

Lack of Distribution System Responsible for Great Wastage in Food

More Perishable Food Is Dumped Into the Ocean Off New York Harbor Than Is Lost Through the Sinking of Ships by the German Submarines

This is the second of a series of articles written for THE SUN on food production and distribution in the country at the present crisis. The first article dealt with the general outline of food production.

By A. C. LAUT.

FOR the past year eggs have varied to the Eastern householder in price from 40 to 82 cents a dozen. Would you have preferred to buy those eggs at a straight 36 cents a dozen, year in and year out? Of course you would. Then you are interested in food distribution; for that is what the farmer wants.

Milk has varied in price from Chicago to the Atlantic to city buyers from 11 to 35 cents a quart. Would you have preferred to buy that milk at a straight 10 cents a quart, year in and year out? That, too, is food distribution, and that is what the farmer wants.

Apples, grade A, fancy and large and flawless, have cost the city buyer from \$6 to \$9 a barrel. Now, this grade of apples runs about 100 apples to the bushel, or 300 to the barrel; so they have been costing you from 2 to 3 cents each. Would you have preferred to have had them at a straight 2 cents each, or \$6 a barrel, evenly through the year? That is food distribution.

Sawtooth With the Farmer.

A year ago and well into the middle of the summer of 1917 you were paying from \$2.50 to \$3 a bushel for common, average potatoes. To-day they can be bought for 50 cents a bushel in the country. Would you have preferred an even \$1 a bushel every day in the year? Food distribution again. For if the farmer got these prices, they would be from 40 per cent. to 100 per cent. higher than he receives, and they would be from 40 per cent. to 100 per cent. less than you have been paying. You would buy more and eat more of these farm foods.

There would be no glut of food so high priced that it backs up on the farmer's hands a dead loss; so that he cannot afford to raise that food the next year, and the farmer's returns would be so much higher than he has been receiving that he could afford to raise food in such a superabundance there could never be a scarcity of food.

The whole food problem is exactly like a grownup edition of playing sawtooth with a board plank across a rail fence. On one end of the teeter, instead of a boy, is a full grown farmer. On the other end of the plank is a city man, with his belt reefed in.

Up go the farmer's profits—the farmer is high in the air—and he sends such a slide of big crops down that plank toward the city man's end that prices hit low levels with a bump. Down go the farmer's profits till his end of the plank hits the ground with a bump, and up fly prices with the city man till he pretty nearly turns a handspan head over heels off that plank altogether; and when that happens the farmer stays down and the high prices stay up, and that is where we are with nine food commodities out of ten right now.

Profit Down, Crops Small.

The farmer's profit has been shaved so close that he is staying down and not rolling the crops along the plank, and the consequence is the prices are staying up and the consumers are not buying.

That is the whole and sole food problem confronting the world to-day, and to spike down prices—stabilizing it, I believe, the dignified word—is simply to balance the plank in midair with both ends off the ground and neither crops nor profits rolling back and forward end to end. And that is what has resulted from price fixing wherever it has been tried since the war began.

Price fixing is nothing new in world history. It was tried in France before the Revolution, and it was in vogue in

