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WONDER BREAD:

The Rise and Fall of an Iconic American Food

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INTRODUCTION

Why Study Wonder Bread?

Bread is one of the most basic foods on the planet. Ever since the process for leavening baked grains was discovered over six thousand years ago in Egypt, bread has spread across the land and has been eaten in different forms by almost every culture on Earth¹. Recently, however, bread has undergone a transformation, changing from a simple food made by bakers and housewives into the mass-marketed sliced-and-bagged commodity that lines our grocery store shelves. This change has occurred most prominently in America, where the industrial bread revolution has been lead by Wonder Bread. During the twentieth century, Wonder Bread rose to the top of the bread industry and into the hearts and stomachs of the American public. Even more recently, however, a backlash has occurred, in which health- and taste-conscious consumers have begun to choose other bread options, so much so that Wonder Bread, once the king of American baked goods, went bankrupt in 2004.

What forces explain the rise in popularity and subsequent fall in attractiveness of Wonder Bread? This paper examines these phenomena and discovers that both the success and failure of Wonder Bread can be attributed to a combination of changing science and cultural values. Technological advancements in food production and preservation techniques, as well as marketers that successfully exploited societal trends and gender relations explain the ascendancy of Wonder Bread during the first half of the twentieth century. Conversely, new scientific discoveries about the nutrition of processed foods and white flour as well as a failure on the part of the Wonder Bread

¹ H. E. Jacob, *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History* (Westport: Greenwood University Press, 1970)

marketers to respond to changing social norms and new food influences beginning in the late 1960s and continuing through to today have caused the fall of this American icon.

Corporate Background

Whereas bread has been around for thousands of years, Wonder Bread is a relatively new invention. The first loaf was made and marketed by the Taggart Baking Company in 1921. In 1925, Taggart was bought by the Continental baking company, which would spread Wonder Bread throughout the United States.² In 1995, Continental Baking Company, at the time the leading American baked-goods corporation, was bought by Interstate Bakeries Corporation, the nation's third-largest wholesaler baker. Once they combined, Interstate controlled "41% of all sales of white pan bread in the Chicago market; 33% in the Milwaukee market; 62% in the central Illinois market; 64% in the Los Angeles market; and 50% in the San Diego market."³ In addition to Wonder Bread, Interstate Bakeries Corporation owns 21 other brands, including Hostess Bakeries, Butternut Breads, Home Pride Breads, Drake's Bakeries, Dolly Madison Bakeries, and Holsum Bakeries.⁴

Methodology

This paper examines the role that science and culture played in the rise and fall of Wonder Bread's popularity throughout the course of the bread's history. In order to do so, it was necessary to first understand American food culture and history. Two scholars, Harvey Levenstein and Warren Belasco, stand out as exemplary leading historians of

² Wonder Bread, "History" Wonder Bread Online, available online at: <http://www.wonderbread.com/history.asp>, accessed 25 November 2007.

³ US. V. Interstate Bakeries Corporation and Continental Bakeries Corporation, Civil Action No. 95C 4194 (1995), United States Federal Trade Commission Database, Available online: <http://cybersafe.gov/atr/cases/f0300/0303.htm>

⁴ Interstate Bakeries Corporation, "Brands," IBC Online, Available online at: <http://www.interstatebakeriescorp.com/brands.html>

American foods. In Levenstein's works, *Revolution at the Table: the Transformation of the American Diet*⁵ and *Paradox of Plenty: a Social History of Eating in Modern America*, he examines in a concise profound way the many forces that have intermingled to create the American appetite.⁶ Belasco's work *Appetite for Change* also looks at these interactions, but with a focus specifically on how the counter culture of the late 1960s changed the way that Americans eat.⁷ Without the groundwork laid by these men, it would have been nearly impossible to create a cohesive picture of the history of Wonder Bread.

The first section of this paper analyses how new baking technology and scientific "improvements" of bread ingredients has set Wonder Bread apart and enabled Wonder Bread to become an industrial commodity. In order to understand the significance of these changes, it was first important to understand how traditional bread is created. A bakery visit and interview was done with Gerard Grabowski, owner of the Pleasanton Brick Oven Bakery in Traverse City, Michigan. This bakery uses traditional ingredients, recipes, and methods, including totally organic wheat and a wood-burning brick oven. Interviews conducted by the author at the bakery allowed her to contrast traditional methods of baking with the ingredients and processes used by Wonder Bread.

The bulk of the paper focuses on how Wonder Bread responded to and exploited cultural changes and gender relations in order to gain popularity and become America's most desired and iconic bread. A number of authors have done such studies with a brand of food in the past. Most notably, Katherine Parkin has undertaken this process with

⁵ Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)

⁶ Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: a Social History of Eating in Modern America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)

⁷ Warren J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, 2nd ed. (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2007),

Campbell's soup in her article "Campbell's Soup and Traditional Gender Roles."⁸ In order to accomplish this task with Wonder Bread, a number of original sources from the period in which Wonder Bread was gaining popularity were used. These included interviews with women who lived during the time as well as advertisements from that era, which were analyzed in order to better understand the goals and methods used by Wonder Bread marketers. Other sources, such as government documents, were employed where necessary and relevant.

ANALYSIS- THE RISE AND FALL OF WONDER BREAD

The Science Behind Industrial Bread

In order to understand the phenomenon that is Wonder Bread, it is first essential to know what exactly Wonder Bread *is*. What *are* those fluffy white loaves made of? By dissecting the ingredient list on a package of Wonder Bread and attempting to better understand the processes and networks that must come together in order to produce a loaf, it is possible to better understand how the rise of the industrial product of Wonder Bread is such an important topic in American food culture.

Perhaps it is best to explain what Wonder Bread *is* by starting with what Wonder Bread is *not*. Wonder Bread is not traditional bread. Traditional bread was first discovered about 6,000 years ago, probably when some sort of mold or yeast spores fell upon the dough with which an Egyptian was planning to make unleavened flat bread. These spores fermented the mix of flour, water, and salt, creating bubbles of gas and causing the dough to rise. Though they probably did not understand the biological processes behind their new food, the Egyptians discovered that if they saved a bit of this

⁸ Katherine Parkin, "Campbell's Soup and Traditional Gender Roles," in: Sherrie A. Inness ed., *Kitchen Culture in America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001)

“sour dough,” it could be added to later batches, and thus began bread’s ascension into the human diet.⁹

The process of creating traditional bread begins with this sourdough starter, which is created in a process that takes at least three weeks. A small ball of flour and water is created and kneaded by hand, and then buried under pounds of flour. The next day, the ball is uncovered, kneaded, and reburied again. The baker repeats this process day after day and in doing so incorporates spores and microbes from his hands, his workspace, and the air into the dough, beginning the fermentation process. With any luck, these weeks of hard work will have created a successful starter which, with careful tending, can be used for years to come.¹⁰

The ingredients of traditional bread are simple: flour, water, and starter. Other ingredients, such as herbs, seeds, and flavorings, can be added to create different flavors, but are not necessary to create a successful loaf of bread. The ingredients are then mixed, kneaded, allowed to rise for anywhere from 6-24 hours, and baked, often on the hearth of a brick oven. It is a simple process, but one which requires time, energy, and human care.

Production of Wonder Bread, however, is a nearly fully mechanized process. Ingredients are mixed by machine in 2500 lb batches, separated into loaf pans by machine, allowed to proof, or rise, in controlled proofing machines, and baked in an automatic oven with 29 mechanized heat zones. This production process generates 180 loaves each minute or 35 million loaves every week.¹¹

⁹ Jacob, 24-27

¹⁰ Gerard Grabowski, Brick Oven Bread Baker, Interview by Author, 23 November 2007, Pleasanton Brick Oven Bread Bakery, Traverse City Michigan.

¹¹ *Unwrapped: “Sack Lunch”*, Food Network Productions, 18 October 2007

Wonder Bread differs from traditional bread not just in the size of their bread batches, but also in the size and scope of their nation-wide distribution network.

Traditionally, bread was baked, sold, and eaten locally; this was due to limitations on the baking capacity of the artisan baker as well as the tendency of the product to mold or go stale. Still today most small artisan bakers either own their own shops, sell at local farmers markets and co-ops, or some combination of the two.

Wonder Bread is a completely different story. There are 17 Wonder Bread factories scattered across America, from Maine to Alaska.¹² Interstate Bakeries, Wonder Bread's parent company, owns 45 baking factories in total. These bakeries are linked by over 6,500 different delivery routes to large network of bread outlets, distribution centers (650 in total), and retail sights such as Wal-Mart, Safeway, and Giant.¹³ Whereas traditional bread may be seen as a craft, Wonder Bread is a commodity. It has the ability to reach and enter a multitude of markets with the kind of ease and power of which a traditional baker could only ever dream.

The production of Wonder Bread is truly an industrial marvel. It is not just how Wonder Bread is made, however, that sets it apart from traditional bread. The ingredients in Wonder Bread are a testament to the industrial and scientific nature of this commodity. Wonder Bread does not begin as only flour, water, and starter. Rather, it contains a plethora of ingredients that come (and are created) from far and wide to create one white fluffy loaf. In order to more fully understand what makes Wonder Bread such a modern marvel, a closer look at some of these ingredients individually is necessary.

