Food for Thought About Food

FIRMAN E. BEAR

A LICE, in Wonderland, was running hand-in-hand with the Queen, and just as fast as she could. But she was surprised to find that she wasn’t getting anywhere. The Queen said, “What did you expect?” “Well,” panted Alice, “in our country you would generally get to somewhere else.” “That’s a slow sort of country,” said the Queen. “Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.”

We older agronomists have to run as fast as we can just to keep pace with the rapid developments that are taking place in food and fiber production. We depend on the younger men “to get somewhere else.” They are not handicapped by having learned so many things that are no longer so.

All of us see the need for abundant supplies of food and fiber—enough to meet the requirements of all our people all the time. We recognize the importance of having substantial surpluses for export. We think it essential to have reasonably large quantities in storage to carry us safely through in time of drought. Finally, we are impressed with the necessity of having dependable reserves of productive capacity that can be called into play in the event of war or other world catastrophe.

Planning for Two Hundred Million People

Recently, the 150-year-old Malthusian principle has been revived. Malthus asserted that population tends to increase up to the limit set by the food supply. His concepts fell into disrepute, however, with the rapid agricultural development of the New World during the nineteenth century. But much is now again being said about this subject by a great variety of people, many of whom have no first-hand knowledge of agriculture. It seems important, therefore, that some of us who deal directly with farming carefully consider the matter. Accordingly, I propose to outline the potentialities for food and fiber production in the United States of America in relation to our future needs.

Population growth provides a good starting point. When the first settlers arrived some 350 years ago, the 1,905 million acres that now constitute the United States of America was an Indian Paradise. In 1602, it included about 800,000 people in it. During the first 200 years after a white man arrived, the population increased from about 4 million people. But by 1850 it had increased to about 40 million, by 1900 it had reached 76 million, and the total number of people in the United States is expected to be 150 million.

This vast new country had tremendous resources. Its population grew rapidly because it prospered. A large percentage of them lived in the open country where children had economic value. In 1820, over 80% of our people were farmers. Twenty years later, over 80% of them live in cities. When children tend to be economic liabilities, knowledge of contraceptives is sought and applied, the capacity to reproduce is lowered, and the rate of increase begins to decline. To be on the safe side, however, it is wise to plan for 200 million people.

The tendency toward a declining birth rate is compensated for temporarily by a marked increase in longevity. This is credited to improvements in sanitation, growth in medical knowledge and facilities, and the development of new drugs. By the year 2000 it is expected that some 13% of our population will have passed the 65-year mark.

The curve of population growth in any country is sigmoid. It rises slowly at first, then more rapidly. Later it flattens out, and finally it falls. Accurate population estimates for the United States appear to be those of Raymond Pearl, a few years ago, predicted a population of 149 million by 1950. Pearl’s estimate for the year 2000 is 186 million.

Most experts in this field doubt that the population of the United States will reach that number. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations has set the goal of 500 million. But even this is probably too high. The Food and Agricultural Organization’s estimate for 1950 was 150 million. The United States is the only country in the world with the resources to balance the growth in population and the growth in medical knowledge and facilities with the development of new drugs. It is not handicapped by having learned so many things that are no longer so.