging cooperation by implying a sense of participatory involvement in the war effort.

In order to effectively plan food-related propaganda, it was necessary to understand more about the process of food selection and why people considered certain foods as "appropriate" to their nutritional repertoires.

- 
10. From torn wartime clipping, source unavailable.
  11. Related during an interview with Hertha Daley at Huber Village Retirement Center, Westerville, Ohio, June 1988. She recalled a shopkeeper who always managed to "find" what she needed, even though he had told the woman before her that he had none of that particular item. He told Miss Daley that the other woman had abused her rationing privileges.
  12. Hendrickson, p. 35.

In a study financed by a grant from the Committee on Food Habits in the early 1940s, Professor Kurt Lewin, a member of the Committee, examined the questions of why people ate what they ate and how food habits could be changed. His findings provided a descriptive model of the food production/consumption chain.<sup>13</sup>

He found that why people ate what they ate was far more complex than the simple biological need for nourishment and involved both cultural and psychological aspects as well as accessibility, availability, and economic considerations. In wartime, there was obviously the possibility of the disruption of, and necessary alteration to, these considerations. The assumption is that once food had reached the table, someone in the family unit would consume it, so that the real issue became how and why certain foods reached that stage.

Before food ultimately reaches the table, it must pass through what Lewin termed "channels" controlled by "gatekeepers" who could at any point in the process prevent the food from reaching its destination. The persons with the power to move the food through its various channels were called "gatekeepers" because of their ability to determine whether or not food, for whatever reason, was acceptable or available for these purposes. Psychological factors influencing the "gatekeepers" may also have influenced the movement of food through the different channels and various sections of those channels. The cost of certain foods, the social or religious attitudes toward certain foods, as well as the moral values placed on food behaviours during a crisis situation, could all cause conflict within the "gatekeepers."

Other considerations in Lewin's model included methods of acquisition of food supplies, whether foods were home grown or purchased, and the means by which the food was preserved, that is, commercially processed or home canned.

Lewin's study determined that while husbands and children influenced food choices within the family unit, it was the woman as homemaker who was considered the primary "gatekeeper" of family traditions relating to food.

As primary "gatekeeper" of the family food supply, production, and distribution, women became the primary target of food propaganda and advertising. Understanding that the success of any governmental control of food rested in the acceptance of the plan by the population, and in order to achieve maximum cooperation, massive

---

13. Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science*, London, Tavistock, 1952, pp. 170-187.

educational efforts flooded the mass media all using the stereotypical model of the "home front homemaker."

In 1942, pamphlets like *War Ways for Guardians of the Home Front* were directed toward the "traditional homemaker," sporting an apron and a cooking pan but now considered a "guardian" of the home front.<sup>14</sup> A neatly coiffured woman on a booklet for home canning even salutes in military fashion to more closely imply her association with the military war effort; the military motif evoked a sense of participatory involvement.<sup>15</sup>

Governmentally sponsored pamphlets and massive advertising campaigns in publications aimed at motivating cooperation, offered suggestions on how to create, conserve, and substitute foods which fell within the rationing guidelines. A key element in these publications was that the recipes emphasized not only scientifically balanced nutrition, but also the "traditional" nature of the recipes, using substituted ingredients for rationed or scarce foods like sugar, eggs, or meats.

Most propaganda began by calling on the woman's patriotic sense of participation and cooperation in the war effort. Advertisers made readers feel that by using the suggestions contained within their ads women would be contributing in a direct way. Many booklets challenged women directly, for example:

Hail to the women of America! You have taken up your heritage from the brave women of the past. Just as did the women of other wars, you have taken your positions as soldiers on the Home Front. You have been strengthening your country's defenses—as plane watchers—as flyers—as members of the armed forces—as producers, in war plants and homes—and Red Cross and Civilian Defense activities. The efforts and accomplishments of women today are boundless!

