

THREE CSAS, THREE ECONOMIES

WOODY WODRASKA

With the principles of associative economics in mind, how can we develop positive social and economic relationships in a practical way? This article tells of a farmer's (and consumer's) experiences with three community supported agriculture initiatives, considering and comparing their operations.

QUINCY, ILLINOIS, COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE PROJECT—1988

A little more than twenty years ago, I read in this journal an article by Jan VanderTuin (*Biodynamics* No. 163, Summer 1987) about a new way for farmers to relate to the buyers of their produce and it was as if I'd been struck by lightning. The concept of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project at Indian Line Farm in the Berkshires of Massachusetts that he described was so suited to my situation on a smallholding in Illinois, it answered so well the difficulties I'd experienced in my first two years of selling produce at the local farmers' market, that I was staggered by its implications.

Here was a melding of Steiner's agricultural insights and his threefold social order, a cooperative venture between growers and eaters that resulted in a sacred compact—"support my efforts and I will feed you to the best of my ability," and "feed me right and I will provide for you." It removes from the equation the deadening competition between growers for the buyers' dollars, the dreadful uncertainties of marketing, and opens the possibilities for the families who eat the food to see how it is grown, to help a little if they wish, to have a comprehensive relationship with it. Go to the farm, tread the soil, taste it, inspect the chickens, sniff the compost pile; bring the children to see the pig, pet the herd dog, sample the green beans—this is the reality, folks—it's got dirt on it, bugs over there, worms in here; check out the bees from a distance; it's all of a piece, food without the packaging, hype, the sugar-laced processing, coupons, fluorescent lights, and muzak.

I did not realize until much later that farmers and community-minded folks in New Hampshire had in the same year, 1986, initiated another CSA project. The founders of the two farms met the winter before to compare notes, and their major difference in approach, according to Steven McFadden (who, with Trauger Groh, wrote *Farms of Tomorrow*), was the pledge meeting to price shares (New Hampshire) versus arbitrary pricing.

I was inspired and enheartened but wasn't able to wrap my mind about how to proceed with starting a CSA project here in the benighted Midwest where "farming" meant cash grain crops from here to the horizon and pigs in tin buildings.

Not until New Year's Eve.

The eve of the new year, 1988, we were invited to a party like no other I had experienced: eats aplenty and camaraderie, music and good talk—but no alcohol. That's what the invitation specified. By 10:00 p.m. or so, at the hosts' behest, we arranged the seating in a circle and sat looking at each other, wondering . . .

Then the hosts made their intention clear: we were all going to speak in turn around the circle telling the others about our dream for the new year, how, with all obstacles removed, we would conduct our lives that year. The others in the circle were to accept each speaker's dream as worthy and achievable and respond to tell how they could help.

What a contrast to the drunken, content-free tumult at most New Year's Eve parties! Here was an opportunity to share our heart's desire, no matter how outlandish, and to accept pledges of support.

I outlined the CSA concept, told of my frustrations with marketing the produce of our smallholding, wondered if such a cooperative plan would fly in our conservative town, told of my willingness to put my efforts and the assets of my smallholding on the line. In fact, if I got a go-ahead from this group I would quit my job as a psychologist by February to work full time to make this thing happen.

The response was far more than I could have hoped. Elise and her husband Todd offered to head up the effort to recruit members; Otto, who had done much of the renovation of our farm house, was willing to help with special projects; Al, an accountant, would keep the project honest in that realm. These folks would lend credibility to the venture, for they were long-time residents of our town, and I was a comparative newcomer. Here was my core group.

The local newspaper ran a nice interview, with photos of the greenhouse work just getting underway. Our nascent project was truly newsworthy, a radical innovation in the relationship between growers and eaters. Before the season was done there were several news articles and TV reports featuring Quincy Community Supported Agriculture Project.

That first news story drew more people to our home for the public meeting than I expected, twenty-some. I presented the ideas underlying CSA, gave a foretaste of the season's harvest—vegetables in quantity from early June until October—told a bit about biodynamic agriculture, outlined the financial arrangements necessary to get the CSA underway. I enumerated the steps I'd taken over the past two years to make it possible—the cow, the greenhouse, and gardens about to begin a third year, composted and tilled.

