



J. B. KENDRICK JR.
Vice President
Agricultural Sciences
Director, Agricultural
Experiment Station
University of
California

Hard Tomatoes and Hardy Myths

Now that a fairly significant proportion of the population has rejected the idea that the world is flat, it may be a good time to examine some other widely held myths more closely related to the day-to-day welfare of humanity. A myth, according to one of Webster's definitions, is "an ill-founded belief held uncritically especially by an interested group."

An adequate food supply is generally conceded to be related, or even indispensable, to human welfare; and there is a growing body of mythology concerning our food supply which seems to fit Mr. Webster's definition. Its general theme is that those responsible for our food supply, including the agricultural scientists in the land-grant universities, have devised a system to drench soil and crop plants and embalm meat animals with harmful chemicals later reinforced by a deadly array of additives and preservatives.

All of this provides us with food that is tasteless, expensive, poisonous and nutritionally deficient, and best exemplified by the tomato which has been designed with the performance characteristics and taste of a tennis ball. The motivation behind this seemingly irrational expenditure of costly materials, energy, time, and technology is not made clear but two obvious explanations can be inferred: either farmers and processors have a charitable desire to enrich the chemical industry or they are driven by a malevolent or suicidal compulsion to poison the population and reduce the demand for their products.

The latter may be the answer because it is consistent with other parts of the mythology such as the menace-of-mechanization myth. The American farmer could have retained the horse, the hoe and the hand scythe, but for perverse reasons he opted for less drudgery and more efficiency. The American agricultural scientist is not accused of inventing the combustion engine but he is accused of

developing all manner of machines and technology designed to save labor, accelerate production, and provide excessive profits for corporate agriculture.

These misguided choices, the "reasoning" goes, are responsible for rural unemployment and flight to the city, decay of our central cities, poverty, burgeoning welfare, juvenile delinquency, and crime in the streets. Scientific agriculture is held responsible for all this, for the growth of farms that are too large, and for the demise of a pastoral, utopian way of life that never existed except in the unreal world of Christmas card and calendar art.

The mystery is not that these charges and variations thereof are heard, read, and repeated, but that they are believed. It is perhaps understandable that those unfamiliar with land-grant universities could believe responsible scientists and faculty members to be servile "hand-maidens" of industry — or unfamiliar with the fact that the findings of publicly supported agricultural research are available for anyone to use. It is quite possible for the urban citizen to be unaware of the distinction between the tough-skinned tomato — designed for mechanical harvesting and used for ketchup and sauces — and the fresh market tomato which is picked by hand.

But to the people who believe the world is round, not flat, it must be apparent that millions of tons of food have been and are being consumed without illness and death attributable to methods of American scientific agriculture.

It must be apparent to anyone who reads, listens, or travels that our system of agricultural production has provided us with a variety and abundance of food at a relative cost that is the envy of most of the world; that the system is able to produce a surplus that helps sustain a growing number of nations whose "pastoral" agricultural methods cannot meet their

needs; that that system has been the final bulwark against hunger and starvation for more than one country on more than one occasion.

It is difficult to understand why it is acceptable for other sectors of society to participate in the industrial and technological revolution, but not for agriculture. The "good old days" of horsepower might be more "pastoral," but there is no way, biologically, to produce in the next two decades the 60 million horses needed to maintain our present level of production, and it would be a setback to lose the estimated 180 million acres of farmland required to feed them. It would be a problem, too, to find the five million man-days of hand labor required to harvest California's five million-ton tomato crop. That kind of workforce is unavailable, not so much because the *machine* drove labor from the farm, but because labor generally preferred the shorter work-week and benefits of city dwelling to the dawn-to-dusk drudgery of the farm.

There is no outcry to dismantle the large automobile company and return to the "small family auto plant." But at a time when growth in food production is economically and socially imperative there is a growing illusion that we must turn back the clock on our efficient agricultural system, and a growing mistrust of the methods and the products of that system. The outcry is not harmless. Our enviable economic, and nutritional, status was built on hard-won scientific and technological developments. These advances and many more — developed through research — will be needed to deal with the complex problems ahead. Public policy, and research funding, are affected by opinions, sentiments, and fears in the public mind, legislative halls, and governmental agencies. Simplistic solutions and distrust of science can only result in losses for the farmer, the consuming public and the hungry world.