

Farm Profile

BIODYNAMICS IN THE HEARTLAND: The Legacy of the Zinniker Family Farm

JANET GAMBLE

In commemoration of Dick Zinniker, who passed away April 3, 2011, we include this profile of the Zinniker Family Farm, the oldest biodynamic farm in the United States. Dick was a hard-working, warm-hearted individual with a deep love of nature and farming. His gentle way will be greatly missed.

This article is based on Janet Gamble's interviews with the Zinniker family in the spring of 2008.

THERE'S A FARM IN THE HEARTLAND where the cows have horns, the milking barn has stanchions, trees adorn the fence lines, windrows of compost dot the landscape, chickens strut and peck in the barnyard, and there's an open place at the table for the weary traveler or friend. The Zinniker Family Farm exemplifies the farms of the past for those who can remember. But this third-generation family farm is also trying to bring its traditions and innovations into the future.

HISTORY

Let's start at the beginning. Dick Zinniker's parents, Max and Matilda Zinniker, were Swiss immigrants who met in Chicago. In 1942, they bought a 100-acre farm in East Troy, Wisconsin, and moved to the farm a year later. They purchased forty more acres in 1949, thirty more in 1958, sold a few in the meantime, and today have 165 acres.

Max was an estate gardener in Glencoe, Illinois, who became interested in biodynamics after being introduced to it through a woman who cared for Matilda while she was suffering from an illness. He made compost from dairy manure to put on the lawns and gardens he tended and saw improvements. Dick was twelve at this time, and his father wanted a different life experience for his son.

At the time, there was momentum toward a modern type of agriculture with a focus on yields rather than quality. The Zinnikers, however, didn't agree with that thinking. As they were starting out, they were told, "You won't be in business ten years from now. You've got to keep up with technology and growth, and you just gotta go with it." But as Dick said, "That was over fifty years ago, and the funny thing is, we haven't done anything different—just tried to improve what we did. Then one day people [started] to notice us."

The Zinnikers were pretty much on their own in

those days. There was no one around to mentor them. If you were organic or biodynamic, you were basically ignored. Most farms were mostly organic in this country until after World War II, at which point the mentality changed quickly as the chemical revolution took off.

In the early 1950s, Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (a student and colleague of Rudolf Steiner who brought biodynamics to the United States) came to the Zinniker farm and brought the Pfeiffer compost starter. This was the only biodynamic preparation available to them at the time. In 1967, Dick took over the farm and ran it for twenty years before turning it over to his son, Marcus. Because everyone listened to the university, which supported chemical agriculture and the "get big or get out" mentality espoused at the time, support for alternative agricultural methods soon became non-existent. Yet during this period, the Zinniker Farm saw demonstrable benefits from its use of biodynamic methods, with the crops staying greener during droughts and the corn not going to tassel during stress.

Dick had been on the farm almost continuously since he was twelve, able to count on one hand the times he took a trip. "I feel satisfied with my life," he said. "I did it the way I wanted to and what worked best for me. If I could, I would do it all over again. I like the country. I like being alone. I like the cows. My father and I worked well together, and he allowed me to experiment and supported me to do things in my way. I have that same relationship with my son Marcus, and now the farm has completely been turned over to him. He has built good standing relationships with the township and businesses." Dick chuckled that "you can do what you want as long as you pay your bills."

During this period, Ruth Vogel was involved in what was already a well-formed movement imbued into the German culture called *Wandervogel*, which translates as "back to the land." This movement began around the turn of the century, and many of these "back to the landers"



Photos: Dick Zinniker; view of Zinniker farm buildings from corn field; Zinniker dairy cows

(sound familiar?) turned to anthroposophy and some started farming biodynamically.

Ruth met Dick Zinniker in 1958 at a biodynamic conference with Ehrenfried Pfeiffer at Golden Acre Farm in Pennsylvania, which was started by Pfeiffer. Ruth had a degree in agriculture and home economics and was wondering what she could do with it. She had come from Germany to America to travel and spread her wings, taking a domestic position at the Fetzer Biodynamic Guest Farm. Ruth was already feeling that this trip would be a turning point in her life, as it became clear that she was on a destiny trip.