Yeast

¹² Interstate Bakeries, "Locations", Interstate Bakeries Investor Relations, Available online: <http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=93242&p=irol-location>, accessed 4 December 2007

¹³ SEC, "Form 10-Q, Interstate Bakeries Corp.," Washington, DC, filed 4 October 2007

One of the greatest differences between Wonder Bread and traditional bread is the leavening agent that each uses in order to make the bread rise.¹⁴ Whereas traditional bread uses a living starter formed from the interaction and fermentation of a multiplicity of microorganisms, Wonder Bread, and in fact the great majority of modern American breads, relies on the use of bakers yeast. Bakers yeast is a single microorganism which was discovered and isolated approximately 150 years ago by beer brewers. They discovered that this organism (actually a type of fungus), when added to a mixture of warm water and flour, would digest the sugars in the mixture and begin to produce carbon dioxide bubbles, causing the bread to rise. Sugar added to the mixture would catalyze this reaction further, and allow for faster bread.¹⁵

Baker's yeast clearly has its advantages to industrial (and even home) baking. It is simpler and faster; it does not take 3 weeks to produce, nor does it require care. It can be packaged and re-activated with the easy addition of warm water, and it generally causes bread to rise faster than sourdough starter. While traditional bread may take anywhere from 6 to 24 hours to rise, the average yeast bread recipe calls for 1 to 2 hours of proofing time.

Yeast also has disadvantages, however. In the words of traditional baker Gerard Grabowski, "all that baker's yeast does is give the bread poof. You don't get any of the good stuff from yeast. Just poof." This is because yeast, as opposed to a sourdough starter, is a monoculture. In a starter, each of the individual organisms break down the dough's proteins and starches to produce a multitude of vitamins and minerals, such as phytic acid, which help make the bread more digestible and nutritious. Yeast, on the

¹⁴ For the purpose of this discussion, I am defining "bread" as the leavened baked good, as opposed to the wider definition of "bread" which includes unleavened flatbreads as well. This is in accordance with the definition of the word "bread" used by H.E. Jacob in *Six Thousand Years of Bread*.

¹⁵ W.P. Edwards, *The Science of Bakery Products* (Essex: RSC Publishing, 2007), 170-171

other hand, does break down some of the starch, and does provide convenient “poof”. It does not, however, turn the bread into as complex and nutritious of a food as a sourdough starter would.¹⁶

Wheat Flour

The most elemental and essential ingredient that goes into bread is flour. Flour, however, is not as simple as it may seem. There are actually six varieties of wheat grown in the US, which can be divided into two general categories: hard and soft wheat. The difference between these two classifications is the amount of protein they contain. Soft wheats, which contain lower amounts of protein, are mostly grown east of the Mississippi River, and are usually used to manufacture cakes, as they produce a lighter, spongier baked good. Hard wheats, containing higher percentages of protein, usually between 12 and 16 percent, are better for making bread, as this protein creates more gluten and provides more structural integrity. These hard wheat varieties, hard red spring, hard red winter, and hard white, are cultivated in the vast wheat fields of the Western plains states, such as the Dakotas, Montana, Kansas, and Oklahoma. It is from these states that Wonder Bread gets most of the wheat for their bread flour.¹⁷

One might assume that, different varieties and protein contents aside, wheat is a rather simple, basic commodity. In actuality, however, wheat is one of the crops that exemplify the modern agriculture movement. Throughout the 20th century, innovations in both agricultural technology and seed breeding have led to dramatically increased wheat

¹⁶ Grabowski, 2007

¹⁷ For more information on the types and distribution of US wheat varieties, see: Steve Ettlinger, *Twinkie, Deconstructed* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2007), 15
 Gary Vocke, Edward W. Allen, and Mir Ali, *Wheat Backgrounder* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 2005)
 Walton Feed, “Wheat”, *Walton Feed* [home page online]; Available online from <http://waltonfeed.com/self/wheat2.html>; Internet; accessed 30 November 2007.

yields. Wheat plants have transformed from tall, waving stalks into shorter plants with deeper roots, as seen in figures 1a and 1b. This selective breeding has made the plants less susceptible to harsh weather conditions and enabled them to produce higher yields. For example, intensive agriculture has caused wheat production per acre in North Dakota to more than double between 1941 and 2007, from 15.4 to 35.7 bushels per acre.¹⁸

Figures 1a and 1b

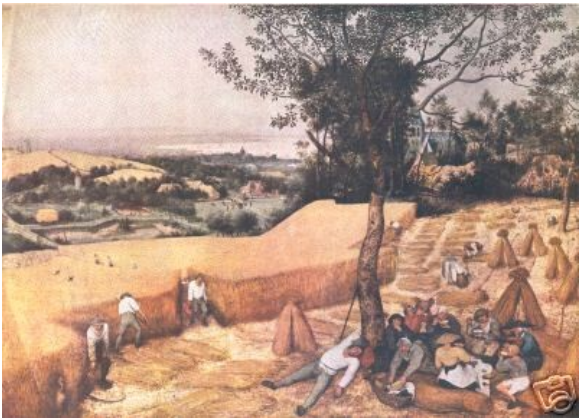


Figure 1a, a painting by Peter Bruegel (c. 1525-1569) shows traditional wheat, a plant approximately 5 feet tall. Figure 1b shows today's shorter wheat in Kansas in 2003

Source: Albert Cheh, "Agricultural Chemicals," In class presentation: *Environmental Resources and Energy*, American University, 17 April 2007

Intensive wheat agriculture has costs, however. The shorter plants, while more stable, are unable to outgrow weeds, and thus require the application of herbicides. Also,

¹⁸ North Dakota Wheat Commission, "ND historical Wheat Production", Available online from <http://www.ndwheat.com/uploads%5Cresources%5C547%5Cndallwheathistwhtacres.pdf>; Internet; accessed 28 November 2007.

as a result of their shallower root systems and increased density, the plants are not able to extract all the nutrients they need from the soil as it is naturally, thus requiring the application of large amounts of fertilizers. As a result of this agricultural system, fertilizers, fuel, and other chemicals accounted for 50-60 percent of production costs for US wheat farms in 2002.¹⁹ This agricultural revolution does not just cause harm through extra input costs to farmers. The increased chemical use can cause everything from health problems such as cancer to those that work with them to polluted run off, eutrophication, and resultant algae blooms that destroy life in waterways.

Furthermore, industrial wheat agriculture has in many ways lead the way for the dominance of industrial bread. The first reason for this is the scale of modern wheat farms. The United States Department of Agriculture has found that the majority of wheat farms belong to large producers, stating that in 2001 “producers planting 400 or more acres of wheat accounted for two-thirds of total production.”²⁰ This consolidation of the agriculture industry in turn has benefited a consolidated bread industry, as large wheat producers can network better with large flour consumers, often pushing small producers and consumers to the sidelines. Another reason that industrial agriculture benefits industrial breads such as Wonder Bread lies in the effects that fertilizers and herbicides can have on traditional bread starters. Whereas bakers yeast has proven to be capable of providing “poof” for bread made with conventional flour, the community of microorganisms in traditional bread starter cannot hold up to the traces of agricultural chemicals left after the processing of industrial wheat into flour. When asked why he uses only organic wheat in his breads, one traditional bread baker replied,

¹⁹ Mir B. Ali, *Characteristics and Production costs of US Wheat Farms*. (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 2002), 11

²⁰ Ibid. 23

Why use organic wheat? Because you *have* to use organic wheat. You it just doesn't work otherwise. The bread won't rise. I knew a guy who tried to make sourdough bread without organic flour once. It didn't work out for him.²¹

Conventional, intensive wheat agriculture, with its heavy use of chemicals and the power it places in the hands of large producers, has been a major force in the march of breads such as Wonder Bread to the top of the US bread market. Wheat, however, is not the only thing that goes into industrial bread. Unlike traditional bread, the list of ingredients in Wonder Bread goes beyond flour, water, and starter. There are a number of other ingredients which go into the creation of this fluffy, sta-fresh© American icon.

Vitamins and Minerals

Many people assume that flour is simply ground up wheat. It is a bit more complicated than that, however. In order to get the bright white flour that Wonder Bread is made of, the wheat must undergo a number of treatments. First, the wheat germ is removed, and then, because wheat flour is naturally slightly yellow, it is bleached using chlorine gas or benzoyl peroxide.²² This process produces clean-looking, white flour, but also removes almost all of the nutritional value of the flour.

In the US, a law enacted in 1941 has attempted to reconcile the loss of nutrients through the flour refinement process. It requires that all flour sold in the United States be enriched with certain vitamins and minerals: ferrous sulfate, niacin, thiamine mononitrate, riboflavin, and folic acid. This is an interesting law, because its goal is not so much to improve a food as to replace what was lost. In the words of one food scientist,

²¹ Grabowski, 2007

²² Although the benzoyl peroxide bleaching method is legal in the United States, it has been banned in other countries, such as the United Kingdom
For more information on the bleaching process, see Edwards, 76 and Ettlinger, 21-28

If everyone ate a well-balanced diet, or used only whole wheat flour, and/or took vitamins supplements wherever they were needed, enrichment—the process of adding back vitamins and minerals to foods from which they have been removed—would become unnecessary and obsolete.²³

The enrichment of flour allows our society to take a natural, basic food, strip it of its nutrients, and then add them back in a different form. The vitamins that are found in wheat come from natural biological processes. Those that are replaced in the enrichment process, however, come from as far away as Chinese petrochemical plants (riboflavin, thiamine mononitrate, and folic acid), Midwestern steel mills (ferrous sulfate), and the Swiss Alps (niacin).²⁴ Although the social forces behind the enrichment phenomenon will be discussed later in this paper, it is already evident that refined, bleached, enriched flour is a far cry from the stone-ground meal eaten by our ancestors.