The core group and I had decided that we had to have at least twenty sign-ups in order to go forward. Our recruitment efforts in the spring ultimately yielded twenty-seven member-families, and the CSA season was a go from then on.

By the time the first vegetables were being distributed in mid-June, though we didn't realize it, the drought was already underway. This was the year Yellowstone burned. By 1988, the drought intensified over the northern Great Plains and spread across much of the eastern half of the United States. This drought affected much of the nation's primary corn and soybean growing areas, where total precipitation for April through June of 1988 was even lower than during the Dust Bowl.

Truth to tell, I don't remember how the core group and I decided to price the shares. The figure we came up with, \$275 for twenty weeks of vegetables, was about what the market would bear, we concluded. Certainly the \$7,000 or so that the project yielded to the farmer wasn't anything near a living wage either

before or after expenses were considered, but that wasn't exactly the point. The point was innovation in connecting people to food.

My twenty-seven CSA families were very kind and uncomplaining about the relatively small amount of produce they were getting, which was less than they might have liked. It was certainly less than I would have liked. But the drought concentrated the life force in the vegetables and the flavor was superb even if the quantities were lacking. We could not irrigate as much as we wanted to, out of concerns for the well. Day after day, week after week of brutal heat assailed us and some crops just burned up. Three years of biodynamic composting and the spray preparations had imparted a resilience to the garden and things were not as bad as they might have been. One of the features of biodynamically grown stuff is its wonderful aroma and flavor. For the most part my customers were down-to-earth folks, many with rural roots, and they knew what good garden truck should taste like; they also understood what drought was and gave me credit for doing all I could to assure abundance. Each week I published a newsletter that people picked up with their share, outlining developments in the garden, prospects for the next week's distribution, news, and announcements. I strove to keep things light and place disappointment regarding individual harvests in perspective, but the fact remains that some people must have been disenchanted with the CSA concept and felt they were paying a fairly high price for involvement with a new social initiative. Probably most would not have signed up for a second year.

This realization led me to understand that I would not sign up again either. The first year of the project would also be the last. I reconciled myself to that and was able to come up with a self-absolving case to prove that the shareholders had gotten their money's worth:

(1) They'd been introduced to associative economics and the experience should have opened them to other possibilities than the barren producer/consumer duality; the commerce between the grower and the eater can be a life-affirming exchange of energies, not just money and food.

(2) They had the chance to experience biodynamic produce, and some of them to experience the making and using of the preparations; I heard week in and week out phrases like, "I don't even like [spinach, green beans, whatever] but yours tastes like candy to me!" or "The kids won't eat any vegetables but yours . . ."

(3) They got the chance to belong to something new, just starting out, and I'll bet even now, nineteen years later, they remember Quincy CSA as having been something worthwhile; some may even belong to this year's iteration of the same kind of thing.

TEMPLE-WILTON COMMUNITY FARM,
NEW HAMPSHIRE—1989

There were about seventy-five of us sitting there in March 1989 to pledge our support in dollars to the year's budget for the community farm, sitting in a newly constructed meeting room attached to Trauger Groh's home, where he lived with his wife,

Alice Bennett Groh, and their new baby. We were representing the sixty families who would receive shares of vegetables, fruit, milk, and other dairy products every week during the season. During the winter the fresh produce would be minimal and maybe not worth the trip to the farm to collect, but if you were a raw-milk customer, as we were, you'd pick up your gallon or two for sure and perhaps a bag of beets or carrots.

There is a difference between what the CSA ideal represented twenty years ago and how the business of CSA is run today. Most of the larger, most successful CSAs now simply offer vegetables in exchange for a set number of dollars. One such, serving 950 families and from New York City and other towns, offers twenty-five weeks of vegetables, roughly twenty pounds per week, for \$495. It's pretty straightforward, much like buying a magazine subscription, with some flexibility built into the system for lower-income folks. Perhaps there are opportunities for shareholders to visit the farm individually or at a festive event.

