

## *Feeding Iowa's Schoolchildren*

# The Fight for the School Lunch Program

by Vern Carpenter

**W**ITH THE START OF THE 1958/59 school year, unknowingly I became a soldier in what would be called "America's war on hunger." That year I started a new job as a field consultant and auditor for the School Lunch Section of the Iowa Department of Public Instruction (DPI). My job was to visit all public school buildings in every county in Iowa. In schools without lunch or milk programs, I learned that some teachers were purchasing half pints of milk out of their own pockets to give to grade school pupils before they left school at the end of the day. These teachers were aware that those children might have little to eat at home before they returned to school the next morning.

A dozen years had passed since the 1946 National School Lunch Act, through which the federal government assisted states in establishing and expanding not-for-profit school lunch programs. Iowa had gotten off to an excellent start: by 1948/49 a quarter of Iowa's public school children were participating in school lunch programs. Nevertheless, by 1958 many schools in Iowa and across the nation still were not offering the lunch program or even the milk program—although most families could probably have afforded to pay the few cents per half-pint of milk.

As I began visiting every public school building in Iowa, I realized part of the problem was the lack of facilities. In Iowa's larger districts, lunch programs were in fact available in most senior high schools and in many junior

high schools. But in the state's elementary schools, most of which were in the older buildings in the oldest sections of town, fewer students had access to the school lunch program.

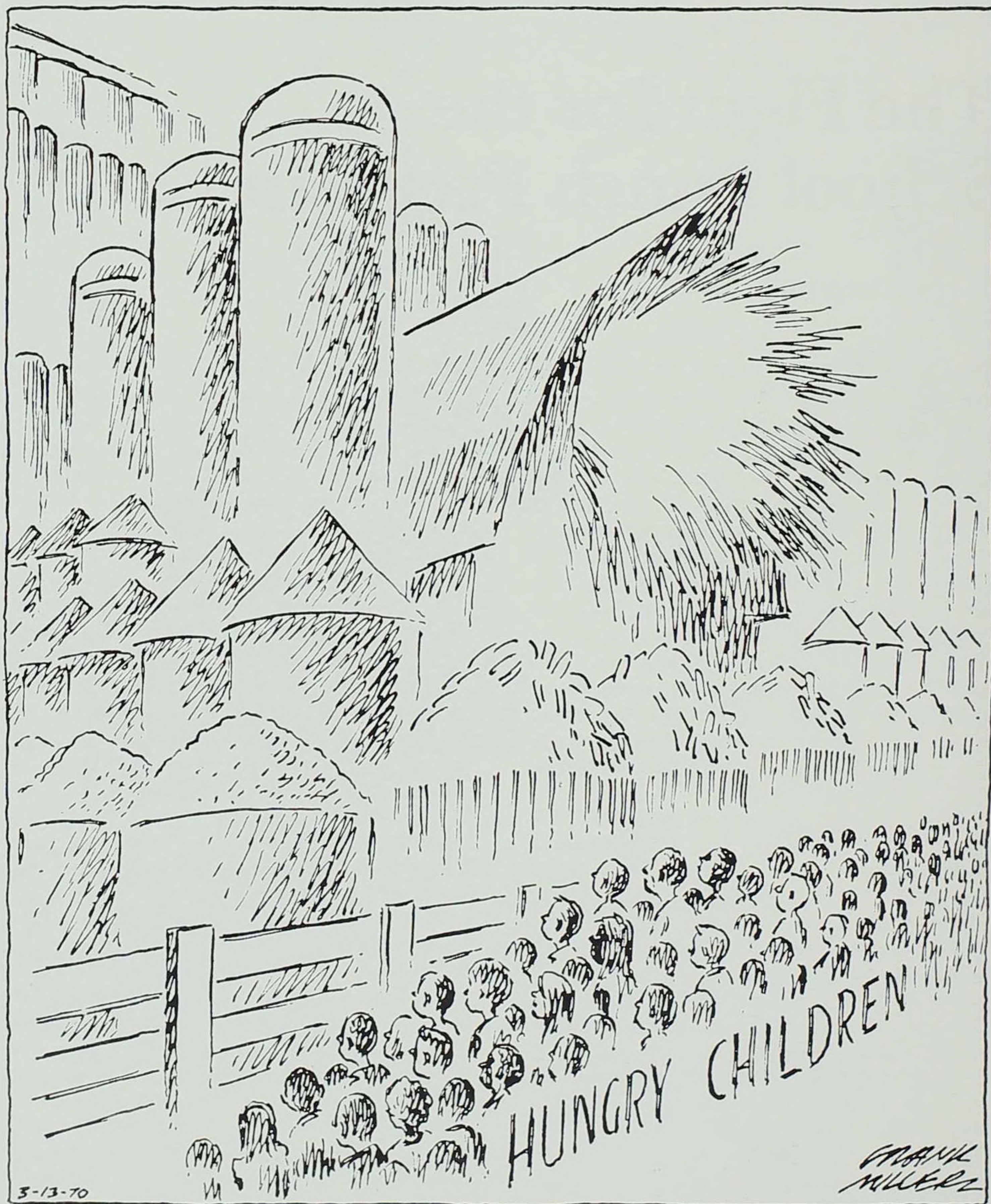
When most of these older school buildings had been constructed, naturally no thought had been given to a school kitchen, cafeteria, or food storeroom because there was no school feeding program. Some schools that took advantage of the School Lunch Act cleaned and converted basement coal storage rooms into kitchens. On other floors, former "domestic science" classrooms or other available rooms were turned over to a food service program. A few school districts had even moved one-room schoolhouses onto the school site to accommodate lunch programs. Town halls and Quonset huts were rented as kitchens and lunchrooms. But far too many school buildings had not managed to set up any lunch program.

