RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Pith, Heart, and Nerve
Truman M. Smith:
Horticulture as the Way Back

Barry L. and Joan Miller Cotter

Page 3

Summer 2009 Volume 44, Number 2

The cover of Vick's Illustrated Floral Guide for 1873. Truman M. Smith was a customer of this commercial nursery and he also used the Vick's catalog to help him gauge the appetite of the St. Paul market for plants that Smith raised for sale. Vick's cover by John Walton. (9 x 5 7/8 in.). Rochester, N.Y. C. F. Muntz & Co. Lith., 1873. Reproduced courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society. © American Antiquarian Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY
History

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THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program of presenting, publishing and preserving.

CONTENTS

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A Message from the Editorial Board

Many of us are newly conscious about eating locally grown foods and love to visit the farmers' markets in our neighborhoods for quality and savings. But the journey from garden to market to table has always been fascinating. In this issue we reencounter Truman M. Smith, who took up a new career as a horticulturalist and market gardener after the disastrous Panic of 1857 wiped out his bank and real estate holdings. To earn a living, Smith turned his hands to providing Twin Cities families with fruits, vegetables, and nursery stock. Although Smith succeeded, his out-of-town nursery stock suppliers did not always ship early enough, believing, in his words, that he "live[d] at the North Pole"! A generation later in the 1900s, John J. Ryan, who started out as a grocery clerk, became a long-time executive secretary of the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association. Ryan led statewide efforts to pass the Minnesota Pure Food and Drug Act, a year before national legislation, and helped bring about credit reform. But his later attempts to save family grocers from competition with new, grocery chain stores such as Piggly Wiggly fell victim to inevitable economic reality. Finally, our main book review recounts the powerful story of the Nasseff brothers, whose family saga of immigrating to St. Paul from Lebanon, and later success in differing business arenas, makes for fascinating reading.

Anne Cowie,
Chair, Editorial Board

Food for a Good Life

John J. Ryan and the Minnesota Grocers Association

Mary Jo Richardson

In the spring of 1885, my grandfather, John J. Ryan, who was born and educated in New York, decided to go west. His first stop was Fort Dodge, Iowa, where he contacted some relatives who had already settled there. Two years later he arrived in St. Paul, Minnesota, a city that in his view was a booming trade center and just the place where a young man could reach for new opportunities that suited his talents and ideals.

John, or J. J., as his friends and associates soon called him, was twenty-two years old and already had credentials in his pocket. After high school, he worked for a law firm in Elizabethtown, New York, a city in the Adirondack region of upstate New York. John was admitted to the bar from the Albany Law School, which is the oldest independent law school in the United States, and today is one of the top twenty schools for public interest law, a field that attracted John from the beginning. Later, John also passed the bar in Iowa, but it was in St. Paul, that he was to make his mark on both the state and the nation as a spokesman for retail grocers throughout the country.[1]

John was born in 1863, about the time when the battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga were fought and just after the terrific losses at Gettysburg. There was one report that his father, who had emigrated from Ireland in 1842, was a Union soldier during the Civil War. John and his brothers and sisters grew up on a farm near Elizabethtown, New York. All of this seemed far behind him by the time he reached St. Paul. He arrived at a most auspicious time for a young man who identified with the reform ideals that were about to surface in the early twentieth century. He was, in fact, part of the cadre of young men in their twenties and thirties and early forties that William Allen White later described as leaders in the Progressive movement. They were young men whose "quickening sense of the inequities, injustices and fundamental wrongs" of America provided the motive power for reform.[2]

John J. Ryan as a younger man. This portrait probably dates from about the time that Ryan became the executive secretary of the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association in 1903. Photo courtesy of Mary Jo Richardson.

Getting Started in St. Paul

John's first step, however, was to get a job and start saving for the future. He started as a grocery clerk and eventually became a partner in the business. Because he was a natural organizer and was convinced that workers had to organize in unions, in 1889 he became one of the founders of St. Paul's first retail clerks union, Local #2. Even after he became identified with the Retail Grocers Association, he retained his interest in the affairs of organized labor.[3]

In the late 1880s, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* was filled with news about workers in the nation and their attempts to organize. For example, in Chicago, a striker at the McCormick Paper Factory was killed by a Pinkerton detective. The strikers retaliated by pulling the Pinkerton guards off a bus and wounding one of the detectives. In a factory in Dubuque, Iowa, women strikers, or "girls" as the paper called them, went on strike because the employers failed to restore last fall's wages. Coal miners in Pittsburgh finally called off a strike because they were afraid of losing their jobs. They had planned to ask for a one cent raise in pay per load. The 1880s was a time of great stress for workers, but also a time of hope. The national economy was bursting at the seams, but there was also a growing awareness of the need to institute certain reforms and John was eager to be part of the growing effort.[4]

Because he was a good speaker and anxious to become more active in the community, in 1892 John ran for office in the St. Paul Trades and Labor Association and was elected president. Reform efforts were underway on many levels. For example, the *Pioneer Press* of May 1892 reported the defeat of what they termed the "old gang" in the city of St. Paul. An article on May 9 noted that the old gang had for many years "fattened at the public crib." Now radical changes were in store for the public. In other areas of the country there was also demand for change. Clergymen in New York City railed against Tammany Hall and urged young men to help create a better city by turning out the scoundrels and closing the gambling halls and saloons. Throughout the country there were protest meetings and calls for reform. It was an exciting

time to be part of organizations that were seeking change and John was now in the thick of it.[5]

As John's career was taking off, his personal life was also thriving. In 1893 he married Nellie Murphy, whose father and mother had emigrated from Ireland and then settled in St. Paul. In the next few years, John and Nellie would become parents of three sons and two daughters. As she grew up, Mary, the oldest daughter, often worked for her father at his office, campaigned with him in San Francisco, and kept records of his accomplishments and writings. After a younger sister died at the age of four, Mary was the one who helped her mother with her three brothers, John Jr., Raymond, and my father, Frank, the youngest boy.[6]

From the time of his first job as a clerk, John maintained his special interest in the grocery business. By 1899, John was assistant secretary of the St. Paul Retail Grocers and two years later was the head of the Association. In this position, he faced many issues including problems with both supply and demand. On the supply side, there was the matter of weather. Springtime could produce terrible weather conditions in the Midwest from late snowstorms, rain, and floods in the Dakotas to late crops in Minnesota. Since the weather was so cold and damp, there were few warm growing days. Agrarian protesters, who were growing in numbers in Minnesota and nearby states, repeatedly complained about the rates that railroads charged to ship their crops to market.

