

Food from Scratch for the Zenith of the Unsalted Seas: Creating a Local Food System in early 20th Century Duluth, Minnesota, Randel D. Hanson

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Chapter 2. Food from Scratch for the Zenith of the Unsalted Seas: Creating a Local Food System in early 20th Century Duluth, Minnesota

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How do you create a locally harvested food system for a city of 100,000? This question is being asked in many cities and regions across the United States. It was also an urgent local question a century ago.

Indeed, across the US a century ago, public and private concerns were scrambling to get a handle on the haphazard process by which nature was transformed into edible human culture within the rapidly urbanizing America. This was a chaotic, wasteful, and powerfully transformative period, with rural populations moving into cities as the primary engine for economic activities shifted from agriculture to industrialization. (Tangires 2003; Cronon 1991; Danbom 1979).

The rapid growth of industrial cities forced an emerging 'municipal responsibility' for the various inputs (food, water, etc.) and outputs (garbage, sewage, etc.) of this emergent urban life (Melosi 2008; Tarr 1984). Public and private city planners in the late 19th century began to reflect upon and intervene into this *laissez faire* urbanization, including how to procure ample food of adequate quality and cost to citizens (Morales 2000; Vitiello and Brinkley 2013). As was the case in many communities (see for example Jason Otto's discussions of these issues as it related to Grand Rapids, Michigan in the following chapter), it became apparent that leaving the issue of food to 'the market' was wholly inadequate to the needs of the emergent society from any number of perspectives. Progressive era politicians and citizens began to collaborate in planning for the needs of cities and their inhabitants, creating solutions as they were then defined. These histories of civic engagement with our food system by city governments,

business organizations and citizen groups represent a fascinating window into our past just as they help us think about our challenges and barriers for creating more desirable food systems within contemporary society.

While there were general issues that characterized the food challenges of early 20th century industrial cities, many communities faced unique problems. The challenges faced by Duluth, MN fall primarily into the latter category. Indeed, early 20th century Duluth found itself in a food systems quandary. Situated on the western tip of Lake Superior amid vast and thick northern forests, the city was growing rapidly amid the immense wealth accumulation of the region associated with exploiting its then abundant natural capital. Timber from surrounding forests was being clear cut and hacked into lumber to build the cities southward; the very rich and easy accessible iron ore of *the Range* was being gouged out and railroaded to Lake Superior docks in Duluth and elsewhere, filling ships and bank accounts; and grain from the newly ploughed Midwestern prairies and plains was being brought to port for shipping eastward, leveraging the ship canal and ever improving harbor facilities for this zenith point in North America for ocean going vessels. New steel plants were being built, and countless spin-off and allied manufacturing, supply and production companies were proliferating in an urban-industrial frenzy. Nearly tripling in population across two decades, Duluth's phenomenal rate of population growth was greater than New York or Chicago in 1910, and local boosters fantasized that Duluth would become the North American hub as infrastructure developed (Van Brunt 1921). As a result of this abundant combination of raw material, labor, and natural amenities, Duluth hosted more millionaires per capita at this point than any other city in the US. These were heady times in Duluth, and the city fathers were indeed filling their plates.

Although the city was rapidly growing, the 80+ thousand Duluthians lived for the most

part on the narrow 24-mile strip of land hugging the western Lake Superior shore. The surrounding region was very sparsely populated save for the booming and busting mining and timber towns spread across the hinterlands. Duluth State Normal School (which would become the University of Minnesota, Duluth) Geographer Eugene Van Cleef worried in an article published in the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* in 1912 that the 'permanence' of Duluth was threatened by the lack of an agrarian base, warning that "mineral resources alone do not invite a large population; they must be accompanied by food to support the people who market them" (Van Cleef 1912). More to the point, business leaders of Duluth were worried about attracting the important middlemen and women to run the businesses that were proliferating: poor quality food was feared to hinder their importation. And they were worried as well about the prices of food, which in cities around the US were reaching all time peaks, often taking between 40-60% of an average family's income (Donofrio 2007). Riots were sparked by this situation in New York and elsewhere, and the strong Duluth Labor community (and its diverse political ideas and aspirations challenging the status quo) was seen by industry captains as a potential environment for fomenting local protest around food prices (Hudelson and Ross 2006). Given the lack of any local food supply, availability and price of food in Duluth was indeed problematic.

