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The Economies and Conveniences of Modern-Day Living: Frozen Foods and Mass Marketing, 1945–1965

American frozen foods were originally considered a luxury product; the industry did not develop a mass market until the late 1940s. Only a few years after achieving mass-market sales, however, frozen-food producers tried to segment the market in order to increase profits. This change was partly the result of internal factors, such as technological developments and interfirm competition. The new marketing strategy also hinged on industry executives' shifting conception of the ideal consumer. Frozen-food marketers of the early 1950s envisioned themselves as providing the good life at a low cost to "average" Americans. When profits slowed in the late 1950s, they designed a variety of new products for groups according to their race, age, and class.

In 1954, the editor of *Quick Frozen Foods* imagined a future world in which frozen food had emancipated women from the drudgery of their cooking routines, eliminated labor strife by keeping down the cost of living, and brought abundance to all American households. In his short story "Frozen Foods 2000 A.D.: A Fantasy of the Future," Edwin Williams recycled a plot device popularized by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Williams's protagonist, a frozen-food distributor named Joe Graham, wakes up in the year 2000 to discover that advanced technology and an "Impartial Industry Authority" have teamed up to keep food quality high and prices low. The American consumer benefits by eating more healthfully, with less work, and at lower prices, while the entire economy grows smoothly and predictably. Frozen foods,

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according to this fantasy, would undergird a stable, progressive political economy based on the mass consumption of cheap, quality food.[1]

Williams's utopian vision was inspired by the frozen-food industry's incredible growth rate in the early 1950s.[2] Prior to the end of World War II, frozen foods were sold at high prices in low volumes in fragmented markets. After the war, the industry began to reconsider its marketing strategies and its relationship with consumers. Executives at several large companies developed new business structures and new technological capacities, such as cold-storage warehouses, that made mass marketing possible for the first time in the late 1940s. Even more important, the arrival of refrigerator-freezers in most American homes and the boom in suburban supermarkets made mass consumption possible. At first, some major industry players were reluctant to engage in mass marketing, but once they did, business became very successful. An industry that had struggled to sell its products since the early 1930s became, by the 1950s, the fastest-growing sector in the food business. This success allowed its leaders to see themselves as suppliers of a low-priced, high-quality product that all Americans would rely on for the staples of their diet. As frozen-food-industry leaders reconceived their marketing strategy, they also reconsidered who their customers were. Marketers broadened their picture of American consumers from one comprising relatively affluent suburban housewives to one that included middle- and lower-income Americans. Although during the 1950s they continued to promote their association with upper-class consumers, they expanded their advertising campaigns by adding the inducement of lower prices to the advantages of convenience.

In the late 1950s, the marketing of frozen foods became even more sophisticated and complex. As the growth rate of the industry slowed in 1957 and 1958, frozen-food leaders responded by producing a variety of

[1] E. W. Williams, "Frozen Foods 2000 A.D.: A Fantasy of the Future," *Quick Frozen Foods* [hereafter referred to as *QFF*] (Feb. 1954): 101–8; Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967 [1888]). On the context and significant impact of Bellamy's work, see Cecilia Tichi, *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, and Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill, 1987), and Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago, 1995), 210–20.

[2] By "frozen food industry," I am primarily referring to packers such as Birds Eye, Stokely-Van Camp, Libby, McNeill, and Libby, and Minute Maid, and to wholesale distributors, whose names are less familiar. Frozen-food packers processed frozen vegetables, fruit, concentrated juice, seafood, and meat and poultry. They generally maintained their own farms or contracted out to large commercial farmers (such as Seabrook Farms in New Jersey) to receive raw food materials. Consequently, in referring to packers as producers, I mean to indicate their involvement in producing raw materials as well as value-added, processed goods. As will be shown, retailers (supermarkets) and manufacturers of auxiliary goods, such as home freezers, were also significant players in the industry, but their interests did not always necessarily coincide with those of packers and distributors.

goods to be sold at multiple price levels. Peas, lima beans, orange juice, and other "staples" had been the main products in the earlier period. But now, frozen-food packers looked for profits in premium items, such as entire precooked meals, ethnic dishes, and "boil-in-bag" convenience items. The industry abandoned the idea of selling a cross-class staple product to the "average" American. Frozen-food companies began to target their products to urban blacks, teenagers, working women, and other "untapped markets."

The following case history of frozen foods intertwines two major stories about business and society in twentieth-century America. On the one hand, business historians have told richly detailed accounts of the origins of mass marketing. Usually focusing on internal decisions at large firms, these stories tell of technological change, entrepreneurial visions, and interfirm competition, which led to changes in marketing strategies.[3] Social and political historians, meanwhile, have studied mass consumption as the product of social forces, rather than of economic or technological ones. We now have an impressive literature on the ways in which consumption patterns have been used to shape the group identities and social aspirations of laborers, women, and African Americans.[4] In the following account, however, we see that these two aspects of the history of mass marketing cannot be easily separated. The marketing decisions of frozen-food producers were always just as much cultural activities as they were firm-level economic ones. Internal firm decisions, technological changes, and business competition created the conditions first for a mass market and then for a segmented one. At the same time, the frozen-food marketers' changing perceptions in the postwar era of gender, race, and class shaped their business strategies, which, once underway, helped to sharpen the social identities of their consumers in the marketplace. These efforts of redefinition began in the late 1950s, years before the rise of counterculture movements caught the attention of corporate advertisers, who marketed products—whether colas or automobiles—by making them seem "cool."[5]

[3] Richard S. Tedlow, *New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America* (New York, 1990); and Richard Tedlow and Geoffrey Jones, eds., *The Rise and Fall of Mass Marketing* (London, 1993); Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York, 1989).

[4] Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, U.K., 1990); Meg Jacobs, *The Politics of Purchasing Power* (Princeton, forthcoming); Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919–1929* (New York, 1994); Robert E. Weems Jr., *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998).

[5] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago, 1997).

From Luxury to Staple: Redefining Frozen Foods

The mass marketing of frozen foods only became possible in the late 1940s. Significant commercial sales of frozen foods had begun in the 1920s, when Clarence Birdseye perfected methods of quick-freezing seafood, vegetables, and fruits.[6] But even after the massive General Foods corporation bought out Birdseye's operation in 1929, the industry struggled to cultivate a large national market through the 1930s. Until 1939, when Birds Eye was joined by Stokely-Van Camp's Honor Brand in establishing nationwide distribution, most frozen foods were sold only in major urban markets, such as New York and Boston. Stores that did carry quick-frozen foods prior to the late 1940s sold them at high prices, primarily to luxury buyers, such as vacationers in resort towns, or as novelty items in all-frozen-foods stores.[7] Sales of frozen goods never reached high enough volumes to make mass production profitable, and few food stores actually carried any frozen items other than ice cream until the late 1940s. *Fortune* magazine called the industry "inchoate" and "adolescent" in 1946, pointing out that more tons of pickles and sauerkraut were sold each year than all frozen foods combined. *Business Week* commented in 1947 that although the industry had finally entered a period in which sales, rather than production, was the overriding challenge, "frozen foods are still far from being high-volume merchandise."[8] As late as 1949, the president of the National Wholesale Frozen Food Distributors admitted that "really, the masses have not become acquainted with frozen foods. Because of our production and distribution costs we've been mostly appealing to the people with higher incomes."[9]

This situation changed in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even as all food sales climbed steadily in this period, frozen foods outpaced the total rate of growth. In particular, customers increasingly shunned fresh vegetables and fruit juices in favor of frozen. For instance, in 1940, annual per capita consumption of frozen lima beans was .29 pounds. By 1949 consumption had jumped to 1.09 pounds per person,

[6] Although Birdseye often claimed that he had "invented" frozen foods after a eureka moment on an Arctic fishing trip, his main contribution to the industry was to gather capital and publicity for the burgeoning industry. See Mark W. Wilde, "Industrialization of Food Processing in the United States, 1860–1960" (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1988), 201–43.

[7] "Frozen Food Merchandising in Resort Towns," *QFF* (Sept. 1948): 44; "Frozen Food Enters Selling Era," 28–9.

