

# Food Packaging Costly But Necessary

PEOPLE who complain about their food bills might consider the costs of processing and packaging. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that many foods and beverages cost less than the packages which hold them.

That beer can or bottle costs five times as much as the beer it holds. The potato chip bag, table syrup bottle and chewing gum wrapper cost twice as much as the foods they contain. The breakfast cereal package, soup can, frozen food box, baby food jar and dessert box cost one and one-half times as much as what is inside them.

Of course packaging is necessary. We no longer expect the dairyman to deliver milk in open pails, as once was done. Milk now must be pasteurized, homogenized, fortified, and transported in sterilized tank trucks or cartons to comply with pure food laws.

Back when butchers had only ice boxes in which to cool meat, they slaughtered daily, cut and sold the meat directly to consumers. It was

wrapped in paper and hurried home to be cooked and served before it had time to spoil.

Today refrigerated trucks may haul meat in boxes or sealed packages hundreds of miles to supermarkets. Packages then may be kept in home refrigerators by customers several days before serving.

Packaging is essential to protect foods and help them retain the quality, flavor, freshness and tenderness that consumers demand.

"No frills" co-ops try to get around processing, packaging and advertising costs by buying generic or no-brand products, sometimes "from original containers." Savings often are less than expected.

Americans still are spending only 12.2 percent of their disposable income for food for use in the home. That's second only to the record low of 12.1 percent spent in 1978, according to USDA records that go back to 1929. Another 4.5 percent of disposable income is spent for food eaten away from home. Costs of processing and packaging, or serving,

the food are there just the same.

Estimates show that consumers spent a record \$302.3 billion for food in 1980, nearly three times the outlay for 1968. Packaging costs were figured to run \$29.5 billion for foods in 1980.

Fancy food packaging is not going to disappear. Instead, it may increase, coming in larger sizes. Consumer reports forecast that future shoppers may take home six gallons of milk at a time, along with dozens of packages of frozen foods in pouches ready for cooking.

"Shrink wrap" already has been introduced as a device to help preserve perishables longer. Other new packaging systems are on the way and all of them cost money. But they also may save food and money.

In spite of much talk, a large scale return to natural food diets would be impractical, if not impossible, unless most families raised much of their own food and, more importantly, did more of their own processing and their own cooking.

How many women (or men) would quit their jobs to do that?