

2006

20 Diets in West Chester during the Great Depression

Derek Shugar

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest



Part of the [Public History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shugar, D. (2006). 20 Diets in West Chester during the Great Depression. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest/79

This The Depression of the 1930s is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of West Chester, Pennsylvania by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wccressler@wcupa.edu.



Diets in West Chester during the Great Depression

Copyright 2006 by Derek Shugar.

Web adaptation copyright 2007 by Jim Jones

When faced with the menace of poverty, people are forced to alter their lives in ways that will ensure their survival. Changing one's diet is often a way to reduce the costs of living. During the economic stress of the Great Depression, how did the residents of West Chester alter their diets? What aid was available to the needy and what did the community do to help each other through this difficult episode?

In order to tell the story of how the residents of West Chester ate during the Great Depression, a variety of sources can be consulted. A survey of notes taken from the West Chester *Daily Local News* between the years of 1929 and 1933 reveals the local media's response to the financial hardships of West Chester residents, often giving suggestions for alternative methods of food preparation and reporting on various food aid initiatives. A valuable primary source for research on diets comes directly from West Chester's grocers, who placed ads for their businesses in the *Daily Local News* displaying prices, and in the West Chester Business Directories from 1929 through 1933 listing their addresses and telephone numbers. Interviews are also an indispensable primary source, residents of West Chester who lived through the Great Depression often spoke about how they ate. These sources allow researchers to discover the ways in which West Chester residents changed their diets in order to survive during the Great Depression.

Altering one's diet to compensate for economic stress is done typically by limiting the quantity, quality, and variety of food consumed and purchased. Limiting these aspects of a diet can result in starvation, food related illnesses, and malnutrition. Malnutrition was frequently addressed by the media of West Chester, and was the problem residents of West Chester most often faced, with quantity and quality of affordable food being less urgent issues. West

Chester residents sought not only the essentials needed to survive, but the essentials of a diet that would be nutritionally adequate. A *Daily Local News* article published in March of 1933 gave suggestions about how to avoid "winter anemia" by enhancing one's diet with generous portions of seafood, greens, and cocoa. In that same month, the *Daily Local News* listed foods that were the "essentials of a low-cost budget" such as cheese, milk, tomatoes, oranges, and potatoes. Although West Chester residents were being forced to purchase more cost-effective essential foods, they could balance their diet through careful planning.

An examination of advertisements from the West Chester *Daily Local News* revealed the costs and availabilities of groceries in West Chester during the early 1930s. Although the vast majority of advertisement space was devoted to specialty foods such as candies, special cuts of meat and exotic fruits, the price of basic food items such as bread, eggs, and cheese was allotted far more advertisement space on average in 1932 than in 1930 at the onset of the Great Depression. The price of bread dropped between these years from an advertised nine cents per loaf to three loaves for eight cents. The price of cheese also dropped sharply from an average twenty-nine cents per pound to sixteen cents per pound and received large, bold listings in advertisements in 1932. Across the nation, food prices during the great depression were falling, with corn being "cheaper to burn than coal" at eight cents per bushel, and with farmers calling "farm holidays" and slaughtering their own animals prematurely to fight plummeting prices.⁽¹⁾ This led to cheaper prices in the suburb of West Chester while rural areas faced with disaster.

However, not all grocers advertised their businesses. Food could also be purchased in West Chester during the Great Depression at local "corner stores". In an interview with West Chester resident Martha Stanley conducted by Jim Jones, Stanley described her grocery shopping options: "We had corner stores. Up there [gestured towards Matlack Street], old Leb Brown, and Eagle Store. There weren't any chain stores around."⁽²⁾ Affordable food was certainly available for purchase, but how to use the essentials of a balanced diet to prepare cost-effective meals was a skill that had to be learned with the Borough's new economic tension during the Great Depression.