After six months at the Fetzer Guest Farm, Ruth left to explore the country. On the way to California, Ruth invited herself to the Zinniker farm to see this biodynamic farm for herself. Her wanderlust then brought her to Kuhn Cattle and Walnut Ranch near San Jose, California, where she worked as a maid for a few months. On her way back to Fetzer's, she once again visited the Zinnikers, where she heard the inner voice beckoning her, telling her that this was her place.

The decision to fall in love and stay in America did not come easily to Ruth. She struggled with the thought of leaving her beloved Hamborn, where the community was thriving and the beauty penetrated her soul. She so wanted to return to her home in Germany to live and farm. With her struggle close to her heart, Ruth continued on her way back to Fetzer's for one season and then near Boston, where she took another domestics job for one winter.

In 1959, Ruth's father died, and she went back to the Zinnikers for a week before returning to Germany to help her mother. She invited Dick to Germany, and, indeed, he did come for her. They married in Scholss-Hamborn in 1961 and went to Dornach to the international biodynamic

agriculture conference together—a honeymoon fit only for a couple of farmers.

LIFE ON THE FARM

Ruth worked like a horse, but, most importantly, she also worked in the social sphere. It was Ruth's warmth that made a visitor feel welcome and her impulse that has made the Zinniker farm the place in the Midwest for festivals around dandelion season in the spring and Michaelmas in the fall, both of which center around the biodynamic preparations.

In the spring, people gather to pick dandelions in the morning. "Everyone picks one bucketful of dandelions before you can have breakfast," Ruth declared. Dandelions are not only gathered for the farm, but also for Josephine Porter Institute (a national non-profit organization that provides biodynamic preparations). After a potluck breakfast, everyone gathers to unearth the preparations that were buried over the winter. In the fall, people gather again to make the preparations, bury them, and get on with the eating and merriment. There are sometimes up to a hundred men, women, and children attending.

Ruth also hosted interns on the farm from participating Waldorf schools in Germany and others who came to their farm, starting during the U.S. "back to the land" movement in the late 1970s. As the sustainable agriculture movement grew during the 1980s, so did the interest in visiting the Zinniker Farm—including from organizations such as the Biodynamic Association, the Midwest Sustainable Working Group, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), and even the university.

Ruth worked from the heart. "One must find it in the



Zinniker Raw Milk Update

In 2009, the State of Wisconsin shut down Zinniker Farm's raw milk operation. The Biodynamic Association has raised funds to help the Zinnikers survive during this difficult time, and also secured a \$10,000 grant from RSF Social Finance to help pioneer a new type of consumers' association that is helping forge a new future for the farm and for similar operations around the country. Nourished by Nature LLC (NbN) is a member-owned LLC designed to purchase and hold agricultural assets to support family farmers and protect consumer rights. For more information, see:

www.biodynamics.com/consumer-association



heart first through the practical work," Ruth often replied to many matters. If hands could speak, her hands would tell the tale of the labor of love. It is often surmised by many living in this region that the impulse that runs through these parts is that of the heart and that "the real work is being done here in the Midwest." What this means is that Midwesterners get down to the nitty gritty, just get it done, and we'll talk about it later.

In Ruth's approach to anthroposophy (founded by Rudolf Steiner and the foundation for biodynamics), she was quick to say there is no such thing as an anthroposophist; we can only *practice* anthroposophy. It is through our living that anthroposophy is at work within us. Life is rhythm, and rhythm is life. And when speaking about biodynamics with Ruth, one realized that understanding of biodynamics comes through the practice, through the will and the doing; through this experience, we find biodynamics in our hearts. When that's accomplished, then we can begin to truly understand it. As Ruth put it, "Biodynamics you can't sell or preach. First you have to be a good farmer or gardener. Then you have to have the inner commitment to go further to heal the earth."



Ruth and Dick had three children, all of whom still live nearby: Susan Kruesenbaum, who farms on a dairy with her husband Alfrid; Chris Kilmer, a Waldorf teacher; and Marcus. Marcus followed tradition and stayed on the farm, working alongside his father, where he took care of the machines and crops, which helped to balance out the work load. Despite the charm and romance of the farm, there have been difficult fundamental barriers.

Marcus started milking after graduating from high school. He had allergies that kept him from mowing or

Photos: Dick Zinniker (top this page, and right); spring dandelion picking at the farm; author Janet Gamble participates in the preparation making

baling the hay. Because of this, he was somewhat disconnected from the farming, but always had a strong connection to the land. He found that there were more difficulties economically on the farm, especially when it came to updating machinery.

