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## OUR CLIENT "THE CONSUMER"

Man is primarily a food-gathering animal. His preoccupation with the acquisition of food has evolved through time from an all-consuming occupation to a relatively easy task for the more favored members of the human race. In a period of renewed interest in food, diet, and consumer affairs, the Bicentennial year is an appropriate time to look at our food situation and compare our American menu, past and present.

Two hundred years ago an adequate diet in this country was often a matter of chance. The early settlers in America weren't concerned about calories or cholesterol. Their day-to-day concern was not *what* to eat but how to keep the larder stocked. And to do that, the average family had to rely on its own efforts and resources. The menu often was limited to what crops they could grow, what livestock they could raise, what game, fish, or berries were available. If there was variety in the menu, it was imposed by variations in the weather and the season, by the family's abilities in hunting and fishing, or perhaps by the inclination of a turkey or a possum or a deer to come within range that particular day.

Now, only 200 years later we can hardly imagine the hardships our ancestors endured in feeding themselves. Today an adequate diet for the average family is not a matter of chance but of choice—choice among literally thousands of foods of uniform quality available in the nearest supermarket. Today's consumer can enjoy strawberries and lettuce in December, apples—without worms—

in February, fresh meat the year around, and, in or out of season, choose from a mind-boggling variety of food products unrivaled anywhere in the world.

Another difference today is in the ease with which the larder can be replenished. The modern "provider" is spared not only the time and effort required to find and shoot the turkey but also the task of plucking it. In his or her air-conditioned supermarket, the oranges are squeezed, the beans are cut, the peas de-podded and the next meal or the next week's supply can be picked up in frozen, concentrated, dehydrated, canned, ready-mixed, ready-to-serve or heat-and-serve form. Convenience has been added to abundance.

Another difference—and one that receives more attention—is the cost of food today. All those processes that bring emancipation from long hours of food procurement and kitchen drudgery are an added cost, but they also produce added value in convenience and time and energy saved for other pursuits. When we complain about the price of steak or milk we seldom remember that our income is much higher in 1976 than it ever was before. In 1890 round steak was 12 cents a pound and a quart of milk was 7 cents. But prices then also were correlated to income. Then a factory worker spent 60 hours a week at 20 cents an hour to secure an adequate income. Today our food costs are lower relative to income than at any time or anywhere else in the world. In just 50 years we have reduced this cost by almost 50 percent.

From the time when almost everyone met his basic survival needs through subsistence farming, we have progressed to the present variety and abundance through the development of a highly technical and enormously productive food system. The revolution in food *production* has also been matched by progress in its *preservation*. We now enjoy foods from any source, from any distance, at any season, because we have progressed from the home use of brine and smoke to effective systems of protection, preservation, packing and transport.

Our diet and our lifestyle have been transformed because we have sought new ways to make nature work for us. Scientific, agricultural and food research has freed us from problems of survival and food preparation and done wonders for the American menu. What has been accomplished has been one of the most successful, but little recognized, consumer movements the world has ever known. It must be admitted that consumer benefits have evolved largely as a by-product of the free enterprise system and the necessity for agriculture to remain economically viable in the face of rising costs. But nevertheless, the final participant in the food complex system—the consumer—is the one who benefits most.

Since the agricultural and food environment continues to be plagued with rising costs and complexities, those of us in the agricultural sciences have our work laid out for us in order to keep the consumer's dollar as effective as possible at the supermarket.