

“It All Started in a Supermarket”:
Women Taking a Stand for Consumer Rights

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Outline

Thesis Statement

Women reformers have been leaders since the 19th century in calling for more information about food, and in standing up for the rights of consumers to have access to information they could use to make sure the food they were buying for their families was safe. Their work has resulted in new laws and guidelines for food ingredients and food labeling, and has been part of broader consumer movements in the 20th century. Even today, there are debates about food labeling and food safety, and women are leaders in today's sustainable food movement, and movements to properly label organic food, genetically modified food, etc.

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“The mere suggestion that consumers have a right to know what they eat is always enough to give food lobbyists the jitters.”

Ruth deForest Lamb

American Chamber of Horrors: The Truth About Food and Drugs (1936)¹

When you’re deciding what to buy at the grocery store, what do you check? There’s the price, of course, but do you look at what’s in the food? How old it is? How do you know if the food is safe to eat? In the 1850s, reports of “swill milk” – taken from diseased cows and “diluted with water and colored with chalk”² – spurred some of the first food safety regulations. But even in the late 20th century, people often did not know how old the food they bought in stores was, much less what was in it. For over a century, consumer advocates have stood up for our right to know what is in the food we buy. Many of the leaders in this movement were women, and they’re the ones to thank when you’re checking labels in a grocery store.

One of the women involved in these efforts was Chicago’s Jan Schakowsky. Schakowsky, now a U.S. Congresswoman, was a young housewife in 1969. One day, while buying food for her children, she witnessed a heated argument between another woman and the grocery’s butcher. The cause? The woman wanted to know how old the meat she was buying was, and the butcher refused to tell. Schakowsky realized that this was a problem needing attention, so she assembled five of her friends to form “National Consumers United” (NCU).³

Schakowsky and her “group of crusading housewives” conducted “store inspections.”⁴ In those days, expiration dates on food labels were encoded so managers knew the food’s condition but buyers didn’t. This was called “closed

dating,”⁵ and no store manager was willing to give up the codes. So, NCU members “did it the old fashioned way – [they] pushed stockboys against the wall and convinced them to give up the codes.”⁶ They compiled a “codebook” and sold 25,000 copies to consumers.⁷ Still, they needed to do more. They continued store inspections in grocery chains, children in tow, checking how old the food available for sale was. Some was recent, but some had been “expired” for years.⁸ NCU members conducting “C-O-D-E campaigns” were sometimes threatened by store workers, with one reporting a supervisor who threatened, “If you talk to customers, we’ll throw you out of the store!”⁹

Store managers were even less pleased, calling women’s husbands, police, and even hiring private investigators.¹⁰ But NCU members didn’t give in. Instead, they moved their actions further up the “food chain.” Women bought shares in food companies, and went to shareholders’ meetings to convince manufacturers to put expiration dates on food. Store owners found that people liked being able to see when food was fresh, and companies providing this information saw better sales. Slowly, after continued NCU lobbying, and seeing a positive sales impact, manufacturers began to use “open” dating.¹¹ [See Figure 1 (left) for example]



The NCU is one example of women being leaders in calling for more information about food, and standing up for the rights of consumers to have access to information they can use to make sure the food they are buying is safe.

Their work resulted in new laws and guidelines for food labeling, and was part of broader consumer movements in the 20th century. Jan Schakowsky made “standing

up” for the rights of consumers, women, and others, the focus of her work as a legislator in Illinois and Washington, D.C., and, as she has said, that lifetime of work “all started in a supermarket.”¹²

Concerns about food purity, though, are even older than the idea of supermarkets. In the 19th century, eating was a game of Russian Roulette. There were practically no federal regulations regarding food safety or what ingredients could be put in food sold to the public, and state laws could only control so much. This blatant disregard for safety was revealed during New York’s “Swill Milk” scandal of 1858, but the nation’s attention wasn’t really caught until the 1906 publication of Upton Sinclair’s infamous story of immigrant life in Chicago, *The Jungle*, which led to public support for laws like the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act, both passed on June 30, 1906.¹³