John, however, was interested in urban problems. He realized that the farmers were hurting but so were the people who were trying to make a living by selling groceries. Besides, the grocers needed advocates as much as other businesses. For many grocers, making a living was tenuous at best, since they were often the first to extend credit but the last to be paid. This was an issue that John would tackle in his lobbying efforts at both the state and national levels. He also paid attention to the impact of advertising on the grocery business.

As the country's expanding rail network made a national market for all sorts of goods possible, advertising boomed.

The interior of an unidentified St. Paul grocery store about 1900. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Consequently the front pages of the *Pioneer Press* were more likely to feature ads than hard news. The newspaper saved its largest headlines and illustrations for commercial products, especially food, clothes, and medicines. One question of the day remained unsolved, however. Who would take action against the companies that failed to tell the truth about their products and sold impure foods and drugs? Again, the newspapers played a key role, especially their investigative reporters, whom Teddy Roosevelt later christened "muckrakers."[7]

Ryan Takes on Statewide Responsibilities

In 1903, John J. Ryan was elected executive secretary of the statewide Minnesota Retail Grocers Association, which had been established just a few years earlier in 1897. As director of this trade organization, he spearheaded many reforms, including advocacy for pure food and drugs. Before this issue reached Congress, the Minnesota legislature took action in 1905 and passed the Minnesota Pure Food Code. John and his associates continued to promote the passage of a similar law at the national level.

One of the books in John J.'s library, a book that he passed on to his children and grandchildren, was Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Published in 1906, *The Jungle* exposed the horrendous working conditions in the meat packing plants in Chicago. But what caught the attention of the public, was not Sinclair's vivid descriptions of the brutal work environment in the stockyards. Instead the book's graphic account of the unsanitary conditions surrounding the production of meat products that rolled out of the plants and were sold in local grocery stores created a furor of protest. No one who read *The Jungle* could ever feel safe using lard after reading about workers who fell into the cooking vats and ended up in "Durham's Pure Beef Lard."

Despite the fact that President Roosevelt's inspectors insisted that stories of workers falling into the boiling lard vats was pure fiction, the public outcry for reform reverberated across the country. Fearing public boycotts, even the meat packers decided it was time for reform and joined in the effort to obtain federal legislation. With Upton Sinclair's testimony and Roosevelt's support, Congress enacted the Meat Inspection Act and Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906. Sinclair, however, did not support the final bill because

St. Paul Grocers and the Baking Powder War

By 1892, the Andrew Schock Grocery Company on Seventh and Broadway was one of St. Paul's most successful grocery stores. Schock made good use of the expanding field of advertising to promote its "superior products." While these ads helped bring customers to its store, it also meant that Schock Grocery was drawn into a war of words waged in the St. Paul newspapers between companies selling various types of baking powder. Schock carried Snow Flake Baking Powder, which it claimed was the best on the market.

Above: A busy street scene outside the Andrew Schoch Grocery Company store located at Seventh and Broadway streets in St. Paul about 1912. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Right: This ad for Royal Baking Powder was printed in the **St. Paul Daily Globe.** *The ad stresses the purity of the ingredients in the Royal product. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

The dispute over the best and safest baking powder took on special meaning in the days before the enactment of the Pure Food and Drug Act. The Snow Flake Baking Powder Company, for example, stated in its May 8, 1892, advertisement in the *Daily Pioneer Press* that during the past two years people in Minnesota had "awakened to the fact that some baking powders are harmful to health." These powders were reported to include alum, ammonia, and other impurities. In particular, Snow Flake accused its chief rival, Royal Baking Powder, of including harmful ingredients in its powder. Snow Flake also claimed that the newspapers were "bribed into secrecy" so they failed to reveal the truth about Royal. In retaliation, Royal Baking Powder ads cited government research that claimed Royal's product had more leavening powder. Their ads also included testimonials from doctors who vouched for the safety of their product.

Before the passage of the Minnesota Pure Food Code in 1905 and the national Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, local grocers were drawn into this type of advertising war waged in newspapers by rival companies of the day. Without standards, independent grocers, like Schock, had to decide which products were safe to sell. The Minnesota Grocers Association strongly supported pure food laws and John J. Ryan, the organization's executive secretary, lobbied at both the state and federal levels for truth-in-advertising. After the passage of the Pure Food Acts, Royal Baking Powder ran monthly ads like this in the *National Grocers Bulletin* and in many local newspapers to assure everyone that their product was "absolutely pure."

Mail-Order Businesses, Chain Stores, and the Sale of Soap

In 1915 the sale of soap became a symbol for "cutthroat competition," at least according to the National Grocers Association. Behind the soap stories, however, the real issue was the rise of mail-order businesses that undercut local retail merchants. The first mail-order business, Montgomery Ward, started operation in 1872 in Chicago. Its famous catalog, initially called "The Original Grange Supply House," was a boon to farm families. It was, however, a bane to small-town retail merchants. When Richard Sears opened his catalog business in 1886 in Minneapolis, and later joined Alvah Roebuck to create Sears, Roebuck in Chicago, the serious threat to small independent retailers became a reality.

The interior of the Piggly-Wiggly chain's grocery store located at 617 Grand Avenue in about 1925. Early Piggly-Wiggly stores were self-service groceries. Customers passed through one of the turnstiles on the left to do their shopping and then exited via the other turnstile following payment for their groceries. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

In the September 1915 *National Grocers Bulletin,* John J. Ryan, who was then the secretary of the National Grocers Association, wrote a story to explain how local grocers, as well as other small retailers, were hurt by the competition from mail-order houses. He used the sale of soap as his example. He envisioned a group of church women who all decided to save a few pennies by buying from one of the mail-order businesses instead of supporting him, their local grocer. He spelled out exactly how his costs compared with the mail-order houses that could buy in quantity and offer prices below the actual cost of the products they offered. After they drove the competition out of business, of course, the mail-order business raised its prices. By then, it was too late for the local grocer. Ryan ended his apocryphal tale by telling his readers, "My partner committed suicide and shortly afterwards, I said amen to the retail grocery business forever and ever."