Other Ingredients: Sugars, Preservatives, and More

It is not in its flour or leavening agents, however manipulated and industrial they may be, that Wonder Bread truly departs from traditional bread. It is, rather, in the multitude of other substances that can be found in the Wonder Bread ingredient list. It is these ingredients that have allowed Wonder Bread to be produced quickly and stay fresh on the shelves of grocery stores for what seems like an infinite time.

The first subset of these additions is sugars. They provide the bakers yeast with food that can be metabolized more quickly than the more complex carbohydrates in flour, causing the yeast to produce more gas faster, speeding up the leavening process, and thus reducing the amount of time it takes to bake a loaf of Wonder Bread. The sugars in Wonder Bread are not the white crystals that you put in your coffee, however; most of the sugar in Wonder Bread is in the form of high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), a highly-

²³ Ettlinger, 29

²⁴ Ibid, 32-41

processed substance that, because of the high government subsidies for American corn, and its chemical nature (unlike syrup made of cane sugar, corn syrup will not form crystals) is a cheap, stable alternative for food processors. While food processors love the ease and versatility of corn syrup, others have pointed out that the molecular structure of corn syrup may make it metabolize in a unique way, causing it to convert to fat more easily, while its harshest critics have even linked it to higher insulin levels and resulting higher rates of type-2 diabetes.²⁵ Whether the critics of HFCS are correct in their assertions or not, however, it is important to remember that bread does not traditionally require the addition of sugars. Therefore, the addition of any sweeteners, be them simple or highly processed, means extra and unnecessary calories being fed to a society facing some of the highest obesity rates the world has ever known.

Other food additives found in Wonder Bread are put in to help stabilize and preserve the bread, allowing it to stay fresh and mold-free much longer than traditional breads. These preservatives are necessary in a system where bread is produced in factories that are often many miles away from where they are sold. Some of these are truly feats of modern science. They include “dough conditioners” such as sodium stearoyl lactylate--formed from a complex reaction between sodium, stearic acid, and lactic acid--which keep the bread softer longer and has no real equivalent in non-industrial home baking.²⁶ Other preserving additives include the mold-inhibiting calcium propionate, also used to treat sick cows, and calcium sulfate, also known by the names gypsum, sheetrock, or Plaster of Paris.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid, 66-70 and Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: a Natural History of Four Meals*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2006)

²⁶ Ettlinger, 215-223

²⁷ United States Department of Agriculture, *Calcium Propionate, a Treatment for Milk Fever AND a Mold Inhibitor* (Washington, DC, 2007) Available online from:

It is clear that Wonder Bread is not traditional bread but a creation which flows out of the industrialization of the food industry. Wonder Bread is, in many ways, more like a science project than a food. Its ingredients come from across the planet, from factory-like farms to petrochemical plants, joining together to create a loaf of bread that almost seems to defy physics with its ability to be baked quicker and stay fresh longer than traditional bread. It is this science of food processing, then, that is one of the main factors behind the rise of Wonder Bread in America. Without large wheat farms, quick-rise yeast, enriched white flour, sugars, and preservatives, Wonder Bread simply could not exist as it is today.

Dissecting ingredient lists and trying to understand the biological, chemical, and industrial processes that go into a loaf can tell us a great deal about the phenomenon behind Wonder Bread. This exercise gives one the ability to know *what* goes into a loaf, and a bit about *how* that loaf is made. What ingredient lists and bakery science cannot tell us, however, is *why* Americans like to eat it. In order to understand why our society has chosen processed, industrialized white bread over more traditional forms, we must look beyond science, for it is in American culture that Wonder Bread truly takes root. We must now look at the social forces that have affected and been affected by Wonder Bread, in order to understand not just what goes into a loaf of Wonder Bread, but what goes into a society that chooses to eat Wonder Bread.

Culture and the Rise of Wonder Bread

Setting the stage

Wonder Bread came into existence in 1921. It did not just appear out of thin air, however. There were a number of changes that had to take place to set the stage for Wonder Bread's acceptance into the American bread market. As discussed above, many of the driving forces behind the growth of Wonder Bread were technical and scientific changes. Railroads were expanding across the west, allowing the transport of grains as well as finished foodstuffs with ease never imagined before.²⁸ Technologic improvements in harvesting equipment such as mechanical reapers also increased the efficiency of the wheat industry.²⁹

Not all of the changes leading to the ascension of Wonder Bread were scientific, however. There were a number of social and cultural changes that shaped the American conscious into one that was prone to not only accept, but adore white industrial bread. The first of these is the western predilection towards light grains over dark grains. In the words of food historian Steven Laurence Kaplan,

A sign of purity, an emblem of a coveted social quality, and a stake of power for centuries, white bread was never simply a source for energy and nutrition... Associated with every virtue, competency, and prerogative, whiteness structured day-to-day relations and exchanges.³⁰

This societal norm had taken years to develop and therefore was deeply entrenched into the American consumer's subconscious. As early as the Roman Empire, wheat, a relatively white grain, was the chosen grain of the ruling, affluent class, while darker grains such as rye and barley were eaten by the less "civilized", non-Roman tribes. Throughout the Middle Ages and into modern times, dark grains continued to be those eaten by the "others", such as the Russians and Eastern Europeans, while the peoples and

²⁸ Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003) 30

²⁹ Jacob, 269-278

³⁰ Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Good Bread is Back* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 100

cultures of Western Europe preferred white wheat.³¹ In many ways, this trend mirrored the Western notion of a light-skinned self as good and a dark-skinned other as savage and uncultured. As society developed, this division of light and dark grains came to exist not only between Western and “other”, but between socioeconomic classes as well. The rich ate clean, white bread. The poor ate cheaper, “dirtier” brown bread. In turn-of-the-century America, where the culture values social mobility, mass-market industrial white bread would offer more than a food source. It would offer everyone the opportunity to eat as equals, at least symbolically.

The other important trend that existed in America before the creation of Wonder Bread was Americans’ new-found obsession with food safety. With his 1906 work *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair had exposed the malpractice of the meatpacking industry and had caused a public outcry for improved sanitation and food safety. One manifestation of this was the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act. Another was the increased popularity of pre-packaged foods such as canned soup, which were marketed as cleaner and safer than those which could be produced by smaller cooks.

It is easy to see why the general American might believe industrial bread was more sanitary than that made by traditional bakers. Traditional bread requires that one touch and knead the dough. The act of allowing the dough to rise is essentially allowing it to begin to rot, or go sour. It is a hard, hands-on job. Bread historian Steven Laurence Kaplan has describes the scene in an eighteenth-century baking room:

... an ill-ventilated basement, lit by a few candles...The work was hard and often mind-numbing. Someone had to prepare wood for the fire, then light it, draw water, handle bags of flour weighing nearly 150 kilos, then knead 100 kilos or more [of dough] with his hands and sometimes his feet... The air in the bakery was heavy...when the oven

³¹ Ibid.

was in use, the heat was overwhelming... apprentices dripped with sweat, enriching (or infecting) the dough.³²

Although bakeries at the turn of the century were much more sanitary than their eighteenth-century counterparts, they nonetheless were places where ingredients were handled, breathed on, and kneaded. The baker still seemed the illusive “flour-coated cave dweller” to many.³³ Traditionally-baked bread was condemned by progressive reformers such as Caroline Hunt as “...a kind of bread which in no way [came] up to ideals as to quality, and which is frequently sold and delivered without proper protection from dirty hands, from dust and from flies.”³⁴ These critics saw industrial bread, which came from modern technology, clean and white and wrapped in packaging, as a manifestation of cleanliness and sanitation, and therefore as a sharp contrast to traditional hand-made loaves.

Americans’ obsession with purity and cleanliness paved the way for a prepackaged white bread to take over the market. In the words of food scientist James A. Tobey in 1939,

... the American have always preferred white bread and continues to espouse it, chiefly because of its bland flavor and more attractive appearance. Only 2 percent of wheat flour consumed in the US is of the whole wheat variety, and there seems to be little likelihood of any drastic increase.³⁵

After it was introduced in 1921, Wonder Bread’s pure white appearance, its standardized production process, and its packaging were used to market the new product. For

³² Kaplan, 13-14

³³ Ibid. 14

³⁴ Caroline Hunt, speaking at the Ninth Annual Lake Placid Conference, 1907, quoted in: Joel Spring, *Educating the Consumer-Citizen: a History of the Marriage of Schools, Advertising, and Media*, (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 2003) 40

³⁵ James A. Tobey, “Baking Technology and National Nutrition, *The Scientific Monthly*, Vol. 49, No. 5. (Nov., 1939), pp. 464-468. 466

instance, a singing quartet named the Happy Wonder Bakers performed songs on the radio with lyrics such as:

We are the bakers in spotless white
Whose pans are polished and shining bright
Who bake the bread that is always right
Hurrah for the Wonder bakers!³⁶

The Wonder Bakers jingle was more than a catchy tune. With words like “spotless white” and “shining bright”, it insinuated that Wonder Bread was a clean, uncontaminated choice. Also, assertions that Wonder Bread was “always right” assured the consumer of consistency.