But whatever else you do—you are, first and foremost, homemakers—women with the welfare of your families deepest in you hearts...Never has there been such an opportunity, and a need, for what American women can contribute...And we salute you all.

Betty Crocker<sup>16</sup>

- 
14. *War Ways for Guardians of the Home Front*, Home Service Manual, The Ohio Fuel Gas Co. U.S.A., 1942, front cover.
  15. *Modern Homemaker, Victory Recipe Edition*, Pasadena, California, 1942, front cover.
  16. General Mills, Inc., *Your Share*, Minneapolis: General Mills, Inc., 1942, inside front cover.



Some informative materials were aimed directly at keeping the public aware of their duty and slogans like "Share and Play Square—All Thru '44 Your Help Is Needed!" were constantly being used.<sup>17</sup> As the war continued, stronger commitment was needed as often repetitious meals and continued shortages dulled the appetites of even cooperative families. One such commitment was a voluntary pledge which appeared in the magazine *American Cookery*, and which requested a written commitment from the home front consumer:

*The United States Government's Consumer Pledge for Total Defense*

As a consumer, in the total defense of democracy, I will do my part to make my home, my community, my country, ready, efficient and strong.

I will buy carefully.

I will take good care of the things I have.

I will waste nothing.<sup>18</sup>

As in World War I, civilians were again charged with minimizing waste in all areas. "'A women,' according to an old adage, 'can throw out with a teaspoon more than a man can bring in with a shovel.'"<sup>19</sup> To help the home front homemaker ease this potential burden of guilt, informative booklets gave a wealth of suggestions for eliminating waste and stretching available foods. Many of these suggestions revolved around traditional holiday and special occasion foods. Trying to maintain traditional food customs was considered acceptable and even encouraged, as long as they fell within rationing guidelines. For example, magazines filled pages with suggestions for wartime entertaining. A government pamphlet called *Your Share* began a section of entertaining suggestions with the following reminder:

In war-time, more than at any other time, we need friendly get-togethers to keep up our morale, give us refreshments and relaxation. But cooperation and simplicity in entertaining are necessary now.<sup>20</sup>

---

17. This advertisement was prepared for the "Food Fights for Freedom Program with the co-operation of the War Advertising Council, *American Cookery*, January 1944, inside back cover.

18. The pledge was to be signed, including address, and sent to *American Cookery* magazine, 35 Fayette Street, Boston, Mass., where it would be forwarded to "be filed in our national capital." *American Cookery*, January 1944, p. 413.

19. Margot Murphy [Jane Holt], *Wartime Meals*, New York, Greenberg, 1942, p. 29.

20. *Your Share*, p. 40.

The booklet contained ideas and recipes for Victory Garden Suppers, Basket Socials, Community Sings, Barbecue Suppers (with food cooked in open fireplaces—a fairly uncommon eating situation at the time), Hobo Parties, A Mother Goose Party for children, and even suggestions for wedding refreshments for wartime which allowed for “short-notice” weddings. A party called “The Walking Supper-Table. . .for eat where you please meals” sounds very similar to the routine of many American families on a daily basis today.<sup>21</sup>

Again, as in World War I, the Victory Garden was considered not only patriotic and nutritionally advantageous, but it also represented a social statement of participatory activity in the war and traditional values. Using foods grown in Victory Gardens (which were sometimes nothing more than window box plantings) for entertaining represented a social and communal acknowledgement of the importance of participation in wartime efforts.

For vacation planning an alternative suggestion was joining the U.S. Crop Corps:

Let's leave the rocking chair resorts for our old age and get back to the land, this summer to back up our fighting men with food! . . .It'll be good to get out in the sun and air—the best cure for 'war nerves' ever discovered! It'll be even better to feel the thrill of helping to make FOOD FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.<sup>22</sup>

With so much emphasis being placed on self-sacrifice and the importance of conservation and restraint, it is not surprising that stories and rumours about mismanagement and waste by the government would surface during this time of emotional stress.