Food labeling in the United States arguably began with the Pure Food and Drug Act, which was meant to promote “truth in labeling” and paved the way for the 1906 creation of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which developed out of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Chemistry, founded in 1862.¹⁴ The FDA’s mission is to “[protect] the public health by ensuring that foods ... are safe, wholesome, sanitary, and properly labeled.”¹⁵ Even with the founding of the FDA, there were numerous gaps in the 1906 law, especially around labeling and enforcement of regulations. One of these gaps was filled by the 1913 Gould Amendment, which required that the contents of food packages “be plainly and conspicuously marked on the outside of the package in terms of weight, measure, or numerical count and ingredients.”¹⁶ Others remained until the passage of the Food,

Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1938, which gave the FDA the authority to oversee the safety of food, drugs, and cosmetics.¹⁷ Food labeling was again addressed in 1967 with the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act, which required a statement identifying



the commodity, name and place of manufacture, and net quantity of contents of packaged food.¹⁸

In 1990, the FDA was given authority to require accurate nutritional labeling by the Nutrition Labeling and Information Act. [See Figure 2 (left) for example].¹⁹ Most recently, the Food Allergen

Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 required labels to identify the presence of any one of eight common food allergens.²⁰ A century after passing the Pure Food and Drug Act, there is still debate over what information consumers need to make decisions about what food to buy.

One of the pioneers of the pure food movement, often called the “father of the FDA,” was Harvey Washington Wiley, who served as Chief Chemist in the Bureau of Chemistry, beginning in 1883.²¹ Wiley pressed for reform throughout the 1880s and 1890s, but without success. While many remember the lurid depiction of Chicago’s meat-packing industry in *The Jungle* and its impact on public opinion, Wiley was quick to credit another factor in the successful passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, and that was women. “[The] tide was turned,” one historian wrote, “when the activist club women of the country rallied to the pure food cause.”²²

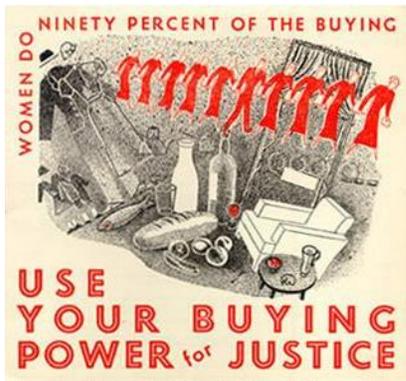
Women had been involved in reform movements since before the Civil War, including abolition, temperance, and public health.²³ By the late 19th century, these

“women’s clubs” lobbied for improvements to public schools, sanitation, and working conditions for women and children.²⁴ While many are familiar with Jane Addams’s work with immigrants through Chicago’s Hull House, women’s organizations also paid special attention to consumer issues, including “household issues” like food.

One of these, also co-founded by Addams, was the National Consumers League (NCL), which, even today, states its mission as “[providing] government, businesses, and other organizations with the consumer's perspective on concerns including child labor, privacy, food safety, and medication information.”²⁵ Although food safety was not the NCL’s only focus, its members did advocate for the passage of the 1906 Act.²⁶ Addams was also involved in the Federated Women’s Clubs, which Wiley recognized as one of his greatest supporters in the pure food fight, and which, like the NCL, continues today.²⁷

While women’s clubs focused on many social issues, the early 20th century saw the rise of women’s movements specifically focused on the home and consumer issues. One of these was the Housewives League, which its founder described in 1913 as “a great uprising of women across the land.”²⁸ Starting in New York, the League had chapters in every state, and almost 750,000 members across the country.²⁹ Even though women did not yet have the right to vote, they became a political force through their associations. The Housewives League promoted farmers markets in order to get food fresh from the source and to apply pressure on retailers to likewise provide fresh, unadulterated food. They also created a system where women would rate stores, with the effect that high rankings in categories like “Clean

Shops” and “Pure Food” increased business at those stores (while low rankings hurt



it).³⁰ Another was the League of Women Shoppers,

which brought women together in support of workers’ rights, but also encouraged them to “use your buying power for justice.”³¹ [See Figure 3

