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Groceries by Punch Card

By R. B. Wilson and Charles French

Everytime you put a food item in your shopping cart you are contributing to a revolution in the food business. How? By voting for that item and against the thousands you leave behind. Whole industries rise or fall because of your selections.

To win your vote, new foods are constantly being developed. Many items sold in today's grocery were all but unknown ten years ago: frozen orange juice, prepared dinners, heat-and-serve rolls, frozen soups. Yet experts tell us that we have only begun to make changes in the way our food products are processed, packaged, and sold.

No, we won't soon be buying our meals in science-fiction capsules. But we may soon show up at the supermarket with a punch card rather than a market basket.

Let's look at some of the changes your votes are causing all the way from the farm to the family, and dream a little of some of the food in your future.

Cows are being bred to produce lower-fat milk. Chickens and turkeys with small bones and deep meat now fill our poultry houses. Long, lean hogs are being raised. You have vetoed fat pork cuts, so hog farmers now are producing "meat-type" hogs. At Purdue university, researchers are using a Buck Rogers-type gun with which they probe the backs of hogs to measure fat depth. It enables them to select those hogs that will yield the lean pork chops you want. In the near future, some hogs are going to be produced in air-conditioned buildings so that the quality and cost of their meat will conform to your wishes.

In some areas peaches and tomatoes are being ripened on the vine rather than being picked and shipped green. Vine-ripened products taste better, but they must be moved rapidly so that they do not spoil before reaching your table.

Processors are keeping up with farmers in the food revolution. Frozen chocolate-milk concentrates, for example, are in the experimental stage.

And powdered fruit and vegetables juices (orange, tomato, apple, and pineapple) are coming along. All you have to do is add water. You don't need to refrigerate them.

New X-ray type sterilization of foods will make them keep much longer. You may not need that refrigerator much longer. Atomic energy, or perhaps even solar energy, may allow the processor to do all your cooking for you, so the stove may go too! Indeed, some scientists predict that the kitchen itself, as we know it, may be gone within a few years!

Retailers aren't to be outdone in the food race, and it's hard for us to keep up with the changes they are making. The cracker-barrel store has given place to the gleaming supermarket with its approximately 4,000 items. Self-service, prepackaged meats, fruits, and vegetables are just a few of the recent changes. What's ahead? Researchers are teaming with producers, handlers, and distributors to bring about changes we haven't even begun to dream about.

Frozen meats are already on the market, and at least one packer has a line of frozen meat that is processed and frozen at the packing house and kept refrigerated until you select it at the meat counter.

Are you feeling too lazy to cook, or even to go out to dinner? An Indiana retailer is considering a plan that will enable you to call a grocery store and order a dinner that will be cooked in infra-red ovens and delivered to you steaming hot. No money in the house? You won't need cash you will simply show your credit card. You haven't yet voted for this, but the Indiana grocer hopes you will.

Let's take a look at the grocery store of tomorrow. Don Grimes, president of the Independent Grocers alliance, says that it will be almost completely automatic. To shop, you will merely pick up some punch cards of envelope size. On these cards will be listed the different items available. Casting your mind over what you will need for Sunday dinner and subsequent meals during the week, you will punch the items on these cards. Then you will take, or send the cards to the store. The retailer will put them into a Univac-like device. The machine will select your items in less than five minutes. They will come out bagged and ready to go.

Thirty years ago each farm worker produced only enough food for himself and seven others. Now he produces enough for himself and 19 others. The unneeded

farmers now help make our TV sets, work to process those new foods we've mentioned, run our resorts, and generally add to our national gross product.

Thirty years ago one out of each four of our take-home dollars went for food. Now, although one dollar out of four still goes for food, the food is much better. Then, too, as a nation we are eating 14% more food than we did before the 2nd World War. If we were satisfied to eat as we did before the 2nd World War, we could manage it by spending only 17% of our income for food.

We are also buying a lot of built-in maid service. We used to buy chickens that were only partially dressed. Now, we buy birds which are cleaned, washed, cut-up, and ready to cook. And some items are much cheaper than they used to be. Now, one hour's take-home pay will buy three pounds of chicken; 30 years ago it would buy only a pound and a half.

Foods once regarded as luxuries are now commonplace. Remember when oranges were found only in your Christmas stocking? Some of us do, but now they are available the year around. Consumption of oranges has almost tripled.

We haven't yet seen the end of marvelous changes in the food business. Interesting and exciting ones? You will cause many of them by your vote. Vote wisely -- your choices are important!

Note: This article was recently published in the "Catholic Digest," November 1958.