The Age of Convenience and the Creation of the American Housewife

Wonder Bread came onto the American marketplace at a time when convenience foods rising in popularity. It was the beginning of the age of foods like Campbell’s soup and Jell-O, and Wonder Bread fit into this atmosphere like bologna on sandwich. Much of the impetus for the rise of convenience foods came from the changing roles of American women and changing views of nutrition.

The first half of the 20th century was a time of redefining roles of women. As the US became more urbanized, roles between men and women became increasingly separate. Males were expected to be breadwinners, while housework, cooking, and child-rearing was the domain of females. Because females were seen as the main consumers of groceries and other household goods, marketers of processed foods such as Wonder Bread aimed to exploit and shape the feminine market. In the words of food historian Laura Shapiro,

The advertising industry, the manufacturers of household goods, the food companies, the women’s magazines, and the schools all shared in the task of creating a woman who could discriminate among canned

³⁶ Happy Wonder Bakers song quoted in: *The Wonder Bread Cookbook*, (Berkley: Ten Speed Press, 2007)

soups but who wouldn't ask too many questions about the ingredients: neither angel nor scientist, but homemaker.³⁷

One way that convenience food marketers hoped to gain the dollars of housewives was by portraying cooking and housework as hard work that could be avoided with the use of modern foods and technology. Ads for processed foods claimed that they enabled women to “accomplish better results with less drudgery.”³⁸ Others went so far to claim that processed foods were “God’s own gift to the busy housewife.”³⁹

An interesting coalition built up around this idea. On one hand there were food processors who hoped to increase sales. On the other were feminists and home-economists, who believed that convenience foods freed women from housework, allowing them to pursue other interests. They viewed a woman who resisted the new modern conveniences as one who “enslaves herself to ignorance by limiting her time for study.” They warned that “the woman who shall insist upon carrying the home-making methods of today into the tomorrow will fail to lay hold of the possible quota of freedom which the future has in store for her.”⁴⁰

Home economists furthered this idea by transforming housework into something that was to be quantified, valued, and regarded as an asset, along with learning and leisure time. They preached that the convenience presented by processed foods made them a smart economical choice. Furthermore, they caused the transformation of housework into scientific subject. This change had some positive effects on housewives by “legitimizing” their work, as cooking and other household duties were now studied in

³⁷ Laura Shapiro, *Perfection of Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, quoted in: Sherrie A. Inness ed., *Kitchen Culture in America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) 7

³⁸ 1926 Campbell’s soup ad, quoted in Katherine Parkin, “Campbell’s Soup and Traditional Gender Roles,” 53

³⁹ Cookbook author Blanche Firman, quoted in: Erika Endrijonas, “Cooking for a family in the 1950s,” in Inness ed., *Kitchen Culture in America*, 158

⁴⁰ Caroline Hunt, speaking as head of Domestic Economy at Chicago’s Lewis Institute, quoted in Spring, 37

schools alongside math and literature. School classrooms also had the effect of mainstreaming and promoting convenience foods, however, as students were increasingly taught recipes featuring foods such as Jell-O and Wonder Bread while being taught the gospel of time-saving and household efficiency.⁴¹

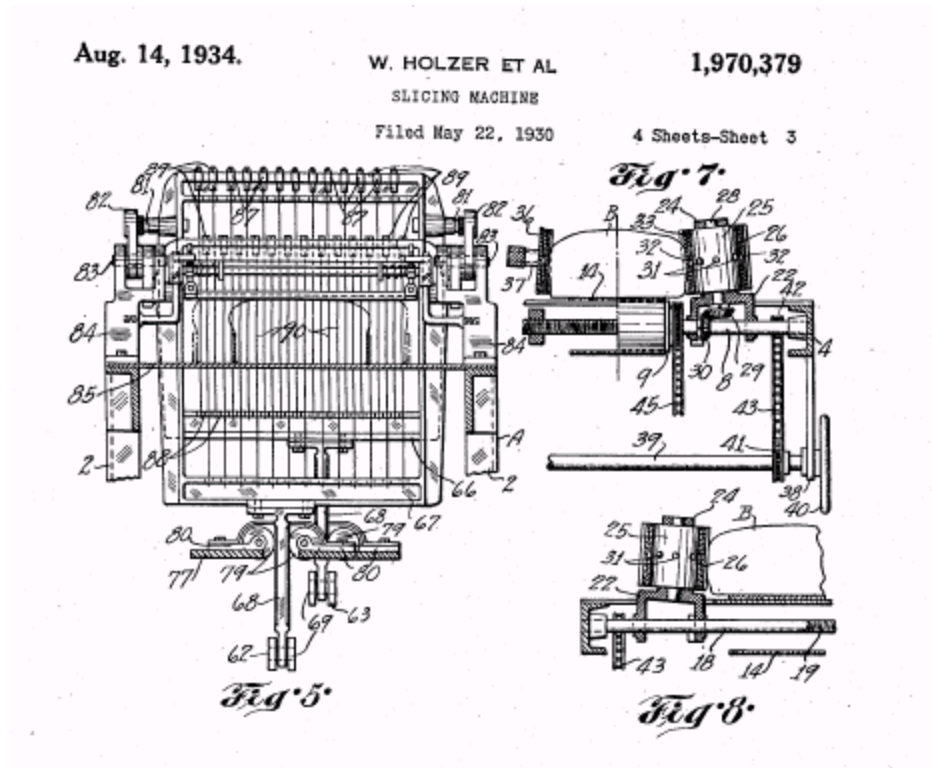
Wonder Bread was the perfect example of a modern convenience food. Baking bread at home takes hours and requires considerable work. Wonder Bread, on the other hand, not only came pre-packaged and ready-to-eat, but also stayed fresh longer than homemade bread, eliminating much of the work for housewives.

It was a man by the name of William Holzer, however, who launched Wonder Bread into the annals of convenience food history when, in 1930, he filed US Patent number 1,970,379 for his slicing machine (see figure 2).⁴² When Wonder Bread seized on this idea and became the first company to market pre-sliced bread, it did not take long before the term “the best thing since sliced bread” was coined. Now, Wonder Bread did not just eliminate the time-consuming task of baking bread; it removed any need for utensils in the preparation process at all. The pre-slicing of Wonder Bread was a huge step in shaping the products image as a food for the modern American housewife: clean, neat, wholesome and convenient.

Figure 2

⁴¹ Spring, 28-61 and Sherrie A. Inness, “‘The Enchantment of Mixing spoons’: Cooking Lessons for Girls and Boys,” in Inness ed. *Kitchen Culture in America*, 120-134

⁴² William Holzer and John Le Brell Jr., *Patent #1,970,379: Slicing Machine*, (Washington, DC: United States Patent Office, 1930)



Drawing from William Holzer's "slicing machine" patent. Although it was patented "not exclusively for the slicing of bread," it was in the baking industry, through Wonder Bread's introduction of pre-sliced bread that this invention had the greatest impact.

Source: William Holzer and John Le Brell Jr., Patent #1,970,379: Slicing Machine, (Washington, DC: United States Patent Office, 1930)

Although marketers and food processors were willing to exploit the feminist perspective to increase their sales, there is little evidence that the men in charge of the processed food industry were actually interested in empowering women. Thus, at the same time as promoting their foods as a way for women to be freed from the "drudgery" of house hold tasks, they also promoted housework and cooking as women's sacred duty. Women were often presented with the idea that their family's health and happiness depended on their skills as housewives. Thus, women were simultaneously told that they must find free time in order to liberate themselves but that "a woman's effect on the

home sphere was so powerful that it exceeded and made unnecessary any power she sought in the real world.”⁴³

Advertisements and propaganda for such a concept was often found in women’s magazines and cookbooks. They presented the image of women as stay-at-home consumers and doting wives. Women were pictured doing tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and shopping. Their role as homemakers was portrayed as having utmost importance. In one extreme example of this is 1939 advertisement for *The American Home*, a women’s magazine that promoted the homemaker lifestyle. In it, the imminent visit of a husband’s boss is portrayed as more important than a potential Nazi takeover of Europe.⁴⁴ (See Figure 3) Although not all advertisements in magazines such as *The American Home* were as blatant as this example, headlines such as “60 ways to enjoy life at home!”⁴⁵ and promotions such as the “Loving Hands at Home Contest”⁴⁶ reinforced the idea that women’s place was in the home and in the kitchen.

Figure 3

⁴³ Historian Ellen Garvey, quoted in Spring, 41

⁴⁴ Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 32

⁴⁵ Cover page, *The American Home*, June 1943, image available online at: <http://www.gono.com/adart/American-Home/The-American-Home-July-1940-1.jpg>

⁴⁶ Cover page, *The American Home*, July 1940, image available online at: <http://www.gono.com/adart/American-Home/The-American-Home-June-1943-1.jpg>



1939 advertisement for *The American Home*, reinforcing women's important role as housewives
 Source: Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*

Processed food manufacturers responded to this paradox by aiming to convince women that using convenience foods was a way to show their love and commitment to their families by preparing “better food with less time in the kitchen.” They focused on marketing their products as ones which allowed women to “raise the standard of their family’s health and their own—with less expense and effort.”⁴⁷ In other words, they promoted their products as tools that women could use to improve the way they served their family and pleased their husbands.

