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PUSHING THE PROTESTANT CULINARY AGENDA IN DEPRESSION ERA AMERICA

Brittany M. Millidge | Research Seminar in History: 400W | Faculty Mentor: Dr. Bridget Chesterton

Abstract: *One would think that America, a nation largely consisting of immigrants with diverse backgrounds and traditions, would see a melting pot of cultural tastes reflected in its national diet. Instead, one of the foremost criticisms of the modern American diet is its lack of flavor and diversity. By analyzing primary sources such as government documents, cookbooks, recipes, and journals, the research below seeks to identify the origin of the American diet as we know it today. In doing so, connections are established between nutrition, politics, immigration, and religion. These factors all played a role in influencing the US government in establishing national dietary recommendations, based on Protestant theology, aimed at Americanizing the immigrant population during the Great Depression.*

Introduction & Background

In 1922, the book titled *Household Management* was distributed to social workers hired to assimilate America's immigrant population. The book's author, Florence Nesbitt offered advice on how to "spread the gospel of right living, a translation of the principals of underlying nutrition and other sciences connected with homemaking".¹ Nesbitt reiterated the belief that the immigrant routine of poor moral habits were reflecting on the rest of American society. It was therefore an imperative patriotic duty to teach the supposedly ignorant immigrant population the "American way." Nesbitt was not the first to establish a connection between morality, nutrition, and patriotism in America. Such rhetoric can be traced back to Protestant ministers during the late nineteenth century, who preached the ideals of self-depravation in order to live a wholesome life in the eyes of God. Such teachings went on to shape the collective moral customs that would affirm Anglo-Saxon superiority over a nation full of newly arrived immigrants, well into the twentieth century. Threatened by foreign, Catholic, cultures that were perceived to be destroying the foundations of self-governance and ethical behavior in America, anti-immigration movements swept across the nation. Every aspect of immigrant life was criticized, most notably, their culinary traditions, which seemingly centered around gluttony and the consumption of stimulants such as coffee, spices, and alcohol. Such stimulants were believed to encourage sinful behavior - prostitution and infidelity - that would lead to the imminent breakdown of American society. During the height of national interest in the immigrant diet, the stock market crash of 1929 served to exacerbate the plight of the immigrant population, as unskilled workers were often the first to lose their jobs. As the shadow of starvation grew across the country, the issue of food, morality, and assimilation was taken on by the US government. The Great Depression offered administrative officials the opportunity to take on a conscious role in deciding what Americans ate. Creating a nationalized diet that held true to self-discipline and morality as taught by Protestant theology, the US government surreptitiously used the Great Depression as a means to Americanize the immigrant population and condone their consumption of flavor-centric foodstuffs.

Protestant Morality

Ministers in the late 1800s, most notably, a man by the name of Sylvester Graham, preached the Puritan ideals of maintaining a healthy body and soul void of earthly pleasures to please God through self-discipline. While further studying the effects of religious self-deprivation on health and morality, Graham came to the conclusion that the consumption of spicy foods served to overstimulate the body, throwing it out of balance, leading to the wicked behaviors afflicting American society such as indulgence, prostitution, alcoholism, and gambling.² Graham also viewed the spread of disease in America as a punishment from God for not fulfilling the divine covenant made with the Puritans to create an example of a self-governing, moral society. Thus, in the eyes of Graham, those who wished for the success of American society had to practice Protestant principals. The topic of food, nationalism, and faith became a mainstream discussion in religious circles, and Protestant church took on the responsibility to "guard what has been won by the Protestant emphasis upon freedom, and to work out the appropriate forms in which freedom may express itself in unity."³

The Foreign Threat

Graham's rhetoric for the promotion of Protestant morals became the grounds for American-born Anglo-Saxon superiority beginning in the 1840s, when waves of Catholic immigrants arrived in the United States seeking employment. The Catholic allegiance to the Vatican was viewed as not only a moral defect, but an indicator of low intelligence as well. Their faith in the authoritarian religion made Anglo-Saxon's suspicious of the immigrants' ability to be productive members of American society, as loyalty to the pope was suspected to severely hinder their ability to self-govern. Immigrants were often the subject of ridicule for their "backward" ways of living.⁴ While all ethnic groups were considered inferior, there was no European immigrant group as discriminated against as the Italians. The most scrutinized aspect of the Italian immigrant life was, by far, their culinary tastes. Their appetite for heavily spiced food and drinking alcohol with meals further brought into question their morality. Despite Italian immigrants being largely impoverished, their "overindulgent" celebrations, close-knit communities and extravagant spending on native foodstuffs made it appear to Anglo-Saxons that they enjoyed their lifestyles and had no desire or intention of becoming Americanized.⁵



Placing Blame

In the midst of the attention brought to the dietary practices of immigrants, social workers became continuous critics of the immigrant lifestyle. Social workers believed, like Graham, that the source of all of the problems afflicting the immigrant population, including disease and malnutrition, were not the results of poverty, but rather the results of their impulsive dietary practices and ignorance about domesticity. Teaching professionals also laid blame on immigrant mothers, whom they considered to be responsible for the deteriorating health of their children. Teachers emphasized the belief that the immigrant allowance of adolescent children to consume coffee, alcohol, and spiced food led to not only disease, but also to the creation of angry, ill-tempered children incapable of learning in the classroom. Immigrant parents who failed to provide their children with the necessary nutrition to foster their moral and intellectual development were the reason for the difficulties in assimilating foreign-born students into American society. Again, the inability to provide for their children was not viewed as a result of the poverty they endured at the hands of discrimination, but rather their religious turpitude and reluctance to exercise American principals.⁶

