

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE FOOD ADMINISTRATION

It was decided to require every seller of food in the United States to take out a license and to report his transactions at stated intervals to the United States Government.

Difficulty was encountered in adopting the form which had been approved for retail and wholesale grocers to fit the peculiar operations of wholesalers and retailers of fresh fruits and vegetables and also of storage warehouses and poultry merchants.

The various divisions of the food administration having reached an impasse on the matter, Mr. Hoover commandeered Grandfather from The Curtis Publishing Company and Grandfather was sworn in as a "dollar a year" man to help solve the problem. Grandfather had recently completed a two-year study of the food industry and was regarded with respect by the leaders of the various divisions.

The problems were complex and involved, and various people had worked so long and so frantically over it that the water was muddy and no one could think the thing through clearly. Grandfather, having been installed as a kind of arbiter, insisted that each step be made perfectly clear to him. Under the necessity of lucid statement, in the course of about three weeks, in their efforts to make Grandfather understand what they were aiming at, the problem cleared itself up and everyone was satisfied.

The following week the approval of Mr. Hoover and President Wilson was obtained, and the system put in effect and the work being completed for which Grandfather was drafted, he returned to his work with The Curtis

Publishing Company. While the period of service was only about a month, it made a never-to-be forgotten impression. Able men left their own business in a period which was critical for their business as well as for the country and unselfishly gave their time to the Government. Men, each accustomed to a large private office with a mahogany desk, were huddled together in crowded offices - each content if he could have any kind of a desk for himself.

Another striking memory is the profound respect all these men had for Mr. Hoover. The extraordinary leadership of Mr. Hoover and the marvelous support he received from a large number of the most capable minds in the food industry pulled America through one of the most difficult phases of the war - the consumption of food supplies. The inside story - and a thrilling story it was - of the food administration was not told the public - Mr. Hoover shrank from personal publicity and would not permit it.

A vast amount of publicity went out, but it dealt only with details - "Eat less wheat" and everyone quit eating wheat altogether. "Eat more potatoes" and the sudden demand for potatoes forced prices up unreasonably. Nothing could be had in moderation. The public jumped to an extreme at every suggestion.

All the advertising men in the food administration desired to have some general stories of the work. Skilled copy writers prepared copy, but Mr. Hoover would allow no one to speak for him and he had no time to prepare copy personally. A single illustration will give you the picture.

That a licensing system was being planned had been kept a dark secret. With so many people working on it, it seems unbelievable that there should have been no leak. Some of us tried to get Mr. Hoover to prepare the country for the move which was revolutionary in its character. Never before

had merchants been licensed, involving penalties for infraction. But the order was signed by the president, the group of executives listened to a final reading of the act, while newspaper men waited outside.

Once more Grandfather made a plea for preliminary publicity - make the first announcement with a touch of human understanding, explaining the aim and the necessity; let the act with its penalties follow. This time Mr. Hoover listened. Did we have the suggestion in concrete form? A statement had been prepared by an excellent copywriter. Mr. Hoover read the statement, approved the idea, but said he preferred to rewrite it, sent word to the newspaper men to come back in an hour, dismissed the conference and wrote his own statement. It was an excellent statement and put the licensing system over without resentment.

But in those days Mr. Hoover could not take the time to write personally statements and much which would have been interesting and helpful to the administration and to Mr. Hoover personally was not told.