Wonder Bread fully utilized this image, intimating that women to be both thrifty and caring by choosing their product. One ad attempted to boost sales by asking women to please their husbands and families with Wonder Bread, calling on them to:

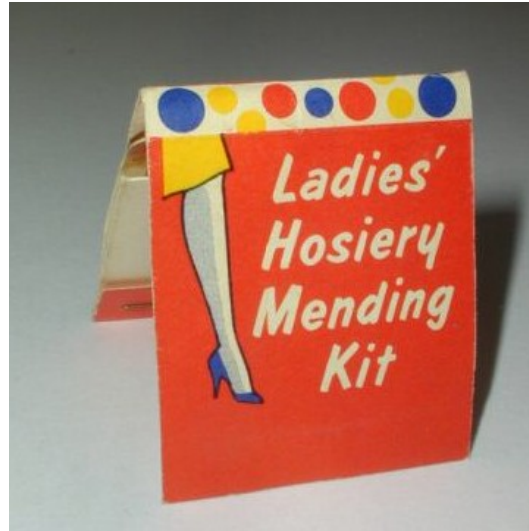
⁴⁷ Parkin, in Inness, 53

Hurry *your* husband home!
 Smart women know that *meals* are an important part of *every* husband's life!
 That's why wives by the thousands serve Wonder Bread...
 Makes *every* meal worth hurrying home for!⁴⁸

One Wonder Bread advertisement that exemplifies this approach was a hosiery mending kit that they handed out in the 1930s (see figure 4). This kit was simple, compact, and ready-to-go, just as like their pre-sliced loaf of bread. It was aimed toward the woman who, just as she did not have time to search through her sewing kit for the needle and thread to darn her stockings, could not be bothered with baking or slicing her own bread. Yet it is important to note that this was a hosiery mending kit, not a pants mending kit. The picture on the front showed a long, slender leg ending in a conservative, yet attractive high heel. It was clear that this kit was meant not for the revolutionary feminist but rather the woman who wanted a quick, convenient way to appear well-groomed in order to please her husband and uphold the appearance of her family.

Figure 4

⁴⁸ Smith, 42



Wonder Bread hosiery mending kit from the 1930s

Another way in which food processors aimed to make their products fit into a world where women were to be innovative but still remain in their roles as housewives was the promotion of recipes using their products. These allowed for the creation of “homemade” food by housewives while enabling companies such as Wonder Bread increase their profits. In many instances, these recipes were presented by spokeswomen personalities such as Betty Crocker. These characters, often fictional, were portrayed as perfect American housewives. Although the spokeswomen were created by and for the food companies, their endorsement of these processed-food-based creations granted the new foods legitimacy as creative ways for homemakers to show their love for their families.⁴⁹

Wonder Bread’s spokeswoman was Alice Adams Proctor “who was to bread what Betty Crocker was to cake.” Her recipes, all prominently featuring Wonder Bread, offered “flashes of inspiration to charm the flagging appetite and ease the family budget.”⁵⁰ In the works of Alice Adams Proctor, Wonder Bread was more than white

⁴⁹ Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 33-34

⁵⁰ *Wonder Bread Cookbook*, 5

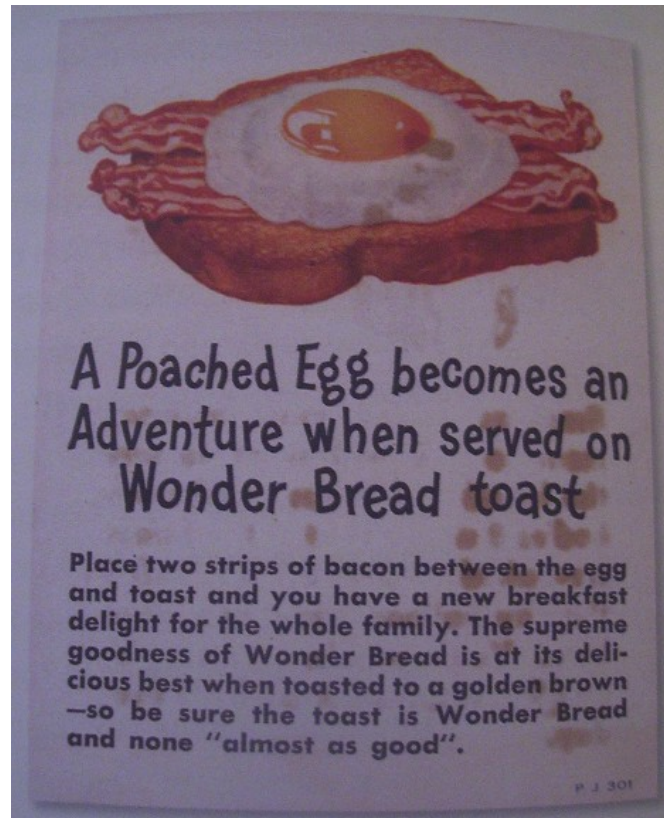
pre-sliced bread; it was a versatile base for a veritable cornucopia of family-pleasing recipes.

There were various Wonder Bread recipes for all times of the day. For example, Wonder Bread breakfasts could be anything from eggs on toast (see figure 5) to “cinnamon Wonder waffles”, created by placing a “sandwich” of butter, sugar, cinnamon, and Wonder Bread in a waffle iron. (Similarly, the “waffles” could be served with fried chicken by omitting the sugar and cinnamon).⁵¹ Many recipes utilized other processed foods in addition to the bread itself. Examples of these included a “nutritious, economical, and delicious dish” consisting of a casserole of layered Wonder Bread slices alternating with canned tomatoes, or “three Wonderful pieces,” in which Wonder Bread was spread with processed cheese spread and wrapped in bacon.⁵²

Figure 5

⁵¹ “Cinnamon Wonder Waffles” originally printed in *The Wonder Book of Good Meals*, 1934, reprinted in: *Wonder Bread Cookbook*, 22

⁵² *Wonder Bread Cookbook*, 58 and 31



Advertisement for a Wonder Bread breakfast; Women could make a quick breakfast that would be a “delight for the whole family”

Source: *The Wonder Bread Cookbook*, 20

While many people today may look at the above recipes with skepticism and disgust (“awful, terrible, horrible!” being the reaction of one interviewee to the “three Wonderful pieces”⁵³), during the middle of the 20th century, they were marketed as ways that women could please and nourish their family. This was not an age of calorie counting or of connecting diet with health related illnesses such as heart disease and stroke. Warren Belasco comments, “when my father died of a fatal heart attack in 1967, at age forty-seven, his doctor saw no significance in the fact that he was overweight. Cholesterol was not yet a household word.”⁵⁴ This science would come eventually, and when it did would help ring the death bell of Wonder Bread, but first Wonder Bread had

⁵³ Laura Minicucci, Interview by author, 6 December 2007, Washington, DC.

⁵⁴ Belasco, 6

to conquer another market: that of American youth; and they did so, perhaps audaciously, by marketing themselves as part of a healthy diet.

Building Strong Bodies: Wonder Bread and the Baby-Boom Generation

Wonder Bread was very successful in marketing to the American housewife. They did not simply focus on the matron of the house, however. As World War II ended, and young American soldiers were reunited with their young American sweethearts, young American children began to be born. Wonder Bread marketers recognized the potential in this ever-expanding group of consumers, and began shifting their advertisements towards the baby boom generation. They did this in a number of ways, focusing on marketing to the parents as well as kids themselves.

One of Wonder Bread's most successful, memorable, and long-lasting campaigns was their "builds strong bodies" advertisements. This initiative began in the 1940s and has lasted, in some way or another, throughout the remainder of Wonder Bread's existence. (Even today Wonder Bread is marketed as a good source of "body-building" elements such as calcium.) The introduction of this campaign was more than a clever new marketing strategy, however. It coincided with a revolution in how Americans viewed nutrition and a balanced diet.

Food historian Harvey Levenstein has classified this transformation, which began to occur in the late 1920s, as the shift from "new nutrition" to "newer nutrition." New nutrition, which was popular at the turn of the century, was revolutionary in that it recognized the need to eat a variety of foods in order to have a healthy, well-balanced diet. New nutritionists, for instance, recognized the need to eat a mix of carbohydrates,

proteins, and dairy products. The science behind new nutrition, however, was only as details as the times permitted, and therefore did not go into a very microscopic level.⁵⁵

While new nutritionists were worried about balancing the types of food people ate, newer nutrition was born with the discovery that microscopic elements and vitamins could greatly impact health. The first known vitamin was discovered in 1912, and all had been discovered by 1948. With these discoveries, scientists could now explain and help prevent occurrences of diseases such as pellagra and beriberi.⁵⁶ Nutritionists also began to realize that a person could be “well fed” in the sense that they had ample amounts of food to eat, but still malnourished from eating food that lacked essential vitamins and minerals.⁵⁷

This realization changed the way that Americans viewed food. Suddenly, a nation which had viewed itself as the “best fed people on earth” had come to realize that being “well-fed” meant more than having ample food supplies. This realization was so shocking that in 1939 the head of the US Public Health Service proclaimed that nutritional diseases and deficiencies were the country’s “greatest single health problem.”⁵⁸

The fact that this discovery was made on the eve of World War II gave newer nutrition even more prestige, as vitamins came to be seen as necessary for national security. General Lewis Hershey, head of Selective Service declared that “we are physically in a condition of which nationally we should be thoroughly ashamed,” and the US army began researching and funding the distribution of vitamin supplements to

⁵⁵ Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*

⁵⁶ Ettinger, 29-30

⁵⁷ Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 67-68

⁵⁸ Ibid, 63

soldiers.⁵⁹ Eventually, vitamins “came to be regarded as absolutely essential for national defense.”⁶⁰ Vitamin A was said to be the “vision vitamin,” a lack of which would impair army sharpshooters. A study showed that B vitamins made lab rats less sensitive to noise, leading the army to begin feeding it to men under fire. The one of the most popular vitamins was thiamin, said to bring “pep” and energy, and was widely distributed as a morale-booster.