This is the "vegetable box" scheme discussed and found wanting by Wolfgang Stränz in a 2007 posting to the BDNOW! email discussion list, which I'll quote extensively later. Wolfgang is involved with the Buschberghof Farm in Germany where Trauger Groh farmed before romance brought him to New Hampshire.

Many of the most successful CSAs have flourished with an additional twist, based on inspired convictions about the ultimate relationship between land, farmers, and eaters, a relationship that faces up to risk and responsibility. The Temple-Wilton Community Farm (T-WCF) blurs the distinctions by calling all members "Farmers" and has remained quite small, just over one hundred families. The following is from their current website, in this their twenty-second year (<http://www.templewiltoncommunityfarm.com>).

The Temple-Wilton Community Farm is a free association of individuals which aims to make possible a farm that provides life-giving food for the local community and respects the natural environment. The members are economically organized in households. Out of their household income they cover, individually and together, the operational costs of the farm. They are not legally connected and have, therefore, no legal claims on each other.

So:

- if a member does not do the farm work that they promised to do

- if a member does not pay the share of the farm cost they declared they would pay

- if a member harvests more produce for their household than is socially responsible

- if a member does not come to meetings to discuss their needs, and the needs of others in the community

- if a member works on the farm without first coming to an understanding with the other farmers;

in short, if any of us goes against their own expressed will and intentions, the others can have no claim against them. The only thing that the others can do in these cases is to jump in, in order to prevent an eventual loss.

Everything concerning the farm originates from the constantly renewed free will of the participants.

But I was telling the story of the pledge meeting that cold March evening in Temple, New Hampshire. The farmers passed out copies of the proposed budget and discussed it briefly. I remember that it was in the neighborhood of \$68,000 that year. There was general consensus that it was a reasonable budget. Trauger gave a high-minded little talk reminding people of the significance of the occasion—that they were engaging in a very unusual activity here, the application of principles of brotherhood in the sphere of economics, a radical departure from the prevailing economic ideology of cheap goods at the lowest possible price. There was a peroration to help strengthen resolve and lighten the mood, which was actually a little heavy, I thought.

This was the one mandatory meeting of the year: you came to make your pledge, or sent a proxy, or lost your share. It was a thrill to be part of this, to put the “I” in Idealism and vote with our pocketbooks for food of the highest quality, grown by farmers who were first of all stewards of their land. Everyone, I think, was stoked, but most had been through the process before; this was my first time. For me, to speak aloud before this circle of strangers to tell what I could afford, to undergo such an exposure of private matters—this was exhilarating, humiliating, and disconcerting.

It was clear that the average pledge was going to have to be more than \$1,000, and it was understood that some could afford to offer more to cover the shortfall caused by others who could only give less, like me. I was prepared to pledge \$650 for the year’s share, all we could afford. Most of the others in the room had kids in Waldorf school too and were sorely burdened by that tuition as well as the high cost of living in the region, but many were employed by high-tech firms and making three times what I did in my social service work, or they were professionals of one kind or another. Then there were the farmers, total masters of their craft, who were taking only a pittance for themselves.

[I have not analyzed budgets of the most robust CSAs in this era to see what wages the farmers are earning—probably pretty good, considering—but this brings up another point which doesn’t seem to fit elsewhere: all CSAs I know about or have been involved with have been subsidized in some fashion, often enough, as with T-WCF, by donated capital investment represented by the farmers’ land and equipment. I’m sure that by 1989 the budget covered normal operating costs for the tractors, mowers, swathers, balers; the fixing of fences; and purchase of supplies. Farmer Groh had all this equipment and more besides, along with a few cows and fields for crops—blueberries and an ancient apple orchard as well. Farmer Graham worked the land belonging to the Lukas Foundation, a Camphill-inspired life-sharing community occupying three houses at Temple, and

Farmer Geiger, on land next door to Lukas, was continuing the dairy operation he’d run for years. My point is that none of the eaters, in their share price at this time, were paying for the capital assets: land, equipment, animals, or housing for farmers. This, too, along with the living wage issue, may well have been addressed in more recent years, and Steven McFadden points out in a *New Farm* article (<http://www.newfarm.org/features/0104/csa-history/part1.shtml>) that the town of Wilton assessed itself \$40,000 for the farm’s support—this, as Steven reports, in “skinflint New Hampshire.” Clearly the town cherishes the farm.]