(left)] Groups such as these struck fear into the hearts of businessmen, who knew that women

controlled many of the consumer decisions in their homes. Conservative politicians and journalists charged that consumer groups were controlled by Communists. With the 1950s “Red Scare,” many of these groups were discredited and much of the momentum behind consumer reform, including food safety, came to an end.³²

There was a resurgence of reform in the 1960s. Along with the civil rights and women’s rights movements, the consumer rights movement returned with a vengeance, and, more importantly, political support. On March 15, 1962, President Kennedy issued a “special message to the Congress on protecting the consumer interest,” in which he articulated four basic consumer rights: the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard.³³ In addition to this “Consumer Bill of Rights,” Kennedy specifically noted the role of the housewife, who was “called upon to be an amateur ... chemist, toxicologist, dietician, and mathematician ... [but was] rarely furnished the information she needs to perform those tasks proficiently.”³⁴

When Schakowsky and her friends formed the NCU, they were not only demanding their consumer rights, but were reflecting the activist approach also

found in the 1960s and 1970s in the women’s rights movement and a consumer movement that included not only information campaigns, but also boycotts (which Schakowsky also helped to lead).³⁵ This was the start of a “new citizens movement” that informs local organizing even today.³⁶ In 2017, “food politics” remains a concern for citizens, consumer advocates, and politicians alike.³⁷

For example, there is the issue of definitions. With the rising popularity of soy, almond, and coconut milk, there is a debate over what should be called “milk.”³⁸ The dairy industry and dairy-producing states argue that only something coming from a mammal can be defined as “milk.” Others, including the Soyfoods Association of North America and the Plant-Based Foods Association, say the definition should be changed.³⁹ This battle is currently playing out as part of the debate over the DAIRY PRIDE Act, introduced to Congress by Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) in 2017.⁴⁰

Other current debates include those over the labeling of organic foods and genetically-modified organisms (GMOs). Foods labeled as “organic,” for example, must meet national standards set by the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990.⁴¹ GMOs became subject to a new labeling law in 2016.⁴² Nutritional information is also still an issue, with the Affordable Care Act of 2010 requiring restaurants, grocery stores, and other food sellers to post calorie counts on menus.⁴³

Former FDA chemist George H. Pauli has noted GMOs as an example of the difficulty in responding to conflicting demands for food labels and food information. As he said, “[some people] want to know ‘everything’ about the food they are buying, but this goes well beyond the legal requirement for food labels to be ‘truthful, but not misleading.’” There is no consensus, he continued, on what is

“important” for people to know, or on what they “need” to know. Food producers, he concluded, “could never satisfy a requirement to provide *all* information that *any* consumer might want to know.”⁴⁴ From “closed dating” to labels including expiration dates, nutritional information, and allergy information, we have come a long way since Jan Schakowsky walked into that Chicago supermarket in 1969.

Women have been important consumer advocates and reformers for over 100 years, in part because they control so many consumer decisions.⁴⁵ Women like physicist Vandana Shiva and nutritionist Marion Nestle are powerful figures in today’s sustainable food movement.⁴⁶ Others, like Jan Schakowsky, have taken their advocacy experience to state and national politics. While many issues related to food labeling continue to be contentious, we can count on women leaders to continue advocating for our right to be informed.

¹ Ruth deForest Lamb, *American Chamber of Horrors: The Truth About Food and Drugs* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1936), 168.

² Timothy Messer Kruse, “Pure Food and Drug Movement,” in *Dictionary of American History*, ed. Stanley I. Kutler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), 553.

³ Neal Samors, *Chicago in the Sixties: Remembering a Time of Change* (Chicago: Chicago’s Books, 2000), 76-77; Jan Schakowsky, interview by the author, Chicago, Illinois, January 25, 2017.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Leena Trivedi-Grenier, “Expiration Dates,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Food Issues*, ed. Ken Albala (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015), 422.

⁶ Jan Schakowsky, interview by the author, Chicago, Illinois, January 25, 2017.