As one item after another had to be rationed during the war, fear grew that eventually clothing would be rationed by coupons, as it was in England. From time to time the government denied that such rationing was contemplated, but. . .a neighbor of ours in Ann Arbor said that a friend of a friend living in Bloomfield Hills had lost her grocery ration book. She had made application for a new one, but received instead through the mail an entirely new book designed for clothes rationing! Here was positive evidence that the government was preparing to restrict the sale of clothing. The story gained such circulation in the Detroit area that a radio newscaster denied the whole yarn in his broadcast, the next night after the story reached us. (I heard this same story about the same time, but the locale was Youngstown, Ohio-The Editor)<sup>23</sup>

---

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21, 40-43.

22. Home Economics Institute, *Health for Victory Meal Planning Guide*, Mansfield, Ohio, Westinghouse, Inc., 1944, back cover.

23. Howard Peckham, “Folklore of the Home Front,” *Hoosier Folklore* 7, 3 (1947), p. 101.

As the war continued, the media image of the traditional guardian of the home front, i.e. the homemaker in dress and apron, began to change. As more and more women were called into active participation by taking over jobs once held by men, propaganda and advertising directed toward women had to change as well. A poster from the War Production Co-Ordinating Committee showed a woman in work attire, with hair covered, sleeves rolled up and fist clenched to expose powerful biceps with the slogan, "We Can Do It."<sup>24</sup> A cover from *The Woman's Home Companion* shows a woman applying lipstick, but wearing work coveralls—stereotypes were changing.<sup>25</sup> To keep pace with rapidly changing lifestyles, and to provide information with a more timely relevance, publications now featured recipes with emphasis on the speed and ease of preparation. The working women had less time to spend in the kitchen, and the focus on the home front was changing.

This emphasis on "convenience" was to last far beyond the end of the war and the end of rationing. Many men returning from the war found a very different cultural milieu from that which they had left. The traditional "guardian of the home front" had left the home and found a working world which had little time for savouring the deliberate attention to food traditions and customs so disrupted by the war. People were now free to eat whatever they wanted and whatever they could afford. This restored freedom, coupled with the increased income from two breadwinners, provided greater buying power: "...therefore it is no coincidence that from this point onwards, advertising campaigns, cookery literature, immigration, foreign travel, and the ebbs and flows of fashion would make their effects felt quickly and directly."<sup>26</sup>

With the aid of massive propaganda and advertising campaigns, civilians tried to maintain tradition and rituals within the confines of governmental controls, believing the sacrifices were not only patriotic, but essential to the successful outcome of the war. "But, far from dampening spirits, wartime restrictions added to the national spirit of unity in the drive toward victory."<sup>27</sup> Now, a forward looking soci-

---

24. "We Can Do It!" poster. Sponsored by the War Production Co-Ordinating Committee. Copy in Mary Martha Thomas, *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie: Alabama Women and the Second World War*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1987.

25. *Woman's Home Companion*, January 1943, front cover.

26. Christopher Driver, *The British at Table 1940-1980*, New York, Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1983, p. 60.

27. Appelbaum, p. 249.

ety found itself with an expanded worldview, and this new awareness meant changes in many aspects of cultural patterns. Just as in many other aspects of traditional lifestyles, traditional foodways had been disrupted and to varying degrees altered and forced to adapt to new situations.

People in America who had been urged to return to the simple life and maintain restraint during the war years now felt the need to experience the American ideal, and live the American dream of "the principle of unlimited good."<sup>28</sup> When both real and perceived limitations seemed to have been lifted, and when people began to feel a security in life which had been missing for a long time, those restrictions and deprivations under which they had lived seemed to pale quickly beside the optimistic view of the future.

Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Newfoundland

---

28. Alan Dundes, "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview," *Journal of American Folklore*, 84, 331 (Jan.-March 1971), pp. 93-103.



Luc Lacourcière, D. Litt., (h.c.), Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1975.  
(Photo: *MUN Gazette*)