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In the 1930s and 40s, young American children flocked to the cinema to witness their idols thwart dastardly deeds, from halting train robbers to saving the ranch. These cowboys did not achieve their brave acts alone: some had sidekicks, but all had the aid of their trusty steeds. Silver, Trigger, Thunder and Buttermilk were the equine heroes whose names still reverberate in the American zeitgeist. However, when bombs began to fall over Europe, many Americans were forced to see horses in a new way – as dinner. Beef shortages due to rationing brought horsemeat to American tables. This new protein was controversial; many Americans objected to eating it, whether for religious reasons or because they felt distaste at the prospect of eating a cowboy’s companion.

For many in the United States, family dinners were far more than just a means of sustenance: they were an important part of the national culture. Anthropologists have hypothesized that meals have a distinguishable structure associated with their cyclical appearance in households and at social events. Food and the act of eating it have deep cultural meaning, affecting individuals on physiological, psychological, and sociological levels. The absence of any part of this defined structure can have a severe effect on individuals (Mitchell). In the mind of the average American, a meal always consisted of meat and vegetables. It is estimated that between 1931 and 1940, Americans ate close to 131 pounds of meat annually. This figure is particularly interesting because it was during the Great Depression, and the fact that meat was still incorporated into the American diet at a time of great financial strain demonstrates the intensity of the psychological need for animal protein (Egan). Additionally, during the Second World War, three quarters of the global population were practicing vegetarians, yet many Allied citizens viewed this practice as something only “crackpots” partook in (“Heydays for the Vegetarians”). The profile of vegetarians was worsened when numerous newspaper articles in both the United Kingdom and the United States highlighted that Adolf Hitler was a practicing vegetarian (“Fuehrer Ascetic in Personal Life”).

There is an old adage that runs, “I am so hungry I could eat a horse.” During and after World War II, that saying rang true for many American families. Social taboos were tested when heavy rations on meat pushed some people to partake in what they would have normally considered unthinkable. However, there has been long history of human eating horsemeat. Consumption of horsemeat has been practiced since the time of early cavemen in Northern Europe, but nonetheless, it persists as a taboo (“Horse-Flesh as Human Food”). One reason for the strong resistance to the practice of hippophagy may lie in religion: In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church delivered a prohibitive decree against the use of horsemeat because it had been sacrificed by the Germans in honor of Oden and Freya (“May Eat Horse Meat”).
While this decree was issued to preserve the power of the Catholic Church from pagan competition, the opposition to eating horsemeat remained a part of the Christian psyche up until World War II. The largest resistance to eating horsemeat probably stemmed from the sentimental feelings that Americans harbored (and continue to harbor) toward horses (“Horse-Flesh as Human Food”). Regardless of why people were hesitant to eat horsemeat, it was unrationed in the United States, which meant it was an accessible choice for families seeking to procure animal protein for their dinner plates.

Americans then had to face the psychological dilemma of whether to eat horsemeat. In the United States, the image of the horse is synonymous with freedom itself, as demonstrated by the number of popular narratives involving horse and rider conquering nature in the American West. However, despite the taboo against it, there have been cases of Americans eating horses throughout U.S. history. Missionary families in the Pacific Northwest, near Spokane, “kept up the trapper custom and stocked their larders every fall with a generous supply of ‘Indian Beef’” (“An OK on Horse Meat”). As time progressed, many states banned the sale of horsemeat, with the bans remaining in effect until the First World War. While bans were lifted in many states in 1915, it was not until the Second World War that the American government began to actively encourage the consumption of horsemeat (“May Eat Horse Meat”).

Some Americans were more than willing to try horse flesh, especially those who lived in the Northeastern United States. A slaughterhouse stated, “People are just eating the stuff because they can’t get beef. We’re shipping between four and five carloads of quarters a day to Boston and New York from our two plants. They eat it back there” (“Horse Meat Sales Reported Booming”). The New York Times reported, “With the usual kinds of meat selling at high prices, scores of New Yorkers were driving over to Newark yesterday and taking home in shopping bags and suitcases big juicy steaks of horsemeat at 25 cents a pound” (“Horse Meat Sale Booms in Newark”). In Washington, D.C., a roast of beef was selling for thirty-five cents a pound, but a similar cut of horsemeat was selling for seventeen to nineteen cents a pound (“Horse Meat Sale Booms in Newark”). The price difference alone was enough to make a few Americans forgo any preconceived ideas about the taboos toward horsemeat.

The divide between those who ate horsemeat and those who did not can be seen, to some extent, as a regional one. While people on the East Coast were buying horsemeat by the suitcase, residents in Dallas, Texas, watched the eating of horsemeat with shock and horror. In fact, across the Great Plains, consumers rejected horsemeat as a viable substitute for beef, despite the beef shortage. In March 1943, meat supplies fell 30,000 pounds below the monthly rationing quotas for residents in Roswell, New Mexico, and other towns (Hurt 140). This division is most likely due to people in the West viewing horses as companions, or at the very least, as vital supports for their farm labor. American culture’s sentimental attachment to horses was acknowledged in an editorial in The Washington Post: “Nothing hampers the popularity of a filet of horse, except sentiment. When you eat meat from a cow you are not bothered by any personal friendship for the cow. On the other hand, every man feels that some of his best friends are horses” (Phillips). The disinclination to eat horsemeat might have been stronger in the West, but – as this editorial suggests – it was still present in many centers.
in the East. New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia, echoing the medieval church edict, declared the consumption of horsemeat a sin. The former mayor worked hard to keep horsemeat from being sold within the city, leading many to travel across the Hudson to Newark to buy it. La Guardia described the practice of eating horsemeat as “repulsive, degrading, and demoralizing” (“Horse Meat Sale Booms in Newark”).

While the cultural reaction to the introduction of horsemeat was intense, the national supply of the product was actually relatively small. In 1943, *The Science Newsletter* wrote, “Actually, the supply of horsemeat is so small that whether you like to eat it or not, you probably will not be able to get much if any, nor is there enough to help reduce the meat scarcity situation” (“Horse Meat Won’t Hurt” 5) and the figures showed that only 30,000 horses were slaughtered that year (5). The American discomfort with the consumption of horsemeat prompted the United States to become a major exporter of it to Europe. Montana senator Mike Mansfield sang the praises of horsemeat, and urged the federal government to include more of it in foreign food relief. He did not, however, urge Americans to eat it themselves. Shipping horsemeat to Europe allowed more beef to stay in the United States to be consumed by Americans. By 1946, horsemeat topped all other meats exported to Europe. In fact, in August of that year, horsemeat reached an all-time monthly high: more than twenty-million pounds were exported (Hurt 141). Americans’ reluctance to consume what they were happy to sell may have been related to the fact that when they thought of horses, they remembered Trigger or Silver.

WORKS CITED


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