On a more serious note, Ryan met with representatives of the Federal Trade Commission in St. Paul in August l915. He told the commissioners, "If the grocers of Minnesota sold the people the same class of goods the mail-order houses ship them direct, the grocers would all be in jail. Our State pure food laws fix standards of quantity and quality that the local grocer must comply with. The mail-order house which ships goods direct to the grocers' customers from another state is exempt from state laws and can sell goods below the state standard, both in quantity and quality."

The year after the FTC met in St. Paul, the independent grocers faced even stronger competition with the rise of the grocery chain stores. In 1916, Piggly Wiggly entered the market as the first self-service grocery. After its success in Tennessee, Piggly Wiggly franchises spread throughout the country. They were soon joined by the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P), and grocery store chains became common in the United States in the 1920s. The sale of soap was now more than a symbol. The issue was survival of the local independent grocer.

During the 1920s and '30s both independent grocers and druggists urged Congress to pass legislation to halt or slow the growth of chain stores. Since consumers benefited from lower prices and wider choices, they made their voices heard and the lobbying efforts of independent retailers were not successful. Eventually, supermarkets became an even greater threat to independent grocers. Despite the competition, many independents found their niche. The Minnesota Grocers Association, with its headquarters still in St. Paul, continues to support them to the present day.*

*"Unwrapping 110 Years," *Minnesota Grocer* (St. Paul: Minnesota Grocers Association, Winter 2007).

it focused only on health issues rather than the condition of the workers. As a Socialist, he intended to indict the capitalist system as a whole and regretted that while he had aimed at the public's heart he reached its stomach instead. But for both the Minnesota and National Grocers Associations, Sinclair had reached the heart of their agenda—quality products that would give credibility to the local grocers, especially the small grocers who had to stand behind the products they sold to their neighbors and friends.[8]

For John J. Ryan, the 1906 passage of the federal pure food and drug legislation was the beginning of some success in improving the grocery business and in making the public more aware of other issues that affected grocery retailing. In a speech he gave in 1908, Ryan identified other areas of progress. One was the prohibition of grocery sales in saloons. Prior to this legislation, bars had often carried grocery items as a side business in less than sanitary conditions. He also cited other issues that needed to be resolved. One special concern to grocers was the difficulties merchants had collecting debts for goods sold on credit and the impact this had on the stores making reasonable profits. Another troubling issue was the fact that the average grocery store of the time went out of business after only five and a half years.[9]

In another speech the same year, John talked to a group of grocers in Crookston, Minnesota, on "Trading Stamp Evils." He referred to green stamps as "anti-profit coupons." His description of the stamp salesman was worthy of the Irish storyteller he was. He described such a salesman working his wiles on his friend, John W. Lux, of St. Paul. "It is now two years since I saw a short, thick-set man at John Lux's store. He wore, among other things, a silk hat and gold spectacles. From his shirt-bosom blazed sun-burst diamonds. His finger rings and watches charm also scintillated like the jewelry of a multi millionaire. He told Mr. Lux that he had a scheme that would increase his business by 50 percent, and drive all competition off the earth, at a cost to the recipient of the favor of only 4 percent." Of course, Mr. Lux, who happened to be the president of the National Retail Grocers Association, did not fall for the scheme. Instead he railed against the last S. and H. Green Stamp salesman who "Stole away in the night leaving behind him a long green trail of unredeemed, iridescent trading stamps."[10]

John W. Lux of St. Paul served as the tenth president of the National Grocers Association. In the 1900s, he owned a grocery store located on Rice Street. Photo courtesy of Mary Jo Richardson.

Besides showing how stamp buying cut into a grocer's profits, Ryan used colorful language to sway his audience. He referred to the stamp salesman as "the oily trading stamp man," and the "bloated bondholder" and to the process as "the trading stamp fever." In appealing to the grocers to stop the scheme in its tracks, he told a story about two grocers on Rice Street in St. Paul. "One grocer told me that during the last year he had bought $1,200 worth of trading stamps and had given them to his customers to keep them from going across the street to trade. Upon investigation, he found that his competitor over the way had paid out a like amount for stamps to make life easier for his customers. And thus it goes." In September 1908 the *Winona Daily Independent* saluted Ryan's effectiveness in representing small grocers: "J. J. Ryan is one of the most logical, eloquent and convincing speakers on trade topics that has ever been heard in Winona."[11]

The Politics of Progressivism

During Ryan's years as executive secretary for the Minnesota Retail Grocers

John J. Ryan, far left, with unidentified associates in front of the still-unfinished Minnesota Capitol. Ryan, who was known for his skills as a lobbyist for both the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association and the National Retail Grocers Association, twice served as executive secretary of the state association (1903–1915 and 1930–1935). He was elected secretary of the national grocers trade association from 1915 to 1919. Photo courtesy of Fran (Ryan) Butler.

A Daughter's View: Claiming Her City

While John J. Ryan made his mark in public life from the local to the national scenes, his daughter, Mary E. Ryan, made her mark in private life where she was a great support to her family and friends. From a daughter's perspective, St. Paul was where she belonged.

Mary Evelyn Ryan, daughter of John J. and Nellie Ryan, was born in 1894. She grew up in St. Paul where the family's first address was 471 Rice Street. As the city of St. Paul expanded from neighborhoods near downtown to the border of Minneapolis, the Ryan family followed the westward trend by moving first to 733 Carroll Avenue and finally to 1661 Laurel Avenue, in the Merriam Park area of St. Paul.

As a young woman, Mary was a tall, slim, auburn-haired beauty, always competent and quick to take responsibility. At the age of twenty-one, she and two of her friends went to the convention in San Francisco with her father to campaign for him to head the National Grocers Association. He was successful in becoming the executive secretary of the Association and then moving the headquarters to St. Paul. When they returned home, Mary not only did secretarial work for her father, but was the keeper of his and the family's records, and helped her parents entertain many business associates at their home on Laurel Avenue.

Among the frequent guests were a number of prominent grocers, including, Mr. and Mrs. James Williams of Minneapolis, Mr. and Mrs. John Lux of St. Paul, and state Senator and Mrs. George Peterson of Duluth. James Williams is best known for establishing the nationally recognized Creamette Company, which still produces the macaroni product it proclaims is a "Hometown favorite since 1912." John Lux, well known for his successful St. Paul grocery and liquor businesses, became president of the National Grocers Association, and Senator Peterson followed John J. Ryan as executive secretary of the Minnesota Grocers Association.