The hype of vitamins was not just reserved to the army, however; a strong national defense required strong citizens to feed the army, work in the factory, and provide for a strong economy. There were a number of initiatives to improve the amount of vitamins consumed by the American public. In 1941, for instance, a new table of recommended daily allowances of vitamins was published in order to educate the public about their daily vitamin needs. In addition, some private corporations began handing out “pep pills” of thiamin to their workers to improve productivity.⁶¹

One of the largest and most significant initiatives, and one that would have an enormous effect upon the industrial bread industry, was the 1941 law requiring that all white flour sold in the United States be enriched with iron, and B vitamins. Because of its omnipresence in the American diet, as well as the fact that additives could be easily added to it, flour was a perfect candidate for an easy way to boost Americans’ vitamin-intake levels.⁶² It is interesting to note that the enrichment of bread was undertaken in order to correct a nutrition problem caused largely by the fact that convenience foods, ever gaining popularity in the American diet, lost much of their nutritional value during

⁵⁹ Ibid, 65

⁶⁰ Ibid, 21

⁶¹ Ibid, 64-79

⁶² Ettinger, 29

processing.⁶³ Moreover, while the idea of adding more natural ingredients, such as wheat germ and milk solids, or even simply promoting wheat bread over white bread, was debated amongst scientists and politicians, vitamin enrichment was ultimately chosen for the reason that the other options would be too difficult.⁶⁴

Wonder Bread marketers slyly turned this new regulation into an advantage. Instead of saying that they were required by the government to add vitamins back into their bleached white flour, they framed the issue in a much different way:

Wonder Bread was involved in a government-supported move to enrich white bread with vitamins and minerals to improve nutrition. Known as the “quiet miracle,” bread enrichment nearly eliminated the diseases Beriberi and Pellagra and brought essential nutrients to people who previously could not afford nutritious foods.⁶⁵

Wonder Bread, then, was not simply something to make a sandwich with—it was an egalitarian way to improve the health of an entire nation.

The “builds strong bodies” campaign flowed directly out of this vitamin-mania. It was directed towards young parents, especially mothers, intimating that Wonder Bread would help their children grow to be strong and therefore was an important product to use if they loved their offspring and wanted them to succeed. An early print ad for the campaign contrasted a sick, unhealthy child with a happy, strong, muscular child who ate Wonder Bread, in doing so hinting that if parents did not want disease-ridden children, Wonder Bread was a necessary part of their diet. (See figure 6) A series of TV advertisements were launched as well, many of which showed small children growing up at alarmingly fast rates, and had scripts discussing the positive effects that Wonder Bread could have on growth and development. One, for instance, stated:

⁶³ Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*

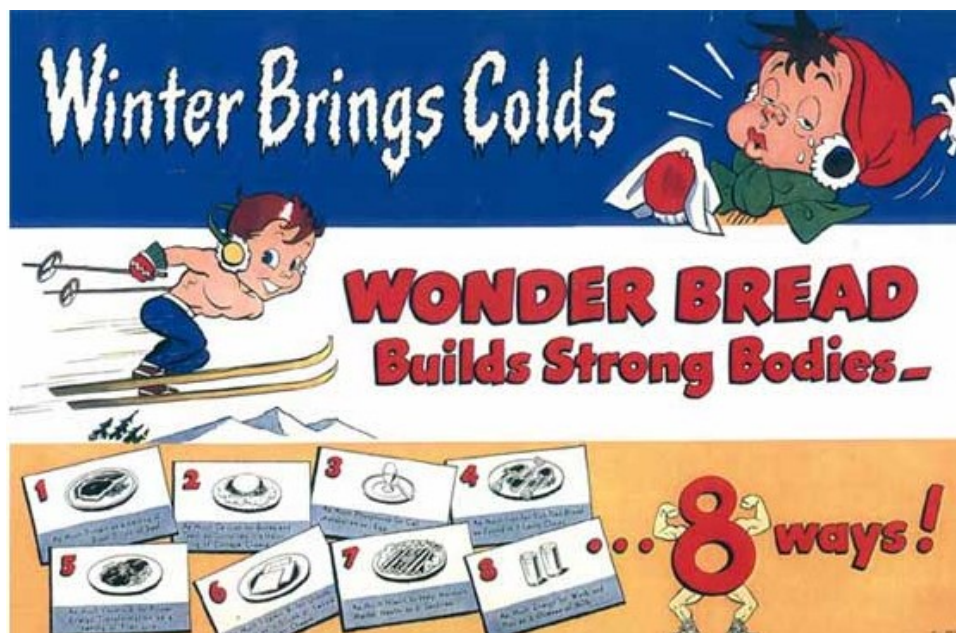
⁶⁴ Tobey, and

Robert R. Williams and E. V. McCollum, “Bread ‘enrichment,’” *Science*, New Series, Vol. 102, No. 2642. (Aug. 17, 1945), pp. 180-182.

⁶⁵ Wonder Bread Online, “History”

...they'll never need Wonder Bread more than now, because the time to grow bigger and stronger is now... ages 1-12, the time when your child grows to 90 percent of their adult height. How can you help? By serving nutritious Wonder enriched bread. Help your child grow bigger and stronger. Serve Wonder Bread.⁶⁶

Figure 6



An early print ad for the “builds strong bodies” campaign. Note that early ads only claim to build strong bodies 8 ways. It was not until the 1950s did Wonder Bread discover “4 new ‘body-building properties,’” changing the slogan to the current “Builds Strong Bodies in 12 Ways.”

Source: *The Wonder Bread Cookbook*, 7

The “builds strong bodies” campaign marked an important step in the marketing of Wonder Bread. It represented the shift from focus on the housewife to a focus on youth and children. Although the housewife was still targeted, it was mainly in her role as a mother, rather than as a woman or wife. The main focus of their campaign was to show that their bread led to healthy children and in doing so to tap into the vast and ever-growing youth market.

Although “builds strong bodies” was one of Wonder Bread’s longest-lasting and most effective campaigns, it was not the only way that they aimed to reach and influence

⁶⁶ Wonder Bread, “1970s Wonder Bread Commercial,” You Tube, video available online at: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=RxK-1MpMBIk>, accessed 10 November 2007

American youth. Another way that Wonder Bread found its way into young people's hearts and stomach was through school lunches. It has been said that "a sandwich is the center of the American lunch," and Wonder Bread aimed to make themselves the bread of choice for school lunches.⁶⁷

Once again, Wonder Bread marketers used the tried-and-true axioms of convenience and taste to sell their bread as the perfect ingredient in a student's sandwich. "I remember using Wonder Bread for my children's lunches," remarks one woman, "it was just so much easier, and the slices came in the perfect size!"⁶⁸

Another woman comments on the sandwiches her mother would prepare her for lunch,

When I was a child, I didn't like regular sandwiches for lunch. My mother had the solution: she made potato chip sandwiches [consisting of Wonder Bread, mayonnaise, and potato chips] for my school lunch. Forty years later, I still enjoy the chip"wich."⁶⁹

This chip"wich" recipe may seem extremely unhealthy to the nutritionist of today, but it is important to remember that the mother in the story was only doing what society and advertisements had told her was the right thing to do—she was able to get her child to eat lunch, and even if the interior of the sandwich was unhealthy (although there was not yet an extensive amount of science on the health consequences of foods such as potato chips and mayonnaise at that point), the outside of the sandwich consisted of enriched Wonder Bread, which would help her daughter to grow big and strong.