[8] Wilde, "Industrialization of Food Processing"; Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (New York, 1993), 106–8; "Frozen Foods: Interim Report," *Fortune*, Aug. 1946, 104–9, 178–82; "Frozen Food Enters Selling Era," *Business Week*, 4 Jan. 1947, 28.

[9] W. M. Walsh, "A Message from the President," *Annual Yearbook of Frozen Food Distribution* (1949), 9.

and by 1955 it was up to 1.58. Meanwhile, annual per capita consumption of fresh lima beans had gone down, from .80 pounds in 1940 to .50 in 1949 to .30 in 1955.[10] Basic frozen vegetables, such as lima beans, peas, and broccoli, brought steadily increasing profits to established frozen-food producers like Birds Eye, but sales of frozen concentrated orange juice skyrocketed in the late 1940s. Frozen orange juice had been around since the 1930s, but consumers rarely bought the foul-tasting stuff. Until a group of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) scientists found an effective freezing process in 1945, most frozen orange juice tended to taste, as one scientific report delicately phrased it, like turpentine. In 1946, after the USDA's scientists made public their new method for freezing concentrated orange juice without damaging its flavor, Florida Foods Corporation, soon renamed Minute Maid, was established by former sales executives at the National Research Corporation to market the new product.[11] When Minute Maid signed Bing Crosby as its celebrity stockholder/radio promoter in 1948, the company was selling $2,972,000 worth of orange juice. In three years their sales rose tenfold, to $29,474,000.[12] Minute Maid was the single most successful company to profit from frozen-food sales, but the late 1940s and early 1950s brought significant increases in sales for all producers. As Table 1 shows, the period from 1949 to 1956 saw rapid gains in the volume and percentage of sales of frozen foods in American grocery stores. In 1949, frozen foods accounted for sales of $496,000,000 (1.43 percent of total food-store sales). By 1956, sales had increased to nearly $2 billion, bringing in 3.93 percent of total food-store sales. Frozen foods had become the fastest-growing segment of the food industry.

As sales grew, various companies sought to compete with General Foods' Birds Eye division. Having pioneered the industry and spent the most money on national advertising since the 1930s, Birds Eye consistently held the largest market share from the 1940s to the 1960s. The

[10] Even more dramatic rates of growth can be seen for frozen peas and snap beans. Consumption of other frozen vegetables, such as broccoli, also increased, but not at the same rates. "Per Capita Consumption Comparison," *Frozen Food Factbook* [hereafter referred to as *FFF*] (1957), 91; "Frozen Fruits, Vegetables Usage Continues Post-War Uptrend," *QFF* (Sept. 1957): 107.

[11] "Frozen Concentrated Citrus Juice Process Covered by Public Service Patent," *Fruit Products Journal and American Food Manufacturer* (Mar. 1949): 195, 219; J. L. Heid, "Frozen Concentrated Orange Juice," *Fruit Products Journal and American Food Manufacturer* (Apr. 1949): 232–3; John McPhee, *Oranges* (New York, 1966), 122–33; Gray Singleton, "Experiments with Citrus Juices," *Fruit Products Journal and American Food Manufacturer* (Jul. 1948): 314–15, 331; E. W. Williams, "The Minute Maid Story," *QFF* (Mar. 1955): 250–82.

[12] Compiled from Minute Maid, *Annual Corporate Reports*, 1946–1951. On Bing Crosby's relationship with Minute Maid, see McPhee, *Oranges*, 138; "Where Do Frozen Concentrates Go from Here?" *QFF* (Nov. 1948): 47–9, 92; "Bing Crosby Minute Maid Corp. to Handle Calif. Distribution," *QFF* (Nov. 1949): 62.

Table 1

Frozen Food Share of Grocery Store Sales, 1949–1956

	1949		1950		1951		1952		1953		1954		1955		1956	
	Value of total U.S. consumption ($)	*% of food store sales*	*Value of total U.S. consumption ($)*	*% of food store sales*	*Value of total U.S. consumption ($)*	*% of food store sales*	*Value of total U.S. consumption ($)*	*% of food store sales*	*Value of total U.S. consumption ($)*	*% of food store sales*	*Value of total U.S. consumption ($)*	*% of food store sales*	*Value of total U.S. consumption ($)*	*% of food store sales*	*Value of total U.S. consumption ($)*	*% of food store sales*
All nonfrozen foods	56,551	86.90	58,091	86.07	62,448	84.90	65,177	84.10	65,771	83.80	65,992	83.40	67,707	82.10	71,075	81.50
Frozen vegetables	156	0.41	197	0.50	238	0.54	288	0.62	297	0.59	328	0.62	361	0.64	400	0.65
Frozen fruits & juices	112	0.37	168	0.52	218	0.62	254	0.70	297	0.76	307	0.75	333	0.77	366	0.80
All frozen foods	496	1.43	655	1.86	993	2.52	1,215	2.91	1,335	3.02	1,503	3.34	1,753	3.71	1,981	3.93

All dollar figures in millions.
Source: *Frozen Food Factbook*, 1957–58.

most successful competitors joining the fray in the 1940s had already established themselves in the processing business as canners, particularly Stokely-Van Camp—whose Honor Brand line of frozen foods held a consistent second place in market share to Birds Eye through the early 1960s—and Libby, McNeill, and Libby (famous for its frozen strawberries). Other competitors, such as PictSweet, Snow Crop, and Minute Maid, were new firms in the 1940s, and they produced solely frozen foods. Of these, Minute Maid was the only one to last through the 1960s. Snow Crop was purchased by Minute Maid in 1954, and PictSweet was acquired by Stokely-Van Camp in the same year. Other major players chose to team up with Birds Eye rather than compete, especially Seabrook Farms of New Jersey. Early in the 1930s, Seabrook, owner of the world's largest vegetable farm and frozen-food processing plant at the time, signed a deal to provide General Foods with frozen foods to be sold under the Birds Eye brand. With the rapid increase in consumption, sales, and involvement of major corporations in frozen foods, what had once been a relatively rare sight on American dinner tables became commonplace by the mid-1950s.[13]

Developing this mass market required new methods of distributing and selling frozen foods. The movement of the first frozen foods had been significantly limited by refrigerated rail cars that used unreliable dry ice. Consequently, manufacturers of railcars and long-haul truck trailers—primarily General Motors and Fruehauf Trailers—worked in the 1940s to construct mechanically refrigerated transportation capable of safely hauling frozen foods across long distances.[14] Frozen-food distributors turned to the new mechanical "reefers" with great enthusiasm, causing rail and trucking companies to establish and rapidly expand refrigerated-transport fleets in the 1950s.[15] The rise of centralized, automated cold-storage warehouses—located strategically to connect the established rail network to the rapidly growing interstate highway system—also accelerated the expansion of frozen-food sales. One of the first of these high-tech freezer warehouses was built in Watertown, Massachusetts, where the Quincy Market Cold Storage and Warehouse

[13] George Haddock, "Frozen Foods: Billion Dollar Industry," *Nation's Business*, Jun. 1954, 60–2; "Frozen Foods: Interim Report"; "Biggest Vegetable Factory on Earth," *Life*, 3 Jan. 1953, 40–3; "Output Doubled in Frozen Foods," *New York Times*, 15 Apr. 1963, 118.

[14] William McGinnis Holroyd, "Influences and Challenges of the Growing Frozen Food Industry on Refrigerated Transport Equipment" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1960); "Technology in Food Marketing," *FFF* (1953): 36–55; James A. Mixon and Harold D. Johnson, "Iceboxes on Wheels," in U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1954: Marketing* (Washington, D.C., 1954), 103–4; Alan F. Keenan, "Long Haul Refrigerated Motor Carrier Transportation," *QFF* (Nov. 1948): 70.

[15] "More Mechanical Reefers for Frozen Food Transportation," *FFF* (1954): 97.