Mary formed a special friendship with Mrs. Peterson, whom we called Aunt Mae, and her two daughters, Grace and Harriet. Every year Mary took the train to Duluth to visit the Petersons and they were often overnight guests in St. Paul as well.

Mary Evelyn Ryan as a young woman. Portrait by Alfred Miller. Photo courtesy of Mary Jo Richardson.

Like many women of her generation, Mary never married, but her family responsibilities never ceased. She was the caretaker of her mother who was ill much of her life. From early on, Mary managed to be a creative hostess to an ever-widening circle of family and friends. The story of her hospitality reads like the fictional story of "The Man Who Came to Dinner." Only, in her case, it was usually "The Woman Who Came to Dinner." In one instance, a cousin who was offered a job of principal of a St. Paul school, wanted to check out the city. She came to Mary's house for dinner, went home and packed her luggage, returned the next day, and stayed for the entire school year.

Another time, a longtime friend, who was waiting for her daughter to renovate her home, came to dinner and stayed for several months. Family and friends were always welcome at 1661 Laurel, including my family. It was the home where I grew up with my father, Frank Ryan, Mary's youngest brother, and my mother, Nina, my sister, Frances, and brother, John. Mary Evelyn, better known by her friends as Mamie or Mame, along with our mother, Nina, were excellent cooks who loved to entertain. Mary said the best thing about growing up in St. Paul was the nearby network of family and friends who always seemed available to visit or entertain.

One of Mary's and our mother's specialties was their Sunday night suppers for ten or more people who gathered around the large dining room table. Mary usually featured her pies and cakes which had won prizes, like her Lady Baltimore cake, a Minnesota State Fair prize winner, and her lemon chiffon cake that had taken first prize in the Calumet Baking Powder contest. But it was not just the good food that attracted so many people to 1661 Laurel, it was the feeling of always being welcome there, a feeling of genuine hospitality.

Sunday afternoon was a good time for Mary to visit her relatives. She started close to home and then fanned out across the city. After being in a serious car accident, she gave up driving, so she called on her brother or sister-in-law to drive and make the rounds of the relatives. On her mother's side of the family, she visited Uncle Will and Aunt Pearl Murphy, and her cousins who lived at 976 Minnehaha Avenue. She often spent time with her mother's sister, Anna Spence, and her husband, Thomas Spence Sr., at 929 Laurel Avenue. Thomas was police commissioner in St. Paul in 1913 and 1914 but was better known for his real estate business. In a city that usually belonged

to the Democrats, it was interesting to find that his two-year term was under a Republican mayor. In the next election, the Democrats were back in power and Thomas went on to other endeavors. He shared his expertise in real estate with our father who decided that was the field for him too.

Mary was especially close to her Spence cousins, Tom Jr., Ruth, and Josephine. When Tom Jr. married Lucille Pine, Mary was often invited to their home on Portland Avenue, not far from St. Luke's church and school, which their children attended. As for her cousins, Ruth and Josephine, they too remained single and, like Mary, they were close to their family and lavished much attention on their nieces and nephew.

In her memoir, *The Florist's Daughter*, Patricia Hampl, whose mother was a cousin of Tom Spence's wife, Lucille, wrote about the rhyme her mother used to recite: "A son's a son until he takes a wife. A daughter is a daughter all her life." That rhyme rang particularly true for Mary, who was a caretaker for her mother and others all her life.[19]

On her father's side of the family, Mary loved to visit the McHales who lived a short distance from her at 1858 Selby Avenue. Once John J. Ryan was established in St. Paul, his sister, Katherine, decided to leave Elizabethtown, New York and join him here. After living and working in St. Paul for three years, she married Patrick McHale. Like many Irishmen of the time, Patrick joined the St. Paul police force and later became a detective.

Mary enjoyed the company of her McHale cousins; Katherine, the oldest daughter who was named for her mother, the middle sister, May, and the youngest, Helen. All three sisters remained single, but Helen found a career in nursing. For thirty years, Helen McHale was a head nurse at Miller Hospital and after Mary's mother died, she was the one to encourage her cousin to apply for a job in special services at the hospital. Although Mary probably would have chosen the nursing profession if she had had the opportunity when she was younger, she appreciated her job at the hospital and especially enjoyed meeting new coworkers who quickly became part of a new circle of friends.

Mary Evelyn Ryan, center, the daughter of John J. Ryan, and two of her friends from St. Paul who were employed by the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association. Mary Evelyn along with Lillian A. Pieper, left, and Ella Carroll, assisted John J. in San Francisco in his successful campaign to be elected secretary of the National Retail Grocers Association. Photo courtesy of Mary Jo Richardson.

While some of Mary's single women cousins and friends lived into their eighties, Mary was the only one who was still active and living in her family home when she was in her nineties. After the rest of the family had moved on, Mary continued to entertain family and friends at 1661 Laurel Avenue. Besides family, her guests included the coworkers she had met at Miller Hospital and several long-time members of her bridge club, a club that had lasted more than sixty years.

Although career opportunities were limited for women in the era in which Mary grew up, she had a keen sense of belonging and found her place in St. Paul society. Part of that sense of belonging came from her Irish-Catholic connections. While Mary had friends and neighbors from many ethnic and religious backgrounds, her Irish relatives and friends provided a basic social network for her all her life. As Mary Lethert Wingerd points out in *Claiming the City,* citizens who were active in Irish-Catholic circles felt respected and particularly welcome in St. Paul from the turn of the twentieth century onward. If they were middle class, they also felt respectable and life in this city could be very rewarding. This pride of living in St. Paul might seem parochial to outsiders, but to insiders, like Mary, this city turned out to be a very good place to live. In many respects, the Irish could claim their place in the center of life in St. Paul, and Mary did that as well.

When she decided she could no longer maintain the family home, it seemed only fitting that Mary's nephew, John J. Ryan, who was his grandfather's namesake, and his wife, Marion, were the first to invite her to move in with them and their daughter, Maureen. Mary accepted the invitation and finally left St. Paul for Shoreview. For many years the family had enjoyed summer outings at a cottage our parents owned at Turtle Lake in Shoreview, just across the road from the James J. Hill farm in North Oaks. Although Shoreview was a familiar location to Mary, and close to St. Paul, it was not the same. It was just not the same as her city, the one in which she had grown up and grown to love; the place where she had been enriched by a close circle of extended family and friends.