Government Action

While Catholic immigrants had been discriminated against since their arrival in America, the Great Depression brought the topic of their culinary practices into the spotlight. Unskilled immigrants were hit hardest by unemployment, and despite being the biggest recipients of public aid, children remained malnourished. The US government sought the advice of social reformers, teachers, and nutritionists, who had been preaching the idea that the immigrant diet was an imminent threat to the United States since the mid-1800s. Working in conjunction with the aforementioned food reformers to create a campaign to encourage moral behavior through eating, and the assimilation of immigrants through their culinary practices, the US government confirmed the belief that American values and Protestant values were one in the same.⁷



Plan for Moral Assimilation Through Culinary Practices

Create dietary recommendations that fall in line with moral principals

Use pop culture to make "moral dieting" en vogue by launching government sponsored radio talk shows & cookbooks

Adhering to "American diet" equated to higher social status, makes immigrants question their own consumption

Integrate American culinary practices into public schools

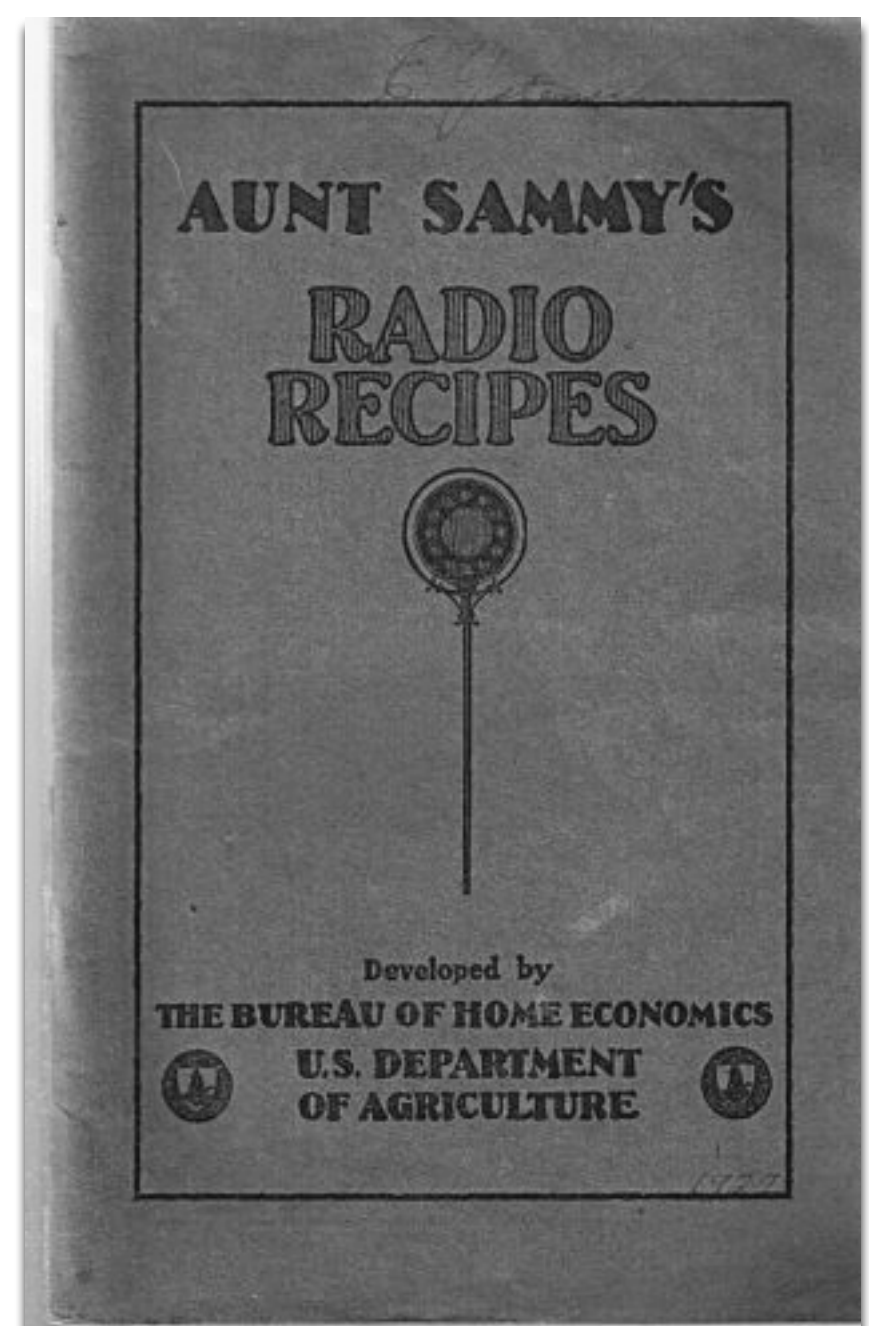
While initially established before the Depression, school lunch programs now focus on adhering to US dietary recommendations, thus creating "moral" citizens

Nutrition becomes core aspect of curriculum, and home economics class teaches females how to cook and raise children the "American way"

Social Workers and Child Protective Services

Social workers regularly and unfairly inspect the homes of immigrant families, providing demonstrations on how to care for children

Threaten to remove children from immigrant families and place into foster homes if nutritional advice is ignored



References

¹ Florence Nesbitt, *Household Management* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1918).
² Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 2004), 24.
³ Kyla Tompkins, "Sylvester Graham's Imperial Dietetics," *Gastronomica* 9, no.1 (2007): 50-60.

⁴ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 69.
⁵ Florence Nesbitt, *Household Management* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1918), 104.
⁶ Simone Cinotto, *The Italian American Table: Food Family and Community in New York City* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 80.

⁷ Ziegelman, Jane and Coe, Andrew, *A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016).

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