

'The Poison Squad' : A plea for regulations to make food safer

November 25, 2018 10:00 AM

By Glenn Altschuler

Harvey Wiley is an unsung hero.

Chief of the United States Department of Agriculture's chemistry bureau from 1883-1913, he was, in essence, the federal official most responsible for Americans' food safety. Conscientious, courageous and combative, he recruited young government workers to participate in "hygienic table trials" of untested and potentially dangerous additives, adulterants and preservatives, and published the results. He lobbied for detailed labeling of food products. With good reason, many informed observers dubbed the landmark Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 "Dr. Wiley's Law."

In "The Poison Squad: One Chemist's Single-Minded Crusade for Food Safety at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," Deborah Blum, the director of the Science Journalism Program at MIT, publisher of Undark magazine and author of "The Monkey Wars" and "The Poisoner's Handbook," provides a splendid account of Dr. Wiley's crusade for consumer safety and the forces arrayed against him.

Intended as an antidote for our nation's current "regulatory memory failure," her book is a powerful and persuasive reminder that caveat emptor affords precious little protection to purchasers of manufactured products.

Ms. Blum takes us through a series of epic food fights. Dr. Wiley, we learn, testified before a War Department panel investigating allegations that "embalmed meat" was a staple of the diet of American soldiers in Cuba during the Spanish-American War. His laboratory reports helped remove formaldehyde and borax from the food supply. And he took on the mighty Coca-Cola magnates in an unsuccessful effort to remove saccharin from food and drinks.

It takes a village, Ms. Blum demonstrates, to pass legislation opposed by powerful corporate interests. The National Manufacturers Association, the dairy, baking, bleached flour and industrial chemical industries, and the National Wholesale Liquor Distributors Association hired scientists to testify in Congress that their products were harmless; their lobbyists warned that if the Pure Food and Drug Act became a law, government control over people's lives would know no limits. The bill passed, Ms. Blum

"THE POISON SQUAD: ONE CHEMIST'S SINGLE-MINDED CRUSADE FOR FOOD SAFETY AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY"

By Deborah Blum
Penguin Press (\$28).

points out, only when public indignation was aroused by “muckraking” journalists, women’s consumer protection organizations (and cookbook author Fannie Farmer), food commissioners in progressive states, and, of course, the publication of “The Jungle,” Upton Sinclair’s exposé of the meatpacking industry.

Equally important, Ms. Blum emphasizes, the Pure Food and Drug Act (like all laws) required vigorous enforcement by federal agencies, supported by federal courts. The original bill, she reveals, had authorized the Agriculture Department to establish standards of purity for food products and define adulterants. But lobbyists persuaded Congress to remove that language and cap enforcement funding at \$700,000 a year, not even enough to pay for a robust food inspection program. Nor were James Wilson, secretary of agriculture, or President Theodore Roosevelt willing to spend additional political capital on food safety. “The new, the boasted pure food law adds nothing,” journalist David Graham Phillips declared. “The pure food men did the shouting, but the poison trust got the victory.”

Mr. Phillips, no doubt, knew he was exaggerating. Dr. Wiley’s hope that “more perfect” regulation would follow the legislation of 1906 was realized with the passage of the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act in 1938. The bill, Ms. Blum writes, made the Food and Drug Administration an independent agency “with real authority to protect American citizens against risky drugs and tainted food.” In 2011, the Food Safety Modernization Act required food growers, importers and processors to adhere to specific safety practices and keep records of compliance.

President Donald Trump, Ms. Blum notes, has vowed to reduce or eliminate regulations opposed by American businesses. His appointees in the Environmental Protection Agency, the Agricultural Department, the Department of the Interior, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the Food and Drug Administration have aggressively implemented his agenda.

In his autobiography, published in late 1930 soon after he died, Dr. Wiley declared, “The freedom of science should be kept inviolate,” so that it could live up to its calling “to search for truth and thereby elevate and improve mankind.” We need a 21st-century Harvey Wiley “or rather a cadre of them,” Ms. Blum concludes, “to preserve and build on a protective system” that at its best makes us healthier, safer and more prosperous. But it’s our responsibility to value and maintain that system.” If an effective regime of consumer protection is to return, Ms. Blum writes, “it will be because we, like Wiley, refused to give up.”

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