After two and a half years of traveling across Iowa, I had seen enough. I was convinced that Iowa could—and should—do better. In March 1961, I proposed that our office of the DPI push to expand the lunch and milk programs to every public school building in Iowa. (We did not then administer programs in nonpublic schools.) My supervisor, the chief of the School Lunch Section of the DPI, Elmer E. Cowan, readily agreed. We also agreed that reaching the thousands of economically needy children in Iowa be given top priority.

Thus began a decade of trying to sell the idea to school administrators, legislators, and



## RIGHT HERE IN IOWA



Titled "Right Here in Iowa," Frank Miller's editorial cartoon in the *Des Moines Register* (March 13, 1970) pointed to the irony of hungry children amidst Iowa's agricultural abundance.



the public. We were not alone in trying to make this happen. Across the nation, grassroots organizations were springing up to help the needy, and the school lunch program was part of their agendas. But there would be frustrating obstacles ahead.

Graduate courses in school-community relations had taught me the importance of working with the media, parents, church organizations, women's clubs, the legislature, universities, and anyone else who would listen to the idea. My goal was to blanket the state with news stories about the lunch program—why it was vital, the number of needy pupils, the need for making free and reduced-price lunches available, congressional action (or inaction). The media was tremendously cooperative. For instance, one of the many news releases I sent out was picked up by seventy Iowa newspapers. The *Des Moines Register* was most supportive, particularly Bill Leonard. Leonard wrote numerous editorials about the lunch program and kept the issue before the public. Del Monaco, a radio announcer for KIOA in Des Moines, frequently covered the issue. He would call me for direct quotes for his stories and then pass them on to the Iowa Radio Network, which in turn relayed stories to about sixty-five other Iowa stations. I appeared on numerous radio and television programs. My hope was that enough groups and individuals would realize the need for the school lunch and put pressure on those who didn't understand it or opposed it.

There were plenty who opposed it. I encountered many Iowans who held to beliefs prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s that everybody should pay for their own and no one should be given anything free (although there were also many Iowans, like me, who had lived through the Great Depression and therefore remembered what hunger felt like).

