

# THE PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH SOCIETY

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## NOTES ON NUTRITION



DEAR FRIENDS:



n the beginning human beings ate because they were hungry. They were largely carnivorous until the rise of community existence which made agriculture possible. From sad experience it was discovered that it was necessary to discriminate between digestible and indigestible material. At some remote time mankind became aware of the medicinal qualities of certain plants. Animals, incidentally, were instinctively aware of these natural remedies. Evidence seems to point out that botanicals were first used by mystics and the initiates of healing cults. In Egypt, Greece, China, and Medieval Europe most religious institutions had herb gardens, and about the beginning of the Christian Era medicinal botany was practiced successfully in Alexandria and important communities in the Near East. It thus came about that the art of eating was divided into two schools of thought. The larger group gave little attention to the consequences of their dining habits, but there was a growing interest in the basic problem of nutrition in the smaller group.

In early Europe the poor ate what they could and the rich ate what they pleased. The few thoughtful observers noticed that those whose meals were somewhat scanty seemed to live longer and enjoyed better health. For several centuries feasting was a status symbol and to be overweight was a distinction. Gout due to gastronomy caused a number of doctors to shake their heads and recommend moderation but their warnings passed unheeded. A curious habit arose in the practice of medicine. Prescriptions--usually powders, syrups, or unsavory pills--were taken with an alcoholic chaser which proved refreshing.

In the good old days most communities had a town physician, but his services were largely limited to prosperous families. Those living in small villages in rural districts were born, lived, and died without medical assistance.

Among such as these folk, remedies were administered by elderly women who dealt in herbs and simples, together with psychotherapy, witchcraft, prayers, and incantations. Most of them were practical midwives and it has been recently observed that this branch of obstetrics is being revived in many countries and areas. The "widow women" also gained distinction as nutritionists. They could always provide soups suitable to those who were fading away for lack of nourishment or who suffered from digestive disorders. Paracelsus, the first systematic pharmacologist, traveled about Europe and the Near East investigating the exponents of folk remedies, and became convinced that they knew more than the professors in the great universities. In sober truth, many of the most successful prescriptions now in use originated in folk medicine.

Long before the Food and Drug Act, rural areas in the United States had neither doctors nor hospitals. Each year the general store received a supply of almanacs which were usually distributed free to the local farmers. In addition to tables of dates for planting and harvesting crops, these infallible booklets advertised patent medicines. They provided an encyclopaedia of symptoms so that everyone could diagnose his own disorders. The housewife who thought she was healthy until she read the list of symptoms experienced some ache or pain she had previously overlooked. In remote areas there were also the medicine men. They traveled through the countryside dispensing all types of infallible remedies. Some of them claimed that their formulas originated with American Indian tribes who had used them successfully for centuries. It is now known that the principal ingredient was alcohol, but under an appropriate trade name even teetotalers could benefit from the concoctions.

A number of manufacturers distributed proprietary medicines which we usually refer to today as patent medicines. Some have survived and can still be found on the shelves of supermarkets. The more dangerous remedies, such as opium soothing syrup for infants and laudanum earache drugs, have vanished; but Castoria, Sloan's Liniment, and Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound have lingered on until recent times. The government-taxed patent medicines and funds gathered by this process helped to win the Civil War. Incidentally, matches, snuff, and playing cards were taxed and, if you had your photograph taken, a tax stamp had to be placed on the reverse.

While nutrition had a small following wherever gluttony flourished, it was not until the twentieth century that dietetic supplements gained general favor. Today they are as popular as the proprietary remedies of the last century and cost considerably more. The emphasis on health foods came into prominence shortly after World War I. About this time a health food cafeteria opened in Los Angeles. It served only raw food and was strictly vegetarian. It was a gathering place of the infirm, but was not a success financially. At the same time the medicine man reappeared in all his glory. He preached the glad tidings of vim, vigor, and vitality; advertised lavishly in the local press; gave free lectures in large auditoriums; and disseminated appropriate remedies. Such terms as vitamins and calories were too esoteric for those days and food chemistry was still sketchy. There was much talk however of natural methods, exercise, fasting, and positive thinking. Bernarr MacFadden was a forceful exponent of the benefits of long fasting, but weight reduction had slight

following. It would have been difficult to gather an enthusiastic audience which wished to seriously restrict its food intake. It is true, however, that itinerant proponents of health by natural means pioneered the way to present concepts of nutrition. I remember when a prominent advocate of the food cult gave a series of lectures at the Trinity Auditorium (now Embassy) about the time of the great depression of 1929. The auditorium had an impressive facade and this was strung with garlands of fresh vegetables. It was all right for the first day or two, but before the series of talks was over the vegetables were in an advanced state of deterioration. The speaker was emphasizing a digestive powder packaged in small containers. He passed these around and told the recipients to sample them immediately. In a few minutes the carpets in the hall were in terrible condition with white powder all over the place. The janitor told me it took three days with a powerful vacuum cleaner to get rid of the debris.

Some other food enthusiasts were rather neater in their promotional programs. One I remember featured Hawaiian dancing girls against a background of artificial palm trees. Another brought his entire family, including several children, to testify to the excellence of his nutritional aids. It was always carefully pointed out that the medical fraternity completely ignored the problem of food chemistry. There was also growing fear of the complex medications prescribed for simple ailments. The public was ready to consider the possibility that good health was natural to the human being and sickness was a result of ignorance and indifference. The subject is still in an experimental stage, but new discoveries are recorded with increasing frequency. It is inevitable that enthusiasts will make excessive use of nutritional additives, but things are better than they were before. Research in nutrition has now extended itself into the study of the soil in which crops are planted. It is becoming more and more evident that human survival depends largely upon an uncontaminated source of nutrition.

As I am getting more wordy than I expected, I will continue in another letter.

Always most sincerely,

*Marilyn P. Hall*

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