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NONFICTION; Crash Diet

By SADIE STEIN

A SQUARE MEAL

A Culinary History of the Great Depression

By Jane Ziegelman and Andrew Coe

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During his presidential campaign of 1928, Herbert Hoover declared that the United States was “nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land.” The country was giddy with postwar prosperity, and the country’s mood was reflected on America’s dinner tables. As people flocked to cities and moved to small apartments, delicatessens, cafeterias and other purveyors of grab-and-go food began to proliferate. In rural communities, efficiency experts encouraged farm wives to lighten their loads with a range of new conveniences. When President Hoover and his wife, Lou, arrived in the White House, they set a regal tone, presiding over elaborate multicourse banquets and requiring dinner jackets even en famille.

The Depression brought all that to an end. And as Jane Ziegelman and Andrew Coe show in their engaging and often moving cultural history, “A Square Meal,” those years also changed the way America thought about food. We are what we eat — or in the case of the Depression, didn’t.

As in other respects, the gastronomic effects of Black Tuesday were not immediate. Warring reports and “slippery” statistics made the full impact of the stock market crash hard to gauge, and long into the crisis, the Hoover administration remained staunchly optimistic. In New York, increased numbers of people in the city’s bread lines were an early bellwether. The institution of the bread line dated back to the turn of the 20th century, when tourists would journey to the Bowery to gawk at the seasonal workers who queued up for “promenade breakfasts” of dry bread and coffee in the winter months. The official city charity — the dreaded “Muni” — imposed punitive “work tests” on its clientele and was regarded as a last resort. However, even the private bread lines carried a distinct whiff of the moralistic English poor laws: to ensure that only the most desperate benefited, officials generally distributed these meager meals in the middle of the night.

In the spring of 1930, the bread lines did not disperse as usual. They grew. As increasing numbers of urban workers were laid off and agricultural laborers began flooding the city in search of employment, makeshift bread lines popped up all over New York; by 1931 they were serving some 85,000 meals a day. The socialite Marian Spore handed out Y.M.C.A. meal tickets on the Bowery, while William Randolph Hearst funded — and publicized — two Army trucks serving hungry men sandwiches and crullers.

Hoover and his advisers had an unshakable faith in the spirit of private philanthropy and a constitutional aversion to any form of direct relief. But as the months passed and the waves of financial collapse reached farther, it became clear to city administrators that a more organized system was needed. The bread lines, with their dubious nutritional standards and uncertain supplies, had never been intended as more than a stopgap. On the right, critics charged that the ready food was making able men soft and encouraging freeloaders to flood the city. Social workers complained that amateurish handouts diverted funds from more organized efforts. Because it was socially unacceptable for young women to patronize bread lines, “business girls” often went hungry.

The suffering was not, of course, limited to the cities. Despite Hoover’s 1931 claim that “nobody is actually starving,” the country was desperately hungry. As the Depression deepened, for most Americans the question became not whether one suffered, but in what way. Ziegelman and Coe draw on a range of primary sources to produce grim pictures of subsistence diets across the country. An Arkansas widow and her seven children were found by a relief worker to have little more than “a pint of flour and a few scraps of chicken bones” in the larder; out-of-work West Virginia coal miners were limited to “potatoes, bread, beans, oleomargarine.” In the Dust Bowl, families “pared back their daily diet to the bare minimum of flour, lard and potatoes,” often supplemented by Russian thistle — better known as tumbleweed. Pellagra, rickets and other diseases of malnutrition were rampant. The effects of vitamin deficiency could be felt into the war years, when a startling number of young draftees failed their physicals.

Today, the official responses can seem almost unbelievably callous. Despite Hoover’s urging, the Red Cross refused to provide direct food aid to starving Appalachian communities, while in 1932 the chief statistician of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company opined that “as a people, we are given normally to overfeeding I would not be surprised if, under the present conditions of enforced moderation, many have enjoyed better health than ever before.”

Inevitably, and increasingly, local governments were forced to intervene. Often, administrators wielded their power to enforce local prejudice: Black sharecroppers — already living at a bare subsistence level — were routinely given fewer rations than their white counterparts and illegally forced to do street repairs or perform other work tests. In Tennessee, “the better farmers” in the county seats regarded the famine as a natural means of culling the “more or less subhuman” hill folk; a New Jersey administrator declared that “Eyetalians” didn’t need meat.

Indeed, what is most striking about Ziegelman and Coe’s account is the clash of ideology and reality. Theories were tested in real time for the highest imaginable stakes, whose failures exacted an immediate human toll. Hoover had been by all accounts an energetic and often effective public servant. As president, he found himself paralyzed by his own aversion to what he considered fundamentally un-American values. While Franklin Roosevelt also harbored grave reservations about the role of welfare, he proved more adaptable. Even if his programs were hit-or-miss, he recognized the desperate necessity of experimentation.

Among the few real winners of the Depression, from a gastronomic perspective, were the home economists — the mostly female corps of domestic scientists, recipe testers, efficiency experts and nutritionists who sought to educate America’s housewives. This was their shining moment, and the cascade of federally funded classes, recipe pamphlets, dietary recommendations and public-service positions elevated the domestic sciences to national importance. Eleanor Roosevelt was a zealous

proponent of scientific eating and, in concert with her housekeeper, Henrietta Nesbitt, kept the sybaritic president on a dreary austerity diet of, among other things, watery soup and prune pudding.

Since the beginning of the century, there had been a move toward greater scientific purpose in eating; now, with the country in desperate need of nutrition and a sweeping new school lunch program, home economists had an unprecedented opportunity to change America's attitude toward food. While much of this work was both necessary and useful, it's also true that this moment was crucial in drawing a line between pleasure and nutrition. Even when kitchen advice was dispensed by a friendly mascot named Aunt Sammy (presumably Uncle Sam's thrifty wife), emphasis was less on enjoyment — dismissed as "flavor satisfaction" — than on economy, the provision of vitamins and something derived from one of "the hardest-working adjectives in American culinary history": wholesomeness. And citizenship. In the interests of homogenization, immigrant cuisine was discouraged in favor of "foods found in the ordinary American dietary." This translated to a great deal of milk, oceans of white sauce and a taste for white bread.

Despite its vast scope, "A Square Meal" is often heartbreaking in its human specifics. An earnestly planned New York school lunch menu, the enormous appetite of a hungry man at a New Jersey transients' camp or a grimly inventive recipe for liver loaf can move the reader to tears. Less often, the shifts in focus can prove distracting, as when the perspective moves from a general survey of the state of federal aid to the narrow lens of a Michigan social worker. It is not always entirely clear what Ziegelman and Coe mean for us to take away from their eloquent work of historical summation. Then again, that may be a good thing. The larger question of America's shifting attitudes toward federal aid is a prodigious topic to digest. And the universal experience of eating is a wholesome place to start.

PHOTO: Dinner during wheat harvest time, central Ohio, 1938. (PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN SHAHN/U.S. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION, VIA THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)