Iowa farm families who were accustomed to stopping work and gathering together for hearty meals were sometimes less ready to realize that urban families, where parents left at different times for work, had to follow other schedules. Sometimes older children were responsible for feeding younger siblings before going to school in the morning.

Others insisted that the government and

the schools should not be feeding children—rather, that parents should feed their own children. Who could argue with that? I agreed that they should, but they weren't always doing so. I remember working with one superintendent who knew his school needed a breakfast program. At a school board meeting, a minister's wife came and objected. She held to the ideal of every family sitting down together and eating breakfast after they had said their prayers. We agreed. This was ideal, but it wasn't happening in many cases. I wrote in our newsletter: "Our pride compels us to force ourselves to think that there are no hungry children in Iowa. But there are many. We would like to think that every child has eaten a good breakfast (rich and poor alike) but we are mistakenly prideful."

Many who opposed school lunch programs doubted there was poverty in Iowa, of all places. I told them they should visit the welfare office and inquire about the number of children on Aid to Dependent Children in their county. I knew there were plenty of Iowa's schoolchildren who didn't have one well-balanced meal a day, or even in a week. And then there was the unresolvable question: where is the poverty line? No matter where it was set, there were those who thought it was too high or too low.

A few people opposed the school lunch program because they thought their property taxes would increase. In reality, they seldom rose to any great extent. Schools that hired capable food service directors often had well-managed programs that either broke even or carried a surplus into the next school year, so there was little cost to the school district. Only schools that didn't manage their programs well had to use property taxes to cover deficits at the end of the year.

One of our goals, therefore, was to help schools develop well-managed food service programs. Our monthly newsletter provided updates on federal and state legislation, policies and procedures on reimbursements, information on surplus commodities (which could save schools thousands of dollars), and news on kitchen equipment. We also published menus and hints from school cooks.

While I remember talking with numerous



people who opposed the idea, I also heard from those in support. I remember one mother who called me. Her children were enrolled in a school with a high percentage of needy pupils. She and a group of other mothers wanted to get a lunch program started in the worst way. She was rightfully frustrated that one building in her district not only had a lunch program but also a swimming pool, yet her children's school didn't even have a lunch program.

What she had observed was no surprise to me: In Iowa's larger cities, the "haves" had it, and the "have-nots" did not have it. The older, ill-equipped school buildings were usually in the inner-city neighborhoods, where children attended school sporadically or were moved around during the school year as parents searched for better jobs or housing. Principals told me that the pupil turnover in some of these buildings reached 90 percent a year. Think of it—nine out of ten children who enrolled in a building in September would not be in the same building the following May. It was hard enough to consider the difficulties these children faced by being moved from school to school, facing new teachers and curricula—much less the effect of hunger and poor nutrition on them.

Part of our task was to compile a list of all schools in Iowa. This proved to be difficult and time-consuming because of differences in terminology and reporting. For instance, our office distinguished between "school buildings" and "schools." One school building might house three schools—elementary, junior high, and high school. By early 1968 we had identified 352 buildings without lunch programs. This was roughly 20 percent of Iowa's school buildings.

Although the numbers documented the need, the stories from teachers and school administrators put a human face on the problem. "One administrator identified a needy child after the cooks reported that the child had asked what 10¢ would buy," we reported in a 1966 newsletter. "Another needy child was identified after teachers had observed one boy (elementary pupil) who made a B-line out the door as soon as classes were dismissed at noon. He did this even in the wintertime. The teach-

ers observed the boy and found that he went directly to the bird feeder and ate the bread crusts that had been put there to feed the birds."

The stories were heartbreaking. But educators also knew what hunger meant in the classroom. For instance, in the fall of 1966 an elementary principal began a breakfast program on his own through donations. The positive results were immediate. Teachers noted that their students were more alert. The school nurse reported that fewer pupils came to her office at midmorning complaining of stomach aches or headaches. In another school with a new breakfast program, the principal reported less tardiness.