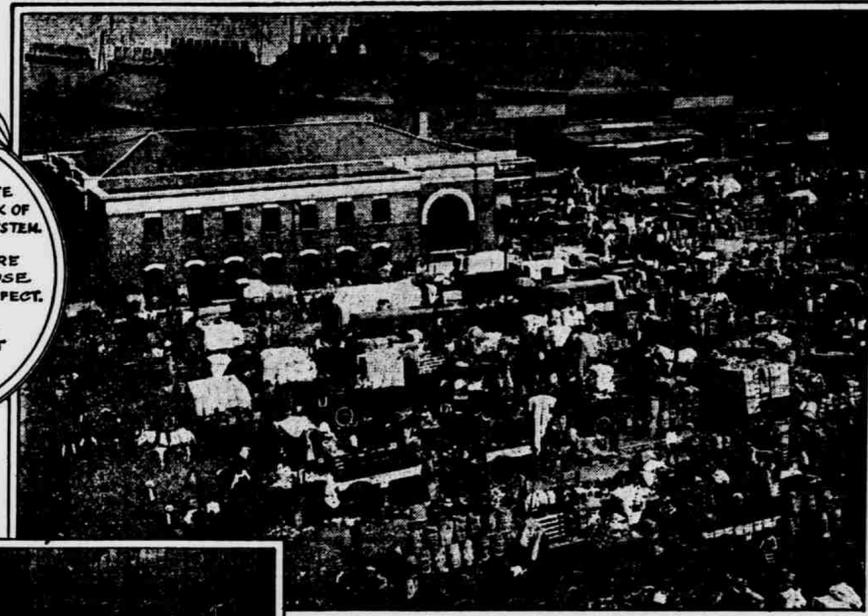
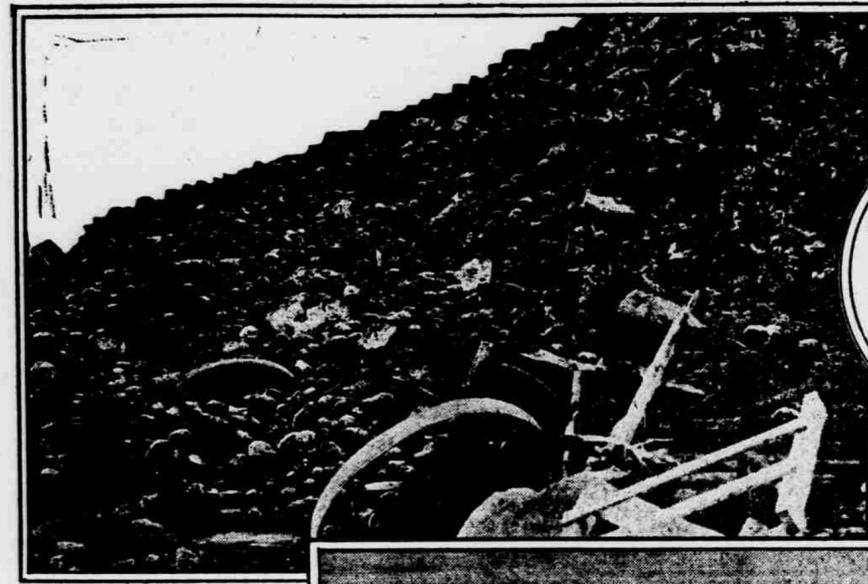


Photo by Arma Bros.



England both as to clothes and food to the days of Queen Elizabeth, and all it has ever done is produce a hungry, riotous mob in the cities and depopulate the country.

We had had price fixing in this country on dozens of farm commodities twenty years before the war began, and contemporaneous with the vogue of fixing prices for what the farmer sells—instead of leaving prices to supply and demand—was the rise of the condition chronically known as the abandoned farm. The farm was not abandoned because it had "run out." It was the farmer who was "run out." With prices fixed for all he sold and not fixed for all he bought he was put out of business.

We have had so many food commissions in the last year that we have lost count of them. Yet the whole problem is to give the farmer such a profit he will increase his crops, and to get the crops into the hands of the city buyer at such a price he will keep on buying freely.

"If you raise prices," cried out a bewildered newly appointed food commissioner, "the city man won't buy, and if you lower prices the farmer won't produce. How the public can expect lower prices to the city man and higher prices to the farmer passes the bounds of common sense."

Distribution System Primitive.

Yet that is exactly what has to be done if the world is not to go hungry, and when you come to examine it in terms of the breakfast table it is so simple and obvious we wonder if we are a nation of fools that we didn't do it long ago. We didn't do it long ago because what is everybody's business is nobody's business, and we have never attempted to tackle food distribution in this country.

Like Topsy, it has just grown. Before the civil war the farmer found his market by having his hired man hitch up a load and haul it to the nearest village, but the nearest village has moved to the nearest industrial centre or itself grown to a great factory town. Under one factory roof to-day, in one hotel, centre more people than lived in a country town before the civil war. How many farm wagons do you suppose it would require to feed the workers of Bethlehem Steel?

The farmer's market moved away from him, and while the railroad has taken up the work of hauling to the market, the handling of the food at both ends of the haul is as primitive as it was before the civil war and many times more helter skelter, for it is so much bigger.

It is easy to explain that prices are going up because demand is increasing and supplies are decreasing. They are not going up to the farmer. They are going up only to the consumer.

