

Information for Consumers

By Ruth Moyle

BACK IN NOVEMBER our Home Economics Extension Service was invited to participate in a "Farm City Forum" sponsored by the Kiwanis Club of South Peterborough. The subject to be discussed was "The Farmer and the Consumer" and as you would gather, Miss McKercher was asked to send some one to speak for the consumer. One member on this panel represented the farmer, one spoke for the packagers and one for the retailers, and I was there to speak for you, the consumer.

As sometimes occurs in discussions such as this, the representative of both packagers and retailers pointed out to the consumer, "We have never had it as good as we have it to-day". We were reminded how little food costs have risen in proportion to the rise in costs of other commodities. We were told how wonderfully well modern packaging and processing serves us and how essential and important advertising is.

Would you be interested in hearing what I had to say for you, the consumer? I do hope you will approve.

First I emphasized the fact that today's informed consumer is sympathetic to the farmer, that we are very aware he cannot possibly stay in business unless his returns are reasonable and comparable to other fields of endeavour.

I agreed enthusiastically that we are fortunate in Canada to-day. We are happy with the seasonal foods that are available to us the year round. We like the convenience and the sanitation of packaged foods. Many of us are quite willing to pay extra for labour-saving, time-saving, ready-to-serve and eat foods. And generally we realize the increased cost of labour, taxes, equipment, processing, marketing and merchandising have inevitably added to the cost of food.

But at the same time women to-day are beginning to question the wide divergence that exists between the prices we pay and the prices the farmer receives for his produce. We are beginning to feel we are paying more and more for services, for sales promotions and sales gimmicks (that we don't need or even want) rather than being given the much-to-be-preferred advantage of lower food prices.

What are some of these things we would gladly do without?

Well, packaging pleases us, but up to a certain point only.

USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) figures show—and I would guess

they are reasonably similar in Canada, that when an American family spends \$20.00 on food, from \$1.50 to \$2.00 goes for the package. Or from \$72.00 to \$96.00 goes into the garbage pail each year. That's a lot of money and we'd be happy to see much of the packaging kept to the minimum. Lots of articles to-day don't need all the wrappings, two or three of them plus the overwrap that's designed solely to catch our eye, our fancy and our dollar.

I also said we do not like the super-gigantic packages that have no corresponding economy in price. We don't like packages marked with fractional and complicated weights, measures and prices. Who wants to get out paper and pencil and, in the crowded aisle of a busy supermarket, work out the comparative cost per pound of 8 3/8 ounces at 5 1/3c an ounce? Such figures as these make it practically impossible to shop on a price basis.

It is said promotional expenses, packaging, advertising, etc. have increased 400% over a very short time. It is only realistic for us to expect, therefore, that we consumers are carrying a good share of that added cost.

When it came to advertising, I suggested it is necessary to differentiate between the different kinds. We are very happy to have that type which stores and supermarkets give us daily or weekly—factual information on sizes, grades, variety, trade names and prices. There is the other kind of advertising, however, that I for one am bored with and tired of—that kind which only conditions us to buy so that we become "conditioned", not "informed", consumers. There is one that sticks in my mind especially—a certain product was advertised as the one with the "2 or 3 dimensional flavour", whatever that means or tastes like!

Consumers want information but we want it to be informative, useful and educational. We deplore that which only sells us. And we don't like pressures to buy placed on us through pressures on the children. A friend of mine calls that "the lowest form of advertising."

Speaking along this line to an executive of a large supermarket chain, I was told: "But advertising is only a natural thing. It's something we all do from the cradle on. A baby cries and advertises his needs and wants and they are supplied at once." My answer to this was: "That may be true but just as a mother learns to turn a deaf ear to a crying, complaining child, so we women now, at long last, are beginning to build up a protective indifference to these undesirable and sometimes distasteful kinds of sales promotion and advertising, at the same time objecting heartily to the fact that we have to pay for some of it when we pay for our food."