⁷ Samors, *Chicago in the Sixties*, 77.

⁸ National Consumers Union, *Codebook* (Prospect Heights, IL: National Consumers Union, 1971), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Jan Schakowsky, interview by the author, Chicago, Illinois, January 25, 2017.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Robert M. Crunden, “Muckraking, Progressivism, and the Pure Food and Drug Law,” in *The Jungle: An Authoritative Texts, Contexts and Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. Claire Virginia Eby (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 447; Wallace F.

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¹⁴ Janssen, "The Story of the Laws Behind the Labels."

¹⁵ U.S. Food and Drug Administration, "What Does FDA Do?," last modified March 3, 2017, accessed March 4, 2017,

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<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/origins-FDA-what-does-it-do-180962054>.

¹⁶ "Amendatory and Supplemental Enactments to the Federal Food and Drug Act of 1906 (1934)," last modified May 20, 2009, accessed March 18, 2017,

<https://www.fda.gov/regulatoryinformation/legislation/ucm148690.htm>

¹⁷ Janssen, "The Story of the Laws Behind the Labels." Ruth deForest Lamb, whose quotation from *American Chamber of Horrors* opens this report, was the Chief Educational Officer of the Food and Drug Administration, and used the stories presented in her book to organize consumer support for the 1938 law. Examples from her work are included in the appendix.

¹⁸ "Fair Packaging and Labeling Act (1966)," last modified May 20, 2009, accessed March 18, 2017,

<https://www.fda.gov/RegulatoryInformation/Legislation/ucm148722.htm>.

¹⁹ Maggie Fox, "FDA's New Food Labels: What to Know," *NBC News*, last modified May 20, 2016, accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/fda-s-new-food-labels-will-be-little-bigger-n577481>.

²⁰ The "8 most common food allergens" covered by the 2004 law are: milk, eggs, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, peanuts, soy, and wheat.

²¹ U.S. Food and Drug Administration, "Harvey W. Wiley," last modified July 28, 2016, accessed March 4, 2017,

<https://www.fda.gov/aboutfda/whatwedo/history/centennialoffda/harveyw.wiley/default.htm>.

²² *Ibid.*; Janssen, "The Story of the Laws Behind the Labels."

²³ Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers: 1815-1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978); Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (2nd ed.) (New York: Free Press, 1997).

²⁴ National Women's History Museum, "Introduction to Clubwomen," accessed February 11, 2017, <https://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/progressiveera/introclubwomen.html>.

²⁵ National Consumers League, "Mission," accessed March 4, 2017,

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²⁶ Allis Rosenberg Wolfe, "Women, Consumerism, and the National Consumers' League in the Progressive Era, 1900-1923," *Labor History* 16, no. 3 (1975): 378-392.

²⁷ General Federation of Women's Clubs, "Impact and Accomplishments," last modified 2017, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://www.gfwc.org/what-we-do/impact-accomplishments/>; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, "Harvey W. Wiley."

²⁸ Mrs. Julian Heath, "Work of the Housewives League," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 48 (July 1913): 122.

²⁹ Lou Hebert, "Soldiers in Aprons: The Housewives Who Changed America," *Toledo Gazette*, last modified May 16, 2013, accessed February 16, 2017, <https://toledogazette.wordpress.com/2013/05/16/soldiers-in-aprons-the-housewives-who-changed-america/>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jessica Derleth, "The League of Women Shoppers and Women Workers, 1935-1948," accessed March 4, 2017; Tamiment Institute, New York University Library, "League of Women Shoppers: Use Your Buying Power for Justice (ca. late 1930s)," accessed March 18, 2017, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tamiment/3061330819>

³² Landon R. Y. Storrs, "Left-Feminism, the Consumer Movement, and Red Scare Politics in the United States, 1935-1960," *Journal of Women's History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 40-67

³³ John F. Kennedy, "Special Message to the Congress on Protecting the Consumer Interest (March 15, 1962)." *The American Presidency Project*, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9108>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Edward Rohrbach, "Leaders of Boycott Urge Two Meatless Days Weekly," *Chicago Tribune*, April 12, 1973, A8; Christine Winter, "Consumer Activists Out to Have It Their Way," *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 1976, B9.