Mary lived to be ninety-six years old, or as one friend commented, "ninety-six-years young." No matter where she lived, whether in St. Paul or in Shoreview, one thing was certain, she was still intensely involved in the lives of her nephew and nieces, and the next generation of grand nephews and nieces. Some of them claim they can still hear her words of advice. Long before there were professionals who, for a fee, would help you to remove the clutter from your life or home, or college guides that warned you to get organized if you wanted to succeed, there was Auntie saying, "There is a place for everything and everything in its place." No matter what piece of advice they remember, all of them agree that in her devotion to all of them she was a quintessential "Auntie Mame."

Association, progressive reform came into its own. Historian Bernard Weisberger claims the Progressive movement "came to a boil" in 1909 and 1910 and reached high tide in 1914 at the national level with health and safety legislation, child labor laws, and the promotion of women's suffrage. While these reforms held the national stage, John J. and his colleagues lobbied the Minnesota state legislature for a number of bills that grocers felt gave them a fairer playing field. These included a garnishment law, the Sunday closing law, a truth-in-advertising, and an anti-trading stamp law, all of which would be revisited again on the national scene.[12]

After each legislative session, John J. traveled around Minnesota and reported on recent developments at the Capitol. At an informal talk he gave in Duluth in April 1911, he presented his view of what had happened at the previous session. "About 2,000 bills were introduced, more than three quarters of which were dumped into the Mississippi River at the close of the session, including progressive legislation advocated by Col. [Theodore] Roosevelt. The Senate was the graveyard of progressive legislation." On the other hand, he gave credit to Minnesota's House of Representatives and to Governor Adolph O. Eberhart for supporting a progressive agenda.[13]

In the next few years, the survival of the independent grocers would become a major theme for John J., especially after 1915 when he was elected executive director of the National Grocers Association at the age of fifty-two. This election catapulted John onto the national scene. It also meant that St. Paul would become the site for the trade association's national headquarters. Writing in the *National Grocers Bulletin* in 1915, the St. Paul Association of Public and Business Affairs painted an idealistic picture of St. Paul. As boosters of the home town, these writers ignored the fact that St. Paul's heyday as a national railroad hub was waning. As Mary Lethert Wingerd notes in her research on St. Paul in *Claiming the City*, the completion of the Great Northern Railroad to the coast meant that St. Paul was no longer a national center for trade. While the city remained a regional trading center, the bubble had burst on St. Paul's aspirations to be a major national player.[14]

Therefore, it is not surprising that the St. Paul Association promoters were eager to proclaim that "The establishment in St. Paul of the general offices of the National Association of Retail Grocers centers attention anew to the exceptional natural advantages which have contributed so materially to the development of the Capitol City of Minnesota as the gateway and trade center of the great Northwest." As if that were not sufficient praise for St. Paul, the article went on to say, "The Capitol building, the Cathedral of St. Paul and other magnificent architectural triumphs pierce the sky-line. Jewels and silks, spices and perfumes, furs and precious metals and a multitude of other products of the energy of man in distant places across the seas come here for distribution to the hinterland of this great trade center."[15]

Nineteen fifteen was a watershed year for the National Grocers Association and for the lobbying skills of John J. Ryan. *The National Grocers Bulletin* was filled with praise for his accomplishments in moving legislation ahead for their field. Many of the issues he had dealt with on the state level were now on his agenda at the national level. He took his concerns about false advertising to the Federal Trade Commission, lobbied Congress on trading stamps, unfair mail order practices, Sunday closing laws, and especially the bankruptcy law. The *Grocers Bulletin* gave John credit for lining up 100 Congressmen to support the Stevens bill amending the national bankruptcy

The MGA Celebrates 110 Years

In 2007 the Minnesota Grocers Association celebrated its 110th year. Originally, the name was Minnesota Retail Grocers and General Merchants Association, but many goals are still the same. According to Jim Bohen, editor of the current magazine, *Minnesota Grocer*, the desire in 1897 to "develop better ways of doing things, and present a united front against the legislation that threatens their businesses" is still a goal of the present Association, the MGA.

J.J. Ryan, executive secretary (similar to today's title of Executive Director), served from 1903 to 1915 and again from 1930 to 1935. During that time, he lobbied for a number of issues that reverberate today, including:

- Pure Food and Drug Laws: The issue of pure and safe food is still alive today. Focus is now on enforcement of laws and concerns that involve the global, as well as the domestic, market.
- Limiting Competition: While yesterday's grocers had to fight to be allowed to sell oleomargarine or tobacco products, today's Minnesota grocers are still seeking legislation to be able to sell wine. "Wine With Dinner" is the current initiative.
- Chains, Mergers, and Buy Outs: In 1935 the U.S. Supreme Court said states had the right to keep chain stores from expanding. Today size is no longer a limiting factor. Smaller chains are still opposed to larger chains that talk about one-stop shopping. Recently, one chain store that challenged its larger competitor used the slogan: "We specialize in fruit, not fruit of the loom."

So the issues have changed and the independent grocers have adjusted to the changes.

As the current executive director, Jamie Puhl, noted in the winter 2007 *Minnesota Grocer*, "We're here to work hard to represent the interests of the food industry so its members can continue to prosper, offering career opportunities and continuing to make the essential contributions to their communities that they've always made."

law to take care of the problems facing independent grocers who were often cast in the role of providing for families who could not pay their bills.

In a light-hearted vein, the dilemma of the nation's small grocers, as providers of charity via credit for goods received, was captured in this rhyme:

> For the love of the grocer is broader than the measure of any man's mind.
> For the great big heart of the grocer is always wonderfully kind.