Once Wonder Bread had gotten into school lunches, it benefited greatly from schoolyard social pressures and the tendency of adolescents to want to fit in and conform to their peers. Home economists saw this as an opportunity to "wipe out the growth

⁶⁷ Unwrapped, *Sack Lunch*

⁶⁸ Matilda Weldy, Mother of 7 during the 1950s, Interview by Author, 21 November 2007, Ann Arbor, MI

⁶⁹ Nancy Ostrowski, quoted in: *The Wonder Bread Cookbook*

differences attributable to economic and social causes...by equalizing the quality and quantity available to all children.”⁷⁰ The effect that it had, however, was to lead to the homogenization of the American lunch pail, with white bread leading the way. When children sat at tables together in the lunch room, those with unique or ethnic food from home felt immense social pressure to conform to American food culture, resulting in a generation of processed-food eaters. One strong illustration of this trend is the case of one “Mexican-American mother whose husband had to eat American food all week and came home on weekends yearning for spicy tamales [who] complained that even then her children would not eat them, preferring American food.”⁷¹

Another immigrant, this one Italian, describes his experiences in the American school lunchroom:

At lunch hour I huddle over my lunch pail, for my mother doesn’t wrap my sandwiches in wax paper, and she makes them too large, and the lettuce leaves protrude. Worse, the bread is homemade; not bakery bread, not “American” bread. I make a great fuss because I can’t have mayonnaise and other “American” things.⁷²

Situations such as these, which were repeated throughout America, were to Wonder Bread’s advantage. Although Wonder Bread did create advertisements based on the idea that Wonder Bread was good for lunches, such as a Wonder Bread sandwich holder (see figure 7), when children went home and asked their parents for “‘American’ bread” so that they could fit in with their peers, they acted as free marketing and became a part of a generation that fondly remembers days of Wonder sandwiches and “Wonder Bread Balls” (made by removing the crust and rolling Wonder Bread into a ball).

Figure 7

⁷⁰ Julie L. Lautenschlager, *Food Fight! The Battle Over the American Lunch in Schools and in the Workplace*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2006), 72

⁷¹ Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 29

⁷² John Fante, “Odyssey of a Wop,” *American Mercury*, Vol.30, No. 12 (Sept. 1933), 89-97, quoted in: Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 119



Wonder Bread sandwich lunch container

Source: http://www.broadwaypanhandler.com/broadway/product.asp?s_id=0&dept_id=900&pf_id=wonder_container&

Whereas advertising through the school lunch table was a secondary effect of a social change, Wonder Bread also engaged in direct marketing to children. They partnered with a number of popular television shows, such as *Howdy Doody*, *Annie Oakley* and the *Gene Autry Show*, developing scripts in which the characters used and advertised Wonder Bread on-air as well as creating advertisements that served the interests of both the media and bread companies (see figure 8).⁷³ Wonder Bread also produced toys for children, such as toy trucks and matchbox cars. As years went on, and shows like *Howdy Doody* faded into television history, Wonder Bread teamed with newly-popular media sensations such as *Star Wars* (see figure 9).

Figure 8

⁷³ *The Wonder Bread Cookbook*, 8-9



An advertisement for Wonder Bread and the Annie Oakley show from the 1950s. During this time, Wonder Bread attempted to tap into the growing children's market by joint-advertising ventures with popular TV shows

Figure 9



Wonder Bread and Star Wars: An example of later (circa 1977) advertisements used by Wonder Bread to market to children through connections with popular media.

The advertisements directed at children that have been discussed so far had really been directed at parents through children. They either used the health of children as an

advertised benefit of buying the product, or they marketed, directly and indirectly, to children in hopes that the parents would pressure their parents to purchase Wonder Bread.

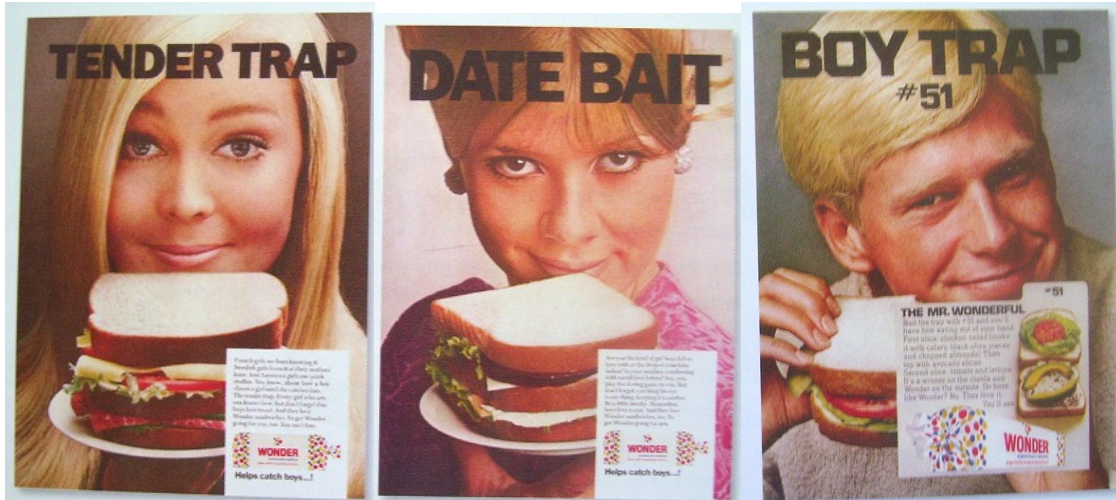
In the years following World War II, however, a completely new consumer demographic began to emerge: the American teenager. One of the main impetuses for the creation and consolidation of the new youth market was the increase in high school attendance that occurred in the first half of the 20th century. During the years 1900 and 1940, high school attendance increased from 11% to 80%.⁷⁴ Marketers flocked to this new group, seeing the advantages in their disposable time and lack of financial responsibilities. Advertisements aimed toward teens focused on concepts such as “going steady,” being “cool,” and budding teenage sexuality.⁷⁵

A prime example of this marketing strategy was Wonder Bread’s “helps catch boys” campaign. These advertisements, marketed especially to teenage girls, portrayed Wonder Bread as “date bait” and a “tender trap.” Recipes were no longer just recipes. They were “boy traps,” meant to help young women catch boys. (See figure 9)

Figure 9

⁷⁴ Spring, 138

⁷⁵ Ibid., 139-40



Images from the Wonder Bread “helps catch boys” campaign, one of the first to recognize the teen demographic as an important market force

Source: *The Wonder Bread Cookbook*, 10-11

Marketing to teenagers was an important revolution in the history of Wonder Bread. The company had transitioned from focusing almost exclusively on marketing to housewives, to marketing to children as a way to reach their parents, and finally to recognizing teenagers as a dynamic and powerful market force. By the end of this transformation, Wonder Bread had become truly ubiquitous in the American food market. In marketing to the baby boom generation and to their parents, Wonder Bread had risen to the top of the food chain, and white bread was everywhere. These were truly the “Wonder years” for the company. All good things must come to an end, however. Interestingly, it would be this same baby-boom generation, once such desired market share, which would begin the downfall of this white, squishy baked good.

The Fall of Wonder Bread

By the end of the 1950s, Wonder Bread had thrived from a number of societal norms and changes, marketed to women and children, and portrayed itself as a nutritious health food, and in doing so had found its way into the hearts and stomachs of the

American public. In 2004, however, Interstate Bakeries, Wonder Bread's parent company, after suffering from flagging sales, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.⁷⁶ Other producers of white industrial bread were suffering greatly as well. In many ways, the fall of Wonder Bread was as reflective of changes in American society as its rise was; these changes resulted in a shift of eating preferences away from white processed bread and towards whole-grains. Steven Laurence Kaplan comments on the multiplicity of stimuli for this shift:

...a number of elements came into play: the prosperity of the [post-war] years; political ecology (moral and nutritional); hippies; the movement in favor of organic agriculture and food; the critique of consumer society in general and productivism in particular; the health concerns associated with the over consumption of fats, refined or "processed" foods, and chemical additives used to complete or replace natural substances;....; a growing disgust with fast food and all of its symbols; old "slumming" reflexes disguised as a real philosophy of postmodern life; the list could go on.⁷⁷

In other words, there were many reasons for the decline in popularity in Wonder Bread. All of these causal factors, however, fed into one main revolution, which would in turn gravely affect the industrial white bread industry: a new American view of nutrition, one which rejected the refined white bread of the previous generation in preference of the new, exotic, and unrefined.

This shift began around the mid-1960s, as America started to change from a modern, materialistic society into a post-material society. The previous decades had been marked by post-war economies (whether post-WWI or post-WWII) and an emphasis on material growth. Happiness meant well-fed children and a house in the suburbs. During the 1960s, however, the American ideal of what signified "happiness" began to change. Non-material ideals of happiness, such as freedom and equality, became ever more

⁷⁶ "Twinkies Makers Files Bankruptcy," *CNN Money.com*, 22 September 2004, available online at: http://money.cnn.com/2004/09/22/news/fortune500/interstate_bankruptcy/

⁷⁷ Kaplan, 102

prevalent as movements and “-isms” such as the civil rights movement, feminism, and the early stages of environmentalism gained strength and popularity. People began seeking more than just *stuff* to make them happy.⁷⁸

Furthermore, events of this time period caused citizens to begin questioning the authority figures in society. This was a time when racial tensions in the country were high, the Vietnam War was heating up, the Watergate scandal was making headlines, and books such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* told tales of the latent environmental damage caused by modern chemicals and technology. A whole generation was coming to age in a time when cracks in America’s white-picket-fence façade were more apparent than ever.