The Duluth Commercial Club (a forerunner of a Chamber of Commerce type of organization) was at this point a powerful civic and political organ that assembled and channeled the business interests of Duluth, and its members began to consider the necessity of proactively building a local food supply (Stockbridge 1913). At the turn of the century, some of the wealthy members of the Club had purchased clear-cut land for their summer homes beyond Skyline Drive, which ran along the top of the 1800-foot drop into the Lake Superior basin. On these

lands they began to dabble in agriculture and animal husbandry. As these 'city fathers' carried out their projects, they realized both the potential of agriculture in the region but also the difficulties, including removing the stumps of clear-cut trees, the new secondary growth that quickly sprouted up, and the rising prices of arable land in the area.

Taking all of these issues into account, Duluth Commercial Club members sketched out a plan to jump-start a food system from scratch, including production and distribution components, to supply fresh produce to area restaurants, grocers and households (Anon, March of the Cities). Club Secretary Major Eva created an agricultural subcommittee of its Public Affairs Committee, and one of their first actions was to hire Mr. A. B. Hostetter, a lifelong farmer and long-term teacher of farmers in the agricultural institutes of Illinois. Hostetter was turned loose with his considerable experience and sufficient Club resources to pull together the educational, public relations and networking elements to spark a local food system. Other Club directors, including Charles Craig, owner of the Jean Duluth Farm and all-around entrepreneur, went to work on creating structures that could channel the developing public and private interests around food and agriculture.

After sizing up the situation, Hostetter approached the Duluth Public Schools to embrace agricultural education, but they demurred. Undaunted, Hostetter approached the YMCA, which began offering classes in poultry production in 1910; by 1911 the 'Y' added gardening classes, integrating a teacher for each of the 20 public schools in the city (Stockbridge 1913). Hostetter also worked with the Duluth Homecroft Association (DHA), a local arm of the national Homecroft movement designed to encourage local self-sufficiency and healthy living (Garvey 1978). As a 'model city' in this movement, Duluth boasted the founding in 1909 of Homecroft Park, which sold one-acre lots to area residents for a back to the land urban lifestyle. Hostetter

harnessed the energy of this movement by partnering with the DHA, which began to offer courses in cooking local produce, preserving foods, and the vagaries of managing such enterprises. Various churches, fairs and community gatherings were encouraged to hold friendly competitions over the fruits and vegetables of these labors to generate greater interest. And the prized specimens were also brought to State Fairs in St. Paul, New York City, and other places to boost the image of agriculture in the region and attract potential farmers.

Mr. Hostetter and other Duluth Commercial Club members also leveraged their networks and the growing food needs of US Steel and its employees by partnering with the various railroad companies in the region, each of which had excess lands adjacent to their tracks (Stockbridge 1913). Together they crafted plans to create farms along the tracks, bunched into groups that would become small towns connected to the nearest train stop, which could serve as portals for produce gathered by the trains for urban destinations. To help grow these small centers for agricultural production, Hostetter created 'educational trains' in which agronomic experts in seeds, produce varieties, production methods, management expertise, etc., would travel on appointed days, stopping at each town to dispense their knowledge, praise, encouragement and institutional support. Free seeds were distributed to town children, who were encouraged to compete with each other for growing the best produce, the winners of which would garner prizes that the Club also dispensed.

But problems in boosting a food system also existed because of a lack of access to lands closer to the city that could be agriculturally productive and affordable. Indeed, given the rapid population growth and the craggy landscapes along Lake Superior, land was quite expensive and arable land was scarce. How could you justify farming on land close to the city that was so expensive? To address this problem, several Duluth Commercial Club members, led by Charles

