

Journal of
Economics and Political Economy

www.kspjournals.org

Volume 3

September 2016

Issue 3

**Robert Dirks, *Food in the Gilded Age; What Ordinary Americans Ate*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 226 pp.
\$36 Hardcover.**

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Abstract. Robert Dirks offers an important contribution to food and nutrition history in his book *Food in the Gilded Age: What Ordinary Americans Ate*. The book spans a broad swath of late 19th century US nutrition history using available dietaries from diverse sources and multiple ethnic groups. Early Mexican-Americans represent one of the earliest ethnic groups in the US. During the Gilded Age, the children of Native-Mexicans with early white European explorers—Mestizos—reflect the most pre-developed diets in the West. Dirks summarizes their diets using Mexican-American households in Las Cruces, New Mexico and the Rio Grande Valley, Texas that were transitioning into Southwestern economies.

Keywords. Food policy, Economic history, Americans ate.

JEL. B10, L66, Q18.

1. Introduction

Robert Dirks offers an important contribution to food and nutrition history in his book *Food in the Gilded Age: What Ordinary Americans Ate*. The book spans a broad swath of late 19th century US nutrition history using available dietaries from diverse sources and multiple ethnic groups. Early Mexican-Americans represent one of the earliest ethnic groups in the US. During the Gilded Age, the children of Native-Mexicans with early white European explorers—Mestizos—reflect the most pre-developed diets in the West. Dirks summarizes their diets using Mexican-American households in Las Cruces, New Mexico and the Rio Grande Valley, Texas that were transitioning into Southwestern economies. Cornmeal comprised the bulk of early Mexican-American diets. As families progressed up the socioeconomic ladder, corn became less prominent and was replaced by wheat. Other standard fare in the late 19th century Mexican diet included beans, chilies, eggs, potatoes, lard, sugar, coffee, and salt. Nonetheless, their diets also included beefsteaks, beef ribs, and hogs' head. Similar to other US diets among the working poor, Mexican diets were monotonous and did not vary, but provided sufficient calories to sustain 19th century Mexicans in the American West (Carson, 2015).

Working-class white diets in the Deep South and Appalachia were sufficient to perform work but did not provide abundant calories (Carson 2014; Dirks, 2016, pp. 20-41). For both African-Americans and whites, corn and pork were the backbone

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of Southern diets (Dirks, 2016, pp. 20-41; Hilliard, 1972; Kiple & King, 1981). Southern and Appalachian farmers raised wheat, corn, potatoes, beans, and sweet potatoes (Fogel & Engerman, 1974, pp. 109-115); livestock included hogs, cows, horses, and mules. Southern foods were also cooked in lard, which was mixed with cornmeal to bake bread. During the 19th century, lard was also a leading cooking medium in the South. Calorie estimates range from 3,536 for Southern students to 5,669 in Northeast Georgia. However, black and white Southeastern diets were monotonous (Dirks, 2016, p. 29; Sutch, 1976). As Southern agriculture became more commercial, the use of processed grains and animal fat increased, and fat, sugars, and salts increased in the Southern diet, as they did throughout the US.

A novel contribution of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman's book *Time on the Cross* is that slaves received more calories per day than their white working class counterparts. Carson (2014) also shows that blacks during the late 19th and early 20th centuries expended more calories per day than comparable lower class whites.¹ Dirks (2016, pp. 43-66) extends Fogel and Engerman's work to show that black diets were monotonous for most workers in the Gilded Age (Sutch, 1976). A persistent observation regarding Southern agriculture is the degree to which cotton took over Southern agriculture to be its export crop. Before the Civil War, the South was self-sufficient in food production. After the War, the South specialized in plantation cotton at the expense of food production (Ransom & Sutch, 1977, pp. 150-155). Soul food is the modern Southern cuisine that originated out of slave diets, and late 19th and early 20th century diets were calorie dense that yielded the greatest energy value to black households. While pork and corn were abundant in black diets, the pork that black households consumed was fat-back pork, which is what black households could afford and provided the greatest energy content for resources allocated to food. However, reliance on pork and lard as a cooking medium was associated with increased dietary trans-fats, which increased low density lipoproteins (LDLs)—bad proteins—and decreased high density lipoproteins (HDLs)—good proteins—which was associated with greater obesity, hypertension, diabetes, cardiac, and circulatory problems.

There were, however, Soul food vegetables that were standard fare in the late 19th century, such as sweet potatoes, okra, beans, and black-eyed peas. And like Ransom and Sutch's criticism that black diets continued to be monotonous, Southern white working class diets also lacked variety. Black diets also interfaced with biology and macro-nutrients. For example, blacks consumed less calcium and dairy products than whites (Kiple & King, 1981). Moreover, calcium is absorbed with vitamin D in the lower intestine, and blacks produced less vitamin D in their epidermis than whites (Carson, 2008; Carson, 2009). In sum, during the Gilded Age, Soul foods evolved out of the slave diet, had long-term health implications, but did not compensate for several black biological disparities.

