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## Report From Britain, 12 March 1950

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN  
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Aberdeen, Scotland  
March 12, 1950

In the late and duly lamented campaign there was a vast amount of nonsense bandied about concerning a subject near and dear to us all--the cost of food. The politicians were highly successful in thoroughly confusing the electorate on an apparently simple issue. Inquiries from home indicate, too, that many people in the United States have found it difficult to reconcile conflicting reports.

The food situation makes ideal election material because it is so easy to quote with abandon facts and figures which, in themselves, are perfectly accurate but which have no meaning except in relation to other conveniently ignored data. In addition, comparisons of today's food costs in Britain with those prevailing here a dozen years ago, or with those advertised in current papers from Germany, Italy, or the United States, is an exceedingly intricate business.

You cannot, then, even begin to comprehend the niceties of the food problem here without taking into consideration all of the following factors: (1) prices and price control, (2) rationing, (3) government subsidies, and (4) wage and income levels. You must also keep in mind Marshall aid, currency and trade restrictions, varying degrees of inflation, the effects of the war in general, and the sober fact that Britain can't feed herself. Simple, isn't it?

When we came to Britain last September, the family anticipated lean pickings and a considerable tightening of the belt. In fact we brought in the legal limit of fifty pounds of food per person and slyly hinted that degrees of friendship might well be gauged by the size and weight of edible parcels forthcoming in the fall and winter. We even lay awake nights gloating over the hard and fast promises we had and speculating on the probables. There was nothing in our first week in London to dissuade us from the notion that we had truly come to the land of austerity.

Now, six months later, we smile as we look back to our early fears and agonies. The weekly packages which were to have staved off actual starvation were stopped before they started. Belts have been extended rather than tightened, due mainly to a normal Scotch diet in which potatoes and grains predominate. It's true, too, that Scotland is immeasurably better off than England when it comes to groceries, and this northeast corner is the most highly favored of all.

How are the British people standing up to a decade of war and economic distress? Within the week the British Medical Association, no governmental flunkey, has reported "that the health of the population as a whole, despite the trials and tribulations of recent years, has been well maintained." The Tories, on the other hand, never tire of pointing out that man does not live by calories alone and that while essential proteins may come from fish, most of us would rather get them from ham and eggs. Psychological effects from present day restrictions in diet -- monotony, "the strain on the housewife and the difficulty of entertaining friends," -- lead, according to the BMA, to deterioration of morale.

Let's look at a few figures. Liquid milk consumption in 1947 stood at 44% above the pre-war level (our kids get it free every day in school). In 1945, egg consumption surpassed pre-war by 7% but has since dropped to 14% below because of decreased imports of dried eggs. (a recent visitor from London took back two dozen eggs as his most prized possession.) "The supplies of meat in 1946 and 1947, 82% and 85% of pre-war edible weights, are higher than is generally supposed," and have gone up in the past three years. (Of six middle class people I asked last night, only one could remember having eaten a "tender, juicy steak" in the past ten years -- but the British have never taken to huge steaks as have the Americans.) The downward trend in mortality rates which prevailed before the war has been continued, but the BMA is unwilling to speculate on the causes of this.

Through rationing and price control, the people of Britain have had nearly equal access to the more essential foods at prices which in themselves are phenomenally low. The government now spends well over a billion dollars a year in food subsidies. These must be paid for in taxes which are at least twice as high as those we complain about in the United States. (Elimination of subsidies alone wouldn't help the tax bill very much.) In the endless chain it means that

inflation has been kept well under control, and this includes the demands of the trade unions for higher wages.

It signifies very little indeed to write that this morning the following prices prevail in the shops: by the pound, tea is 56¢; coffee, 37¢; sugar, 6¢; butter, 21¢; lard, 15¢; margarine, 11¢; rice, 10¢; cheese, 16¢; and meat from 21¢ to 36¢. These strictly rationed items may be compared with off-the-ration Gorgonzola cheese at 49¢; oranges, 10¢; peaches, 49¢; chicken, 40¢; and the lowly peanut, 42¢. Eggs are in fairly good supply now at 55¢ a dozen, while unrationed bread costs 7¢ per pound and milk runs up the bill at about 5¢ a quart.

These prices can't very well be compared with those in America because they reflect devaluation (in the six months since devaluation, food prices have not risen), because wage levels over here run from 25% to 75% lower than those in the United States, and because taxes eat up so much more of the Britisher's income. In any case rationing is likely to limit severely the quantities of most articles he would prefer to buy. Several butchers told me only this morning that the poorer families are now having difficulty in buying all the meat available to them.

It is universally agreed that Britain will keep rationing as long as food is in short supply. Though there is always grumbling, most Britons agree that this problem has been handled in statesmanlike manner; this is, of course, due mainly to the superb self discipline of the British people. The ration of most articles has been increased since we came over and it is now possible to buy all the milk, Danish cheese, and jams and jellies that you can afford. Billy tells me that bubble gum has now been "freed" but he is extremely doubtful of the capacity of the British to attain the "quality" of the American product.

Controlled prices in Britain usually run from 25% to 75% cheaper than those uncontrolled in such countries as Germany and Italy. It is accurate to say that abandonment of controls in western European countries has brought severe rationing by the pocketbook. Wages have definitely not kept up with food prices and the low income groups have suffered. The wealthy find it possible to eat well by any standard in all countries.

Some reflection brings me to the following summary; (1) there is plenty of food for everyone in Britain but variety is still limited, (2) wage earners are undoubtedly eating better than they did before the war and the middle and upper classes are probably worse off, (3) the wiping out of a large part of her resources during the war and the plain fact that Britain is still unable to feed herself make the situation very delicate regardless of what government is in power, (4) the system of self discipline worked out here has been greatly superior to the planless economies of western Europe, (5) politics has very little to do with the food situation in Britain today, and (6) there has been a slow but steady improvement since the end of the war.

My family are still living in anticipation of the day when they can get their fill of hamburgers, hotdogs, steaks, and fried chicken.