Our observations concurred with those of the American Home Economics Association, who met in March 1965 and reported that "hungry children get restless, then sleepy, consequently they are more difficult to teach. The reports from many schools, for example, on the effect of food distribution programs indicate that the children of families who have been using extra food for a time have improved attendance records, are more alert, and consequently achieve more academically."

This is not to say that lunch programs were no extra burden for a school. To their busy days, teachers often had to add selling tickets, collecting money, and supervising lunchrooms. Office clerical staff had additional paperwork. School administrators had to hire food service workers and work out a method of financing set-up costs for new lunch programs.

The 1966 Child Nutrition Act helped some in this last respect. Congress appropriated funds to help schools without programs purchase minimal kitchen equipment and to help others upgrade their kitchens. In 1967 Iowa's first appropriation was only \$12,583, but it was a start for many school districts. And some were really needing the basics. For instance, in September 1966 the food service workers at one school had high hopes that some day their kitchen might get a dishwashing machine.

By the late 1960s momentum had grown considerably. As we reported in our September 1966 newsletter, "Congress received more mail concerning the School Lunch and Spe-



COURTESY PAULINE BAXENDALE



From left, Elaine Dubbs, Marian Netley, Carol Davey, and Mary Kail, at Indianola High School cafeteria, June 1966. Pauline Baxendale, who directed the lunch program there, recalls that this was after the school began receiving institutional equipment. For more on Iowa women who worked behind school lunch counters, see page 148.

cial Milk Programs and the Viet Nam struggle than any other legislation in the history of our country." In 1968 I was involved in a four-state "Great Plains School District Organization Project." In my report on child nutrition programs, I tried to address why needy children still weren't getting lunch programs in their schools. "People living in areas without lunch

programs haven't yelled long and loud enough about their needs," I had concluded. "People living in needy areas haven't asked for programs often enough. They aren't in contact with school board members and with school administrators often enough. Seldom are they asked to serve as members of a committee appointed to solve their problems." (But it



wasn't always for lack of a willing superintendent. I had observed that new superintendents were more likely to get new programs started during their first years of their tenure rather than later, after the "spirit of change" had evaporated. )

That year, on November 13 the State Board of Public Instruction adopted the resolution I had drafted, urging all school districts without food service in their buildings to "make a determined effort to do so." But without a state or federal law to that effect, we had no real clout.

Nationally, the government seemed serious about focusing on the problem, through the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health in 1969 and the enormous National Nutrition Survey that followed. In Iowa, we had local organizations in different towns and cities that were pushing for the lunch program to be expanded. This might be an American Legion auxiliary, a women's church group, and so on. Mothers would call in and offer their help. Women were the ones who made the tremendous difference.

On March 11, 1970, the Governor's Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health met at Iowa State University in Ames. That January I had been promoted to chief of the DPI's School Lunch Section when Elmer Cowan retired. I was excited about this opportunity to report on what we had accomplished and what work remained (a ninth of Iowa's school buildings still had no lunch programs).

I was among a dozen speakers, each approaching the problem from different perspectives. Lloyd J. Filer, Jr., pediatrics professor at the University of Iowa, reported on several studies of Iowa children: "It is reasonable to conclude that within the State of Iowa where we have low-income groups, the incidence and the type of malnutrition as measured by the techniques used by the National Nutrition Survey are comparable to those seen among poverty pockets in the nation at large. In other words, migrant workers in Muscatine or black infants in Cedar Rapids manifest the findings found among their national counterparts."

Monsignor Edward W. O'Rourke, executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, called for action on lunch pro-

grams: "Right now the Department of Public Instruction is trying to push in to the Iowa Legislature a proposal for a 1.5 million dollar allotment for this purpose. Why don't you write to your state legislator and express your opinion on this important matter?"

