

THE CONSUMER LOOKS AT WEIGHTS AND MEASURES*

Let us begin with a simple test of your knowledge of weights and measures. How many ounces are there in one pound avoirdupois? How many quarts in one peck, dry measure? How many pecks in one bushel, dry measure? How many ounces in one quart, liquid measure? How many sheets in a quire? How many quires in a ream? How many cubic inches in a standard bushel? How many cubic inches in a standard gallon? How many pounds in a ton? How many ounces in a pint, liquid measure?

These questions have been asked of 371 teachers and students in college and high school. Of that number, 321 (86%) were unable to answer as many as six questions correctly.

If these results are representative it is no wonder that it is easy to short-weight and short-measure consumer buyers. In fact, it is surprising that there is not more shorting.

These results also suggest that there is something wrong with our methods of teaching weights and measures. It is suggested that you try this on your students and colleagues and let me have your results.

How do the states compare in the effectiveness of their legislation and enforcement? There is extreme variation, from excellent to nothing. In some states administration and enforcement is entirely in the hands of state officials operating under what is called a Form 1 law. In Form 2 jurisdictions state and local officers are responsible for testing and inspection, under supervisory control of the state.

In undertaking to rank the states there is the danger of doing an injustice to some states, especially those in the two middle groups. Let me emphasize that there is no intent to make invidious comparisons. The purpose in presenting the following judgments is to inform the people. The citizens of each state should know the kind of program they have, so as to encourage and support good programs or prod their governor and legislation to strengthen weak programs.

The evidence I have assembled, plus the evaluations of three state officers, suggest that the following 13 states would be ranked in the top group, ranging from excellent to very good: California, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, West Virginia.

On the same basis these 15 jurisdictions would rank in the second group as having good to fair programs: Connecticut, District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, North Dakota, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Virginia, Wisconsin.

Among the 14 states in the third group whose programs range from fair to poor are Alabama, Iowa, Maine, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wyoming.

*Summary of a paper presented by Dr. Leland J. Gordon, Director, Weights and Measures Research Center, Denison University, at the Third Annual Conference of the Council on Consumer Information at the Melbourne Hotel, St. Louis, Missouri, April 5, 1957. Watch Your Weights and Measures, a 34-page pamphlet published later in April by the Council on Consumer Information, contains the salient findings of a two-year national study made by Dr. Gordon.

In the weakest group with programs ranging from very poor to nothing are Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Idaho, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas. Mississippi does not even have a law. Arkansas, Delaware, and New Mexico have weak laws which are not enforced. At one time Texas ranked in the top group but its present rating reflects the baneful influence of politics.

The remainder of the presentation dealt with interesting experiences and surprising discoveries. Specific instances of short-weighting and short-measuring were cited. In Baton Rouge a local chain consistently short-weighted prepackaged items and the state inspector was helpless; in West Virginia each of 400,000 one-pound cans of coffee marked as containing one pound were found to be 4 ounces short; in one state the director reported that a national chain took 30 million dollars a year out of his state in short-weights and short-measures.

Consumers across the nation are being short-weighted and short-measured every day. It has been estimated that the annual loss ranges from 2 billion to 3 billion dollars. Much of this is their own fault and can be corrected by improved buying methods.

First of all, every consumer must know his tables of weights and measures. To accomplish this we should re-examine with a view to improving present methods of teaching weights and measures in the schools.

Every citizen should know the provisions of the law of his state. In the pamphlet, "Watch Your Weights and Measures," you will find the provisions of the law and some facts concerning its administration for your state.

We should know our state and city officers and support them in their work. Invite them to speak to your classes, to your service clubs, and to your study groups. In most states they will accept eagerly and will provide a very interesting and informative program.

Finally, the directors of many states urge that each of us become self-appointed, unofficial inspectors. Probably no state has enough money and staff to do the kind of policing job which needs to be done. Watch the weighing and measuring processes and report any suspected practice to your state, county, or city inspector. A trained inspector will then make a check. This is a service which is beneficial to the honest retail merchant also since it protects him from the short-weighting and short-measuring practices of competitors whose prices may be lower because they deliver less.