Company claimed it could sharply cut food distribution costs by replacing unionized labor with pliant machines.[16]

The rapid postwar growth of chain supermarkets proved as important as technological developments. National chains, such as A & P, Safeway, and Kroger, had been making sharp inroads into food retailing since the 1920s, pushing urban "mom-and-pop" stores out of business through the 1930s. The end of World War II, however, brought more supermarkets, particularly to the suburban neighborhoods that were springing up everywhere.[17] Most important for the frozen-food industry, the supermarkets of the postwar era, which were much larger than their predecessors, made space in their new and remodeled stores for big freezer sections.[18] After the war, many supermarket industry leaders became convinced that huge freezer sections would cause sales of frozen foods to rise steadily.[19] Some supermarkets, however, including both A & P and Safeway, avoided investing in expensive freezer displays in the 1940s, preferring to wait until frozen foods had proved themselves to be profitable high-volume goods.[20] In a review of the industry in 1949, *Business Week* pointed to a lack of retail freezer space as the biggest bottleneck preventing mass sales of frozen foods.[21] But, by the early 1950s, most chains, including A & P and Safeway, agreed that having a large "maximum turnover" freezer section was essential to successful supermarket operations.[22] As one industry analyst put it in 1963, frozen food had become in the 1950s "a 'must' line for supermarkets" and was no longer merely an expensive "status symbol."[23] Whereas small specialty stores had once sold frozen foods at high

[16] Wallace B. Van Arsdel, Michael Joseph Copley, and Robert L. Olson, *Quality and Stability of Frozen Foods: Time, Temperature Tolerance and Its Significance* (New York, 1969), 288, 297; R. M. Conner, "Freezer Space in Nation's Warehouses Is Increasing at a Fast Pace," *FFF* (1954): 25; "Birds Eye Opens New Warehouse," *Business Week*, 26 June 1948, 78–81.

[17] Lizabeth Cohen has documented the early impact of chains on urban neighborhoods in *Making a New Deal*, 99–158. On the postwar boom of supermarkets, see William Applebaum, *Super Marketing: The Past, the Present, a Projection* (Chicago, 1969); Max Mandell Zimmerman, *The Super Market: A Revolution in Distribution* (New York, 1955); Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 113–14.

[18] "Why Frozen Foods Are Climbing," *Chain Store Age* [hereafter referred to as *CSA*] (Mar. 1956): 138.

[19] "Frozen Food Sales Gaining in Chains and Supermarkets," *QFF* (Nov. 1951): 43; Joseph J. Trout, "Get Ready for More Frozen Food Business," *Progressive Grocer* (May 1951): 72; "Annual Frozen Foods Merchandising Section," *CSA* (May 1954): 95; "Chain Store Meeting Focuses Spotlight of Enthusiasm on Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Oct. 1953): 95.

[20] "What Chain Stores Think about Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Mar. 1950): 35; "A. & P. Experiment," *Business Week*, 24 Aug. 1946, 57–8, 62.

[21] "Comeback for Frozen Foods," *Business Week*, 19 Mar. 1949, 23.

[22] "Safeway Stores to Expand Frozen Food Installations," *QFF* (May 1949): 68; "Safeway Goes All out on Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Mar. 1951): 90.

[23] Edward A. Brand, *Modern Supermarket Operation* (New York, 1963), 53, 54.

"The Home of Tomorrow is Here!" proclaims the caption for this 1950 cartoon. Rising incomes in the postwar era allowed middle-class families to invest in household comforts that would have been considered luxuries before the war. *Frozen Food Yearbook*, 1950.

prices in limited quantities, supermarkets relied on low prices and high sales volumes to make profits. The main strategy for maintaining this new retailing pattern was to alter the methods of food distribution. Supermarkets increasingly contracted directly with manufacturers to save money and to increase the speed with which they could order and receive food—much to the prolonged irritation of wholesale distributors, who felt unfairly squeezed out of the industry.[24] Obsessed with lowering prices and increasing sales volume of frozen foods, supermarkets developed ingenious methods for minimizing the number of people required to move foods between producers and consumers. For instance, supermarket managers replaced heavy-lidded "coffin" freezer cases

[24] Zimmerman, *The Super Market*; Brand, *Modern Supermarket Operation*, 53; "Packers, Chains—And Distributors," *QFF* (Oct. 1950): 35; "Retail Frozen Food Prices Declined 3.9% in Past Year," *QFF* (Dec. 1951): 37; "It Isn't Quite Fair, Is It?" *QFF* (Jun. 1958): 178. Alfred D. Chandler Jr. has explained the importance of "throughput" and the elimination of middlemen for the success of "modern, rationalized industrial enterprises" in *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990) and *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977).

staffed by salespersons with self-serve, glass freezers to stimulate impulse buying.[25]

Greatly expanding consumer demand proved crucial in transforming frozen foods into a mass-market industry. During World War II, military purchases, combined with tight rationing of canned foods, helped boost demand far above 1930s levels.[26] After the war's end, rising family incomes and increasing numbers of women working outside the home helped spur more demand.[27] The explosive growth of the home-freezer industry in the late 1940s is particularly indicative of the suddenly insatiable appetite for frozen foods. Sales of home freezers and refrigerator-freezer combinations rose sharply, breaking sales records from the late 1940s into the early 1950s, even as the average freezer grew consistently larger in capacity.[28] General Electric revealed its grasp of the significance of the growing demand for commercial frozen foods in a 1950 advertisement claiming that its latest models finally had "a *REAL* food freezer" that could hold "hundreds of pounds of food." The advertisement prominently displayed a cornucopia of brand-name frozen products, from Birds Eye peas to Libby's frozen strawberries, waiting to be gathered by the armful out of self-serve supermarket displays and stuffed into new, voluminous home freezers.[29] Middle-class American families increasingly considered a good freezer to be essential to a comfortable home. Frozen foods and "deep freezes" had been outside the reach of most Americans prior to the late 1940s. By the mid-1950s, they had become central to middle-class standards of living.

From Reluctance to Enthusiasm: Mass Marketing "Modern-Day Living"

In the early 1950s, frozen-food industry leaders began to see the potential of mass marketing their product, rather than just serving a

[25] "Annual Frozen Foods Merchandising Section," *CSA* (May 1954): 96; "Reach-In Case Sells More Frozen Foods," *Progressive Grocer* (Dec. 1957): 66; Zimmerman, *The Super Market*, 148.

[26] Wilde, "Industrialization of Food Processing," 236. The importance of military purchases would become apparent again during the Korean War. See "Frozen Foods in Wartime," *QFF* (Sept. 1950): 39; "Quartermaster Frozen Food Purchases Reach All-Time High," *FFF* (1952): 98; "Military Buying of Frozen Foods Shows a Big Increase," *QFF* (Mar. 1952): 99.

[27] On the connection between rising income levels and increased spending on processed foods in postwar America, see Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 101–2. On the steady increase of women in the work force in the 1950s and 1960s, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982), 300–19.

[28] "Home Freezers Increase Frozen Food Consumption," *QFF* (Sept. 1949): 39; "Home Freezer Sales Are Setting New Records," *QFF* (Aug. 1950): 33; "Home Freezer Sales Break All Records," *FFF* (1952): 111; "The Freezer—Rocking the Food Industry," *Business Week*, 28 Mar. 1953, 64–74.

[29] "25% to 50% More Space," *Life*, 13 Nov. 1950, 69.

privileged market segment. This changing attitude was encouraged and documented in trade magazines of the period, particularly *Quick Frozen Foods*. These periodicals, whose readers were the executives of large and small companies that produced and distributed frozen foods, provide a fascinating overview of changing attitudes about frozen-food marketing. Executives both read and contributed articles to these journals, exchanging ideas about how to succeed in a volatile, relatively new industry. In the early 1950s, contributors to industry trade journals began to stress the idea that their product was a critical provider of the "conveniences and economies of modern-day living."[30] Based upon advanced technology, these commentators argued, frozen-food production would bring abundance to all Americans by giving consumers quality and convenience at a low price.