Also that old myth about prices being high because there is so much gold, while it is a nice glittering explanation it does not appeal to the producer at all. If prices are high because there is so much gold, why aren't they high to the producer? Why are they high only to the consumer?

Another almost comic disguise of facts is that supplies of food are decreasing

because labor is scarce. Who began rolling that piece of German camouflage along? I don't know, but it has done more to make cheap labor stick out its chest and ask the wages of skilled labor than any influence I know. Outside war work industrial trades are running slack, and only men over 20 and under 50 can stand the high pace of war work.

If you think man power is scarce take a walk around lower Broadway, the Battery, the water front of Philadelphia or the lake front, Chicago. I'll wager you will find fifty idle men to the block, men idle all day. Or go into the hotels and restaurants. Do you notice any scarcity of waiters? Or notice the average village grocery store or station. Armies of idle men and boys so busy managing other people's affairs and the nation's affairs they haven't time to take a job themselves.

Yet because somebody said "labor is scarce" and everybody kept repeating it, if you offered these men a job they would demand the wages of a skilled laborer. It isn't the labor that is scarce. It is sufficient profit on his produce to enable the farmer to hire the labor.

I know farm laborers that "chucked long hours and hard work for fair," as they described it, and hied them to the munition factories in droves in 1915. They were to get \$4 a day instead of \$1.50 and house and privilege, as on the farm, or \$2 and pay their own board. Four a day seemed to promise over \$100 a month; but the younger men proved irresponsible and smashed too much machinery to hold their jobs, and the older men could not stand the pace of electric driven machinery.

What with accidents and layoffs and fruitless days and high rents and high priced food they came out at the end of 1917 not a cent ahead and eager to go back to the land, but for the present utterly spoiled for lower wages. They have

failed on the high wage job, but they want to come back to the old job at the skilled workers' wage.

Meanwhile the survey reports made out when the first rush to the munition factories began are being repeated all through the country newspapers; "labor is scarce," "labor is scarce," and many a farm laborer jumped his price in the early months of 1918 only to find himself let out; and he is still out, and will have to drift into casual town jobs for the rest of the year, whittling a stick around the station platform or proving to the idle park loungers and seat warmers how "scarce" labor is. It has been the best piece of camouflage that could have been put out to help German propaganda.

Labor is "scarce" with slackers always. We are a funny people, but the scarcity of labor has nothing to do with the scarcity of food supplies. Food supplies are decreasing solely because the farmer has not been getting sufficient profit to justify him increasing his output.

Cut out the gold supply myth! It doesn't work at the farmer's end of the plank. Likewise, cut out "the labor is scarce" myth! When you can walk ten city blocks without seeing a hundred idle men, or motor through ten country villages without seeing councils of state on store fronts and station platforms, I'll believe labor is scarce. Lack of a system of food distribution is the culprit and the only culprit in high priced food to the city man and low priced produce to the farmer. Lack of a system of food distribution will be the cardinal curse if we permit famine to come on the world.

We may store food against famine, as Joseph stored corn in Egypt, but don't forget when a nation can no longer feed herself the star of empire passes away. When Egypt could no longer feed herself the star of empire passed to the wheat plains of ancient Macedonia. When Greece began talking food more than

raising food the star of empire passed to Rome, and when Rome became so busy with politics and wars that she had to feed her rabble populace with free wheat jamborees on the street the star of empire passed north and west. This thought it not original. I first heard it from the late Sir William Home when he was predicting the very dilemma that has come upon us now, five years before the war as an accelerating cause.

Our lack of food distribution is not only the culprit, but it causes us more sheer loss in one year in one single food commodity than all the German submarines have caused us in all the four years of the war. Isn't that a pretty wide statement? Not wide enough. Let us see. Let us take the little egg. Poultry and produce experts tell us that with eggs as a breakfast food, in pastry, in cake, in salads, in garnishing, we use one egg a day for every soul of our 100,000,000 population.

Now, in summer time, when hens are rummaging afield over the farm, though they have to have corn and grain feeds to produce eggs, it is customary for the farmers to sell their eggs at 18 to 25 cents a dozen. This year they cannot sell at that price owing to the cost of feed. It will be nearer 30 and 36 cents all summer.