And so the protocol went: each of us around the room, one by one, spoke out our pledge, without too much editorializing or justifying, so the process could keep moving along. As each firm pledge figure escaped a shareholder’s lips, a dozen poised fingers homed in on calculator keys, and a running total was kept. First round, \$29,000 short; second round, \$12,000 short; third round, DONE DEAL! We applauded lightly, many grinning faces and nodding heads. It was late. We congratulated ourselves and headed home.

Now we hear from Wolfgang Stränz, from Germany:

At Buschberghof we are an all-year CSA with a full range of food, including bread, meat, cheese. There is no need to go shopping anymore for us. And the other difference is that we (the members) decide personally, how much money we want to give. There are no fixed prices. Trying to let the social threefold thing to come alive.

Talking of sharing risk and responsibility in agriculture CSAwise means for me that it has to happen reciprocally. To run a CSA scheme only during the summer season and let the consumers go to the supermarket during the rest of the year and let them buy the crap from there, is not a mutual commitment. I do guarantee the economical stability for the farm and I do expect from the farmers that they don’t let me starve.

This is the clearest explanation I know of why one would belong to a CSA and embrace the heart-centered commitment Wolfgang is proposing.

From the Temple-Wilton website, details of the financials:

The following formula has allowed the farm to operate smoothly since its inception: All unprocessed farm produce (vegetables and milk) is available to members free of charge, if they meet the proposed budget through contributions over the course of one year. This enables us to sever the direct link between food and money. Pledges are made, based on the ability to pay, rather than on the amount of food to be taken. Having made a contribution, the member is free to take as much food as is needed, dependent on availability. Processed goods (yogurt, cheese, meat, bread, etc.) and eggs, are sold at a price that will enable the processing costs to be covered.

The motivation to do things on the farm should always be



Photos: Seeking Common Ground CSA, Rochester, New York (W. Wodraska)

directed by our spiritual and nutritional aims rather than by our financial needs.

Wolfgang contrasts this level of brotherhood with the more typical CSA:

What we have here in Germany is many vegetable box schemes, which is less than CSA for my taste. Because it is so easy to stop your subscription. To take over risk [and] responsibility in agriculture is something different. But possibly these veg box schemes are similar to many CSAs in the U.S. of which I know too little.

I say all blessings on the named and unnamed heroes at Temple-Wilton Community Farm, and on all those in Germany. They provide elegant models for the almost 100,000 families involved in CSA projects around the country to strive for greater involvement and commitment—for the sake of the land and the children.

SEEKING COMMON GROUND CSA, ROCHESTER, NEW YORK—1997

Eight years after that pledge meeting I write about in New Hampshire, I agreed to be farmer for my second CSA startup at Honeyoe Falls, outside Rochester, New York.

Here the core group was nine women, almost all of whom were mid-level executives in various high-tech companies and who came together to do something somewhat more community-minded. After I projected purely theoretical harvest numbers—so and so many pounds of such and such vegetables—for the coming season, we decided on a \$350 share price, based on fifty shareholders. A theoretical harvest, an arbitrary share price, and a speculative membership—not an auspicious beginning, but a beginning nonetheless. We couldn't very well have a pledge meeting, attended by nonexistent shareholders, in the manner of Temple-Wilton. In order to recruit member families,

we needed to be able to present them with the price of membership.

It took four or five recruitment meetings, but we did manage to attract fifty member families and I got lots of practice promising bountiful vegetables at these meetings, while I scrambled to get a greenhouse built and work up the ground in beds in a very wet spring. After a rocky beginning, the promises were more or less fulfilled during the season and the retention of members for the second season was not too bad, considering.