The leaders of the frozen-food industry did not immediately embrace the strategy of mass marketing low-priced goods. In fact, the industry leader, Birds Eye, preferred to continue advertising itself as a luxury-goods producer. As the first firm to try selling frozen foods nationally, General Foods had expended considerable money and effort since the 1930s to establish Birds Eye's reputation of high quality. A January 1949 advertisement in *Life* magazine depicted a well-off woman, wearing pearls, high heels, and an elegant satin outfit. Noting that Birds Eye frozen spinach was not only "*grander* than the grandest spinach," but also the "work-free-est," the ad showed the woman relaxing comfortably on a pillow, reading a novel. Another advertisement, appearing in the February 21, 1949 issue of *Life*, also showed a woman bedecked in jewels, this time using Birds Eye frozen lima beans to impress a smartly dressed beau at dinner. The text of the ad claimed that Birds Eye buyers could "watch [their] stock rise as the luscious buttery beauties disappear!" In 1949 at least, General Foods preferred to project its ideal consumer as coming from an upper-middle-class background, capable of appreciating Wall Street metaphors for the exchange of affection.[31]

In the 1940s, the mass market still belonged to canned foods. Canning companies were more accustomed to selling to people on limited budgets, and most of them preferred at first to stay out of the frozen-food business. The Green Giant Company, for example, would later become one of General Foods' biggest competitors in frozen foods. Until

[30] See, for instance, "Home Freezer Sales Are Setting New Records."

[31] Roland Marchand has documented the tendency of 20th-century advertisers to depict products being used by consumers in a higher income bracket than the intended audience, in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, Calif. 1985).

General Foods continued to cultivate the luxury market for Birds Eye frozen foods as late as 1949, stressing quality and convenience in its advertisements. *Life*, 24 January 1949, p. 34.

1962, however, the company remained dedicated to selling only canned foods. In its annual reports from 1945 to 1962, the company repeatedly explained to its shareholders that frozen foods could not deliver profits comparable to high-volume canned-food sales.[32] Although Libby, McNeill, and Libby entered the frozen-food field sooner than Green Giant, its first forays were, as it told its stockholders in 1946, "conservative." Until the early 1950s, Libby preferred to maintain its high-volume, steady sales of canned vegetables and fruits.[33] Stokely-Van Camp was thus the only major established canning company to enter the business enthusiastically before 1950.

Consumer demand for frozen foods was surging in the late 1940s, however, and the mass-marketing strategy became increasingly attractive. In the years immediately following the end of World War II, hundreds of entrepreneurs established small frozen-food packing operations, hoping to capitalize on the growth in demand demonstrated during wartime. These smaller operators proved willing—unlike major players such as Birds Eye and Stokely—to sell "B grade" products. Lower quality standards brought lower prices and higher sales volumes. One of the most ingenious of these new packers, Quality Frozen, of San Francisco,

[32] See particularly Minnesota Valley Canning Company [Green Giant], *Annual Report*, 1948, 5. The company did try a limited run of frozen green peas in 1953 but found "the lack of profit generally throughout the industry in frozen peas, has determined us not to expand this operation at the present time." Green Giant Company, *Annual Report*, 1953, 3–4.

[33] Libby, McNeill, and Libby, *Annual Report*, 1946.

sold its products in plain red-and-white wrappers printed with only two lines of text: the type of food and an enormous "19¢" to indicate the product's very low price.[34] The major firms believed that lower quality standards would tarnish the image of the entire industry and ruin their long-term profit prospects. Consequently, in what became known within the industry as the "battle of the brands," the large packers began to slash prices in 1947 and then increasingly sold their own "B-grades" directly to supermarkets, hoping to eliminate the competition of the audacious interlopers.[35] Within a few years, consumers could buy good-quality, nationally advertised frozen foods for prices equal to or lower than nineteen cents.[36]

In order to win the "battle of the brands," the major frozen-food makers had to transform their fundamental marketing vision. Leaders of the industry now promoted their ability to produce high-quality food at low prices. As they argued in trade-journal editorials and articles, the quick-freezing of foods allowed *all* consumers, not just the wealthy or fortuitously located, to have tasty, nutritious vegetables in any season of the year. As one executive suggested in 1952, modern methods of food production transformed the average American consumer into royalty, able to visit supermarkets year-round and choose from "a more princely selection than any king of old could command."[37] The industry's primary trade journal, *Quick Frozen Foods*, constantly emphasized the high quality of frozen foods, even dramatizing this theme in a series of fictional stories in 1958. In these short pieces, a supermarket clerk named Red enjoys a series of "Adventures in Frozen Food Handling." Visiting an industrial farm and food-freezing plant, Red learns that science and technology have created a nearly perfect frozen vegetable. Seeds are scientifically engineered and selected, and workers and production cycles are scientifically managed. Advanced freezing, packing, and transportation technology assures that a vegetable's flavor and color is "locked in" immediately after harvest. Red incredulously asks his host, Farm Manager Jones, if "frozen vegetables are better than fresh." "'Unless you own your own farm they usually are,' replied Jones in all seriousness. . . . 'When you buy fresh produce in a market, the quality will vary from day to day and from season to season. However, with frozen, the vegetable is processed during the best part of the

[34] "New Market for Frozen Food," *Business Week*, 23 June 1951, 134–5.

[35] "Frozen Food Squeeze," *Business Week*, 22 Feb. 1947, 69–72; Edwin W. Williams, *Frozen Foods: A Biography of an Industry* (Boston, 1970), 65; "Comeback for Frozen Foods," *Business Week*, 19 Mar. 1949, 23.

[36] "What Happened to B Grade?" *QFF* (Feb. 1953): 39; "Are B Grade Brands Coming Back?" *QFF* (Aug. 1958): 310.

[37] "Royal Variety for America's Queen," *FFF* (1952): 116.

season.'"[38] When Red returns to his supermarket, he can be assured that his customers can buy the best, freshest, most nutritional vegetables year-round—but only if they buy frozen.

Successful mass marketing depended on convincing customers that frozen foods were high-quality goods despite their low price. Since frozen vegetables and fruit juices made up the backbone of the industry, marketers emphasized the nutritional advantages of quick-freezing. As Edwin Williams wrote in 1948, frozen-food advertising should underscore the idea that consumers could "get [their] vitamins from frozen foods—not from a [medicine] bottle."[39] Convinced that nutrition could team up with low prices to create a mass market for frozen foods in the 1950s, the National Association of Frozen Food Packers appropriated $250,000 to fund a Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF) study comparing the nutritional value of frozen and canned vegetables.[40] After the report's release in 1956, frozen-food leaders applauded the quarter-million-dollar investment, since WARF researchers had offered "scientific proof of nutritional superiority" for frozen vegetables compared with canned, citing higher levels of thiamin, riboflavin, vitamin A, vitamin C, and niacin.[41] This scientific endeavor was not just an interesting contribution to the knowledge of humankind; it also offered a "valuable sales tool" that would make frozen-food sales skyrocket.[42] Although canned-food producers pointed out the biases inherent in the study, frozen-food advertisers felt they had the ammunition to convince consumers of what the packers had believed all along: frozen vegetables are good for you.[43]

Ensuring the quality of frozen foods was one of the industry's main challenges in the 1950s. Packers hired agents from the USDA to inspect

[38] "Adventures in Frozen Food Handling, ch. 8: Red Learns Why Frozen Vegetables Are Better," *QFF* (Aug. 1958): 70. On the role of agricultural scientists in the development of processed foods, see Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 109–10. For fascinating depictions of the technological complexity of a frozen-food farm and processing plant, see: "Biggest Vegetable Factory on Earth," *Life*, 3 Jan. 1953, 40–3.

[39] E. W. Williams, "Frozen Foods Forum," *QFF* (Sept. 1948): 41.

[40] The published study appeared in a refereed science journal: Marie Burger et al., "Nutrients in Frozen Foods, Vitamin, Mineral, and Proximate Composition of Frozen Fruits, Juices, and Vegetables," *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* 4 (May 1956): 418–25.

[41] "Scientific Proof of Nutritional Superiority to Multiply Demand for Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Apr. 1956): 132.

[42] "The Wisconsin Study of Frozen Food Nutritional Values," *FFF* (1957): 66–71. By selling nutrition, packers were tapping into a relatively recent trend of Americans paying attention to the healthfulness of food. Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York, 1988).