Today the farm is run by Marcus and his wife Petra, and hopefully someday their two children, Timmy and Jenny, will have working roles with them. Until his death, Dick was still helping out, primarily with milking, and they had a hired hand. In 2008, the farm had twenty-nine cows with an average of twenty-five milking at one time, twenty-five young stock, 165 acres with 120 tillable, and an additional five rented acres. It takes about 2.5 acres per head to support the herd. The farm has a closed-loop nutrient cycle, only importing minerals and salt and fuel—with the exception of drought years, when they purchase organic hay. Mark and Petra's concern is the labor demands of the farm. By design, the farm involves much hand labor. Their children are too young to be working yet, and there aren't many hires out there who want to commit long term on a small, labor-intensive dairy.

Until recently (see sidebar at left), the saving grace for the Zinniker Farm was their "cow share" program, which began twenty-six years ago. Only in 1997, however, did it reach a level of popularity that started to make an economic difference. Consumers started becoming more interested in their food and where it came from. Some of their customers would come from as far away as Chicago and Madison to get their weekly allotments of milk.

Now that they have a stirring machine, which they purchased in 2006, Marcus and Petra are spraying more biodynamic preparations on the land. They have introduced sole solution Himalayan Salt Crystals to their spraying regimen, and have also added comfrey concentrate, barrel compost, and sometimes nettle liquid. These can make up many combinations of sprays, depending on crops and seasonal variabilities. The farm liquids (urine) are captured in a tank where they steep the compost preparations. The solids (manure) are taken out of the barn during daily cleaning and put in windrows. Compost preparations are added every other day to the growing



windrow.

Petra came to the farm in 1991 as an intern from Germany and soon felt her destiny to be in America. She and Marcus married in 1994. Her role on the farm is the maintenance of the chickens, pigs, and the home garden. She has incorporated meat chickens, which are raised in Joel Salatin-style chicken tractors.

She gave up on raising meat chickens for sale and only produces enough for their own use. Petra also takes care of the bookkeeping, customer service, sales room, and milk house cleaning. The sales room is a help-yourself station where customers can fill their own milk bottles and purchase other farm-based products such as honey, soap, eggs, and meat.

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The chicken house is quite impressive, with south-facing windows for solar gain and community nesting boxes. One box holds about ten chickens at a time. In 2008, there were 200 layers, which generated 5-7% of the total farm income. The beauty of this farm is that almost all the products produced there are sold directly to the customers right off the farm. Basically, they have a built-in market, and anything they produce they can sell. In fact, the problem is actually keeping up with the demand. "It's a question of where to put my time," said Petra. She would rather be out farming than doing the business end or producing more value-added products like soap.

As the torch passed from Dick to Marcus, so did the responsibility of the preparations from Ruth to Petra: "Ruth [brought] me into making barrel compost and preparing the animal parts," Petra explained. "We are able to retrieve heads, horns, and intestines, but haven't been able to get the mesentery. We don't think our butcher knows what it is. The inspectors make me sign a waiver 'not for human consumption' to acquire the heads." Petra also is in the North Central Region Biodynamic Group, as well as a Steering Committee member for the Fellowship of Preparation Makers.

With each generation that passes, something is left—a love for the land, a passion to farm, and a desire to produce food full of nutrition and life forces. As the history unfolds, the interesting evolution that is so vital on this farm is the community that embraces and so depends on the Zinniker Farm products. Perhaps it will be the community that becomes the economic solution for the future.

Janet Gamble farms at Turtle Creek Gardens in Delavan, Wisconsin, a community-supported vegetable farm, with some crops also grown in the biodynamic soils of Stella Gardens at Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in East Troy (www.turtlecreekgardenscsa.com).



She also serves on the Board of Directors for the Biodynamic Association and Angelic Organics Learning Center and is a founding board member of Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Services (MOSES).

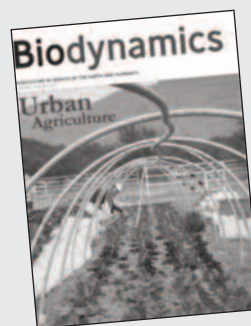
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