

CHAPTER I

THE FEEDING OF THE NATION

THE feeding of the nation has been left almost wholly to chance and to unorganized, uncontrolled agencies. Production and distribution have been permitted to evolve from the conditions of a half-century ago into the highly complex relationships of a whole nation, if not the entire world, with but little official concern for either the producer at one end of the line or the consumer at the other.

Before the coming of great cities each community sufficed for itself. The marketmen or local grocer bartered for food with the neighboring farmer, and the laws of demand and supply regulated production and kept prices at a reasonable figure. This was the condition up to a few years ago.

Cities grew. The nation became a market. The Northwest entered into competition with New England, and California and Florida with the local truck-garden. The steamship widened the market into the world. Canada and the American Northwest, Russia, Australia, and South America produced for the industrial workers of the world, and the prices of cereal and meat products were fixed in London and Liverpool. Refrigerator-cars brought

the fruits and vegetables of Florida and California closer to New York than the near-by farm of earlier generations, while the cold-storage plants and terminal warehouses made it possible for perishable commodities to be held for months or years for their ultimate market.

Prices were fixed not only by a world market but by an all-the-year-around market. The price of butter and eggs in April was fixed in the previous November, just as the price of meat and growing crops was fixed during the harvesting season.

With all these revolutionary changes, with the refrigeration devices and the means for placing the products of the world upon the breakfast-table, the control of a multitude of agencies as well as the production and distribution of food was left to the anarchistic, chaotic direction of thousands of individuals, each of whom was thinking only of maximum profit to himself rather than of the service he was performing for the nation.

Only in a few countries—notably, Australia, Denmark, and Germany—has the control of food been viewed as a matter of government concern or subjected to a unity of direction in the interest of the producer and the consumer. And these countries have worked out means for social control of food in the interest of the nation. In most of the other countries, and in America in particular, the subject has been left to the unregulated license, not of the

producer, not of the consumer, but of the distributing agencies which have it in their power to control not only prices but production as well. Unregulated private banking and usury have contributed still further to the disorganization which prevails, while no official concern has been shown for the economic foundations of agriculture, the relation of the people to the land.

The extent to which this whole subject of the feeding of a people has been neglected is indicated by a comparison with finance or industry. To-day the credit of America is organized in every detail. The control of our monetary resources has been so mobilized that it is under the direction of comparatively few men, subject to regulation by the Federal Reserve act. The weekly deposits of the wage-earner in a distant mining-camp are effective for credit purposes in distant China or South America as soon as they are deposited. The total resources of a bank in a farming community are readily mobilized for a two-billion-dollar loan through the district reserve cities, and from them to New York. The credit resources of the country are known, as are the liabilities. Just as the tiny stream emerging from the mountain slopes of Colorado ultimately finds its way to the Gulf of Mexico, so every dollar in every bank in America is potentially organized for the doing of the work of America every moment of time. Yet credit is merely an agent, an agent for production.

And one of its primary purposes is the feeding of the people and provision for their wants.

That which is true of credit is true of many industries as well. The great steel corporations are self-contained industries reaching out to different sections of the country, or even to distant lands, for the more efficient performance of their functions. These corporations own great iron-ore deposits in Minnesota and northern Michigan, in Cuba, and in other foreign parts. They own their own coal-fields and coking plants. They own natural-gas fields and limestone quarries. They own great fleets of vessels which ply upon the Great Lakes, while thousands of miles of railroad have become integral parts of their industrial processes. The Standard Oil Company is a world-wide agency. It owns oil-fields not only in America and Mexico, but in Russia, Roumania, and, in fact, all over the world. It owns fleets of sailing vessels, pipe-lines, and oil-tank cars; it manufactures almost everything that it uses in connection with its activities. It is far more than a self-contained industry. It owns or indirectly controls banks, trust companies, and hundreds of related industries. The American Tobacco Company reaches from the tobacco plantations of the United States and Turkey to its distributing agency in almost every city in the land. The United States Rubber Company owns rubber-plantations, while the sugar-refineries own sugar-plantations in Cuba,

Hawaii, and elsewhere. Every great industry, in fact, is organized and integrated. It has eliminated one profit-taking intermediary after another between the soil and the consumer. It acts with a single mind. It knows from day to day the raw materials available, and through its nation-wide or world-wide statistical bureau it knows the fluctuations in demand. Financial knowledge and industrial knowledge have been mobilized in a hundred great private corporations, and their control has been so concentrated that all of the more important industrial activities of America are susceptible of control from half a dozen great offices, for the most part situated in New York.