But the National Grocers Association under John J. Ryan decided that the time had come to be pragmatic about the need to reform the system of credit that left the grocers holding the bag when people failed to pay their bills. John J. explained the situation in one of his stories. "Even this old system of crediting everybody might survive," he said, "if the customer's mother-in-law did not get sick and his wife had to make a railroad journey to see the afflicted, or perhaps the little girl or boy fell down stairs and broke an arm or head and the doctor's bill crept in, and many picture shows must be patronized while the grocer waits. He must wait. He won't dare ask for what is due him for fear the customer will go in a huff and trade elsewhere." The plight of the grocer was a theme that John addressed in speeches he gave across the country. On other issues, the National Association and John, as their leading representative, were active in promoting uniform and effective food laws, the application of the Pure Food Law to packaged foods, honest weights and measures, and the relation of the Pure Food Law to imports.[16]

Ryan Heads the National Association

The National Association first elected John its secretary at its 1915 convention in San Francisco. The *Grocers Bulletin* reported that 10,000 people attended the opening ball. The Civic Center, which had been built nine years after the great San Francisco fire, was called the "last word in modern architecture." As the promoters of the conference wrote, "You have come to the marvel of the world—San Francisco, the attractive city that has arisen phoenix-like from the ashes and has astounded the world by building the greatest Exhibition known to civilization." Ryan's daughter, Mary, who was then in her early twenties, went to San Francisco to help campaign for her father. It was a heady time for the National Grocers Association and for my grandfather as well.[17]

During World War I, grocers were encouraged by the U.S. Food Administration to order and display colorful posters such as this one titled "Victory is a Question of Stamina" that directly tied the nation's food supply to the war effort. Photo courtesy of Mary Jo Richardson.

While the delegates, who attended the conference in May, were euphoric, there was a dark cloud on the horizon. Delegates from England and France declined the invitation to come to what was billed as the World's Congress in San Francisco. Representatives from England wrote, "The war will make it impossible, I dare say, for any of us to make the trip." The French refusal was polite but pointed out that "Leading members of our Federation are now doing their duty at the battle front defending our country." Citizens in the United States were concerned for their friends but hardly thought the European fight would involve them directly.[18]

Even in Washington, D. C., life went on as usual. Woodrow Wilson was president and was carrying out the progressive reforms that others had been promoting for years. For the time being, all eyes were on domestic issues. But the days of peace were numbered after the sinking of the *Lusitania* (1915), and they finally floundered on the issue of keeping the seas open for trade. When Germany revoked its pledge to refrain from the unrestricted use of its submarines in January 1917, Wilson broke off relations with Germany and in early April, the United States declared war on Germany.[20] Although there were a few prominent politicians who opposed American participation in the war, the martial drumbeat all but silenced the protesters. Congress enacted the military draft law in June and it was just a matter of time before thousands of Minnesota families were involved in World War I.

The Home Front Goes to War

On both a personal and a public level, John J. was one of those caught up in the war. His oldest son, John Jr., was drafted and soon sent overseas where he fought in the trenches in France, a far cry from his recent past where he had been a star football player for Mechanic Arts High School. A 1917 article in the *Grocers Bulletin* pointed out that John Jr. would not be twenty-one until the following March. With his son in service overseas, John J. also had a public reason for doing all he could to help win the war because food production was one of the most important factors in supporting both the home front and the allies overseas.[21]

President Wilson appointed Herbert Hoover as Food Administrator for the country, which already faced issues of food hoarding and speculation. As Food Administrator, Hoover rejected plans for rationing and instead launched a volunteer conservation program that mobilized American households to create surpluses of food, fuel, and other critical wartime supplies. As part of this program, Hoover often turned to the National Grocers Association for help and sent a number of letters to Ryan thanking the grocers for their cooperation and urging them to "do their bit" by encouraging conservation of the nation's resources and energies. He said their patriotic cooperation was needed

and even gave them advice about urging housewives to serve more fresh vegetables and fruits in season, do more canning, dry fruit, and keep potatoes and root vegetables in cool basements.

Later, the Grocers Association went on record supporting the Lever Food and Fuel Control Act (1917), which forbade hoarding and authorized the president to, among other provisions, fix prices. There were some who argued that even after the war the idea of price controls would be helpful to both farmers and retailers. During the war, however, Ryan and the National Grocers Association were determined that Americans and the allies would be well fed. They joined the fight led by Herbert Hoover whose slogan was, "Food will win the War." Not only did the grocers serve their country well, but their businesses prospered. One of the changes that the war brought to grocery retailing was a widespread shift from grocers typically offering customers the use of "credit and delivery" for goods sold, which was costly to the grocer, to offering only "cash and carry" sales. As John J. noted in his report in 1918, "A very large percentage of the grocers of the country have gone on a strictly cash basis."[22]

After the war the mood of the country and the situation for farmers and grocers changed dramatically. As European farms began to produce more food for their own people, the demand for U.S. farm products decreased. Surpluses in the U.S. grew and oversupply drove prices down. In addition, the federal government's wartime seed loan program ended, thereby cutting off a valuable source of crop production credit for farmers. The return to "normalcy" after the war promptly ended the climate for reform.

In 1915 John J. Ryan, second from the right, joined five other businessmen from Minneapolis and St. Paul in testifying before members of the Federal Trade Commission. Ryan's statements stressed the importance of pure food laws in assuring a high standard of quality for groceries sold in Minnesota, especially when compared to goods sold by mail order. Photo courtesy of Mary Jo Richardson.

Ryan's Postwar Work and Retirement

John Ryan now found himself fighting rearguard actions against what he called "freak" legislation. He traveled from state to state where legislators proposed bills that would drive up grocers' costs unnecessarily. In many states grocers spoke out against the license of $100 a year for the privilege of selling oleomargarine. In Minnesota, as well as other states, the measure was defeated. In the case of Minnesota, former state Senator George Peterson, who had followed John as secretary of the Minnesota Retail Grocers, led the fight against the bill. Grocers by the dozens lobbied against the bill. Other legislation was introduced to prevent grocery stores from selling a variety of products from snuff to fly paper. With the great cause of food for the war over, John decided it was time to take a break. In 1919 he retired from his job as national secretary but continued to work in the field of advertising.[23]

Although John stayed active as a private citizen in the Grocers Association, he felt it was a time to spend more time with this family. News articles said Ryan was semi-retired, but he never really retired completely. Then, in 1930, George Peterson, John's friend and colleague of many years, suddenly died. Ryan's associates again called on John to serve as secretary for the Minnesota Association. At the age of 67, he returned to the fray.