[43] Canned-food makers complained that the canned vegetables under study had already been cooked by the processors. Frozen foods, they argued, would lose vitamin content after consumers cooked them.

their production lines and provide official grade stamps, the highest being "USDA Grade A Fancy."[44] In one of the regular features in *Quick Frozen Foods*, a home economist purchased brand-name products at random stores, then prepared them according to the package directions in a model kitchen. The "Frozen Food Critic" then condemned or praised the item's taste, ease of preparation, and appearance.[45] Editorials often raised the specter of the late 1940s, when "fly-by-night" entrepreneurs had almost (literally) spoiled the market for large packers by selling poor-quality goods.[46] Fears about spoilage and loss of consumer trust became significant in the 1950s. The intensity of these concerns heightened noticeably after a USDA-sponsored report in 1956 suggested that most frozen foods lost their flavor, color, and nutritional value on their way to supermarket freezers.[47] The report argued that truckers, railroad and warehouse workers, and supermarket stockers did not understand the importance of keeping frozen foods at or below zero degrees Fahrenheit at all times. Packers, horrified that consumers would lose faith in the quality of frozen foods, responded quickly to the report. Industry leaders formed a task force in 1957 composed of producers, distributors, retailers, and USDA scientists to develop and enforce minimum standards of frozen-food handling.[48] Maintaining quality had been easier when the frozen-food industry produced specialty goods in relatively low volumes, but providing a high-volume distribution network required ever more vigorous methods of quality control.

The industry also boasted that it was providing the American consumer with a previously unknown level of convenience. Frozen foods came with "built-in maid service," argued marketers, emancipating women from their kitchens. The concept of frozen vegetables as "work-free" foods had been a favorite selling point well before the advent of the mass market. With the advanced industrial production techniques of quick-freezing, frozen vegetables entered the home efficiently

[44] For a detailed description of the inspection process, see Dennis T. Avery, "A Day with a Fruit & Vegetable Inspector," *QFF* (Sept. 1964): 43.

[45] See, for instance, "The Frozen Food Critic," *QFF* (Aug. 1948): 71.

[46] F. Gilbert Lamb, "Let's Stress Quality in Frozen Foods," *FFF* (1957): 13, 51, 53; M. J. Copley, "Keeping Frozen Foods at Zero All the Time Best Assurance of Consumer Satisfaction," *QFF* (Feb. 1957): 177; Albert I. Ris, "A Message from the President," *FFF* (1957–58): 7.

[47] The task force's findings were published in a series of articles in the journal *Food Technology*, beginning with W. B. Van Arsdel, "The Time-Temperature Tolerance of Frozen Foods: I. Introduction—The Problem and the Attack," *Food Technology* 11 (Jan. 1957): 28–33. The series was eventually collected, revised, and republished as Wallace B. Van Arsdel, Michael Joseph Copley, and Robert L. Olson, *Quality and Stability of Frozen Foods: Time, Temperature Tolerance and Its Significance* (New York, 1969).

[48] Sterling P. Doughty, "'Task Force 1957' Is Answer to Industry's Handling Problems," *FFF* (1957–58): 13.

prepeeled, prewashed, and preseeded. The most difficult and time-consuming job left for the cook was to boil the water or start the oven. In the 1940s, frozen-food marketers believed that such convenience would appeal to upper-middle-class consumers, who had been experiencing the "servant problem" brought on by the rapid decline of the domestic servant labor market after 1940.[49] In the 1950s, however, frozen-food promoters broadened their vision, asserting that "every mother will be an expert, effortless cook because of her delicious delicacies frozen fresh. Then indeed will womankind acclaim the Second Half Century—America's Frozen Food Era!"[50] The convenience of frozen foods would emancipate not just those women able to afford the luxury of maids—whether "built-in" or wage-earning—but the *entirety* of "womankind." *Life* magazine echoed this sentiment in 1953, arguing that every woman could now afford a "maid" of her own, since "servants . . . come built into the frozen, canned, dehydrated and precooked foods which lend busy women a thousand extra hands in preparing daily meals."[51]

The truly exciting thing about all this quality and convenience, according to the frozen-food industry, was that it was also cheap. Ever since the price-slashing battles of the late 1940s, industry leaders had trumpeted themselves as providing more taste, nutrition, and convenience than other food processors at a competitive—though admittedly somewhat higher—price. However, prices of fresh and canned foods, particularly vegetables and fruit juices, became relatively more expensive in the 1950s in comparison to frozen foods. Frozen-food marketers quickly embraced low prices as their chief sales weapon. When price-index statistics compiled by the USDA indicated in 1953 that frozen peas had, for the first time, become cheaper than canned peas, industry leaders saw that their pursuit of the mass market had paid off.[52] With streamlined distribution techniques and technologies, the cost of frozen foods kept decreasing compared with other food forms, and industry leaders patted themselves on the back for thus being able to provide cheap luxury for the masses.[53] As one executive gloated, "The luxury

[49] See, for instance, Harry K. Schauffler, "Foreword," *FFF* (1952): 9: "30% fewer household domestics than in 1940 . . . demands solution of kitchen chores through convenient frozen foods." Also, "The Frozen Food Era Is Coming In!" *QFF* (Mar. 1949): 93; "The Fabulous Market for Food," *Fortune*, Oct. 1953, 135–41, 271–6.

[50] Harry K. Schauffler, "Foreword," *FFF* (1950): 5.

[51] "Ways to Cut down Kitchen Work," *Life*, 3 Jan. 1953, 16–20.

[52] "Frozen Peas Today as Cheap—Often Cheaper than Canned," *QFF* (Mar. 1953): 105.

[53] "155 Million Consumers—and More Food Than Ever Before!" *QFF* (Feb. 1952): 41; Harry K. Schauffler, "Foreword—and Forward!" *FFF* (1954): 5; Hubert F. Sandoz, "It Costs Less to Pack Frozen Foods than the Equivalent Canned Goods!" *FFF* (1954): 29–31; Richard M. Page, "A Message from the President," *FFF* (1957): 7; Patsy D'Agostino, "The Frozen Food Industry Is Getting Streamlined!" *Frozen Food Yearbook*, (1950): 25.

market has become the mass market—and people in all walks of life are buying on the basis of quality."[54] In the early- to mid-1950s the frozen-food industry radically altered its strategy, enthusiastically celebrating its ability to provide quality goods at a price that everyone could afford. This was a particularly shrewd marketing strategy in the 1950s, since the growing cost of living had become one of the chief worries of the American middle class.[55]

The low cost of frozen foods quickly became a prime selling point in national advertising campaigns. Advertisements began to stress the cost advantage of frozen foods. An April 1950 cartoon ad for Birds Eye green beans told the story of Doris, whose husband had invited a business partner to dinner on short notice. Apparently struggling to maintain respectable middle-class standards of housekeeping, Doris did not keep her refrigerator fully stocked, and she wore only a plain dress and no jewels. She was, however, fortunate enough to have a friendly parka-wearing duck on hand to advise her about Birds Eye's "LOW-COST Winner!" Another advertisement in *Life* on January 15, 1951, likewise emphasized the low-price theme, arguing that Birds Eye spinach was not only "super eatin'!" but "oh, so easy on Mom—and her pocketbook!" Frozen-food marketing of the 1950s, like the advertisements for many processed foods, increasingly underscored the egalitarian nature of mass-produced food.[56]

Frozen-food manufacturers also developed a number of other advertising campaigns to educate consumers about the advantages of their products. The goal was to teach women, especially those who had learned to cook in the days before electric refrigerator-freezers, how to use frozen foods to quickly create healthful, tasty meals. The National Association of Frozen Food Packers, for instance, funded a Consumer Education Program, which provided a "streamlined test kitchen" where a crew of home economists cooked up ideas for new recipes using frozen foods, which they then released to women's magazines for publication.[57] The industry published its own cookbooks, including the *General Foods Kitchens Frozen Foods Cookbook*, which was "intended especially for beginners" and included a series of questions and answers that demonstrated the superiority of frozen foods for the modern cook.[58] As chef Jean Simpson explained in her introduction to the

[54] Charles W. Lubin, "It's Easy to Get Your Price for Quality," *FFF* (1957–58): 27.

