

Experiment Station Dietary Studies Prior to World War II: A Bibliography for the Study of Changing American Food Habits and Diet Over Time¹

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ABSTRACT Diaries reported by previous generations of researchers, originally collected to advance the science of human nutrition, now have considerable value as primary historical documents. USDA experiment station reports and bulletins represent the single largest collection of such documents. Our annotated bibliography of experiment station studies is meant to facilitate their use in historical and other diachronic studies of American food habits and diet. *J. Nutr.* 128: 1253-1256, 1998.

KEY WORDS: • *American food habits* • *diet history* • *agricultural experiment stations*

The bibliography presented here contains references to studies of the American diet from the earliest days of fieldwork to the beginning of World War II. Its purpose is to draw attention to the great wealth of history produced as the unintended legacy of early dietary studies.

Field scientists always write history whether they are aware of it or not. Depending on the subject, it may be natural history or cultural history, but seldom is it the main purpose of the work. The science stands to the fore. The history emerges from the background of facts. Although collected to address current issues, the data sooner or later become matters of the past.

Human nutritional data became subject to this ineluctable process once investigators stepped out of their laboratories to record what people ordinarily ate. The discipline at that moment took on an ethnographic dimension and in the process, began producing a stream of papers and monographs destined in time to become primary historical documents. Today those documents go back more than 100 years. There have been immense changes in the science. What was conceptually and methodologically leading edge a century ago has less worth as far as today's work is concerned. But, yesteryear's field data remain valuable, particularly in the eyes of those concerned with developing diachronic perspectives on food habits and diet.

The diaries collected by previous generations of researchers should be of utmost interest along those disciplinary borders where nutrition, anthropology and history meet. The past 25 years have witnessed the development of cultural nutrition, nutritional anthropology and a florescence of food and nutrition-related historical studies. Yet, there appears to be little awareness from any quarter of the wealth of reliable, systematically collected information that lies waiting in decades-old field reports. These data beg to be recycled into social and

historical investigations and the kind of evolutionary food systems research envisioned by Jerome (1981).

We see our bibliography as helping facilitate this. It focuses on dietary studies conducted under the auspices of the USDA Office of Experiment Stations and its state affiliates. We exclude other works in the interest of economy. Were we to include experiment station projects dealing with related topics such as cooking or food budgets, the bibliography would more than double in length. It would likely double again were we to include reports appearing under the imprint of other organizations.

Although the construction of an even more extensive list of works remains a goal, there is no question that the dietary research of the experiment stations is the place to begin. Altogether, experiment station reports and bulletins represent the largest body of work about food intake. The stations initiated and published nearly all of the very early studies. The data are easily situated in fairly precise social context and analyzed in light of other historical materials because researchers for many years reported consumption by household instead of lumping data together. In some studies, such as the work of Atwater and Woods (1897) on black families in Alabama, the report itself contains considerable information about the economic and social environment. Knowledge of local conditions enviroing food habits and nutrition received a big boost in the mid-1920s when the experiment stations undertook work in the areas of home economics and rural sociology.

Our citations come from the *Experiment Station Record*, *Agricola* and various other sources. The *Experiment Station Record*, the richest source of references, was published by the Office of Experiment Stations from 1889 until 1946. It ran though 95 volumes, providing an on-going account of research attuned to agricultural and rural interests. *The Bibliography of Agriculture* superseded it and continues to be published both under its own name and, in electronic form, as *Agricola*. Citations to many older dietary studies can be found in *Agricola* thanks to a retrospective project at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Thomas 1988).

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Our bibliography orders citations by date. The dates cluster into two periods. The first, running from 1891 through 1911, can be referred to aptly as the "Atwater Period." W. O. Atwater originated American field investigations and set the standards for the period. Research dealt with various individuals and groups, but most often the unit of study was the family household. Atwater's method was to weigh the food on hand and all of the food entering the house for at least a week. Researchers calculated the quantity consumed by deducting from the total weight whatever went out the door as waste and the food remaining at the end of the study. Reports usually included a brief description of household members, their activity levels, a list of the foods consumed, an analysis of the foods, and tables showing the energy, carbohydrates, fats, and protein consumed per 150-pound, moderately active, adult male (or his equivalent) per day.

The second period of station dietary studies began in 1926. At this point home economists and rural sociologists brought diverse formulas to the enterprise; generally speaking, however, the use of household account books, recall interviews and survey questionnaires expanded the scope of inquiry beyond a handful of households. Nutritionally, protein and energy were central but not fats or carbohydrates as such. Researchers added data on vitamins and minerals as knowledge increased, rated diets against then current recommendations and made the cost of food a matter of even greater concern than before.

Between 1911 and 1926, experiment station publications contained no reports of dietary studies. What is more, outside the USDA, relatively little appeared in print. Still, researchers were not entirely inactive. Sherman and Gillett (1917), for example, published 102 urban dietaries, and the Women's Educational and Industrial Union (1917) released its findings about the diets of Boston's working women.

Our annotations, in keeping with our purpose, are concerned less with methods and findings than with situating subjects geographically, socially and culturally. The inclusion of studies published by other agencies certainly will increase the diversity of subjects. Nevertheless, as far as experiment station works are concerned, we believe our bibliography is nearly complete and contains all of the major landmarks for studying dietary changes over a period of dramatic developments in American society and culture at large.

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