Roberta Davis, representing the Aid to Dependent Children Council and herself the mother of four schoolchildren, recounted her own experiences: "[My] high schooler has a part-time job so he doesn't partake in the school lunch program. He buys it himself. The three little ones do and I pay one-fourth. . . . I have one child that was quite sickly as a little one and she was an almost cleft-palate baby and had much difficulty in eating different types of foods, and of course I wasn't able to offer her a real varied diet. The first week in first grade she weighed not quite 30 pounds. And during that first month in participating in the hot lunch program, she gained 5 pounds."

Nathan K. "Nick" Kotz was the keynote speaker. He was the Washington correspondent for the *Des Moines Register* and author of *Let Them Eat Promises: The Politics of Hunger in America*. In his speech, Kotz traced the origins of the war on poverty, exploded myths about the poor, and lambasted the federal government for failing to feed three-quarters of the "8½ million desperately poor American children" who still weren't getting "the free meals we promised them 21 years ago."

"The place to start," Kotz remarked, "and it has taken us so long to learn this, and for liberals and conservatives to finally come to the same conclusion—the place to start is at home; the place to start is in the school nearest where you live; the place to start is to find out how many poor children there are in that school and to find it out in a way that will not be embarrassing to the children."

I knew what Kotz was referring to. Less than 3 percent of Iowa's school lunches were served free or at reduced prices, but this did not accurately reflect the numbers of children eligible. I had worked hard to get the message out that this program existed, but we were hampered by erratic and arbitrary application procedures. Each school administrator determined who received free or reduced-prices lunches, so definitions of





COURTESY DORIS BISHOP

Happy student with lunch tray at Orange Elementary School, Waterloo, Iowa, 1969. Doris Bishop, who directed the Waterloo program, used this image in a slide show presented to "PTAs, community groups and anyone who would listen to our story." She enjoyed photographing school kitchens "when we got a new piece of equipment," but has few photos of "the old things which we were so happy to replace."

underprivileged and methods of determining need varied from district to district, as well as from state to state. In one instance in Iowa, a husband and wife came to visit their school administrator to ask for free lunches for their children. The wife recounted how her husband was out of work and they were having a difficult time financially. She explained that her mother had been paying for her children's lunches but was no longer able to do so. "My mother is a whore, you know," she said, "but now that she is growing old, men don't want her any more, and she

can't afford to pay for our children's lunches." (The administrator approved free lunches to the children.)

Another problem was that in some schools, the free or reduced-price lunch tickets were marked. Sometimes this led other children to make cruel, insensitive remarks to children using those tickets.

After the conference in Ames, the *Des Moines Register* followed up with an editorial. They quoted Governor Robert Ray as saying, "Iowa has exploited every source of funds and food available—be it on the federal, state or local



level—and is getting food to those who need it. This is not to say that we do not have much still to be done.” The *Register* wasn’t satisfied, pointing out that the state of Iowa “makes no contribution to the school lunch program except for administrative costs. The State Department of Public Instruction’s request for state funds for free and reduced price meals has fallen on deaf ears.” Yet in defense of the Iowa legislature, I knew of only one state that was appropriating any money to its schools for school lunches. It wasn’t a general practice at that time. Besides, there was plenty of work to be done on the national level.

Our office had the continuing support of Iowa Congressman Neal Smith and Senator Jack Miller (then the ranking minority leader of the powerful Senate Agriculture and Forestry Committee). The support of these two Iowans was essential as I set out to correct what I considered inequities in the federal reimbursement rate for school lunches. For several years Iowa’s rate of federal reimbursement was only four cents per lunch at the beginning of the school year. Toward the end of that same school year, this rate would be reduced by prorating. Consequently, our school districts never knew how much federal assistance to plan on.