[55] Meg Jacobs, "Inflation: The 'Permanent Dilemma' of the American Middle Classes," in *Social Contracts under Stress: The Middle Classes of America, Europe, and Japan at the Turn of the Century*, eds. Olivier Zunz, Leonard Schoppa, and Nobuhiro Hiwatari (New York, 2002), 130–53.

[56] Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 117.

[57] "NAFFP Consumer Education Program," *QFF* (Nov. 1948): 84.

[58] General Foods Kitchens, *General Foods Kitchens Frozen Foods Cookbook: Modern Living with Frozen Foods* (New York, 1961), ix–x.

"Doris comes up with LOW-COST WINNER!" reads the caption for this comic-strip advertisement. In the 1950s, the frozen-food industry increasingly advertised its goods as inexpensive and appropriate for families on a tight budget. *Life*, April 1950, p. 38.

second edition, such cookbooks answered "the need for education" by providing information on nutrition and safe storage as well as "ideas for combinations of dishes."[59] Frozen vegetables were not only inexpensive, but they could also be cooked in "an elegant way." For example, one could simply add a homemade almond sauce to frozen asparagus and complement it with frozen corn chowder, frozen sirloin steak, and frozen deep-dish apple pie.[60] Another cookbook author advised shoppers to take advantage of the variety offered by their local supermarkets to experiment with different brands of frozen vegetables. Once the shopper had settled on a quality brand, she could easily substitute frozen for fresh or canned in any recipe.[61] The industry devised other ingenious methods to encourage consumers to experiment with frozen foods. In one particularly effective scheme, packers encouraged supermarket managers to team up with local appliance stores to offer discounts on frozen foods to new home-freezer buyers. For instance, a customer could buy a freezer at a hardware store and get a year's worth of frozen beef to fill it.[62] Convinced that those who did not regularly buy frozen food only required education and direct incentives to understand its "economies and conveniences," the industry waged an aggressive campaign in the 1950s to expand the scope of the market.

Still, not all consumers were swayed by the prescription of frozen foods as the key to "modern-day living." Most important, many consumers refused to believe that frozen foods were now actually inexpensive staples rather than expensive luxuries. A survey of 2,500 women undertaken in 1952 by the publishers of *Woman's Home Companion* found that the main reason women at all income levels did not purchase frozen foods was their belief that they were "too expensive."[63] The study did show that many more women bought more frozen foods more often in 1952 than in 1949. Even so, the percentage of women who refused to buy them because they were "too expensive" had actually *increased*.[64] Apparently, consumer perceptions in the early 1950s

[59] Jean I. Simpson, *The Frozen Food Cook Book and Guide to Home Freezing*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1962), 29, 205.

[60] Ibid., 331. Simpson also included mashed potatoes on the suggested menu, but felt that "frozen" and "mashed" were adjectives that could only be applied separately to "potatoes."

[61] Edith Michael Barber, *The Silver Jubilee Super Market Cook Book* (New York, 1955), 438.

[62] Carl Dipman, "Better Take a Good Look at the Freezer-Food Business," *Progressive Grocer* (July 1952): 88; "'Stock Your Freezer' Month Launches Oct. 1 with Industry-Wide Support," *QFF* (Oct. 1949): 42.

[63] "Trends in the Use of Frozen Foods by U.S. Housewives," *QFF* (Mar. 1952): 105.

[64] The first study had shown that 30 percent of all nonusers (and 35 percent of those with yearly incomes under $2,000) claimed that frozen foods were "too expensive," while the 1952 study showed a total of 36 percent of all nonusers (with no separate data on income groups) having the same concern. "What the American Housewife Thinks of Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Apr. 1949): special insert section.

did not necessarily jibe with the industry's enthusiastic claims that frozen foods had become a low-price good for mass consumption.

There were several reasons for this split between the rhetoric and the reality. First, although the frozen-food industry claimed to take great interest in the concerns of the American housewife, their primary customer remained the American *supermarket manager*. This discrepancy becomes readily apparent if one compares the advertising in general-interest magazines, such as *Life* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, with the ads in supermarket trade journals, such as *Chain Store Age*. General-interest magazines of the 1950s carried perhaps one advertisement per month for frozen foods and tended to feature large, colorful pictures of a prepared frozen food. While there were descriptions of the advantages of frozen foods (quality, convenience, and economy) in the ads, the enticing pictures overshadowed the text.[65] Frozen-food advertisements in 1950s issues of *Chain Store Age*, however, were numerous and filled with material written to convince supermarket buyers that they could sell frozen foods in mass quantities. For instance, a common Libby's ad aimed at supermarket managers asserted that "Libby's Frozen Foods mean more store-traffic, more BIZ, and more REPEAT-BIZ for YOU."[66] In an important sense, supermarkets served as consumers' representatives in the frozen-food industry's understanding of mass consumption in the 1950s. Packers were anxious to sell the idea of frozen foods as a staple good to supermarket chains that thrived on high-volume sales, low prices, and quick rates of turnover.[67]

An even larger problem, however, prevented frozen-food producers from matching the rhetoric of mass marketing with reality. While constantly claiming to serve the interests of all American consumers equally, the industry maintained a relatively narrow understanding of its customer base. It focused on selling to the white, middle-class, suburban housewife.[68] While frozen foods were less expensive than before,

[65] This generalization is based on a systematic biannual (all odd years) sampling of *Life* and *Ladies' Home Journal* issues from 1945 to 1965, plus perusal of issues from the even-numbered years between 1950 and 1956.

[66] "Answers to a Quiz on Bigger Biz," *CSA* (May 1954): 98.

[67] John Soluri has made a similar point in his study of the United Fruit Company's "Miss Chiquita" banana sales campaign of the 1940s and 1950s. According to Soluri, the company developed the "Miss Chiquita" campaign primarily as a means of encouraging supermarkets to adopt the practice of buying bananas by the (branded) box rather than by the (unbranded) bag. A graphic of Miss Chiquita was printed on the outside of the box, making for a free and attractive display case, with tie-ins to a national television and radio advertising campaign featuring a catchy jingle. Supermarkets thus received free national advertising in exchange for buying only Chiquita bananas. John Soluri, "(Trans)Gendering the Banana: Monocultures, Supermarkets, and the Birth of Miss Chiquita, 1929–1972" (paper presented at Hagley Center Conference on Consumption and the Environment, Wilmington, Del., 9 Mar. 2001).

[68] "Better Living for Everyone . . . from Kelvinator," *Ladies' Home Journal*, June 1959, 102.

advertisements never depicted consumers living on constrained budgets, on farms, or in small urban apartments. The answer to the *Frozen Food Factbook*'s 1952 question, "Who Uses Frozen Foods?" was the "average homemaker," graphically depicted as a smartly dressed white woman with fine features, holding a packaged frozen convenience item to help her prepare her "family meals."[69] Advertisers continued to picture their consumers in terms of their own socioeconomic conditions and aspirations.[70]

Most important, frozen-food promoters generally refused to think of their consumers as working women, preferring to view them as housewives. The industry's emphasis on "convenience" was often linked with a promise to emancipate the American homemaker from her kitchen. In fact, however, industry leaders generally expected frozen foods to make it more convenient for women to maintain their "traditional" family roles. What the average housewife really wanted when she bought a package of frozen foods, according to one editorialist, was not freedom to work for pay outside the home but, rather, freedom to loaf about the house.[71] Other "traditional," or unpaid, middle-class women's roles were also to be made easier, such as "church or club work, or that hobby you have always wanted to find the time for."[72] As food historian Harvey Levenstein has pointed out, "working women were invisible" in processed-food marketing during the 1950s.[73] For much of that decade, the industry's explicit avowal of its commitment to inclusive mass consumption in its trade magazines remained distant from the images it presented in advertisements. The industry no longer believed that consumers had to be particularly well-off to enjoy the conveniences of frozen foods, but the promoters continued to direct sales efforts to the same typical suburban housewife, a strategy that made it more difficult to come up with a transparent mass marketing strategy that would appeal to their most promising customers.

