1961

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Home Economists Help Solve Nation-wide Crisis

by Mary McKennan, H. Jl. 4

President Kennedy's Executive Order #1, issued January 22, 1961, called for immediate expansion of the surplus food distribution program. More foods would be made available, and more people would be eligible to receive them.

By April, commodities were ready for distribution to 6 million needy families in 703 counties in the United States. Eligible recipients lined up at distribution centers for allotments of dried egg and dry milk solids; bags of rice, corn meal and flour; peanut butter; and canned pork and gravy.

But these foods were not packaged in familiar containers; several were items not offered in supermarkets; and one, the pork and gravy, was an entirely new product.

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Some foods were totally new: some, regionally unpopular. Cornmeal, a staple food item in the South, was rejected there. Instead of the finely-ground white meal they were used to, Southerners received the coarse-ground yellow cornmeal popular in other sections of the country.

Dried eggs presented a serious problem in all distribution areas. Subject to speedy bacterial attack if not properly cared for, the eggs also had to be cooked at high temperatures. Homemakers quickly learned that 2½ tablespoons dried egg, mixed with 2½ tablespoons water, was equal to one fresh egg. But it was not so easy for them to realize why this egg could be used for baked scrambled eggs, but not in eggs prepared on top of the stove — or why it could be used in cornbread and cookies, but not in pancakes.

Distributing recipes did not solve the problem. Some homemakers cannot read or do not understand English. Most of them have very limited time and large families to care for. Also, recipes are usually developed for satisfactory performance under ideal food preparation conditions. Recipes calling for accurate measurements and exact oven temperatures are useless in much of the South, where baking in a "hot oven" still means another stick on the fire!

As the educational problem became apparent, home economists and other volunteer workers in 42 states, many with already crowded schedules or with families of their own to care for, responded to the crisis. They gave demonstrations at distribution centers, organized workshops for volunteer workers who could then conduct neighborhood demonstrations, and solicited the aid of community organizations, radio and television stations, and local newspapers for both publicity and direct demonstration purposes. At state universities, recipes and meal-plans were adapted to the eating habits of people in each area.

School lunch managers, who also received these Federally-donated foods, strove to make dishes using the commodities attractive and enjoyable for the youngsters. Busy homemakers don't often try new recipes, but if children ask for foods they like on the school lunch, the mother is more likely to investigate how to make them.

This fall, the distribution program has been expanded even further; and, with the aid of several hundred professional and part-time home economists, accomplishments are being made in a nation-wide attempt to improve the nutritional status of nearly 10 million American families.