August 2017

Pushing the Protestant Culinary Agenda in Depression Era America

Brittany M. Millidge

Buffalo State College, milldmb01@mail.buffalostate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/exposition

Part of the Catholic Studies Commons, Christianity Commons, Cultural History Commons, Food Studies Commons, Intellectual History Commons, Other History Commons, Political History Commons, Public History Commons, Social History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

Millidge, Brittany M. (2017) "Pushing the Protestant Culinary Agenda in Depression Era America," The Exposition: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/exposition/vol4/iss1/1

This Poster is brought to you for free and open access by the History and Social Studies Education at Digital Commons at Buffalo State. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Exposition by an authorized editor of Digital Commons at Buffalo State. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@buffalostate.edu.
**Introduction & Background**

In 1922, the book titled *Household Management* was distributed to social workers hired to assimilate America’s immigrant population. The books author, Florence Nesbitt offered advice on how to “spread the gospel of right living, a translation of the principles 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-deprivation 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-government and ethical behavior in America, anti-immigration movements swept across the nation. Every aspect of immigrant life was criticized, most notably, their customs that would affirm Anglo-Saxon superiority over a nation full of newly arrived immigrants, well into the twentieth century. Nesbitt's book aimed 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 affecting 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, the efficacy 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.”

**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 work. The Catholic 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 insufficiency and reluctance to exercise American principles.3

**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.4

**Plan for Moral Assimilation Through Culinary Practices**

- **Create dietary recommendations that fall in line with moral principals**
- **Integrate American culinary practices into public schools**
- **Social Workers and Child Protective Services**
- **Use pop culture to make "moral dining" en vogue by launching government sponsored radio talk shows & cookbooks**
- **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 so children can embrace the “American way”**
- **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**


**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.