Yet, while this perfection has been achieved in banking, transportation, and industry, the greatest concern of all, the feeding of the people, is wholly unorganized, wholly disintegrated, and up to the present time has not even been studied from the point of view of the producer and the consumer. It is hardly too much to say that the feeding of the people is primarily under the control of the distributing and credit agencies of the nation, which, guided only by the desire for private profit, determine, indirectly at least, how much shall be produced, how much shall be paid for the labor of those who feed America, as well as the price that the ultimate consumer shall pay. And springing from the private control of this, the most important need

of the nation, many consequences have followed, consequences which are directly traceable to the neglect by the nation of fundamental economic conditions which must coexist if sufficient food is produced on the one hand and sufficient food is consumed on the other.

It is true, the Federal Government has elevated agriculture to a place in the cabinet. Congress appropriates annually over \$20,000,000 for the maintenance of the Department of Agriculture. It gathers information; it encourages production; it advises the farmer about soil, planting, and the care of his farm; it studies soils and the breeding of cattle; it distributes market reports to aid him in the sale of his produce. Nearly all of our States, too, maintain agricultural colleges for the training of boys and girls in scientific agriculture. They teach dairying, farm management, and the production of pedigreed seeds. Farming is being elevated to a science and the potential output of the land is being increased by all these processes. And year by year science is demonstrating that there is no known limit to the yield which can be secured from the land. It has been estimated that 20,000 men properly organized can feed 2,000,000. And the studies of agricultural experts have shown that, with sufficient labor applied, enough food can be produced on a tiny bit of land to feed a family. Agricultural science has already demonstrated that the limits to the possibilities

of nature have not been reached in any country and that many times the present population of the world can be adequately and comfortably fed by the use of the knowledge already existing.

Yet, despite all this expenditure of money and effort, despite the discoveries of science and the introduction of improved machinery, despite the substitution of steam and gasoline for horse-power and the increase in the effectiveness of human labor, the question of feeding America becomes more acute each year, while the high cost of living is a problem which worries not only the worker but the middle classes as well. The war has made this problem acute, so acute, in fact, that the war has passed from one of man-power and munition-power into one of food-power. Not only is this true of Austria-Hungary and Germany, it is true of England, Russia, and France as well. And now America is confronted with the same problem, which is becoming so acute that the public-school classes have been dismissed in order that boys and girls may be organized for the planting and harvesting of crops. The whole nation has been urged to cultivate its back yards and to utilize heretofore neglected fields and parcels of land. The people have been urged to economize, to husband their food supply. Dietary statisticians suggest the substitution of cheap cereals, and the worker is solicitously informed that he can live upon a rice diet if he but makes up his mind to do so. Even the

saving of potato-skins has been urged upon the workers by advertisements appearing in the metropolitan press. The farmer is being indignantly prodded to increase the acreage under cultivation, to labor a little harder, while the consumers are appealed to to limit their consumption, already reduced far below the American standard of living by famine prices.

Yet with all these appeals, with the chambers of commerce and countless other organizations bending their efforts in these directions, little organized, intelligent thought is being given to the real problem. Why do boys and girls leave the farms for the cities? Why do the farmers desert their holdings to become motor-men or workers in the city? Why is our agricultural population relatively decreasing and the acreage under cultivation increasing but slightly in amount? Why, with all the aids of science and countless agricultural experiment stations, is agriculture less attractive than it was to our fathers, and why does the per-capita wealth produced fail to respond to all of the improvements in agricultural production? Why have so many of the advances in civilization passed by the farmer? Why is agriculture a neglected if not a despised profession, and why among other industrial classes does the farmer feel that he is of least concern to the state? Why do agricultural organizations like the Greenback movement, the Grange, the Equity, and more re-

cently the Non-Partisan Farmers' Alliance of the Northwest periodically appear in politics, make a gallant fight, and then their members settle down to a kind of political despair? What is the matter with our food supply? What is the trouble with agriculture as a profession? To what is the high cost of living really attributable and with it the health of our children and the lowered standard of living of our people as well?

It cannot be that this problem is insoluble. It cannot be that a civilization that can perfect wireless telegraphy, the flying-machine, and the modern battle-ship; that can organize science to systematize warfare—it cannot be that a people who are able to perfect medicine and whose discoveries have speeded up science in every realm of life is impotent before this, the greatest social problem of all, the feeding of the people. There must be knowable economic reasons which underlie the discouragement of the farmer and the decadence of his industry. It must be possible to trace the economic forces at work to their source, and after ascertaining the proximate causes for these conditions to correct them by constructive political action. We have done this in industry. We have produced the dollar watch, the \$350 automobile, marvels of mechanical and engineering skill. Electricity has been made the servant of man, aiding him in a million ways. The power of Niagara has been harnessed and is

distributed for thousands of miles to cities, towns, and individual factories. The desert lands of the Far West have been reclaimed by the storage of water, and heretofore barren wastes have been made to yield three or four crops a year. The bottoms of the sea have been compelled to yield up their secrets, as have the inscriptions of prehistoric times. Yet to-day the first industry of man, that of keeping himself alive, remains the least organized and certainly the least socialized of any modern service.