³⁶ Harry C. Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1980).

³⁷ Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

³⁸ Candace Choi, "Putting Fine Point on Food Identities," *Chicago Tribune*, March 5, 2017, A6.

³⁹ Dan Charles, "Soy, Almond, Coconut: If It's Not from a Cow, Can You Legally Call It Milk?," *National Public Radio: The Salt* (December 21, 2016), last modified December 22, 2016, accessed March 11, 2017,

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⁴⁰ "H.R. 778 – DAIRY PRIDE Act," last modified January 31, 2017, accessed March 18, 2017, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/778/text>

⁴¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Organic Labeling Standards," accessed March 11, 2017, <https://www.ams.usda.gov/grades-standards/organic-labeling-standards>.

⁴² Dan Charles, "Congress Just Passed a GMO Labeling Bill. Nobody's Super Happy About It," *National Public Radio: The Salt* (July 14, 2016), last modified July 14, 2016,

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<http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/07/14/486060866/congress-just-passed-a-gmo-labeling-bill-nobodys-super-happy-about-it>

⁴³ Samantha Bomkamp, "Calorie Labeling Rule Delayed by FDA Until Next Year," *Chicago Tribune* (May 1, 2017), accessed May 13, 2017,

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-menu-labeling-delay-0502-biz-20170501-story.html>

⁴⁴ George H. Pauli, interview by the author, Chicago, Illinois (by phone), February 12, 2017.

⁴⁵ Michael J. Silverstein and Kate Sayre, "The Female Economy," *Harvard Business Review* 87, no. 9 (2009): 46-53.

⁴⁶ Tom Philpott, "Acknowledging Women's Role in the Sustainable Food Movement," *Grist*, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://grist.org/article/food-2010-10-22-acknowledging-womens-role-in-the-sustainable-food-movement/>.

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This book gave me a better idea of the food labeling situation of the 1930s, and how women fit into it.

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"U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky." In *Chicago in the Sixties: Remembering a Time of Change*, edited by Neal Samors, 76-77. Chicago: Chicago's Books, 2006.

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This article introduced the current debate over nutritional labeling on menus.

Choi, Candace. "Putting Fine Point on Food Identities," *Chicago Tribune*, March 5, 2017, A6.

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This article introduced the current debate over the definition of "milk."

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This article provided a contemporary view of the meat boycott in the 1970s.

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Winter, Christine. "Your New Computer Checkout Girl – She's Got a Secret" *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1975: A15.

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This "food podcast" introduced the current debate over GMO labeling.

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Pauli, George H. Personal interview. 12 February 2017.

This interview with George Pauli, former FDA scientist, gave me information about the FDA role in food labeling, and introduced me to the idea that labels must be “truthful, but not misleading.”

Schakowsky, Jan. Personal interview. 25 January 2017.

This interview gave me a first-hand look at what occurred (and why), and broader context for what U.S. Representative Schakowsky herself did, and information about the situation for consumers in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Secondary Sources

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Crunden, Robert M. "Muckraking, Progressivism, and the Pure Food and Drug Law," in *The Jungle: An Authoritative Texts, Contexts and Backgrounds, Criticism*, edited by Claire Virginia Eby, 445-459. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.

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This entry gave information about current issues concerning food labeling and the differing opinions people have about it.

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This entry gave an in-depth introduction to food labeling from a modern perspective.

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Video

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This video provided an introduction to the history of the consumer movement, with a focus on the consumer rights articulated by President Kennedy: the right to safety, to be informed, to choose, and to be heard" (also known as the "Consumer Bill of Rights").

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This entry provided a basic introduction to the FDA's mission and basic activities.

Interviews

Perez, Miriam Z. "The Feministing Five: Representative Jan Schakowsky." *Feministing*. Last modified July 31, 2010. Accessed January 3, 2017.
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This was the first interview with Jan Schakowsky that I found, and it helped me to write questions for my own interview with her.