**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Dr. Libby O’Connell – Food and WWI** (21m 21s)

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**2 speakers** (Theo Mayer, Libby O'Connel)

**[0:00:11]**

**Theo Mayer**: Welcome to the How World War I Changed America podcast series, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. I'm Theo Mayer, your host for this episode. Our subject today is food in World War I. As a famous slogan and poster of the time stated, "Food will win the war." With us today to cover this topic is the series' regular host, but today a guest, Dr. Libby O'Connell. Dr. O'Connell is a very diverse historian and person, the former chief historian at the History Channel, appointed as one of the 12 US world War I Centennial Commissioners, a key figure in the recently approved design of The National World War I Memorial in Washington DC, and an author of a book entitled The American Plate, A Culinary History In 100 Bites. Libby, it's wonderful to be exploring the subject with you today.

**[0:01:05]**

**Libby O'Connel**: I'm excited to go on this adventure with you, Theo.

**[0:01:09]**

**Theo Mayer**: Libby, as a historian, I know that you think that food is a wonderful paradigm through which to explore history. Can you explain that idea?

**[0:01:17]**

**Libby O'Connel**: Sure. I think one big problem we have in this country is people feeling distant from history. They don't quite get that personal connection. Food is a way to explore the past through something we all experience. My first job was at Plymouth Plantation, a living history museum on Cape Cod, and I worked in the food house. We were cooking food over an open hearth and I noticed that everybody stayed to ask questions because food was something that they had direct experience with. It's really a great way to get people engaged in history.

**[0:01:50]**

**Theo Mayer**: Okay. Let's move this to World War I. Unlike a lot of modern conflicts, World War I was a war that every citizen was expected to participate in, and part of that was through food conservation. Why was that and how did that play out?

**[0:02:04]**

**Libby O'Connel**: It played out differently in different countries, but I think throughout history, food has been used as a weapon in war. We see that very writ large in World War I with the blockades of Great Britain by Germany and the famous British blockade of Germany. There were lots of people in both countries that suffered from starvation and malnourishment, particularly in Germany. In the United States, the topic of food conservation was an important theme in engaging really mass mobilization of their citizenry, and that's something that sets World War I apart from all previous wars. Everyone was supposed to be involved and one way they could participate was through saving food, by producing more food, or by conserving food for the future. You chose certain foods not to eat, you chose to raise certain foods in your gardens, and you chose to conserve food, in a lot of cases, in jars. All different ways to help participate in the war effort by saving food.

**[0:03:13]**

**Theo Mayer**: Why did the government feel that that was important?

**[0:03:16]**

**Libby O'Connel**: Even before we'd gotten involved, there was the commission for the relief of Belgium. Belgium, of course, had been invaded by Germany and, what had been a prosperous middle-class country, became a country facing starvation. A brilliant young engineer named Herbert Hoover, who we'll hear about more later, headed up the committee for the relief of Belgium and he earnestly appealed to all Americans, from all walks of life, to contribute, to food drive, raising dollars, and contributing food to help with the starving Belgians. The food also eventually would go to our allies, the countries that became our allies when we joined the war in France, Britain. But initially, there was food being sent to civilians in Germany as well.

**[0:04:03]**

**Theo Mayer**: In the World War I effort, the Wilson administration had two sets of war effort created agencies collaborating on the food issue. George Creel's Committee on Public Information, and you mentioned Herbert Hoover and he wound up being asked to head the National Food Administration. Could you talk about those two agencies, and really about the two interesting guys behind them?