Craig and mining lawyer and future University of Minnesota Regent John G. Williams, founded the Greysolon Farm Company in 1910 (Mattocks 1911). The Greysolon Farm Company was a mile square area on Duluth's northern urban edge near Jean Duluth and Martin Roads; the land was developed as small farms ranging from 1-15 acres for both rental and sale to workers, truck farmers, and existing distant farmers who might be coaxed from elsewhere to relocate. Craig and colleagues devised long term financial terms amendable for people to both rent and purchase land from which stumps were removed, and they created another, less expensive track for those who were willing to remove such obstacles to farming themselves. And as part of the deal, the Greysolon Farm Company would help people learn the skills of "intensive cultivation, market gardening, and dairy farming under the most modern scientific conditions" so they could make profits sufficient to justify purchasing the lands (and fulfill the food supply ends of the Club). The Greysolon Farm Company quickly took off, renting and selling agricultural lands for home and market production. Educational courses were held on the Greysolon Farm Company lands, organized by Hostetter, helping the farmer aspirants gain the necessary skillsets to produce for nearby markets. The creation of the Greysolon Farm Company was also not coincidentally commercially successful, creating profits for investors by adding value to cut-over lands by removing stumps and getting the lands into cultivatable condition.

The University of Minnesota was also interested in inserting itself into the formal development of an agricultural infrastructure in the western Lake Superior region as part of its broader 'Land Grant' mission (Thompson, 1938 and 1954). In 1911, the Minnesota State Legislature authorized the Board of Regents to come to Duluth to seek lands that could support an experimental station akin to others that it was creating around the state. The Greysolon Farm Company lands were widely seen as the best farmland in the immediate Duluth area. The

University negotiated hard with Greysolon's owners, the arguments drawing out for over a year, but eventually the University purchased some 240 acres at Greysolon's asking price and founded the Northeast Demonstration Farm and Experimental Station. Bolstering Greysolon Farms activities, this new Station quickly ramped up its operations. By the Spring of 1913, Superintendent Mark J. Thompson was hired and the farm quickly developed as a combination dairy, poultry, and truck farm. Although the 'Great Fire of 1918' burned this area, it was a temporary setback: the Northeast Agricultural Experimental Station (which soon became its official name) became an important piece of the agricultural architecture of the region as a site for demonstration, production and education. Thompson remained a main force on the farm for several decades, contributing to the 'golden years' of research and extension services in the region.

Seeding education and production lands were two key aspects of building a food system from scratch that were now set in motion, but distribution was also a problem. To address this problem, the Duluth Commercial Club worked with area farmers to found a Cooperative Produce Warehouse in west Duluth in 1910 to supply goods to city retailers (Anon, A Model Co-Operative Marketing Association). This experiment soon ran up against stubborn economic realities: there were not enough farmers bringing produce to the warehouse to make it economically self-sufficient, and the Commercial Club which was underwriting the project soon grew dismayed with the ongoing financial losses, shutting the doors. In the wake of the closure, the Club worked with area farmers to create the Producer's Cooperative Market Association as a more diffuse organizational means to represent and boost the interests of area farmers in distribution issues. In addition, the City of Duluth founded the Duluth Farmers Market in 1912 to service private households (Stockbridge 1913; see also Morales on Chicago's Maxwell Street

Market). This first iteration of the Duluth Farmers Market, regulated by the City Council, opened up shop in the Armory, adding two additional satellite markets in other parts of the city. That first year 25 farmers used the market to sell produce, which was all locally harvested, and the Duluth Farmers Market has in one form or another remained a part of the city ever since.

In sum, an amazing amount of energy and organization was brought to bear on the creation of a local food system for Duluth in the early part of the twentieth century. For an interim period that lasted several decades, this bid to create a local food system worked: locally harvested produce began to flow into area outlets, people turned to farming as an occupation, and other distant farmers relocated here. This local food system grew throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and vegetables like potatoes, brassicas, celery and lettuce became staples that were grown in large fields sufficient to supply locally and to ship elsewhere. Small fruit production, particularly raspberries, was also robust enough to not only supply the region but also ship refrigerated train-car loads to Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Chicago, and Omaha. Simply put, regional food production thrived.