But last year speculators big and little bought up practically 75 per cent. of all the farm eggs at 25 to 30 cents. (The other 25 per cent. were absorbed by home use.) Add 6 cents for freight and storage. Say the eggs cost them 3 cents each. Then came the six months of egg scarcity—October to March. Eggs jumped in price to you to 82 and 81 cents a dozen. (The egg speculators didn't make that, for Hoover cleverly spiked the little game.)

Because there is no system of distributing eggs between farm and city table, for six months you had to pay for your egg 7 cents instead of 3 cents.

Now recall we use one egg each a day for one hundred million population; and those eggs for six months cost 4 cents more than necessary. Deduct the 25 per cent. of the population who raised their own eggs. The figures as I make them stand thus 4 cents multiplied by 75,000,000 people multiplied by half of 365 days equals what?

Lack of a system of food distribution on eggs alone equals a big enough total to build fifty dreadnoughts a year at \$12,000,000 apiece, to supply half the billion needed for our airplane army, to supply one-sixth of our last Liberty Loan. And this on eggs alone, which can hardly be described as the most essential of our foods.

I could show the very same loss, only in bigger totals, in milk, in apples, in meat, in potatoes; but you can figure these out for yourselves; and instead of repeating the proofs let us see how the appalling loss comes, first to you, the eater, in food costing higher than it should, second to the farmer in prices coming back lower than they should.

Take milk! You can wriggle or scriggle the figures any way you like, raise the feed or buy it, employ your own son or hire a neighbor's son. You cannot put a team on the road hauling at less than \$5 a day for man and team, or \$2.50 a half day. At the time of writing milk is running at \$2.50, slightly more or less, according to butter fat, a hundredweight, or \$2 a can.

Watch any receiving station from Illinois to Pennsylvania. At this season of cheap prices and lowered flow hundreds and hundreds of farmers drive to the receiving station with only one can of milk. That is, they are getting \$2 for the milk and it is costing them \$2.50 to haul it. The loss in hauling is 50 cents, not counting the feed of the cow and the labor of caring for her. If all the milk in one neighborhood were hauled by one van—say thirty cans—the haul would cost only a little over 8 cents a can instead of \$2.50.

And right here Canada has us beaten to a frazzle. She gets less for her dairy products. She is further away from her market, but she is growing rich on her dairy exports. She cuts out this haul loss by having the buyer send his ice and refrigerated van to the milk stand at the farmer's door.

Consider the Milk Supply.

And that is the least part of the loss in milk distribution. You can save yourself the effort of tilting a lance at the railroad. The railroad is not a sinner here. It performs a service for the farmer in the ordinary year round a city at from three-tenths to seven-tenths of a cent a quart for a 50 to 100 mile haul which the farmer can't do for himself at 6 cents a quart for a five mile haul.

We may yell our heads off at monopolies, but here are railroad monopolies doing a service at a hundredth fraction of what it would cost the farmer to do it for himself. It is when you come to the city end of the distribution that you wallow to your waist in loss.

Don't go to the richer parts of the city to observe! Rich people can pay for milk no matter to what level the price goes. And the richest districts are pretty well zoned off by the highest type of distributor. But go to the outlying districts, where the poor dwell, the poor who have not been able to afford milk at present prices. Between 5 and 7 in the morning within one block you will see half a dozen different milk delivery wagons. Each driver on those wagons costs \$18 to \$22 a week. Each horse costs from \$150 to \$200. The feed of each horse costs not less than \$16 a month. Then there are the harness and the wagons. One wagon would serve that entire block.

The milk company does not pay for that wasteful, useless duplication of the same service. Every extra cost is put on the price of the milk. That is why you pay 11 to 15 cents for milk for which the farmer receives only 5 to 6 cents and on which the railroad charges only three-tenths to seven-tenths of a cent a quart.

High Prices Unnecessary.

Then there is the waste of the days in hot summer when the exodus from town lessens the demand. There is a lot of camouflage fibbing right here, for in the hot days when the people flock from town the demand for ice cream and cream fix increases a hundredfold. Also milk thrown back on the big distributors' hands can be used in the byproducts of condensed milk, candy, casein, cheese, butter, &c., but there is a real service which the State Administrator of Food could perform here.

