

Wait for cheese is long and cold, but the gratitude is real

They were out there in the cold yesterday morning, waiting for a bit of free cheese.

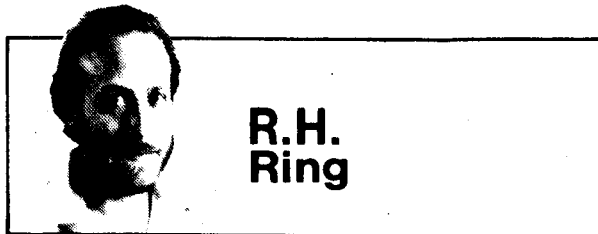
Each person would get 5 pounds of American processed, worth eight or 10 bucks.

A couple of hours was an average wait. Some had waited longer, since dawn. They said it was worth it.

"People's hungry," one man explained. He stamped his feet to get the blood going.

They formed in double lines that curved back and around, so they could all get off the street at the Northwest Neighborhood Center.

They were elderly women wearing scarves over their hair, elderly men in fedoras sporting feathers in the hatbands.



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Their hands were jammed into the pockets of cloth coats. Their shoulders were hunched against the cold. Their breath made steam as they waited, quietly.

They were young women with babies in their arms, youngsters by their sides. One woman was very pregnant. The children's eyes were wide with wonder.

They were middle-aged men in farmer caps and work boots and paint-stained pants.

Their eyes were weary, troubled.

Most of them were slightly embarrassed to have to be out there. They looked away, or down at the ground, when subjected to a stranger's gaze.

"One good thing, the crippled get in first," said a gray-haired woman wearing white cotton gloves.

Other times, the cheese ran out by midmorning. People got angry, abusive. Once a man had a heart attack while waiting. He left in an ambulance, with no cheese.

Yesterday, just about everyone got cheese, because double the normal amount was available. In all, 13,440

packages of cheese were handed out at five neighborhood centers, to a record number of needy.

There could have been trouble, with that many people and that much at stake — to them.

But they were calm. There was an air of resignation. They waited patiently for their "surplus" cheese.

"Miss, right here please," a volunteer called out. He directed people inside the building to tables, where IDs were checked.

"Sir, over here. Thank you." The volunteer's smile offered assurance to those who waited and inched

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forward, their eyes trained on the tables with anticipation.

"I'm so cold I can't feel my fingers," said an elderly woman in a gray sweater. Her hands shook as she signed a list, wrote down her name, the size of her household. She wore lipstick for this event.

"Thank you," she told the volunteer who handed her a ticket good for some cheese.

A man with long, gnarled fingers stepped up to take her place. He had to concentrate to make his fingers sign his name. He showed his medical disability card, and said:

"It's arthritis. I can get in the disabled line next time, can't I?"

It was the first time for some. Others had been coming regularly, roughly twice a month, since April.

Each person had to prove need — poverty, a lost job, death of a wage earner, illness, disability, advancing years or other factors. Really, they proved it by coming and waiting.

In the next room, more volunteers collected tickets and handed out cheese packaged in gray boxes that looked industrial and carried a generic government label.

"I don't mind it, because I need it," said a woman, 78, living on Social Security. "I have to eat, and everything costs so much. When you buy a little hunk in the store, it's over a dollar and 39 cents."

"Macaroni and cheese makes a

whole meal," advised another elderly woman.

A plaque braced up in a cardboard box offered a prayer: "God give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change . . ."

"It's Big Brother Reagan," snorted a man still waiting outside.

Another, unemployed for two months, chimed in: "I saw that phony on the TV last night. He stinks. He don't care. He's makin' big bucks." The man got angrier.

"You can't buy a job. I know. I go downtown, door to door," he said. "I was flabbergasted to see how many people showed up here. Until you're out of work, you don't realize."

One man, a drifter with a sleeping bag tied to his shoulder, bummed money from a woman lined up next to him. He had holes in his boots. She wore old sandals and socks. She handed him three quarters out of a change purse.

"You have to help a little bit," she said later. "The rich ones don't want to, so the poor ones do."

As the crowd dispersed, two men walked away together with cheese under their arms. One picked up a discarded newspaper and folded it, so he could read it later.

Before they got into a battered Ford, the other man picked up a cone-shaped paper hat. He was pleased to have it. It had been left on the ground after somebody else's New Year's revelry.