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Challenge from Latin America

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LATIN America offers a growing field for trained home economists interested in extending better nutrition beyond the borders of North America. While the need for trained workers is still apparent in the United States, the Latin American's low nutritional status makes outside help necessary for getting a program started.

Iowa State is contributing to the nutritional improvement of their southern neighbor by training South American students here in better methods of agricultural production and nutrition.

In Latin America the federal governments have been the leaders in nutrition work. Four countries, Bolivia, Peru, Mexico and Brazil, have organized popular restaurants to improve living standards and provide the needy and the working man with nutritious and inexpensive food in modern buildings. In several countries school lunch programs have been set up to improve child nutrition.

The rising cost of living due to the war has further accentuated poor nutrition and there are food shortages in many of the South American countries. The transportation system is not conducive to low-cost food. For instance, certain Argentine dairy products move more easily into the city markets of Chile than into the north and northwest provinces of Argentina.

A study of school children in the province of Cordoba, Argentina, showed that 50 to 65 percent of the children enrolled in elementary schools were acutely undernourished. In this same province there is milk distribution and school lunches but because the program is limited, all of the school children do not receive the maximum amount of benefit from it. The children are usually taken out of school at the third or fourth grade to make room for the younger children, making what benefit they do receive short-lived.

A typical day's menu for a low-wage working family in Chile in 1942, was a breakfast of yerba mate and bread, a stew for lunch and a supper consisting of tea and bread. A study of nutrition in Mexico showed that in one community less than 5 percent of the population had a proper diet and that 80 percent of the children were suffering from diseases caused by under-nourishment.

In meeting these needs various solutions have been suggested and tried. In 1941, Mexico City, through the Department of Public Assistance inaugurated a restaurant where inexpensive meals were served to low income workers and their families. Comedor Nacional Numero One, as it is called officially, feeds 1,200 people three meals a day in a modern building formerly used as a public market. The restaurant serves primarily families with children between the ages of four and sixteen. Weekly meal tickets are sold on a sliding scale, the price depending on the family income. The maximum charge is 3 pesos, about 75 cents, and the minimum is .8 pesos, about 20 cents. The ticket entitles each member of the family to three meals a day, six days of the week.

The aim of the restaurant, which is managed like a cafeteria, is to help needy families improve their nutrition by feeding them well-balanced and economical meals in a public institution that strives to preserve a family atmosphere.

Clients are required to wash before each meal, deposit their bundles in lockers and check hats and wraps. Babies are left in the nursery while mothers eat their meals. An advisory committee of mothers meets with the managers and social workers attached to the restaurant to discuss ways and means for the improvement of the service. A nutrition clinic, a laboratory and a corps of social workers are attached to this restaurant.

There are four people's restaurants run by the government in Peru; three are located in Lima and one in Callao. The restaurants established so far are housed in specially constructed buildings made of reinforced concrete and furnished with the best of equipment. Wholesome food is prepared in kitchens open to the view of patrons sitting in the spacious dining rooms with a capacity of 800 people or more.

One of the restaurants in Lima was serving or distributing through its delivery service 21,000 meals a day in February, 1942. Workers and their families who prefer to take their meals at the restaurant are given a choice of two menus which are advertised every day in the newspapers. There are separate dining rooms for families, school children and special clients and a cash and carry service for those who prefer to eat their low-cost meals at home. Anyone is permitted to patronize the popular restaurants. White collar and professional workers form a substantial part of the clientele while unemployed war veterans are given free meals.

In Brazil various social welfare organizations with government assistance have established restaurants in factories where better meals are provided at a low cost in congenial and hygienic surroundings. One aim of these restaurants is to popularize certain foods of high nutritional value. The popular restaurants are now supplying about 5,000 meals daily in the cities of Rio de Janeiro and San Paulo. Consideration is now being given to the provision of traveling kitchens which would operate in the neighborhood of large public projects and provide nutritional meals for workers.

Popular restaurants in Oruno, Bolivia, serve low-priced meals to workers as an important means of improving nutrition and living standards.

In La Paz, Bolivia, in 1935 a school lunch program was initiated as a nationwide program against under-nourishment among school children. The lunch rooms operate through government subsidies, gifts of equipment, and volunteer assistance from the teachers.

The majority of Latin America's food problems can be traced to their inadequate nutritional knowledge, dependence upon imports, limited agricultural production and poor distribution facilities, including the war problems of shipping shortages and fuel and tire rationing, which are becoming more acute.