The explanation is given to the farmers that the price must be dropped for the summer months because tonnage is so scarce condensed milk cannot be shipped across the ocean to Europe. Now it is well understood among the buyers for the allied Governments that Europe can take and is eager to take all the canned milk America can turn out at top speed, and if the big condensed companies cannot finance storage till tonnage is available Uncle Sam can, and he will do more to help the dairy interests by financing such storage than by spiking prices up or down.

Do you begin to see now why eggs cost you 82 cents which should only cost you 36 cents and milk costs you 11 to 15 cents which should cost you only 10 cents? Do you begin to see now how lack of a system of food distribution is one of the criminal follies and curses of our age? Do you begin to see how every man, woman and child, farmer and city man, is interested in food distribution? And the half has not been told of the losses caused by the lack.

Take such perishable products as potatoes, apples and meat! I would be ashamed and afraid to set down the tons of such perishable foods that are dumped into the ocean off New York harbor because they spoil before they can be distributed. For New York alone they exceed the tonnage of food sunk by submarines.

Some time ago a group of hotel men Greece and Rome.

Situation as Regards Milk and Eggs Points to Real Cause of the Farmer's Failure to Increase His Crops and of Rising Prices the Consumer Pays

losing heavily on their dining rooms because of soaring costs were eager to connect with a group of farmers to buy direct. The hotel men were paying \$2.50 a bushel for potatoes, \$8 a barrel for apples, 30 to 46 cents a pound for meat. The farmers were eager to sell at \$1 a bushel for potatoes, \$3.50 a barrel for apples, 15 to 22 cents for dressed meat. The freight did not merit consideration, it was so small—some 6 cents for potatoes, 40 cents for the apples and a fraction of a cent for the meat.

Well—why didn't they connect? The farmers had ice houses and could ship in the cool of the night, and the hotel men could have had their own baggage van at the receiving station, but here is where the shippo came. Said the hotel men: "We have no storage for supplies. When the cold weather comes, how are we going to get those apples and potatoes unfrozen? We can't afford to pay for them if they come frozen. When storms come, how are we going to be sure of the meat? We can't risk 5,000 guests and any uncertainty as to food. If you farmers had storage at this end we would sign a contract with you for all time. Same as to milk! We would pay you 10 cents, year in and year out, but how can we be sure of our supply?"

Four War Essentials.

Is that what we are working toward—the farmers owning and operating the distributing plants in the city? Dealing with facts and not opinions, I can't answer that, but certainly if we are to increase crops, avert famine and allay social unrest we have to slash 40 per cent. off the cost of food and add 40 per cent. to the prices paid the farmer.

Consider: The four essentials to win the war are men, munitions, ships, food. Say we have 5,000,000 men in the army, 2,000,000 men in munition factories, 2,000,000 men either building ships, manning ships or working in the fabricating factories. We have still 30,000,000 eager workers on the farms. Did you ever compare the farmer's service to the soldier's? A farmer raises 100 acres of wheat, or 2,500 bushels, or 500 barrels of flour, or 150,000 loaves of bread, the rations for 500 men for nearly a year. Or work out the same problem in milk or beef.

Yet of the four essentials to win the war—men, munitions, ships, food—it is about the fourth we are all a little nervous, and not needlessly so if we must have wheatless, meatless days.

And why is the food end lagging? Because we have not organized a system of food distribution.

Possible Remedies.

For forty years we have tried private helter skelter, hit or miss methods, and they have been a ghastly, costly failure.

For forty years the consumer has howled, and he hasn't done a thing to help himself but howl and lie back.

Three possibilities are open. Let the producers organize the distribution of food. The pros and cons of that are check full of dynamite and deserve an article to themselves.

Sweep away all competition as we sweep it away when we give a railroad sole right of way, and let one exclusive monopoly handle this food distribution business. Certainly the railroads do the job for us as we never did it for ourselves, and with the ridiculous waste of cutthroat competition cut out prices could be reduced to the consumer and advanced to the farmer. But would they be? There is TNT in the answer to that question.

The last possibility is State distribution, and there might be gas shells and shrapnel in that, especially at election time. But the point is—we can't afford to go on doing nothing for another minute.

Consumers must have lower prices and farmers must have higher, or the star will pass with us as it passed with Egypt and Rome.