

Women and Food in World War I Era Arkansas

Emily Stolp

Introduction

On July 1st, 1917, in the midst of the Great War, Arkansas's Governor Charles Brough appointed Ida Frauenthal as chairwoman to the state's new Woman's Committee of the Council of Defense for Arkansas. The report created by the Woman's Committee allowed the committee to first: organize the results of the efforts of many civil groups and second: immortalize the women's wartime efforts. Women's war efforts in this era naturally focused on the home front. The need to conserve food, a national and local concern, occupied much of women's wartime efforts. Fear mongering and propaganda used to push the food conservation efforts targeted the American housewife. As the acknowledged moral and economic authorities of the home, women were seen as in charge of the domestic thriftiness and became the foot soldiers for food conservation. This presentation draws from scholarship on the relationship between women, food conservation, and propaganda. I am pairing it with many newspaper articles from across Arkansas and the Woman's Committee report. These primary sources show that manipulative language pushed the "need" for food conservation, which women took seriously. Their efforts were partly a response to the national call for action and partly from self-motivation to take on this wartime effort.

Research Purpose and Initial Questions

The purpose of this research is to take a deeper look at Arkansan women's self-motivation to contribute to the food conservation war effort in connection to the Woman's Committee of the Council of Defense for Arkansas and how wartime propaganda persuaded their efforts.

- Were these women just victims of propaganda and tasked with a fruitless effort?
- How did women use their role as the moral and economic authorities of the home to widen their wartime efforts?

Rationing and Food Plans

	Weekly Allowance Per Person.
Meat—Beef (fresh, salted, tinned and hashed); mutton, lamb and veal (mutton by preference)	2 ½ lbs.
Butter	½ lb.
Cooking Fats (margarine, lard, lard substitutes, vegetable oils)	½ lb.
Wheat Flour (for use in cooking gravies, etc., where corn starch, cracker dust or bread crumbs cannot be substituted)	½ lb.
Victory Bread (containing at least 20 per cent. of a substitute for wheat flour)	1 ¼ lbs.
Sugar (including all sugar used on the table and in cooking and all sweetmeats and candies, but not that used for canning and preserving)	¾ lb.

The women of America, who are anxious to do their great part in the winning of the war, are now, as a whole, familiar with the most important aspects of food conservation. The Home Card, both in its original form and in the revised edition for 1918, which provides for two wheatless days, one meatless day a week, in addition to a wheatless meal every day, has been placed by the Food Administration after a vigorous campaign in 10,000,000 American homes. An intelligent and conscientious observance of the Home Card's requirements is all the Food Administration asks of the housewives of the country.

Excerpt from "Women Ask for Rationing Plan" *The Brinkley Argus*, May 24, 1918.

Results of the Women's War Effort

The Woman's Committee Report from July 1, 1917, to December 30, 1918:

The committee reported that the Home Demonstration force, which taught classes about food preservation, wartime cookery, and conservation, grew to 113 agents. 16,834 women and girls had been enrolled in classes. The Food Administration provided food leaflets to Home Economic teachers and rural schoolteachers throughout the state. Around 69,939 women and girl reported that they were influenced by the instructions given. The committee reported an estimated value of \$500,000.00, which is over \$11 million today, of food produced by home gardening, the flock of chickens, and the family cow. The Food Administration with the help of the committee distributed food conservation cards that, once signed, indicated their willingness to follow the federal government's guidelines for food conservation. By December 30, 1918, 55,000 cards had been signed.

Propaganda Advertisements and Manipulative Language

Herbert Hoover, who was the Food Administrator at the time, said in an article published in the *Arkansas Gazette* in March 1918:

"Food will WIN the war! True American spirit has been distinctly shown in quick subscription to Liberty Bonds, contributions to Red Cross and YMCA necessities. But there is another more vital necessity, THE CONSERVATION OF FOOD...use a fraction of an ounce or so less of food a day...to keep allied armies and our own soldiers in fine fighting fettle."

Another article from the *Arkansas Gazette*, June 1917, titled "God Bless the Households that Boil Potatoes with the Skins On" said:

"Suppose that a lot of selfish, careless, thoughtless people throughout the nation so conduct themselves that you cannot get enough food for your family, so that your wife fails and grows weak and shaken before your eyes, so that your children weaken, sicken, and die. Suppose starvation looks at you through the hollowed eyes of all you love best in the world. Wouldn't you be filled with loathing and contempt and bitter hatred for the careless, thoughtless people whose fault it was? Then do not commit that fault yourself?"

Also from the *Arkansas Gazette*, March 1918, titled "Bread First! Will You Save it for Him?" wrote:

"Women of America will you help us save this flour? The president of the United States has asked every household, every individual, to conserve the food supply and stop the waste. Bread is first. The most important food in our homes, the food our soldiers must have, is BREAD...Never before have the women of our country truly and more gravely held in their hands the power to influence the destinies of our Nation."

The Woman's Committee



Courtesy of the Arkansas State Archives

Conclusion

It is easy to look at these women and think they are unintelligent for reading and believing this, but you must put yourself into their shoes. A lot of these women's husbands, sons, brothers, uncles, whoever went off to fight in this war, and a lot of them never came home. These ads are written very carefully to instill fear and compliance in those who read them. Even though these women might have been manipulated into the food conservation war effort, they took their role as the moral and economic authorities seriously. Their efforts would prove to be fruitful as well, and unbeknownst to them, these skills of food conservation and preservation would prove to be vital in the following decades of the Great Depression. The women that made up the Woman's Committee of the Council of Defense for Arkansas and the women who benefitted were the foot soldiers of a large amount of the home front war efforts. I'll end on a note from the committee's state chairwoman Ida Frauenthal: "This report is a history of the splendid way in which the women of Arkansas responded to the call of their country and is a valuable and interesting record of the activities of organized womanhood. ...The value of the Woman's Committee's in the counties has been proven, as each woman endeavored to do her very best under the difficulties under which everyone worked at that time."

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