From Mass to Segmented Marketing: Redefining Frozen Foods, Again

In the late 1950s, the frozen-food industry began to alter its product policy and marketing strategy to pursue new customers. In particular,

[69] "Who Uses Frozen Foods?" *FFF* (1952): 51.
[70] Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream.*
[71] William H. Kearns, "Why Women Buy Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Nov. 1953): 51.
[72] "National Frozen Food Week," *FFF* (1950): 43.
[73] Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 105.

frozen-food makers and distributors began to recognize that suburban housewives were only one group of consumers among many others with unique interests and needs. The surprising onset of recession in 1957–58 after nearly a decade of steady economic growth provided a strong impetus for a new strategy. Frozen-food packers, like other business leaders in 1957, had become increasingly dissatisfied with the economy's relatively sluggish growth rate since 1954. Inflation, unemployment, and corporate losses all soared dramatically between August 1957 and April 1958.[74] When profits began to level off in 1957–58, frozen-food companies, especially Birds Eye and Stokely, attempted to boost the industry's growth rate, creating products for new markets by taking into account race, ethnicity, age, and class differences. Frozen-food marketers of the 1960s came up with products and advertising strategies that catered to cultural diversity rather than uniformity.

The industry's trade-journal editorials and articles consequently began promoting the work of professional marketing theorists. These theorists recommended wholly new methods of studying markets, particularly the use of psychological and locality-based research to determine distinct market segments. Ben Bliss, founder of his own advertising agency, castigated the average frozen-food promoter in 1959 for not carefully "studying consumer habits and visualizing the manner in which his product satisfies the needs of his customers."[75] Bliss recommended that packers move away from national advertising directed to a single market and instead employ "the local concept of marketing," which "breaks up the accepted, collective national market into a nationwide group of individual, heterogeneous markets, each with its own local personality and characteristics."[76] Some frozen-food marketers were eager to engage in such research. An author in *Quick Frozen Foods* recommended that researchers use depth psychology interviews to find out if "housewives [felt] guilt about taking the 'easy way out'" or if husbands dislike[d] frozen foods because of "resentment at the free time made available to housewives through their use."[77] Frozen-food manufacturers hoped to use these new marketing concepts to come up with a variety of new products designed for specific group interests or needs. As one marketer put it in 1962, "The necessity of tailoring products and services to . . . specific population segments . . . ha[s] taken on new

[74] For an overview of the brief but intense recession of 1957–58, see John Sloan, *Eisenhower and the Management of Prosperity* (Lawrence, Kans., 1991), 133–51.

[75] Ben B. Bliss, "Reach Home with Local Ads by Teaming up with Broker," *QFF* (Mar. 1959): 146.

[76] Ibid.

[77] "Motivation Research and Frozen Foods," *QFF* (June 1960): 29.

importance." Recommending "entirely new lines of products [to serve these] untapped frozen food markets," the author supported the growing trend in the industry to think of its consumers as members of a variety of social groups, each with different needs and interests.[78]

In adopting this new direction, frozen-food marketers began to discover that consumers who did not fit the stereotype of the middle-class, white, suburban housewife had long been buying their products. Working-class urban blacks had been eager users of brand-name frozen foods throughout the 1950s. *Quick Frozen Foods* first noticed this in 1954, observing that a Harlem supermarket sold surprising quantities of frozen foods, even to working-class apartment dwellers who owned no freezer. The article pointed out that many who did not own freezers purchased frozen foods on a daily basis, cooking them immediately upon returning home.[79] In 1954 such buying patterns seemed more a curiosity than a reason for adopting a diverse approach to marketing. By the late 1950s, however, the frozen-food industry realized that these previously ignored consumers needed to be courted. Marketers, maintained a number of articles in *Quick Frozen Foods*, had to take into account that African Americans had particular tastes in frozen foods, often preferring traditional southern vegetables (collards, okra, and turnip greens) over the national favorites (green peas and lima beans).[80] Frozen-food producers took this advice seriously: in 1959, Stokely added okra, turnip greens, and succotash to its product line, and in 1962 Birds Eye began distributing "Southern vegetables" as a distinct group of frozen foods.[81]

These new products were especially important, argued contributors to *Quick Frozen Foods*, because blacks demonstrated remarkable faithfulness to nationally advertised brands, apparently for two reasons. First, having often experienced exploitation at the hands of local food dealers, blacks preferred national brands that had demonstrated consistent quality, particularly Birds Eye and Stokely's Honor Brand. Second, according to an author of a 1960 *Quick Frozen Foods* article, the average African American consumer liked to spend money on known brands "to rid himself of the false stereotype that he represents a market only for second quality goods, and this gives him a feeling of

[78] Fred R. Fleischman, "Breakfast Lines, Diet Foods, Teen-Age Market, Senior Citizens, All Beckon," *QFF* (Apr. 1962): 184, 186. Emphasis in original. For more on the social and political history of segmented marketing, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003).

[79] "15 Million Negroes—Vast Market for Quality Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Aug. 1954): 40.

[80] "The Negro Market for Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Apr. 1960): 106.

[81] Stokely-Van Camp, *Annual Report*, 1959; General Foods, *Annual Report*, 1962.

equality and dignity."[82] At least one frozen-food distributor, based in Raleigh, North Carolina, felt ashamed in 1960 that he had "always assumed that the Negro would not buy frozen foods; that our best potential lay in the middle class white trade," and he decided that the industry as a whole needed to pursue this special market aggressively.[83] Marketers became more sophisticated in their understanding and appreciation of the particular needs and interests of black consumers. For instance, one frozen-food promoter referred to Gunnar Myrdal's "caste theory" in 1964 to argue that blacks, as a handicapped "group apart from the dominant culture" formed a solidarity of interests and needs that had to be served by "Negro-oriented promotions and service."[84]

Frozen-food marketers also cultivated distinct ethnic and religious markets in the 1960s. Religious institutions, such as churches, schools, and charity houses, had been a particularly desirable market segment since the 1940s, as they often bought frozen foods in bulk. In 1958, however, a *Quick Frozen Foods* study broke new ground by pointing out that not all religious institutions bought frozen foods the same way. Calling its work "a study in differences," *Quick Frozen Foods* argued that Catholic buying proceeded through more centralized channels than Protestant institutions. Jewish institutional buyers, meanwhile, proved more likely than either Catholics or Protestants to be concerned about the quality of their purchases.[85] In 1963, *Quick Frozen Foods* happily pointed out the unique nature of Jewish food-purchasing patterns. The article discussed a successful kosher frozen-food market in Paramus, New Jersey, that emphasized the "gourmet aspect of the food business" for its "discerning customers." This "unusual establishment" successfully competed with a large concentration of local supermarket chains by offering distinctive items such as "Noah Zark" frozen pizza and four types of frozen knishes.[86]

[82] "The Negro Market"; "Supermarket in All-Negro Neighborhood Tops National Average for Frozen Food Sales," *QFF* (June 1961): 94. Lizabeth Cohen has described a remarkably similar situation in 1920s Chicago, where blacks preferred chain stores and national brands for exactly these two reasons. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 147–56. Robert E. Weems, in *Desegregating the Dollar*, has argued that these status-seeking consumption patterns of African Americans have had contradictory effects for blacks' efforts to gain economic and civil justice.

[83] "The Negro Market," 106–7.

[84] "Is the Frozen Food Retailer Freezing out the Negro Market?" *QFF* (June 1964): 106, 104. It is interesting to note that this author felt that supermarkets, by locating in suburban areas, were failing to serve this important market segment. The problem of urban black access to cheap, quality food would become even more pronounced after many chains fled inner cities following the 1967–68 riots. See Donald R. Marion, *Supermarkets in the City* (Amherst, 1977).

[85] "Religious Market for FF: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish," *QFF* (Dec. 1958): 40–2, 144–5.

[86] "Kosher Frozen Meals Form Basis of Successful Retail Business," *QFF* (Aug. 1963): 93, 94. The article left it to the reader's imagination to figure out the toppings on the Noah Zark pizza.