The basic food elements of a diet were changing, but the preparation of food also had to be changed in response to the Great Depression. Efforts to educate the people of West Chester about how to prepare foods that would serve them both nutritionally and economically were made in the early 1930s. In March, 1933 the *Daily Local News* sponsored an extremely popular free

cooking school for women of the town in which baskets of food were given away daily. In December of the same year twenty women sponsored by the Chester County Emergency Child Health Committee demonstrated how to make low-cost meals to residents.

Although proper nutrition and variety of food were primary concerns, quantity was as well. Families on food relief in the borough consistently outnumbered the baskets of food distributed. Families during this time turned to more conventional methods of acquiring food, such as hunting. In 1930 the *Daily Local News* reported that "more deer than ever before" had been displayed in the county.⁽³⁾ Hunting in the swamps surrounding West Chester was also a way to cut down food costs, in an interview with West Chester resident Jack Harvey conducted by Jim Jones, Harvey described his Uncle's hunting methods: "Uncle Jum, they could almost live off the land. In the summertime, they'd hunt frogs and fish, all the year hunting and trapping."⁽⁴⁾ In another interview with West Chester resident Sarge Clark conducted by Jim Jones, the hunting of groundhogs was described as a way to provide food for needy "colored" residents: "they used to eat groundhogs. People around here used to shoot the groundhogs for fun and take them up and dump them at that [sounds like] "High Corner" place in the West End and the black used to come and pick them up and eat them."⁽⁵⁾ This not only suggests more residents were using hunting to replace grocery shopping, but also that the black residents of the town may have not received the same food aid as white residents. Diets in West Chester were not only being limited in variety, but certainly quantity as well.

Survival in West Chester during the Great Depression meant sacrifice, but many times personal sacrifice alone was not enough. For the nearly three and a half hundred families in West Chester receiving food aid, their survival depended on relief from their government and the charity of their fellow citizens. Hunger relief from the government came from all three levels: federal, state, and local. On the federal level, the United States Senate took out a five-hundred million dollar loan to provide food for the needy in March of 1933 following the inauguration of new President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.⁽⁶⁾ Relief from a more local authority came in July of 1932 when the Town Planning Council of West Chester's Borough Council announced that it would put unemployed residents to work on small local projects and pay them with food rather than an actual wage.⁽⁷⁾ In February 1933 the initiative was carried out as families worked to create a cinder walkway to the Chester County Hospital and cleaned up Hoopes Park in order to receive food baskets as aid.⁽⁸⁾ Chester County also worked to provide food aid when it approved

the use of store orders with which needy residents of the county could still purchase food using the store orders as currency with the state compensating the stores.⁽⁹⁾ Cooperation on all three levels of government from many aid boards and agencies was essential if adequate relief was to reach the impoverished and the hungry.

Yet, not all residents in West Chester were pleased with the arrival of government food aid. Grocers from the Borough decided to travel to the state capital in Harrisburg as a group to voice their concerns about the distribution of food aid in West Chester in March of 1933.⁽¹⁰⁾ However, in that same month the *Daily Local News* described business as "good" for grocers but "spotty" in other areas as part of its daily "Random Notes" column.⁽¹¹⁾ Government aid was available, but still not fully adequate. In March, 1933 West Chester was believed to have reached its "relief peak" of 348 families receiving food aid, with only 301 baskets of food aid distributed to those families.⁽¹²⁾ When government aid was not enough to satisfy the needs of citizens affected by the Great Depression, communities organized to provide their own aid.

The community of West Chester consistently pulled together aid for its hungry throughout the early 1930s. Organizations like the West Chester Civic Association and both the Lion's and Rotary Clubs donated food. Chester County Hospital organized a "donation day" in November of 1933 in which they collected groceries for large families in need.⁽¹³⁾ Churches organized to provide food aid as well, the St. Matthew's Church held a "reform" dinner which provided free a free turkey dinner to all 450 residents attending.⁽¹⁴⁾ The issue of the diets of children was also of great concern in West Chester. 126 children who were not able to receive a Thanksgiving dinner received meals from the local Salvation Army in December, 1933 at the Masonic Hall.⁽¹⁵⁾