At the same time, many schools in southern states received as much as twelve cents per lunch for the entire school year. Why, I asked, did it cost more to serve a lunch in a southern state than in Iowa? I asked and asked and asked, and kept on asking. In the process I was snubbed, delayed, passed by, overlooked, and treated like poor relation. I never did find an answer that made sense. Of course, in Congress the chairpersonship of committees is based primarily on longevity. Since several southern states kept their congressmen in office year after year, the South controlled many important committees. And, of course, the chair has control over which bills leave the committee, when they leave, and in what form. Within the committee, state formulas for reimbursement are determined, and at the time it seemed to me that southern states benefited the most.

I realized I had to work on a national level to help children in Iowa, so I joined the

American School Food Service Association (ASFSA) in Denver, Colorado, and in due time chaired its national legislative committee. I testified before congressional committees on agriculture, education, nutrition and human needs, and consumer protection. With the help of many organizations (such as the hard-working Iowa School Food Service Association), ASFSA got Congress to make some ground-breaking changes. First, the rate of reimbursement per lunch was equalized so that all states were reimbursed on the same basis. Second, uniform and liberalized federal regulations were adopted for the free and reduced-price lunches. And third, Congress provided funds to help schools equip new kitchens and upgrade old ones.

To those of us who had worked more than a decade on these issues, it seemed that the school lunch program was an idea whose time had finally come. Our section started to administer and help launch school lunch programs in Iowa’s nonpublic schools, in daycare centers, and in summer feeding programs. We encouraged public and nonpublic schools to work together in broadening the lunch program to serve all students in the community and to serve senior citizens who could not obtain lunches through other federal programs. Eventually we would administer eleven federally supported programs in Iowa related to feeding.

We also continued to coordinate distribution of surplus commodities from the United States Department of Agriculture. Many years they offered concentrated orange juice. In 1968, for example, we helped distribute twenty-seven rail carloads of orange juice for Iowa schoolchildren. Many schools offered the free juice before school, at noon, midafternoon,

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Iowa’s school lunch program (1960s/70s) is well documented in the “School Lunch Newsletter” and later “Lunch Line” from the Department of Public Instruction (now Department of Education). Proceedings of the March 11, 1970, Governor’s Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health (Ames) were also useful. *The Palimpsest* thanks Norma Miller, long-time staff member in the department’s Bureau of Food and Nutrition, for her help in locating photographs. Extension bulletins from Iowa State and the University of Iowa reflect early efforts to feed school children, and “The Iowa School Lunch Program: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis” (Paul Edwin Nelson, Jr., Iowa State diss., 1949) gives an introductory overview through the late 1940s.





Students help serve food at Longfellow Elementary School in Waterloo, about 1970. Hot food in bulk was transported to the school in heated cases, and cold food in chilled cases with ice packs.

COURTESY DORIS BISHOP

and after school. A few enterprising school lunch directors asked volunteer women's organizations to help serve. Some Iowa children had never tasted orange juice.

I was gratified that the news media had done their job so well from what we had furnished them, and that Iowa legislators understood the issue. The legislators were cooperative, particularly then state senators Charles Grassley and Charlene Conklin. The state legislature treated us right. When it came time in 1971 that states were required to match federal appropriations, Iowa legislators appropriated the money, and continued to do so, year after year without any hassle.

Then came the centerpiece of all our work. In 1972 the Iowa General Assembly made it mandatory for every public school building in Iowa to have a lunch program by the fall of

1973. Now we had some clout. I explained to school administrators that they must have a school lunch program by that date. Schools complied, and administrators were very cooperative. State participation increased rapidly. By March 1973, only 21 of Iowa's 2,064 public schools did not have lunch programs.

Among the ten midwestern states, Iowa was the first to reach the goal of having a lunch program in every building, and among the first in the nation. Georgia and Hawaii were said to have beaten us out, but tabulating methods differed so much it is difficult to say.

But we did not start this effort to win a race. We started it to make certain that every child—especially economically needy children—could eat lunch at school. We did this because of a very simple fact: a hungry child cannot learn. □