One of the major challenges facing the independent grocers after 1916 was the competition from chain stores. John took up the cause, gave speeches throughout the state, talked on radio, and worked on state legislation. Among the arguments he used against the coming of the chain stores was the idea of unfair competition and unfair taxation. As the *Grocers Bulletin* expressed it, "Chain stores have depressed prices of farm products, forced many manufacturers and packers to sell at ruinous prices and have thereby been a big factor in reducing employment, lowering wages, and depressing industry." In an article entitled, "Ruin Wrought by the Chains," John wrote, "They worked their employees [over] long hours and paid them scarcely enough to keep body and soul together." Independent grocers joined together to fight what they considered unfair practices.[24]

When the issue of chain store competition reached the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1930s, Justice Louis Brandeis wrote that the state of Florida had a right to tax chain stores. In his opinion he wrote that "If the state concludes that bigness in retail merchandising, as manifested in corporate chain stores, menaces the public welfare, it might prohibit the excessive size as it prohibits excessive size and weight of motor trucks and excessive height of buildings." The grocers associations around the country were pleased with the decision. Many states, including Minnesota, began crafting legislation to curb the chains since they argued that the chains avoided local and state taxes and thus ignored the needs of the community.[25]

John and members of the Minnesota Association did what they could to hold back the tidal wave caused by chain stores, but times had changed and consumers led the way in the 1920s. They voted with their feet to support the chain stores that provided lower prices, self service, standardized products, and other modern features that were more appealing than the neighborhood grocery store. Soon the economic dislocations of the Great Depression added to the problems of small, independent grocers and many closed their doors for good.[26]

In February 1932, John wrote an article for the *Official Year Book and Convention Program* for the Minnesota Association in which he urged members to stay optimistic. In a rather philosophical mood, he wrote, "History records how America fought and won nineteen major depressions. Good times always follow hard times, as surely as day follows night. Prosperity always comes back. It will come back this time, too." He ended on a very positive note, "Let us look to the new year with renewed hope and aspiration and knowledge that America has always come through."

John J. Ryan at the time of his second term of service (1930–1935) as executive secretary of the Minnesota Retail Grocers Association. Portrait by Alfred Miller. Photo courtesy of Mary Jo Richardson.

But John's message was not only overly optimistic; it was also premature. What he and so many others of his time failed to realize was that this depression was unlike the short-lived dips in the economy with which they were familiar. In her recent book, *Creating Minnesota*, social historian Annette Atkins points out that by 1931 there were already 60,000 Minnesotans who had left their previous jobs and could not find new ones. Large companies, such as General Mills, laid off half of their employees in 1932.[27] There were strikes and protests in Minnesota, as well as at the nation's capital. A large "army" of veterans of World War I gathered in tents in front of the White House and elsewhere in Washington to lay claim to their bonus checks for their service to the country. Despite some support in the Congress, the veterans found their lobbying thwarted by the Hoover administration and their camps callously destroyed by army troops. The defeat of the "bonus army" was one more signal that drastic change was needed. That would finally come after March 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated as president.

From 1933 to 1935, a period that historians have often called the First New Deal, the government created the alphabet agencies which initiated programs of relief for the unemployed, large public work programs, and reform of business and financial practices. The new administration also designed various ways to try to restore the economy. While some efforts were successful, others fell short, and the depression was far from over. It was within this early New Deal time frame that John J. Ryan welcomed the reform effort and urged members to continue to organize and recruit others for the Minnesota Retail Grocers and General Merchants Association in order to pursue fairness for Minnesota retailers. The stress of the times took its toll, however. In February 1935, John added an uncharacteristic note to his usual optimistic tone. "Today, as never before," he wrote, "there are burdens placed upon its [the Association's] officers, both physically and financially, which are hard to carry." He did not mention his own burdens, but they must have been very heavy because within a month, on March 2, 1935, John died at the age of seventy-two.[28]

One of the first tributes came from "Larry Ho," former St. Paul mayor, and columnist for the *St. Paul Dispatch.* He wrote:

> Few men have crowded so much valiant activity into one life as John J. Ryan did. As Secretary for the Minnesota State Grocers, and of the National Grocers Association, he was known as an outstanding organizer and

leader, efficient in method, and exceptional in ability to find the right path between conflicting policies. He was a moving spirit in the Commercial Travelers also. But he was not too busy with business affairs to reserve leisure for friendship, and those who knew him always found his loyal friendliness sustaining and inspiring. A more genial, companionable man never lived, but even his kindly disposition could not make him lax when he was confronted with a duty. His generous humanity and his sturdy loyalty to his principles made him both loved and admired.[29]

Expressions of sympathy to his family poured in from all over the state and nation. His unexpected death led many merchants and associates in the retail business to tell stories of how much he had done for them and for the Retail Grocers Association, the trade organization in which he was a pioneer and in 2007 celebrated its 110th anniversary.

John J. Ryan lived in both prosperous and perilous times. In an era when grassroots lobbying was on the rise, he believed that ordinary citizens could make a difference. With a strong sense of the importance of people joining together to make their concerns known, he saw the Retail Grocers Association flourish and influence the way business is conducted in Minnesota. His story is not only the story of one leader and one trade organization, but the story of how ordinary citizens can make their voices heard and establish meaningful grassroots citizen participation in politics in Minnesota.[30]

Mary Jo Richardson did her undergraduate work at the College of St. Catherine and received her doctorate in Education from the University of St. Thomas. She has held a number of leadership positions within the field of education, most recently as the executive director of the Minnesota Commission on National and Community Service, which initiated the AmeriCorps program in Minnesota. She is the granddaughter of John J. Ryan and a resident of Shoreview.

NOTES

1. H.S. McIntyre, ed., *Grocers Commercial Bulletin and Meat Dealers News* (St. Paul: Bruce Publishing, 1935), 20; *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 3, 1935; and family records, which indicate that Ryan spent more than a year in Iowa before arriving in Minnesota. The news articles summarize his leadership at the local, state, and national levels for the retail grocers associations.

2. *National Grocers Bulletin* (St. Paul: National Association of Retail Grocers, March 1933); William Allen White, *Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1946).

3. *Official Year Book: History of the Labor Movement in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota State Federation of Labor, 1916), 64. Beneath the picture of John J. Ryan in this volume, there is a paragraph stating that Ryan was a founder of the Retail Clerks International Protective Association and that even after he became associated with the Retail Grocers Association, he retained his interest in the affairs of organized labor.

4. *St. Paul Daily Pioneer Press*, April 10, 1885; under "News of the Day," several articles describe the strikes and conditions of workers throughout the country.

5. *St. Paul Daily Pioneer Press*, May 9, 1892.

6. Family records.

7. Aïda DiPace Donald, *Lion in the White House: A Life of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 124–29.

8. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 253.

9. Clipping from *Twin City Commercial Bulletin*, December 11, 1909.

10. Speech on "Trading Stamp Evils" delivered at the Crookston, Minnesota, meeting of the local grocers association, September 2, 1908; "Trading Stamp" article also published in the *National Grocers Bulletin*, July 1915.