**[0:04:23]**

**Libby O'Connel**: Very interesting guys. We've heard a little bit about Herbert Hoover and his very effective leadership in the relief of Belgium, and then there's George Creel, who came from an advertising background, which was a new industry by the way. So he was the cutting edge of advertising and public relations, started up the Committee for Public Information, CPI. He was really something. He wrote a memoir as well, which makes for some pretty interesting reading. But he saw the use of propaganda as very important. He said, "Propaganda, not in the bad way, but in the way the Catholic church used to describe it, which was sending out the faithful, information that they can use to become more faithful." And that is a pretty good description of how he developed his propaganda. It was really to get to all citizens, encouraging men to sign up for the draft, encouraging men to enlist in the military, encouraging all men and women to sign up to work in munition plants or work for the war effort, and encouraging food conservation. There were three main themes, along with buying Liberty bonds. So those were the four focused drives of his propaganda. Hoover was the head of the National Food Administration and they focused strictly on food. They did the food conservation, increased food production, and moderate the consumption of certain foods, like wheat and meat, fats, sugar, all of those things were on the restricted list. The interesting thing to me about Hoover is that he did not believe in rationing. He just felt that it was important that people volunteer. They had a pretty effective campaign going throughout our participation in World War I and the year afterwards, so 1917 through 1919, he was encouraging people to be careful about what they ate, how they consumed the food, how they produced the food, and how they conserved the food. Those three themes were echoed over and over again in the posters, in the editorials, in the magazines. Between Creel and Hoover, they had great impact on public media. Of course, there were no TV, there was no radio. There were short form films shown at movie theaters. People didn't quite understand that these weren't little short movies. They didn't realize that they were advertisements or propaganda being used by the government encouraging people, "Don't eat beef, save the beef for the soldiers. Don't eat pork, but you could eat more corn. Don't eat wheat. Eat corn. Eat potatoes. Eat more vegetables." And then there were also, on state levels, people going into schools and universities and libraries, teaching men and women how to conserve food using what we would call mason jars, canning jams, vegetables, different things to eat that would last, as a way to preserve the harvest from your vegetable gardens. Everyone was supposed to have a vegetable garden, mostly they were called Liberty gardens. We think this was invented in World War II, but in fact it was invented in World War I, the idea that everyone should have a garden. If you didn't have room or a place for a garden, you should go over and help somebody who did. There were programs for getting school children involved, schools having school yard gardens, and the kids were encouraged to raise vegetables, to sell their vegetables, and then you use that money to buy war bonds or to contribute to causes to help buy food products for the soldiers.

**[0:07:57]**

**Theo Mayer**: That's good. Libby, there were a lot of slogans that came out in all that. What were some of them?

**[0:08:02]**

**Libby O'Connel**: The idea that you have meatless Mondays or wheatless Wednesdays, the idea of, "Food will win the war." "Food is the key to victory." This was really a propaganda effort aimed primarily at women. Women were encouraged to sign pledge cards saying that, in their household, these directives of conservation would be followed. They would hang their pledge card in their windows so that people could see they were engaged citizens, they were patriotic and this is how they could prove to their neighbors that they were part of this upswell of patriotism during World War I. The way a lot of women heard about this program, or got engaged, is through local outreach. Everyone from the Boy Scouts to the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Clubs for Women of Color, all sorts of different women's clubs were engaged in getting people to sign these pledges saying that they were patriotic and they were going to observe the recommendations of the National Food Administration.

**[0:09:06]**

**Theo Mayer**: Speaking of women, a lot of the men went off to fight and some of the women went into the fields to grow food. What about that?

**[0:09:14]**

**Libby O'Connel**: That was the Women's Land Army. It's interesting to see that, on state levels, the big state universities today, the agricultural colleges, offered fast training programs for women so they could get engaged in farming. The laborers left the fields. They were getting much better salaries in munition plants if they didn't join the military. So there were two different ways that the farm workers were leaving, one to the factories and one overseas. They needed more people. They actually had programs all over the country, but run on a state basis, for teenagers to get involved from high school, leave high school early and work on farms, and women as part of the Women's Land Army. You look at local newspapers from the time, there are lots of advertisements about join the Women's Land Army, or there's going to be a meeting on how you can get involved. When you think about it, we were involved in the war for such a short time that this was only an 18 month experience for, at the most, if you were engaged in the Land Army, but I think it changed the life for a lot of these women. It gave them a sense of purpose outside the home that they would not have had. It's funny to think of the positive social impact sometimes of war, which in this case, was particularly deadly, catastrophic, world tragedy in a way, but there were still things that happened on the social front that encouraged the growth of women's understanding of that possibility in their lives. It also changed the way people thought about food. They were encouraged to eat more vegetables. We don't think about Americans not eating their vegetables, generally, but in fact, because meat and bread were considered the staffs of life, maybe some dairy products, vegetables were not highly praised, or you don't have mothers all over America saying, "Don't forget to eat your vegetables," in 1911, but by World War I, vegetables became an addition to people's diets because you could grow them yourself. And people were beginning to learn about vitamins and the role of vegetables in keeping people healthy. So it's starting actually to shift the way people... Grains, they had more fresh vegetables. It's just a different way of eating.

