Book review of A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression

By Glenn C. Altschuler | Posted: Sunday, October 16, 2016 12:00 am


At the height of the Great Depression, Oscar Ameringer, a socialist journalist, crisscrossed the country to report on the dire circumstances of millions of Americans. In Seattle, he saw women searching for scraps of food in refuse piles. In Oregon, thousands of bushels of apples rotted, while children went hungry. And on a road between Clarksville and Russellville, Arkansas, Ameringer encountered a woman holding a dead chicken under her ragged coat. She had found it dead, she told him, and added grimly, “They promised me a chicken in the pot, and now I got mine.”

In “A Square Meal,” Andrew Coe (the author of “Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States”) and Jane Ziegelman (the author of “97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York City Tenement”) remind us that the economic crisis of the 1930s was a food crisis, for Americans who grew food and for those who consumed it. Their informative book, which includes authentic recipes, illuminates the ways in which the response to the Depression changed our nation’s food habits.

“A Square Meal” captures the range of Depression experiences with a sumptuous supply of informative — and moving — anecdotes. Farmers, we learn, often returned from church to find that their hen houses had been raided. Sharecroppers sang “Eleven cent cotton and forty cent meat/How in the world can a poor man eat?/Can’t buy clothes, can’t buy meat/Too much cotton and not enough to eat.”

Casseroles and other “budget foods,” the authors indicate, were hyped as opening “the great and glorious field for adventure in creating new tantalizing dishes.” In “a show of gastronomic solidarity with the American people,” President Roosevelt ate modest lunches of deviled eggs in tomato sauce, mashed
potatoes and pruned pudding. Taking a decidedly different tack, the nutrition director of Michigan told her staff that a diet of whole wheat and skim milk had sustained rats for more than 30 generations.

Along with most professional historians, Ziegelman and Coe indicate that the response of private charities and state government to the Great Depression was moralistic and miserly. One official, for example, declared that if “Eyetalians” received the state minimum of $13.50 for a family of six for two weeks “they would live like kings and put five bucks in the bank.”

Although they call attention to the inconsistencies in New Deal relief policies, the authors believe that the federal government helped mitigate the impact of the Depression on millions of Americans. Food stamps and school lunches, they note, were among the more positive legacies of the New Deal.

Nutritionists, the authors suggest, had sought to make a virtue of Depression necessity and teach Americans to mend their gastronomic ways. They got a second chance during World War II, amid concerns about the inadequate diet of enlisted men, and had some limited successes.

It is clear, however, that they could not have anticipated that the United States would soon become a “fast food nation.”

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