With little input from me, the core-group ladies decided during the winter between seasons to expand to one hundred members. I thought this was a bit of a stretch, to say the least, but since I'd asked for a fifty-percent raise in pay I couldn't complain too much. I was irked, however, that the ladies refused to raise the share price at all, which would have allowed a more reasonable expansion of membership.

This disagreement reflected a basic difference between the farmer and the core group. Homemakers all, the core group members naturally sought out bargains in the produce aisles and felt that potential shareholders would be comparing costs of our CSA vegetables to grocery store prices and would be deterred by any premium price we might try to exact from them. I felt this rather simpleminded comparison left out of account all the intangibles—freshness and other quality attributes, the social aspects of the festivals and educational benefits for example, and the sheer excitement of belonging to a new kind of economic initiative—and that members could well afford to pay a dollar or two a week for the privilege.

The grocery store price comparison prevailed in this case, and apparently still does with many CSAs.

This disagreement aside, farmer and core group were in accord on many key features that distinguished this CSA from some others. Two of the foremost of these were the shareholder work requirement and the obligation for them to pick up their shares at the farm on distribution days.

Both of these features strengthened the shareholder involvement with the farm by bringing them in direct contact

with food, farmers, land, and with others who belonged.

For a work requirement, we asked each family for a total of eight hours of labor during the season. This, we felt, was not an undue burden as they could spread it out however they wished over a six-month growing season, and some came to work much more than the eight hours. A few reneged, but only a few. True, it required some careful bookkeeping and some reminder phone calls, but most people were up for it and many, captive to office cubicles and commuting, found that weeding onions or washing carrots for distribution was a nice change of pace.

Pickup at the farm was a live option ten years ago, but perhaps not now as we grapple with inevitable changes in post-peak-oil times. And it's certainly not an option for farms serving a thousand or more shareholders, say, from Chicago or New York City. We required farm pickup in order to avoid having to purchase a truck to make produce runs to central pickup points and to keep farmer and intern on the farm where they belonged. Many shareholders arranged to pick up shares for others who lived near them in the city and this was OK with us, but most were happy to drive to the farm, watch the changes in the landscape from spring to fall, and observe the growth of crops and the changeovers in the growing beds as crops matured and were replaced in successions. The main point, however, was the involvement that automatically came about between shareholders themselves, between shareholders and growers.

Finally, a point of enthusiastic agreement developed around activities made available by the core group: May Day festivities, including the May pole dance; scarecrow-making contest; healing herb/culinary herb classes; pot lucks; and a honey extraction party.

Biodynamic gardeners and teachers seek opportunity to share life's work

Barbara M. V. Scott and Woody Wodraska wish to share the rich diversity of our life's work in a heart centered, human based community motivated to leave a life affirming legacy for the children and the Planet. We have lived and breathed Biodynamics for many years and wish to be with people who take Rudolf Steiner's spiritual impulse for agriculture to heart in their lives. We uphold a vision focusing on education, nutrition and right relationship with all beings. We need congenial housing and modest salary. Read our biographies and about our work in the world at:
www.soulmedicinejourney.com
541-535-1786

Again, community building and associative economics merge.

CONCLUSION

I remain firmly convinced that the Temple-Wilton folks had the right idea from the beginning with their pledge meeting, and a twenty-two-year track record bears that out.

For the CSA grower to try to compete with Wal*Mart "organic" prices, or in fact with anybody else's prices, is a dubious way to honor the high ideals all my heroes brought to the farmer/eater connection.

Adapted from the forthcoming book Deep Gardening: Soul Lessons from 17 Gardens. Woody Wodraska was first exposed to biodynamics in 1975 and has farmed and gardened since in a wide variety of situations. The book will be published this year. Chapters are on the web at www.soulmedicinejourney.com, the Aurora Farm website, where he and his wife Barbara M. V. Scott offer garden seeds, flower essences, composting workshops, and land consultations.

Cow Horns Available NOW!

Make Your Own

500

Small or Large Quantities

\$6/horn for orders over 100 horns

Contact:

Brian Wickert (608) 637-8890
bwickert@frontiernet.net

Viroqua Biodynamic Group