The counterculture had an immense impact on how America viewed its food by bringing into question the nutritional ideals held by the previous generation. The idea of white versus whole wheat bread fit into their re-written commentary extremely well, and helped to reinvent the way that Americans view our grains. In the eyes of the counterculture, white industrial bread was “plastic” and unnatural because it was manufactured with chemicals and additives using machines. Whole-grain bread, on the other hand, was natural and complete. It took time and nurturing, and it could be made with the simplest of ingredients. Eating it made one feel closer to the planet. Furthermore, eating brown bread instead of white bread was a symbolic way to re-connect with impoverished populations and to take a stand against white middle-class supremacy. In the words of Warren Belasco, to the counterculture, Wonder Bread

...symbolized the white flight of the 1950s and 1960s. To make clean bread, bakers removed all colored ingredients (segregation), bleached the remaining flour (suburban school socialization), added strong

⁷⁸ Daniel J. Fiorino, “The environmental movement,” In class presentation: *The Formulation and Implementation of Environmental Policy*, American University, 13 September 2007

preservatives and stabilizers (law enforcement). Brown bread had shorter life spans, but at their peak seemed suffused with innate character. The color contrast externalized white radical's estrangement from sanitized suburban life.⁷⁹

In other words, eating brown bread was not just a way to ease hunger; it was a deliberate political act.

Although some young people might think that everyone in the 1960s wore bell bottoms, lived in communes, and attended peace rallies, this presumption is far from the truth. In fact, the counter culture did not make up the majority of Americans at the time. How, then, did they have such a great impact on the food that we eat? A great deal of their influence had to do with the simple fact that they dared to question the norms and to do something about it. This called into question long-held norms and opened others up to the idea of trying something new. It was not through the radical acts of the counter culture, but rather through the assimilation of their influences into the consciousness of main stream society, that would lead to the descent of Wonder Bread.

This reexamination and opening to new ideas greatly impacted the food industry. First of all, eaters gradually became open to new foods and new ideas. The fact that this new willingness to explore coincided with a general opening up of new markets and expansion of global trade only encouraged this expansion of the American diet. Ethnic foods gained popularity, promoted by both radical thinkers such as Frances Moore Lappé and mainstream personalities such as Julia Child. As these forces worked together, Americans were opened up to a whole new realm of cuisines. Foods that never would have appeared in American supermarkets before, such as cuscus, tofu, and hummus took their place on the shelf alongside Jell-O and Wonder Bread.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Belasco

⁸⁰ Jeremy Iggers, *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex, and the Hunger for Meaning*, (New York: Basic Books, 1996)

In addition to the expanding food choices available to American consumers, this period in time brought a new paradigm of nutrition to the American diet. Americans transitioned away from the “newer nutrition” ideal which had had so much influence in the first half of the century towards what Warren Belasco has called “negative nutrition” Whereas newer nutrition was concerned with eating more of what was good for you, negative nutrition promoted eating *less* of what was bad for you.⁸¹ In its original context, as part of the counter culture movement, it meant eliminating additives, chemicals, refined foods, and other “plastic” foods from diets. As negative nutrition became more mainstream it also became less extreme, but the idea of limiting consumption was still a radical departure from the previously held beliefs of newer nutrition.

This was not an easy change for most steak-and-potato-loving Americans. However, as increasing numbers of scientific studies began to link diet with diseases such as heart disease and stroke, more and more people gave credence to the idea of limiting things like fat, cholesterol, and sugar. Furthermore, the counter culture and negative nutrition led to changing ideals of women’s beauty; Marilyn Monroe, the sex-symbol of the 1950s was 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighed 120 pounds, whereas late-1960s fashion icon Twiggy was 5 feet 7 inches and weighed only 90 pounds.⁸² These new views of beauty and health led a large number of Americans to try to eliminate unhealthy foods from their diet and try to loose weight. They also helped secure negative nutrition’s place in mainstream American society. Negative nutrition has persisted into the current time. It is the underlying basis for nutrition fads such as The South Beach Diet, as well as a multi-million dollar health food industry.

⁸¹ Belasco, 175-176

⁸² “Fast Facts,” MarilynMonroe.com, available online at: <http://www.marilynmonroe.com/about/facts.html>, accessed 8 December 2007, Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 240

Where did Wonder Bread fit into this new paradigm of health, dieting, and eating less of what was bad for you? The simple answer, and the explanation to why Wonder Bread has fallen from its pedestal in the American diet, is that it did not. Wonder Bread, which had so effectively exploited and marketed to social trends in the first half of the twentieth century, failed to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the growing health/natural foods market. While other brands were diversifying and shaping their images to fit this new consumer demand, Wonder Bread allowed their image to stagnate. It was a poor decision on behalf of the company, and would ultimately lead to the bankruptcy of the brand

To be fair, Wonder Bread had the deck stacked against it. It was one of the iconic “white” foods that the counter culture had targeted as a prime example with what was wrong with American foods. However, instead of reinventing themselves in response to market pressure, Wonder Bread chose the path of nostalgia. Asserting that Wonder Bread was “made of memories,” the “Remember the Wonder” TV campaign featured middle age men and women reminiscing, saying things like “I remember Wonder Bread like my first bike ride...my superhero lunch box...my first pop fly.”⁸³ These advertisements, like the TV show *Happy Days*, attempted to appeal to Americans by reminding them of a simpler time. What they failed to do, however, was to take into account that while the baby boomers may enjoy reminiscing about the past, they live in a present in which increasingly large numbers of their generation are dealing with the consequences of diet-related problems such as obesity and high cholesterol—a present that simply does not have room for refined white bread.

⁸³ “Remember the Wonder Campaign Commercial,” Interstate Bakeries, inc., 1996, Available online at: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=CJ3I-DEzYu4>, accessed 24 November 2007

At the turn of the 21st century, one of these health trends caused a great negative impact on the entire bread industry, but white processed bread in particular. Low-carbohydrate diets, such as the Atkins Diet and the South Beach Diet turned the food pyramid quite literally upside down, telling people that weight loss could be achieved by lowering their intake of carbohydrates. These trends have greatly impacted the baked good industry, and falls in food use of wheat during the first years of the 21st century were explained by the FDA as being caused by these “changes in diets.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, if dieters were going to eat carbohydrates, whole grains were OK, but refined flour was to be avoided at all cost. Wonder Bread had no place in the world of South Beach and Atkins.

Changes in science also condemned Wonder Bread. Throughout the second half of the century, nutritionists came to realize that flour refinement did not just remove vitamins and minerals from the flour. They discovered, for instance, the importance of fiber (much of which the flour refinement process removed) in aiding digestion and lowering cholesterol. Furthermore, the scientific community no longer accepted everything that the big food processors said as true. For example, when Wonder Bread tried to introduce a new campaign in 2002 in which “Professor Wonder” told moms that the calcium in Wonder Bread would help to not only build strong bones, but also help their children to think faster, the federal Trade Commission required them to take the ads off the market, citing insufficient evidence for their claims.⁸⁵

Finally, the influx of new flavors and influences into the American food market has caused a change in American food preferences. A cultural exchange of food is

⁸⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, *Wheat Situation and Outlook Yearbook*, (Washington, DC, 2003)

⁸⁵ Federal Trade Commission, *Docket No. C-4042 in the Matter of Interstate Bakeries Inc.*, (Washington, DC, 2002)

occurring, and white bread, previously regaled for its bland flavor, is being passed over by shoppers in favor of more exotic and flavorful breads. Artisan baker Gerard Grabowski notes that, while some of his customers choose his whole-wheat, organic, traditional breads for health, environmental, or political reasons, some of them are just “foodies who want to get their loaf of olive parmesan bread and take it home to enjoy with a nice glass of Chianti.”⁸⁶ These consumers are important to note because, while diet and health trends come and go relatively regularly, changing taste patterns tend to be more long-lasting, and furthermore show that the change in bread preferences has moved from the extreme, faddist consumers towards the middle-ground.

CONCLUSION

Wonder Bread is more than a source of nourishment and something to make a sandwich on; it is, for better or for worse, a 20th century American icon, so much so that a *Washington Post* reporter once commented, “The Portuguese have massa sovada bread. The Greeks have tsoureke...But all of America...has Wonder Bread.”⁸⁷ By tracing the rise and fall of Wonder Bread, it is possible to learn more about this foodstuff, as well as more about our own culture. The rise of Wonder Bread was caused by a combination of scientific and technological discoveries that made the manufacture and preservation of white bread feasible, cultural tendencies and gender relations that favored white industrial bread as well as convenience foods, and by marketers who skillfully responded to and exploited these scientific and cultural changes. The fall of Wonder Bread came about when these same forces of science and culture began to favor a wider variety of tastes and

⁸⁶ Grabowski, 2007

⁸⁷ Walt Harrington, quoted in” *The Wonder Bread Cookbook*, 11

foods, in particular when a preference change occurred in favor of whole grains, and by the failure of the company to adequately respond to these new market dynamics.

This analysis begs the question: what is the future of Wonder Bread? The answer to this quandary cannot be predicted at this time; it depends on the path that the Interstate Bakery Corporation chooses to follow. If they begin responding to new market dynamics, making real and significant changes such as introduction of healthier whole-grain breads with less additives and preservatives or diversification to include other baked goods such as wraps and healthy snacks, the future could be positive for Wonder Bread. If they continue to make only cosmetic changes (such as their introduction of “whole wheat white” bread, which has the same bland flavor as classic Wonder but a slightly higher percentage of whole grains), or to rely on nostalgia as their main form of marketing, Wonder Bread could be painting themselves into the corner of the food industry reserved for foods such as Spam and Moon Pies, foods that have historical value, but which few see as legitimate parts of a healthy diet.

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