

If You Think the School Lunch Battle is New — Go to Philadelphia

A science museum in the city looks back at the history of feeding children in schools and reminds us how fraught the efforts have been for more than 100 years.



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Reporting from Philadelphia

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This article is part of our Museums special section about how artists and institutions are adapting to changing times.

Surrounded by a group of 10th graders, Alex Asal, a museum educator at the Science History Institute in Philadelphia, read aloud from three school lunch menus. She asked the students to raise their hands for which sounded best.

One menu had options such as pizza, Caribbean rice salad and fresh apples. Another had grilled cheese, tomato soup and green beans. The third featured creamed beef on toast and creamed salmon with a roll.

That menu — which did prompt a few raised hands — was from 1914, Asal revealed. A century ago, butter and cream were considered as vital as fruits and vegetables are today because the concern was less about what children ate than whether they ate enough at all.

The exhibition that had drawn students from the Octorara Area School District of Atglen, Pa., was “Lunchtime: The History of Science on the School Food Tray.” It examines how this cornerstone of childhood became deeply intertwined with American politics, culture and scientific progress.

From the earliest school food programs until now, “what’s been interesting for us about this topic is how discourses of nutrition and science have always been present,” said Jesse Smith, the museum’s director of curatorial affairs and digital content.

FOOD FOR CHILDREN EIGHT TO TWELVE 155

meals for the school children at a minimum cost not only brings immediate benefit to the children, but exerts a widespread influence upon homes and parents, as the children carry to them reports of these concrete lessons in the science of proper selection, preparation, and hygiene of food.

The school luncheon must be simple, easily served, and economical. It may consist of a hot dish, with some form of bread, and a choice of about two sweet dishes; milk or cocoa should always be obtainable. A week’s menu as actually served by the School Lunch Committee of the Home and School League in Philadelphia is given below :

WEEKLY MENU IN SCHOOL WITH PENNY LUNCHES AND FIVE-CENT NOON DINNER

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| Monday : | (1) Baked beans and roll, 5 ¢ |
| | (2) Cocoa or milk, 2 ¢; crackers or ice cream, 1 ¢ |
| Tuesday : | (1) Vegetable soup and roll, 5 ¢ |
| | (2) Same choice as Monday |
| Wednesday : | (1) Creamed beef on toast and roll, 5 ¢ |
| | (2) See Monday. Dates 1 ¢ |
| Thursday : | (1) Macaroni with tomato sauce and roll, 5 ¢ |
| | (2) See Monday. Jam sandwich, 1 ¢ |
| Friday : | (1) Creamed salmon and roll, 5 ¢ |
| | (2) See Monday |

The following interesting description shows the mechanism of the service in the New York City schools :¹

¹ The School Lunch Service, Dept. of Education, The City of New York : Division of Reference and Research. Bull. No. 3. 1914. p. 10.

The exhibition includes school lunch menus, including one from the Home and School League in Philadelphia in 1914.

Prelinger Library

Smith didn't anticipate just how timely the exhibition would be when it opened about a month before the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., appointed secretary of health and human services by President Trump, promotes the removal of processed foods from school lunches. History shows that his isn't the first attempt to change what people eat.

"Lunchtime" was developed from the Science History Institute's collection of books and scientific instruments related to food science. Located just down the street from Philadelphia's Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were signed, the small museum and research library teaches the history of how science has shaped our everyday lives.

In 1946, President Harry Truman signed the National School Lunch Act authorizing the creation of the National School Lunch Program. Today, according to the Food Research & Action Center, the program reaches approximately 28 million students. Of those, 23.6 million are in high-poverty districts that qualify for free lunch for all.

"It's a service to students, and something we provide on a daily basis to help the students learn," said Lisa Norton, executive director of the division of food services for the Philadelphia school district. "And we know that there are students that this is the only meal they are going to see."



Children waiting to be served lunch at a New York City school in 1913. via the Science History Institute

The exhibition opens with the 1800s, as industrialization brings people to cities, far from the source of their food. Producers would cut corners, mixing wood shavings with cinnamon and chalk into flour.

“Probably the most notorious example was the dairy industry, which routinely added formaldehyde to milk to keep it from spoiling,” Asal said.

And school medical inspections found that children were severely undernourished. Scurvy and rickets were widespread.

The Institute of Child Nutrition, at the University of Mississippi, maintains an archive of photographs, oral histories, books and manuscripts, and Jeffrey Boyce, the institute’s coordinator of archival services, provided several photographs for the exhibit. One shows a baby being fed cod liver oil, an old-fashioned remedy for vitamin A and D deficiency, in the age before vitamin-fortified cereal.

Philadelphia became one of the first cities to have a school lunch program and, over the next few decades, local programs spread across the country in a movement led largely by women. A federal response to school lunches would come from the National School Lunch Act.

“The National School Lunch Program is the longest running children’s health program in U.S. history, and it has an outsized impact on nutritional health,” said Andrew R. Ruis, author of the book “Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat: The Origins of School Lunch in the United States,” which Smith used as a resource for the exhibit. “Research in the ’20s and ’30s showed overwhelmingly that school lunch programs had a huge impact on student health, on educational attainment, on behavior and attitude.”



