



# *Dorothy Dickins:*

## **Nutrition Pioneer**

**By Bob Ratliff**

Healthy eating is becoming a goal of more and more Americans, and supermarkets are devoting an ever-increasing amount of shelf space to foods that are low fat, low carbohydrate, or otherwise deemed “healthy.”



While a proliferation of information has brought healthy eating into the national conscience, nutrition education is nothing new. Since the early days of the 20th century, the nation's Land-Grant universities have worked to improve food products through experiment station research and to promote good nutrition through Extension service programs.

One of the early leaders in both nutrition research and education was a Mississippian who devoted her long career to improving eating habits.

Dorothy Dickins was born in 1898 in the small Mississippi Delta town of Money. She was delivered by her father, Dr. William B. Dickins, and weighed only about two pounds, the result of a premature birth possibly brought on because her mother suffered from malaria. She thrived as a child, however, and excelled in school.

Following high school in Greenwood, Dickins left the Delta to attend the Industrial Institute and College in Columbus, which soon became the Mississippi State College for Women and is today's Mississippi University for Women. She received her bachelor's in chemistry in 1920, a master's in nutrition from Columbia University in 1921, and later, a doctorate in family economics from the University of Chicago.

Dickins began her career as a lunchroom supervisor for the Jackson city schools and then worked as a hospital dietitian in

Massachusetts. She returned to Mississippi in 1924 as the first female scientist on the staff of the Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station. Her first year of research was conducted on the campus of Mississippi State College for Women before laboratory space was found on the Mississippi A&M campus in 1925. During the 1920s, Dickins conducted pioneering research on the food habits of Mississippi farm families. Recognizing that food consumption patterns are deeply ingrained, she concluded that even in areas where adequate food was available, just instructing people to "eat more of this or eat more of that" could not solve nutritional problems

Dickins and fellow scientist Olive Sheets, who joined the experiment station staff in 1926, sought to improve the health of all Mississippians by emphasizing the value of a balanced diet and demonstrating the conservation of food nutrients by proper preparation methods.

Writing in one of her early journal articles, Dickins noted "better food preparation is one way of raising the level of living of a family without raising its income."

During the 1940s, Dickins conducted research showing the value of soybeans as a source of low-cost protein in the diet.

Through her research, Dickins noted that processing destroyed part of the nutrients in some foods. As a result, she promoted the passage of 1944 legislation requiring the addition of thiamine, niacin, riboflavin and iron to degerminated corn-

meal, white bread and other food staples. Mississippi was one of the first states to pass such legislation.

In a 1945 research bulletin on changing patterns of food preparation by small town families, Dickins noted that sugar and fat rationing during World War II had resulted in increased use of fruits in desserts and less fried food. She urged home economists to use their influence to prevent a return to the former practices.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Dickins' research was often published or cited in the journal *Rural Sociology*. In a 1950 article on changes in farm families due to new technology, she noted that home economists were playing an important part in helping farm families adjust to the changes brought about by the substitution of machine power for manpower.

Other national journals and government reports often cited her studies of rural and small-town lifestyles.

In 1957, *Progressive Farmer* magazine named Dickins Mississippi Woman of the Year.

She retired as head of Mississippi State University's Department of Home Economics in 1964, but the research program she built helped pave the way for the establishment of a home economics teaching program in 1968.

In a publication chronicling her life and career, fellow Mississippi State home economists Betsy Starks and Lois Kilgore noted that Dickins believed it was often "hard to separate the so-called applied and basic research, because today's idle curiosity may lead to tomorrow's most useful discovery. Conversely, research designed to apply to a particular problem often results in basic new findings in a completely different field."

Dorothy Dickins died in 1975, but her devotion to education continues through a scholarship established in her honor in MSU's School of Human Sciences by friends and colleagues.



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