But as with so many aspects of US society, the advent of World War II signaled a profound change for the Duluth local food system. For one thing, the war effort demanded as many people as possible to work in iron ore and steel related activities; and the wage-oriented consumer society that flourished after the war continued the movement away from agriculture in the region. Small farms developed over the previous several decades were abandoned, and today we see those overgrown places all around the area. By the 1950s, larger scale commercial farming across the US began to edge out small scale producers *en masse*, and regional and international specialization and development created the basis for the global, industrial food system (Thompson, 1959). Corporate farming became an increasing norm, as agriculture become

vertically integrated into global food corporations. Farming in northern Minnesota ebbed steadily given the ever cheapening cost of industrial food produced by externalizing so many of the costs of both production and distribution. Suburban sprawl began to creep into the richer agricultural lands north of the city. By the mid-1970s, a regional food infrastructure seemed too outmoded if not already disappeared, and the Northeast Agricultural Experimental Station was closed in 1976, signaling a tardy ceremony for the ending of a local food system in the western Lake Superior region. And if this dirge wasn't heard, the small farm crisis of the 1980s drove nails into the proverbial coffin of smaller scale farming in the region, the state and across the country (Hurt 2002; Lyson 2004).

In the wake of this industrialization of farming, nascent organizations designed to support small scale sustainable farming and gardening began to appear across the US, inspired by the resilient voices of people like Rachel Carson, Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, Barry Commoner and others. Community based gardening in Duluth began to take shape in the late 1970s, and in 1981 the Duluth Community Garden Program was formally founded. Food cooperatives appeared in the 1970s, including Duluth's Whole Foods Coop, which continues to expand into the present. The Land Stewardship project was created in Minnesota in 1982, and in 1988 the Sustainable Farming Association was created. These local and regional organizations have sought to continue a home garden and small scale agriculture practice amid a fast food and industrial agriculture that has systematically de-educated people of food, farming and gardening skills and knowledge. Now that the health, community and ecological bills of the externalizing system of industrial agriculture are coming due in ways they can no longer be ignored, these community and regional organizations resonate with greater authority and importance as we seek to bring their visions from the margins to the center (Reganold, et al. 2011; Syring 2012; Stark,

Abazs and Syring 2011).

To paraphrase the English scholar and activist Stuart Hall, 'hegemony is hard work'. The hegemony of the global industrial food system is both powerful and rigid: we partake in its reproduction with an unnerving knowledge of its destructive wake. How can we use this knowledge to build a healthier food system for individuals, communities and the landscape? Looking back on this largely successful early 20th transformation of the Duluth food system, we see some intriguing pathways. They thought big and systemically, they integrated people and organizations across sectors, and they leveraged powers beyond Duluth that had interests in the city. How can we use their story as we wrestle with smart decline from an industrial paradigm with eyes wide open in optimism for the possibilities of a more sustainable future for ourselves and those who will find themselves on these same soils a hundred years hence? In short, how can we work for the 'permanence' of Duluth by laying the foundations for a sustainable food system? Time to put our shoulders to the wheel, as the arc of history doesn't get bent in a just and sustainable direction on its own.

Discussion Questions

1. How was Urban Agriculture in Duluth 100 years ago similar to urban agriculture today? How was it different?
2. 'Rust Belt' cities like Duluth have been among the hardest hit cities in the current economic recession. Given that urban agriculture originally developed in Duluth due to the economic hardships of many, could urban farms make a return to Duluth under the present circumstances? If yes, how would urban agriculture come into fruition?

3. Businesses, Universities, and organizations in a similar vein to chambers of commerce were at the forefront of urban agriculture in Duluth. To what extent did urban agriculture develop either from the “top-down” or the “bottom-up”? How does this compare with urban agriculture today?
4. Consider the action of Mr. Hostetter and the Greysolon Farm Company. What success did they have in Northern Minnesota that could be replicated today? Did they have any missteps that those hoping to start urban agriculture projects in their cities could hold as a cautionary tale?
5. How did the University of Minnesota bolster urban agriculture in Duluth at the turn of the last century? How Universities support urban agriculture do today, and how has that changed over time?
6. In the 1950s, “Big Ag” began to overtake local food production and by the 1970s Duluth’s original food system was virtually dismantled. However, the Duluth Community garden program was founded in 1981. Given the rich history of urban agriculture, is urban agriculture still on the decline, or is it experiencing a renaissance?
7. Duluth was an exceptional urban agriculture case because it involved collaboration from so many parts of society – particularly from business leaders. Can such collaboration occur today? Should it?