

# Death in a Pot

"Death in a Pot," *Bulletin of the North Carolina Board of Health*, 15:2 (1900), 15-16.

## As you read...

This article, republished by the North Carolina State Board of Health from the *N. Y. Medical Times*, informed the public about health hazards associated with new, and devious, ways of processing and packaging food.

The North Carolina State Board of Health was established in 1877. At the time, however, the board received very little funding from the state legislature and it was relatively ineffective.

In the late nineteenth century, Americans became increasingly concerned with public health — with limiting the spread of disease and with educating people on how to live healthier lives. The North Carolina State Board of Health was established in 1877, but received little funding at first and was not very effective. By the 1890s, concern about public health had grown, and the State Board of Health received more funding and took on a broader mission. (You can read more about the history of the State Board of Health (see <http://www.records.ncdcr.gov/schedules/dhhs.htm#hist>) from the State Archives' website.

## FOOD SAFETY

One area of public health that received great attention at the turn of the twentieth century was the quality and safety of food. The growth of industry and railroads had led to changes in the way food was bought and sold: Food was increasingly being processed in large factories and then shipped to stores across the United States. As it is today, canned and processed food was cheap and convenient, and consumers were also attracted by its novelty.

But industrial-scale food processing created problems for consumers. There was no way for most consumers to know what was in those cans or how it had been produced. Consumers often bought the cheapest available product, and so processors competed to cut costs — often in ways that were dangerous to workers and harmful to consumers' health. Local grocers, bakers, or millers might have felt personally responsible for the well-being of people in their communities, but owners of factories in distant cities too often did not. And in 1900, there were no laws that regulated how food was produced or sold.

At about the same time, doctors began applying the germ theory of disease (the idea that disease was spread by bacteria and viruses) to food safety. To prevent disease, they studied how germs spread through food, sewage, garbage, and between infected persons. Doctors and reformers preached the importance of clean, safe food and encouraged state and federal governments to pass laws that regulated the quality of food and the disposal of waste and sewage.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What different types of chemicals were being added to food?
2. How many different types of foods were being altered by the food processing company?
3. What were the negative consequences of these chemicals to the health of the consumer?

4. How did the authors of this article propose to solve the problem of contaminated food? Who did they think should be in charge of investigating the quality of food?
5. How would you feel if you learned the food you ate was being altered with these types of substances? What would you try to do to end these practices?

Such was the title of a treatise published in England in 1820, calling attention to the adulteration of food and its often injurious effects upon the system. Owing to chemical discoveries the facilities for adulterating food within the past few years have been much greater than ever before, from the fact that almost every variety of food is now put up in enormous quantities in cans, and spices of every kind pulverized and sold to the public in small packages, so that their purity can only be detected by careful analysis. Some of these adulterations are comparatively harmless, simply decreasing the strength and value of the product, but others, which are more commonly used in the finer quality of goods, disguise their real condition, and by their drug action disturb the digestion and poison the blood.

An article in the *Lancet*, of April 22, speaks of meat extracts of “vile origin,” showing they are sometimes made of putrid liver and offal, and that such filthy material is fabricated unto a toothsome paste, the use of deodorizers and subtle flavoring material having been placed at the disposal of offal-mongers by the advance of chemical knowledge. Of course, cooking would destroy most noxious germs, but their products, the poisonous ptomains, would remain and their presence in an extract would cause very serious symptoms of poisoning. The proceedings of the War Investigating Committee called the nation’s attention to the action of adulterated food, and if it was productive of no other benefit, it led to official reports in several States of the alarming extent to which the adulteration had been carried with well-localized cases of poisonous results.

Mr. Wells, the Pennsylvania Food and Dairy Commissioner, states that chemical companies have agents traveling all over the state selling to butchers chemicals for preserving meat. The packages are labeled, telling how they are to be used. And some of them are used when the purification has already commenced. In the last annual report of the Connecticut Experimental Station it is stated that of sixty-three samples of jellies, two-thirds were adulterated, not only with starch and glucose, but with aniline dye and salicylic acid. Out of forty samples of marmalades and jams only three were pure. Of forty-seven samples of beer and ale, twelve contained salicylic acid, and nineteen samples of sausages and oysters were found embalmed by boric acid. Salicylic acid as a food preservative has been forbidden by several European governments. Here it is largely used by canners and butchers. The Department of Agriculture found it in fifteen out of twenty samples of string beans, in ten out of twelve samples of baked beans, and in twenty out of forty-one cases of corn. Is it any wonder, in face of this adulteration of so many of the common articles of daily food, that so much dyspepsia and general derangement of the system, produced by it, exists to so large an extent in our populous towns and cities? Salicylic acid, the favorite preservative used, has been pronounced by the Paris Academy of Medicine not only provocative of, but especially injurious to, dyspeptics. The bodily sufferings of hosts of individuals, for which no adequate cause is assigned, are undoubtedly due in many, very many, cases, to the systemic food poisoning for the profit of dishonest dealers. The coal-tar products are used to a large extent in cheap confectionery, and in the flavoring extracts of

the kitchen. In a Western hotel nearly all the guests became sick, and the cause was traced to the cheap coal-tar extracts used in the kitchen. To remedy this wholesale poisoning from adulterated food it has been suggested that a national food commission be organized with the power of examining manufactured products and testifying as to their quality, these products of food and drink to have on printed labels the contents of the packages. Every physician, if properly trained in laboratory work, would be entirely competent to determine the condition of every product of food or drink, as it regards adulteration, submitted to him. But to accomplish this, more efficient instruction should be given in chemical analysis in our medical colleges, and questions introduced into the State medical examinations fully testing the knowledge of students in the action of drugs used in all adulterations connected with food and drink, and their ability to detect these poisons by the necessary unfailing scientific tests. The examination by the State Board of Examiners in this department of medical studies should be so minute and so exhaustive as to leave no doubt that the student was thoroughly competent for all the details of the work as it regards examination, and the medical action of the materials used upon the human system. We respectfully call attention of the Regents<sup>1</sup> to the importance of this suggestion.

–*N. Y. Medical Times*

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## Notes

1. The New York State Board of Regents, which oversees all educational activities within the state (including those at university medical schools).