Diets also varied between urban and rural locations by social class during the Gilded Age, and there were considerable health conditions related to diets that coincided with growing seasons. The wealthy consumed calories in excess, while the middle class ate heartily. Common fare included beef, lard, eggs, butter, cheese, milk, granulated sugar, potatoes, and wheat flour. However, diets varied regionally, and a typical New England diet included fresh fish, clams, various meats, corn, cracked wheat, and oatmeal. While working class diets varied regionally and with growing seasons, middle class access to nutrition was relatively

¹A 1976 criticism by Richard Sutch's response to *Time on the Cross*'s evaluation so Southern diets is that while slave had sufficient calories to perform work, their diets were monotonous. Dirks (2016, p. 29) illustrates that much of Southern working class black and white diets were monotonous.

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steady throughout the year. However, whereas pork was a staple in middle class diets outside of the Northeast, easy access to the beef industry transported to eastern urban locations from Western states made beef increasingly more common in middle and upper class diets. At the other extreme, wage workers consumed cheaper shoulder and rump roast cuts. Further down the socioeconomic ladder, the diets of the poor were predictably less nutritious and varied seasonally.

For upper, middle, and lower classes, fruit consumption varied seasonally and was limited to fruits that kept with cold storage techniques. Typical fruits consumed by the middle class included apples, bananas, and oranges, and there were disease episodes related to limited seasonal access to fruits and vegetables. Some seasonal calorie estimates are available. In the fall, middle class New Yorkers consumed around 3,400 calories; poor white New Yorkers consumed about 3,200 calories which declined in winter. While middle class diets fell by less than 20 calories per day with seasonal variation, calories in the working poor's diets decreased by as much as 500 calories per day with seasonal variation. In sum, most segments of society had sufficient access to nutrition and calories, but the poor were predictably most affected and paid a larger proportion of their income on food.

Immigration to the US was high during the Gilded Age, and access to food was an early motivation for migration. Robert Fogel proposed that 10 percent of 18th century French workers and four percent of their British counterparts received too few calories to be meaningfully considered part of the French and British labor forces (Fogel, 1994). Nonetheless, Dirks illustrates that 19th century immigrants to the US received adequate diets. Part of the early allure of immigrating was the promise of better nutrition, that there was "meat at every meal" (Dirks, 2016, pp. 104-116). Immigrants were predominantly from Europe, which meant that most immigrant dietary patterns were similar to European diets. The more time immigrants spent in the US, the more their diets assimilated and improved. For example, long after their arrival in the US, Italian immigrants consumed pasta, olive oil, pork, and macaroni. Russian Jews held onto their kosher diets, and Bohemians continued to consume their native frankfurters, poppy seeds, and pork sausage. However, immigrant cuisines were some of the last barriers to assimilation. While most immigrants nutritionally did better in the US than their countries of origin, remaining true to their native diets came at a price, and immigrants devoted a higher proportion of their income to food.

Food and nutrition histories are an important part of development and economic history studies that reflect the calories, health, and labor market success of a population. An important aspect of *Food in the Gilded Age* is its comprehensive summary of calories from dietaries that integrates with the existing food history literatures. Net calories estimated from equations that use age, height, weight, and physical activity are an alternative means to calculate food expenditures required to sustain a person's weight and physical activity (Harrison & Benedict, 1919; Mifflin et al. 1990; Weijs et al. 2007, pp. 153-156). National food balance sheets estimate gross food production, while calories from equations provide net calories available to a population to maintain physical dimensions. In combination, dietaries, food balance sheet records, and equations provide a comprehensive food, culinary, and nutrition history.

Robert Dirks' *Food in the Gilded Age* provides a broad summary of the literature regarding US food and nutrition during late 19th century US economic development. Nevertheless, there are gaps yet to be integrated with other histories. For instance, how do food histories reflect health and labor market success during US economic development? How do food and nutrition histories relate to cognitive and labor market outcomes over time, across ethnic groups, and across geographic

regions? Moreover, how do dietary histories relate to other methods used to estimate calories? Calories from dietaries and food production records reflect food produced but only roughly reflect consumption. There was plate waste, field waste, and other instances where food was produced but not consumed. Alternatively, calories from equations represent food expenditure estimates required to sustain a given physical dimension (Mifflin et al. 1990; Carson, 2014; Carson, 2015; Carson, 2016). Rectifying these two methods lies somewhere in the future, but their combination provides insight into nutrition during economic development.

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