**[0:11:22]**

**Theo Mayer**: Well, okay, so we talked about what people are eating at home and so forth, but let's touch on the subject of food in the military. We never had a standing army anywhere near the scale of what America amassed in World War I. So while the French and the British troops were kind of under nourished, our Doughboys were pretty well-fed, weren't they? How did they do that?

**[0:11:41]**

**Libby O'Connel**: Well, one thing to remember about what's going on in Europe is always an important factor in historical events and always underestimated if you ask me, is the role of the weather. And not only in Europe are you having devastation by acts of war, farmer's fields are being destroyed in battle. You have these enemies marching around stealing food supplies. You have terrible weather for growing things, right? It is cold and rainy the whole time. That's one reason why the battlefields get so muddy. But it also is an important factor in reducing the food supply in Europe. Meanwhile, in America, we're having very good weather for the farmers and they're expanding their farming capabilities in ways that will come to haunt them in the Dust Bowl 10 years later. However, our weather is great. The farmers are able to expand their fields, they're producing more food. The Army is buying it up and encouraging them to keep expanding. They've had very good experience and history in the Civil War. By the end of the Civil War, the federal troops, if they were at their home camps, were pretty well-fed and they'd learned how to develop traveling bakeries. We also emphasized the idea of getting good food to our soldiers through field kitchens and bringing these bakeries and food production to the boundaries of the battles in France. That is not to say that if you were out in the trenches, you'd be eating tons of fresh food. You weren't, but you were well-fed. There's plenty of food. We had the assets and we delivered it. The calorie intake of our soldiers was close to 4000 calories a day between three and 4000 calories a day, which they needed. When the British and French went to war against the Germans in 1914, originally they had adequate calorie provisions for them, but by the time we arrived, they were half what they would be required just to keep them fighting hard. So these were hungry troops. I wouldn't say the troops were all facing starvation, but morale can be deeply affected by the amount of food that's being consumed. And that's one thing the American government was very worried about. They were talking about it with their fellow leaders in the Allies. "Let's not let these guys get too hungry because it can lead to riots. It can lead to mutinies. It can lead to the dreaded worry of socialism." Remember that the Bolshevik revolution had broken out in Russia. Russia had gone over to the socialist side, communists. They were very worried. The West was very worried that after the war, Europe could be open to the expansion of communism. Food will help keep people happy and much less apt to riot or try to overthrow the government. So that's one reason why the United States is pouring food into Europe. The farmers are getting wealthy, some of it is stuff that we are donating. Some of it is stuff that we are charging for. Either way, it is working for the United States government, it's working for the United States marketplace and it's also helping to provide stability in those communities where a lack of food could make the society angry. People who can't feed their children, they tend to be pretty angry and way we were able to provide white bread to the French population was considered to be an important part in stabilizing the willingness of soldiers to fight and families to support their government.

**[0:15:09]**

**Theo Mayer**: Libby, famine and starvation was an endemic and a strategic part of the war in Europe and certainly a result. How bad was it?