A 1944 poster from the U.S. War Food Administration
promoting school lunches. via the University of North Texas Digital
Library

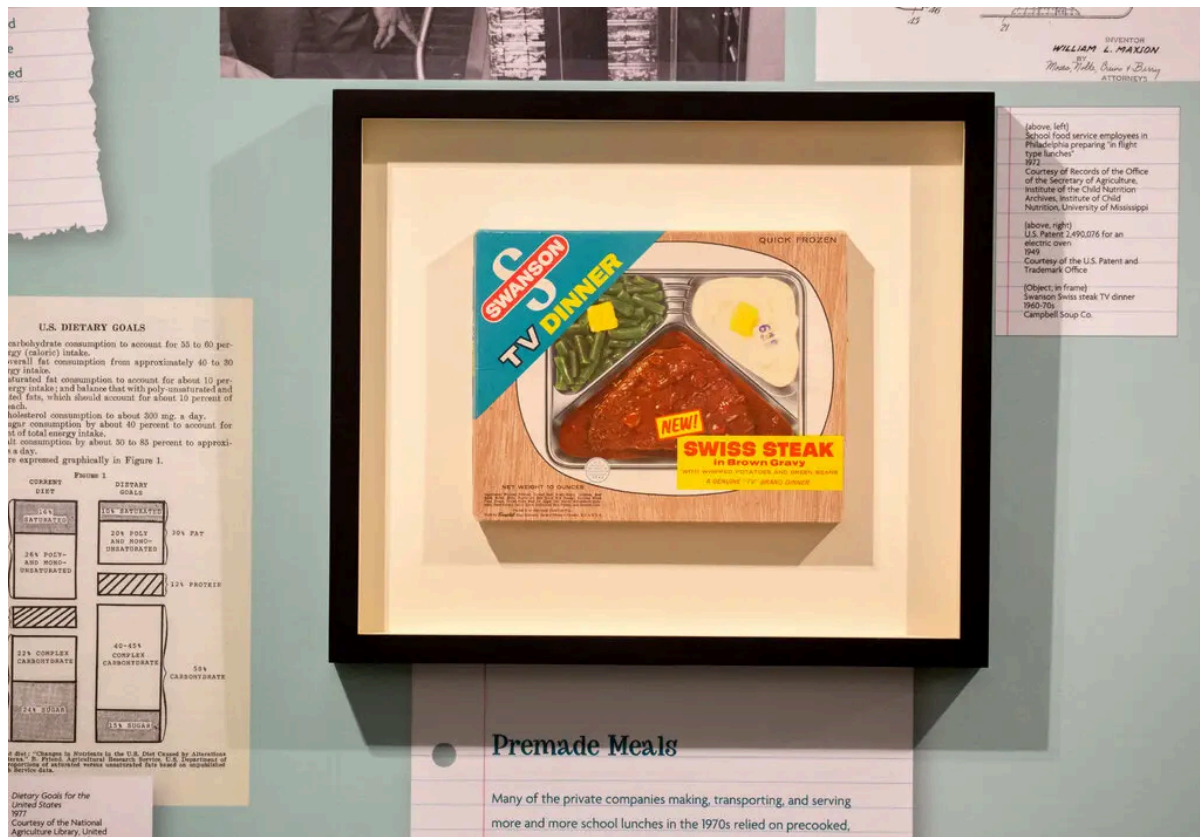
As farmers faced ruin in the wake of the Great Depression, the Department of Agriculture purchased surplus crops to distribute to U.S. schools and as foreign aid. This decades-old partnership made headlines in March when the U.S.D.A. announced plans to cut \$1 billion in funding to schools and food banks.

School lunch programs have wide public support, but that has never stopped them from being a political football. In the 1960s, the civil rights movement drew attention to the fact that many poor children were still going hungry. The Black Panthers' free breakfast program helped fill the gap and put pressure on politicians.

A table in the exhibition piled with Spam, TV dinners, bagged salad and Cheetos explained how military research into preservation created iconic American foods. These advancements, however, also helped put nutrition back under the microscope and led to the concern that young people were getting too much of the wrong kinds of foods.

The 1973 board game "Super Sandwich" tried to make nutrition fun, with players competing to collect foods that met recommended dietary allowances. Remember the controversy in the 1980s over whether ketchup qualified as a vegetable? It erupted in a larger battle over school lunch program cuts under the Reagan administration and further inflamed the national debate over school lunch quality.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, and the public health campaign for children by the first lady, Michelle Obama, resulted in more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains and less sodium and sugar on lunch trays. But balancing those regulations with what young people will eat is a challenge, said Elizabeth Keegan, the coordinator of dietetic services for the Philadelphia school district who advised on the exhibition. Especially when median lunch prices, according to the School Nutrition Association, hover around \$3.



A Swanson TV dinner on display is an example of frozen meals that were developed during World War II. Meredith Edlow/Science History Institute

“We always say, for less than what you pay for a latte, schools have to serve a full meal,” said Diane Pratt-Heavner, the association’s director of media relations.

Following their tour, the Octorara students reflected on the tales of wood shavings in food. They debated the quality of their own school lunches and what they would prefer: more variety, more vegetarian and vegan options, less junk food.

“It made me feel like we should get better food,” said Malia Maxie, 16. “When she was talking about 1914, like how they got salmon — we don’t get that anymore.”

Those from generations raised on rectangular pizza may see it differently.

“From the days when I was in school, the meal program has totally transformed,” said Aleshia Hall-Campbell, executive director of the Institute of Child Nutrition.

“You have some districts out here that are actually growing produce and

incorporating it in the menus. You have edamame at salad bars. They are trying to recreate what kids are eating out in restaurants and fast-food places, incorporating it from a healthier level.”

Everyone has memories of school lunch. Boyce remembers “the best macaroni and cheese on the planet” and the names of the cafeteria ladies. Smith remembers the Salisbury steak and that distinct cafeteria smell. For Ruis, the best day of the year was when his Bay Area school had IT’S-IT, a local ice-cream sandwich with oatmeal cookies.

“So much has changed, standards have changed, and what is considered healthy has changed,” Keegan said. “But something that has never changed is that feeding kids a nutritious meal is important.”

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