With significant community charity activity occurring within the Borough, the citizens of West Chester saw the need of other areas hurt by the Great Depression as well. Profits of a dinner and flower sale held by the High Street Friends Meeting were sent to the Kentucky Mining regions.⁽¹⁶⁾ This fund raiser's purpose suggests that the some residents of West Chester thought the town had covered the needs of many of its own citizens, and recognized the needs of areas less fortunate than their own. West Chester's status as a manufacturing town saved it from the difficult obstacles faced by many agricultural towns across the nation that dealt with falling crop prices, poor land management, and natural disasters during the Great Depression. By diverting aid money to distant parts of the country that could have been used

locally to feed West Chester residents, these residents either felt the town was providing adequate food aid to its citizens, or did not realize the ongoing need for aid in West Chester.

Citizens of West Chester during the early 1930s were no different from most towns in the United States during the Great Depression in that they experienced the need to restrict their diets. Hundreds of families in the Borough received food aid from both the government and the community. West Chester was certainly more fortunate than many towns in the United States in the early 1930s, and some residents even sent food aid to other areas of the nation they thought were in greater need. Yet, West Chester may not have fully realized the needs of all its citizens, especially those of its minority residents. Although West Chester was a fortunate town during the Great Depression, it still had many residents in need of food aid as it pulled together to overcome the obstacles of the Great Depression.

Bibliography

Documentary Sources

Advertisements in *Daily Local News*, 1929 through 1933, available on microfilm at the West Chester University library and the Chester County Historical Society.

West Chester Business Directories, 1929 through 1933, available at the Chester County Historical Society.

On-Line Sources

Clark, T. Walter. Interview by James A. Jones (West Chester, PA, September 9, 1996).

Fraser, David. "Notes on *Daily Local News*" (December 1930).

Harvey, Jack and Harvey, Charlotte. Interview by James A. Jones (West Chester, March 30, 1996).

Jones, Jim. "Notes on Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*" (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970). Location: West Chester University library 4th floor, WCU#309.173 T318.

Pasquarello, Michael. "Notes on *Daily Local News*" (July 1932).

Sauerwald, John. "Notes on *Daily Local News*" (February 1933).

Shugar, Derek. "Notes on *Daily Local News*" (March 1933).

Stanley, Martha Gertrude and Anne Gincley. Interview by James A. Jones (West Chester, March 29, 1996)

Weering, Chris. "Notes on *Daily Local News*" (November 1933).

Williamson, Joseph. "Notes on *Daily Local News*" (December 1933).

Reference Notes

1. Jim Jones, "Notes on Studs Terkel, Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 213-235 *passim*.
2. Martha Gertrude Gincley Stanley and Anne Gincley, interview by James A. Jones (West Chester, March 29, 1996).]
3. David Fraser, Notes on *Daily Local News*" (December 6, 1930).
4. Jack and Charlotte Harvey, interview by James A. Jones (West Chester, March 30, 1996).
5. T. Walter "Sarge" Clark, interview by James A. Jones (West Chester, PA, September 9, 1996).
6. Derek Shugar, Notes on *Daily Local News* (March 28, 1933).
7. Michael Pasquarello, Notes on *Daily Local News* (July 14, 1932).
8. John Sauerwald, Notes on *Daily Local News* (February 17, 1933).
9. Michael Pasquarello, Notes on *Daily Local News* (July 21, 1932).
10. Derek Shugar, Notes on *Daily Local News* (March 2, 1933).
11. Derek Shugar, Notes on *Daily Local News* (March 9, 1933).
12. Derek Shugar, Notes on *Daily Local News* (March 24, 1933).
13. Chris Weering, Notes on *Daily Local News* (November 20, 1933).
14. Derek Shugar, Notes on *Daily Local News* (March 16, 1933).
15. Joseph Williamson, Notes on *Daily Local News* (December 1, 1933).
16. Derek Shugar, Notes on *Daily Local News* (March 6, 1933).