The frozen-food industry of the late 1950s also became interested in serving a variety of ethnic food tastes. *Chain Store Age*'s 1959 list of new frozen foods available to supermarket buyers included hundreds of "nationality products," ranging from borscht to chop suey to veal scaloppini.[87] Frozen-food promoters applauded the rapid increase in sales of "Mexican, Chinese, Jewish, Italian and other" foods.[88] One *Quick Frozen Foods* author suggested quick-freezing every distinctive ethnic entrée he could think of: What about French wild rabbit with wine, mushrooms, and tomato sauce? Perhaps British beef and kidney pie? German weisswursts? Swedish poached fish fillets in dill? Equadorian avocado puree? Puerto Rican pastelillos?[89] As the frozen-food industry continued its search for "untapped markets" in the 1960s, it moved further from its 1950s focus on providing traditional "American" staples like green peas and orange juice.

Marketers also came to view children and teenagers as distinct markets in the 1960s. One 1963 research study published in *Quick Frozen Foods* pointed out that children and teenagers rarely had the same eating habits or interests as their parents.[90] Children had to be treated as a unique category of consumer, such studies argued, because they were the primary influences on purchases of frozen foods such as orange juice and toaster waffles. Furthermore, they provided "a future harvest of pre-sold consumers" who would one day spend money of their own on their favorite frozen foods.[91] Teenagers composed an even more important market segment, since these Baby Boomers were rapidly becoming one of the largest consumer groups in the late 1950s, with plenty of money to spend and unprecedented freedom to do so. The publishers of *Seventeen* magazine carried out an extensive survey in 1960 and reported that "teen-age Susie . . . plans meals, shops for food, selects brands, switches brands. In short, she's mother's partner in running the home."[92] Besides making important food decisions, the psychology of the average teenage shopper prevented her from falling prey to the "guilt" that older women felt about "cooking the easy way," making the teenager a particularly important

[87] "Annual Frozen Food Merchandising Section," *CSA* (Apr. 1959): 171–2. See also June Owen, "Frozen Products: New Dishes on Market Vary from New England to Oriental Specialties," *New York Times*, 1 Apr. 1958, 37.

[88] "No End to Prepared Foods Climb as New Sales Patterns Emerge," *QFF* (Oct. 1957): 35.

[89] "National FF Market Can Expand in U.S. Via Adaptation of Foreign Favorites," *QFF* (Sept. 1962): 99–104.

[90] "Who Eats Frozen Dinners?" *QFF* (Mar. 1963): 86.

[91] "Children's Preferences Determine Growth of Many Frozen Items," *QFF* (June 1961): 40–2.

[92] "The Teen-Age Market for Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Mar. 1960): 141–2.

"untapped" buyer.[93] Frozen-food packers like Libby consequently began targeting teenage girls in the 1960s in advertisements that, for instance, pitched frozen orange juice as a cure for acne or as an essential drink for dance parties.[94]

Finally, the industry also returned to its most traditional market—relatively affluent consumers who looked for something convenient, yet elegant, to eat. This market presented an opportunity for high margins. The question of preserving profit for packers, distributors, and retailers of frozen foods became especially worrisome in the early 1960s, when a Harvard Business School case study claimed that frozen foods did not offer reasonable returns on investment for supermarkets.[95] The industry had championed the production of low-priced foods as the very reason for its existence and success in the 1950s, but by the 1960s some commentators had become convinced that "frozen foods are selling too cheaply."[96] Marketing studies performed by the industry in the late 1950s found that the growing numbers of both working-class and middle-class women who worked outside the home were willing to pay higher prices for the convenience of precooked frozen meals.[97] As a consequence, various advertisements, editorials, and articles in the industry's primary trade journal urged packers to develop "more *expensive* foods" in order to tap into the rising disposable incomes of many Americans in the 1960s.[98]

Established packers, such as Seabrook Farms, began adding fancy sauces to their vegetables, offering "'pepped up' vegetables" in the form of Creole succotash, chopped broccoli au gratin, lima beans in cheese, and hollandaise asparagus.[99] Birds Eye began a national advertising campaign in the early 1960s to showcase its new line of vegetables: Small Onions with Cream Sauce, Rice and Peas with Mushrooms, and Peas and Potatoes with Cream Sauce promised to make "vegetables

[93] Ibid., 144.

[94] "Acne?," *Seventeen* (Mar. 1962): 158; "What Does Orange Juice Have to Do with You and Your Beautiful Skin?," *Seventeen* (Feb. 1963): 153; "Cook for Fun . . . Eat for Beauty!," *Seventeen* (Sep. 1963): 165; "Party Line-Up?," *Seventeen* (May. 1963): 164–5.

[95] John E. Bingham, C. Richard Kramlich, and John D. Leland Jr., *Are Frozen Foods Profitable for Supermarkets?* (Boston, 1960).

[96] "Just How Profitable Is the Frozen Food Department?" *QFF* (May 1962): 174.

[97] "No End to Prepared Foods Climb," 35; "Consumer Attitudes towards Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Oct. 1960): 86–96; "Frozen Fruits Widen Sales Base among Lower Income Groups," *QFF* (Mar. 1957): 44.

[98] E. W. Williams, "Frozen Foods Forum," *QFF* (Nov. 1958): 27; "Future of Frozen Foods Is in Higher Quality, Higher Priced Products," *QFF* (Sept. 1964): 186; quote is from "Retailers Advised to Get Set for Rise in Demand for Prepared Frozen Foods," *QFF* (Aug. 1958): 67.

[99] "Sauce Varieties other than Butter Create Plus Sales for Prepared Vegetable Packer," *QFF* (Nov. 1964): 81.

as exciting as the rest of your meal."[100] These "exciting" vegetables added to the presumably boring items that Birds Eye had been packaging in the 1950s, such as peas, chopped spinach, lima beans, plain potatoes, berries, orange juice, and fish sticks.[101] Green Giant, the major canning company that had previously been reluctant to produce frozen foods, entered the market in 1962 with a line of specialty frozen items, including a new "boil-in-bag" package that offered convenience for a price.[102] Smaller companies also joined the fray. The California & Washington Frozen Food Company of San Francisco, for instance, made a name for itself in the late 1950s as a provider of "only premium quality products." Its "gourmet-type" foods included Italian green beans—which it had been the first in the industry to pack—and sweet early-spring green peas.[103] Supermarkets began carrying a greater variety of these high-end frozen foods. As *Chain Store Age* noted in 1959, the number of new frozen foods in the market had increased 20 percent in the last year, mostly due to the introduction of new premium and gourmet lines.[104]

Conclusion

This history of frozen-food marketing demonstrates how mass marketing can offer a remarkably dynamic mechanism for expressing changing visions of the ideal "American way of life." The postwar frozen-food industry delivered incredible volumes of convenient and economical food to American consumers. As a consequence, frozen foods changed quickly from being considered novelty items to constituting staples of the American diet in the late 1940s. Many consumers of the 1950s benefited materially from the industry's commitment to providing convenience and nutrition at low prices. In the 1950s, producers made low-cost goods suitable for sale to a mass market but developed advertising that primarily courted only middle-class suburbanites interested in convenience and quality. This strategy was surprisingly short lived, largely because it failed to convince many potential consumers that frozen foods were truly good values. In their search for more profits in the late 1950s, the industry came to recognize a variety of consumer needs

[100] "Why Should Vegetables Be the 'Quiet Corner' of Your Plate?" *Ladies' Home Journal*, Sept. 1963, 38.

[101] General Foods, *Annual Report*, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958.

[102] Green Giant Co., *Annual Report*, 1962.

[103] "Quality Packer's Soaring Sales Prove that Upgrading Pays," *QFF* (Feb. 1958): 33.

[104] "Annual Frozen Food Merchandising Section," *CSA* (Apr. 1959): 160.

and interests and began to see urban blacks, teenagers, and working women, among others, as important customers. In doing this, frozen-food marketers were surprisingly prescient, especially for an industry that had once lagged far behind other industries in developing a successful mass-marketing strategy. Furthermore, by packaging and selling new products based on their changing understanding of the composition of American consumer society, frozen-food marketers helped to encourage awareness of the growing diversity of tastes and cultures that made up the buying public.