

The Editor's Corner

THE LOWLY CABBAGE IN THE LIMELIGHT

The cabbage, one of our basic vegetables, is having its day. In fact news about this succulent member of the vegetable world is on a par with the abdication of King Michael of Rumania, the Arab-Jewish clashes in Palestine and the discovery of oil at Tilbury if we can judge from the prominence accorded it in current issues of the daily newspapers. And what has caused it all — a price increase of course, which has been caused by an import restriction imposed by Ottawa on shipments from the United States, and a consequent shortage of supply which cannot fulfil the present demand.

In order to trace the story from its source, we have asked Dick Licata, our local vegetable and fruit impresario to collaborate on an item which might clear up a few points of conjecture in the reader's mind, more particularly about cabbages, but also some generalizations on the fresh fruit and vegetable business as affected by the import ban.

In Ontario, the main distributing centre for fruits and vegetables, both domestic and imported, is the Toronto wholesale fruit market. Most commodities are sold on commission, some are bought outright and resold when commission goods are not available. Toronto, being the largest market, brings the most and the biggest buyers to the metropolis. Wholesalers and retailers travel there in truck and tractor trailers from as far as North Bay, Windsor, Niagara Falls and Kingston. For this reason Toronto is the pulse for price-setting of fruits and vegetables in Ontario, and this price like everything else adheres more or less rigidly to the laws of supply and demand.

PRICES SET IN FALL SEASON

In October and November, root vegetables begin to be brought in from the fields. They are stored either in outside pits, root cellars or in cold storage. To use cabbage as a representative of the vegetable world, when supplies are plentiful the price is usually set at 60c to 75c a case, according to quality. Then as the season advances, prices increase so that by January the price is generally around \$1.50. When imported cabbages begin to arrive in that month, the demand for the old domestic product falls off to nil and prices drop to as low as 50c a crate, or they are dumped back on the fields as fertilizer. Any grower who happens to have stocks on hand stands to lose heavily.

So much are we dependent on our American neighbour that beginning in December, our consumption of imported vegetables is 50 per cent, increasing by April to 100 per cent. The import ban, effective November 15th, came at the worst possible time. Cabbages selling the previous day for \$1.25 a case were boosted to \$2.50 (the same with every other vegetable affected). Wild speculations, price advances and profiteering was experienced the following week by the Toronto Wholesale market. As vegetable stocks are usually on hand a week ahead, the wholesaler profiteered, the farmer reaped none of the increase. As soon as stocks on hand were used up, supplies were depleted to an all-time low — none. From this time on the grower held the reins and the wholesaler paying the highest price got the goods. With cabbages at the present time selling for \$4.50 to \$5.50 a case, the growers are getting the extra profits, not the wholesaler or retailer.

WHY PRICES VARY

There are always differences in cost price of similar articles which reflects itself in the selling price. If the retailer purchases direct from the farmer his cost might be 10c a pound and if bought from a wholesaler, 12c a pound. The retail price would thus vary from 13c to 15c. A six-pound cabbage could then sell for anywhere from 78c to 90c, depending on where the retailer made his purchase. On the same market there could be small or soft cabbages weighing a pound or less, selling for as low as 10c.

Our daily newspapers have been guilty of sensational journalism in their comparisons with prices at Toronto's St. Lawrence Market and the Hamilton Market with higher prices in retail stores. They have not pointed out the proper picture — that these markets are supplied by small farmers and hucksters with profit motive and that purchasers are not regular customers but a transient trade. At least half the merchandise on these markets is of inferior quality, left over after tradespeople have purchased for their stores. Reporters covering these markets have not included this important item of quality in their stories — one might by the same token make misleading comparisons between a four dollar shirt and a dollar fifty shirt, a steak and a pot roast.

MERCHANTS DESERVE CONFIDENCE

With publication of sensational stories which distort the true picture, daily newspapers have put the legitimate merchant in a position where he comes in for much unjustifiable criticism. Common sense would tell us that a merchant with an established business values too much his customer relations to profiteer at their expense. Market hucksters can get away with this because of the transient nature of their trade, for there are always new buyers in search of bargains and when they get stung there are always others to take their place.

CLARIFICATION NEEDED

The latest statement quoted from Ottawa by Hon. Douglas Abbott is that the fruit and vegetable ban will be continued throughout the winter. This does not go far enough. It will be necessary for Ottawa to determine a long-range policy in order that growers on both sides of the border may plan their crops accordingly. If import bans are to be maintained into next winter, it would mean the American grower must either seek another market or cut down on his production of banned items, and the Canadian grower can safely increase his production. If both parties do this and the ban is later lifted, it will mean that there will be a shortage of imported vegetables and consumers will be paying high prices for an inferior storage product which itself will be scarce, for we cannot expect all our domestic growers to take too great a risk without assurance from the proper sources that conditions will not change. Now is the time for the country's economy to be planned in order to avoid repetition of a situation which has hit every consumer where it hurts — square in the centre of the pocket book.

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