**[0:15:17]**

**Libby O'Connel**: It was bad. It was particularly bad in three places. One was Belgium. That was the first place starvation and famine hit because from the first part of the opening salvos of the war, the Germans invaded Belgium and they started seeing severe food shortages right away because the crops were being destroyed and the stockpiles of food are being destroyed. This was a prosperous nation which suddenly found itself facing starvation for the first time. Of course, there was malnutrition in Great Britain. The Germans had a submarine warfare, keeping a blockade by submarines. Isolate Britain from imports. They had some starvation, but not as much as people who were just suffering from not getting enough food, not getting the right types of food. Particularly hit women hard and family groups. Wives and mothers would give the best amount of food to their husbands and to children and they would be the one who often suffered. The country that suffered almost as much as Belgium, I think would have been Germany. And in terms of the numbers, it's really pretty shocking. Of course, when you think about food as a weapon of war to us, ethically, that seems something unparalleled. But the truth is that has been used for millennial. Where you declare war, food is not off the table as a weapon. Germany was particularly hard hit by the British blockade. Over a million people died. 700000 of them because of direct starvation. They did not have enough food. And then there were more who were malnourished, who when getting diseases that may have been related to lack of food or lack of vitamins or just get a bad cold, but because you're so weakened by your malnourishment that it becomes a fatal situation. So it's over a million people are going to die from starvation and malnourishment together. They were very hard hit and it is a devastating weapon in wartime because soldiers see their families struggling to get enough food and that's something actually that is one of the causes of the French mutiny, the soldiers' mutinies in the early part of World War I when these soldiers worried that their families didn't have enough heat to keep their houses warm and weren't getting enough food. And it's hard to fight for your country if you feel that your country is letting your family down.

**[0:17:48]**

**Theo Mayer**: Well, looking forward from World War I, how did the efforts and strategies and approaches and lessons from World War I effect how we dealt with food and world war II?

**[0:17:57]**

**Libby O'Connel**: Well, the rationing in world war II was a lot more legalistic than the food campaigns in World War I. Partially because we adopted rationing and that was following a European model. But it is a way not only of getting people to participate in preserving food for soldiers, but also a way of getting people involved in the war effort. Are you going to be abiding by rationing regulation or are you going to go to the black market and be a bad citizen? I mean all of this sort of draws on your patriotism and your willingness to participate. So whether you are in uniform or whether you're at home, there are still ways for you to fight and join the cause in World War II against the Nazis, in World War I against the Central Powers. So it's very similar. But World War II was more regulated and formalized.

**[0:18:52]**

**Theo Mayer**: Libby, one last question for you. It's sort of a wrap up question. When the listeners think about World War I and food, what are the main things they should remember?

**[0:19:01]**

**Libby O'Connel**: Our policies in World War I about food will come back in World War II, so the idea that the Liberty garden is reflected in the Victory garden. The fact that we were encouraging families not to eat meat, to use substitute foods so that the other foods could be sent to our military and to our allies. These are things that you see in World War I and in World War II. You also see the engagement of women on the home front being encouraged to show their patriotism through food consumption through conservation of foods and also for working on farms, joining the Women's Land Army and doing what they could to increase the local production of food. It also was a way for not just the federal government, not just the state government, but also for community people to come together and work on saving food. Learning how to can food and conservation to create more sources and also to kind of keep an eye on each other in a way to make sure that everybody is participating appropriately. So it's not all, "You know, isn't this wonderful, we're all saving food together." Some of it is, "Let's keep an eye on Mrs. Jones because she looks like she's maybe not following the food propaganda that we're all following. She may not be believing that food is the key to victory in war. She may be eating some roast beef every once in a while." So there were social pressures on women within communities as well as the federal propaganda and the state communications on the same topic. And that would be true in World War II as well.

**[0:20:38]**

**Theo Mayer**: Well Libby, it's a great subject and something that most people don't really think about.

**[0:20:42]**

**Libby O'Connel**: Really enjoyed it.

**[0:20:43]**

**Theo Mayer**: Dr. Libby O'Connell. Historian, commissioner, food lover and author. I think we should all go out and get something to eat.

**[0:20:49]**

**Libby O'Connel**: I'm with you Theo.

**[0:20:54]**

**Theo Mayer**: Thank you for listening to this episode of How World War I Changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the collaboration of the US World War I Centennial Commission, the Doughboy foundation, the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, National History Day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History.

**[0:21:17]**