11. Clipping from the *Winona Daily Independent*, September 1908.

12. Bernard A. Weisberger, *The LaFollettes of Wisconsin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 71–73.

13. Typed copy of speech given in Duluth, Minnesota, April 16, 1911.

14. Mary Lethert Wingerd, *Claiming the City: Politics, Faith, and the Power of Place in St. Paul* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 84–89.

15. *National Grocers Bulletin*, June, 1915.

16. This information is based on the following clippings: "Grocers failures increase," *Commercial Journal*, St. Joseph, Mo., September, 1916; "Tells of grocers' troubles," *Kansas City Retail Grocers*, September 4, 1916; and "The high costs of living and the grocers," *The Grocer*, San Francisco, March 30, 1916.

17. Clipping from *Twin City Commercial Bulletin*, June 16, 1915; the article includes a picture of Mary Ryan and others on the campaign trail.

18. *National Grocers Bulletin*, May 1915.

19. Patricia Hampl, *The Florist's Daughter* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2007), 10.

20. Steven J. Keillor, *Shaping Minnesota's Identity: 150 years of State History* (Lakeville, Minn.: Pogo Press, 2008), 142.

21. *St. Paul Dispatch,* May 30, 1917.

22. *National Grocers Bulletins*, February 1919 and July 1919; the February issue includes letters from Herbert Hoover to John J. Ryan thanking the grocers for their war effort. The July issue has a report from John J. Ryan on the role of grocers in support of the nation in World War I.

23. Copy of form letter to Retail Grocers and General Merchants Association of Minnesota, September 1934.

24. *National Grocers Bulletin: Special convention edition, 1933*; *Grocers Commercial Bulletin and Meat Dealers News* (Minneapolis: Bruce Publishing, March 1935).

25. "The case against the chains: Opinion of Justice Brandeis," *Grocers Commercial Bulletin and Meat Dealers News* (Minneapolis: Bruce Publishing, March 1935).

26. "Mail-Order House," from *Gale Encyclopedia of U. S. Economic History* (2000), retrieved

November 2008, from http:// www. accessmylibrary. com and Tracey Deutsch, "Untangling Alliances: Social Tensions Surrounding Independent Grocery Stores and the Rise of Mass Retailing," in Warren J. Belasco and Philip Scranton, eds., *Food Nations: Selling Taste to Consumer Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 156–74.

27. Annette Atkins, *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 172–76.

28. *Grocers Commercial Bulletin and Meat Dealers News,* section 2 (Minneapolis: Bruce

Publishing, February 1935).

29. "Larry Ho's Column," *St. Paul Dispatch*, March 5, 1935. "Larry Ho" was the pen name for Laurence C. Hodgson, who twice served as mayor of St. Paul (1918–1922 and 1926–1930).

30. "Unwrapping 110 Years," *Minnesota Grocer* (St. Paul: Minnesota Grocers Association, Winter 2007).

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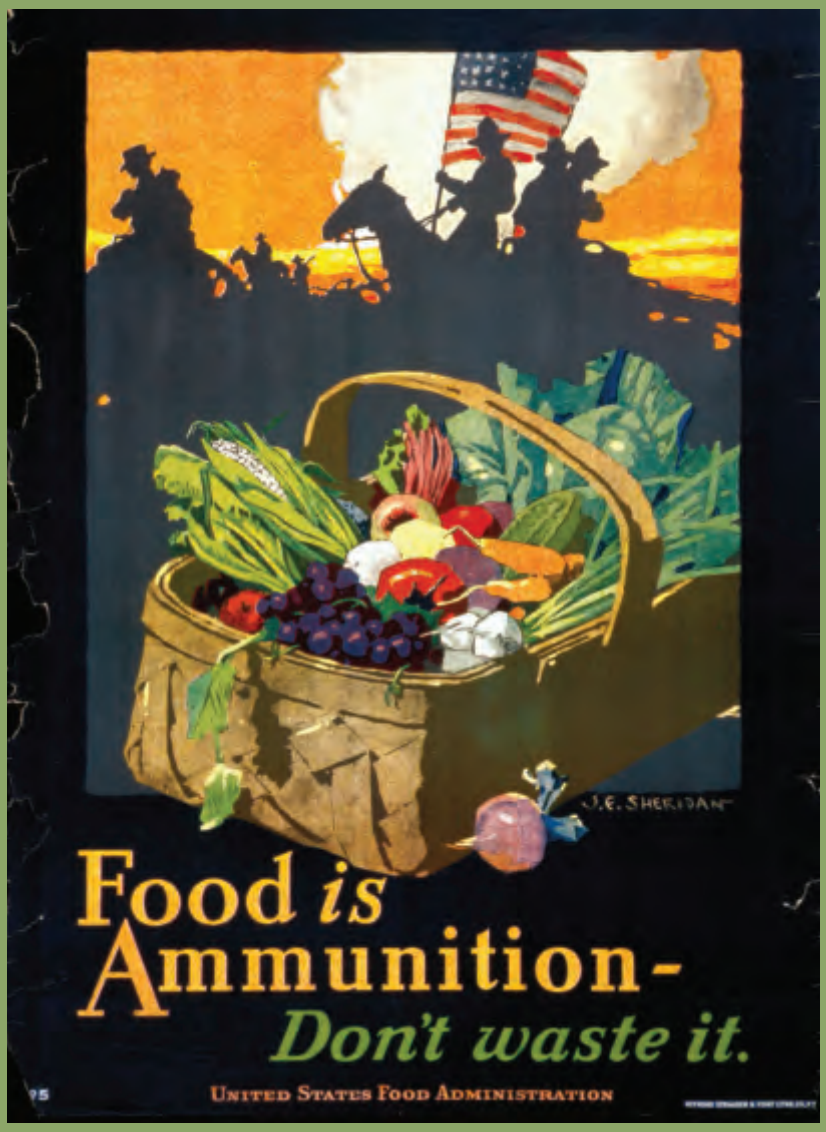

Between 1917 and 1920, the U.S. Food Administration commissioned various artists to create posters that encouraged public support for Liberty Loan drives, enlistment in the army and navy, Red Cross activities, war work, and the production and conservation of food during World War I. Poster by J. F. Sheridan courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society. For more on food for the American people in the early twentieth century, see Mary Jo Richardson's article on page 13.