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**Inventing Baby Food: Gerber and the Discourse  
of Infancy in the United States**  
Amy Bentley

Any Bentley set out to discover how it is that, while breast-feeding was historically acknowledged by experts and mothers as the healthiest means of feeding infants up to the age of twelve months (approximately), in the early twentieth century, this suddenly changed. Now there were artificial formulas available which became recommended instead of breast feeding. Also, it was known that too early an introduction of solids could place undue stress on the infant digestive system, and the introduction of solid foods had customarily been delayed until late in the first year, or, better, long after. Yet in the space of time from mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, the normal feeding patterns of infants in the United States changed from wet-nursing and an introduction of solid foods late in the first year, to bottle feeding and an introduction of solids at six weeks.

As primary sources, Bentley used advice manuals written for mothers by experts and pamphlets published by college home economics departments who were studying these issues. Because the feeding of one's infant is ultimately a private affair, and parents are known to feed their children as their own parents fed them, Bentley used letters from mothers in response to the pamphlets to understand how they actually fed the infants. She also used the results of a 1933 study of seven hundred infants in upstate New York to find out how they were fed.. It is not clear (to me) where this latter information came from, whether a primary or a secondary study. In order to understand how baby food caught on as a normal, natural part of babies' feeding, Bentley also studied the advertisements of the major companies like Gerber, Beech-Nut, Clapp's, and Libby.

One of the most interesting aspects of this study is the rise of the canning industry from a very exclusive and expensive market, to one which reached every level of American life. The Gerber

company (known generally as synonymous with baby food) started life as The Fremont Canning Company. Bentley narrates the beginnings of its offering in baby food, and follows its advertising to mothers, doctors, drugstores, and local food stores. She even relates the two different stories Gerber tells about its beginnings in the production of baby food. The examples she gives show the advertisements to be manipulative, meant to convince women that “scientifically produced” food for their babies was far superior to what they themselves could make. This came at a time when science and medicine were increasingly prominent in the birth and raising of children, “the medicalization of motherhood.” Bentley researched the use of the infant picture on every Gerber product. It was a drawing which had a subtle but profound effect on the acceptability of the products for infants.

Gerber was not the only manipulative producer of baby food. Libby, in a 1938 baby food ad, pictured a young infant with a caption which read, “Hurry, Mother, it’s Libby time! Tiny babies love the vegetables that Libby prepares so carefully.”

Gerber also sponsored research meant to establish the reputation of its baby food as a staple food for babies. There were studies of vitamin content of fresh and canned fruit and vegetables which found a “minimal” difference, but, as Bentley reports, “whether intentionally or not, minimized this difference through opaque, indirect language.”

The period of the early twentieth century was one of profound change for mothers due to the improvements in kitchen equipment, communication about child-rearing, education of women, and women’s employment outside of the home, all of these making significant differences in home life. Society was also looking to science and the medical profession for expert advice on how to live better lives. Advice from doctors and strong advertising had a significant effect on the way mothers fed and raised their children. Bentley’s study is important but is most likely the tip of the iceberg.